Demons of the Sun and Moon

by GunnerPalace

Summary

Ichigo and Rukia are unexpectedly reunited in Tokyo the summer after the defeat of Aizen. Finding they have to come to terms with their ways of dealing with the war, themselves, and each other, they start another journey together that eventually takes them back to Karakura. A canon-to-chapter 423 IchiRuki reworking of the time skip.

Notes

Hello, and thanks for reading!

This is an IchiRuki-focused story set after Chapter 423 of the manga, with a focus on romance and day-to-day life first, personal issues second, and more typical Bleach material third.

There are hints of psychological turmoil in Ichigo and Rukia in the Lost Substitute Shinigami and Thousand-Year Blood War arcs, but with the way the time skip was handled, those seem to have just been permanently bottled up like nothing happened for 17 months. They were also never really addressed directly. My intent is to explore those in a plausible way and give a relatively realistic take on handling them as Ichigo and Rukia move forward, along with how they deal with their pasts and other feelings. Other characters will also gradually get their share of focus.

I take as canon everything through the aforementioned chapter of the manga, and will try and respect the ideas and background elements from thereafter, although I reserve the right to alter them as I see fit. I don't take the anime-only arcs and movies as canon, nor any of the novels,
though some ideas from them will appear. I don't plan to include OCs unless it becomes completely unavoidable at some much later (as yet unwritten) point in the story.

This story is rated M for adult situations and references, including casual alcohol consumption, the rare swear, occasional nudity, and later intimacy—although there is (eventually) sexual content, this isn't really about the smut and it isn't very detailed or explicit in describing anatomy. That said, I do believe describing physical intimacy is important to communicating their gradual understanding of one another and development together.

The start of this story is vaguely inspired by the films *Adrift in Tokyo* and *Lost in Translation*, in so far as I've seen them and can see hints of them pop up.

*Bleach* is copyright to Tite Kubo, Shueisha, et al. I make no claim of ownership of it and this story is intended purely for non-commercial purposes.
'Bye, Rukia.' With that it'd been over, like it'd never happened at all.

It occurred to him over the course of the first few days that he'd never really beaten Nnoitra, Ulquiorra, Yammy, Gin, or Aizen.

Nnoitra had been beaten by Kenpachi; Ulquiorra had been beaten by the Hollow; Yammy had been beaten by Kenpachi and Byakuya; Gin had been beaten by Aizen; Aizen had been beaten by Urahara. The last person he himself had truly beaten had been Grimmjow.

It hadn't been because of a difference in power. In the end he'd proven he was stronger than any of them, and he'd briefly been among perhaps the strongest fighters to ever exist, but he hadn't vanquished them. Why hadn't he won against them? It was easy to say that it was just a matter of timing. It was easy to say that he'd always gotten stronger just a little bit too late. It was easy to say he hadn't had enough time, that if things had gone slightly differently he would've won every battle. It was easy.

It was wrong.

It replayed through her mind while he was convalescing and long afterwards that she'd almost been killed by Grimmjow, Aaroniero, Zommari, and Yammy.

Ichigo had managed to delay Grimmjow the first time; Shinji had saved her from Grimmjow the second; she'd just barely beaten Aaroniero; her brother had saved her from Zommari; Ichigo had delayed and later her brother and Kenpachi had defeated Yammy.

She'd killed an Espada and essentially beaten the head of the Exequias, but in the end she'd played a small part. She would have died many times over if not for the intervention of others. Why was she still alive? It was easy to say that it was because everyone cared about her. It was easy to say that Ichigo, Byakuya, and the rest all just wanted to protect her. It was easy to shift the blame onto them and say she'd been spoiled, that she'd never had a reason to truly step up and prove herself. It was easy.

It was wrong.

Before they'd left for Karakura, his dad had asked 'Will you sit there and cry that you couldn't protect anyone?!!' Would he still ask the same? Isshin had never criticized him again—not once. Still, his answer didn't change; that wasn't the kind of young man he was.

After he'd beaten Zommari, her brother had said 'Now humble yourself and wait until you are completely healed to prepare for the real battles that lie ahead.' Would he still say the same? Byakuya had never criticized her again—not once. Still, the order didn't change; that was the kind of woman she was.
When his mom had died, he'd taken up defending his sisters and others, his dad had taken up maintaining their morale, Yuzu had taken up keeping them clean and healthy, and Karin had taken up not being a burden. He swapped places with the last without ever saying a word about it.

When their friends had died, she'd been the one to propose that she and Renji join the Gotei 13. He'd followed her lead, but he'd been the one who'd worked his way up from the bottom, while she'd been whisked off to a life of nobility. She took up his mantle without ever mentioning it to him.

Everyone they cared about had made it through alive and well. Wasn't that enough of a victory?

When one of his friends (usually Uryū) would run out of class, he'd pretend not to notice. In turn, they wouldn't discuss such things with him. Even those who'd gained some measure of understanding—like Tatsuki, Keigo, Mizuiro, and Chizuru—never asked exactly what'd happened. He stood apart. His problems were mundane ones. That was fine.

When her colleagues swapped war stories or went on training exercises, she'd pretend not to notice. Accordingly, they wouldn't bring them up with her. She'd never really been close to Renji's friends—like Kira, Momo, Ikkaku, and the rest—and they'd kept their distance too. She stood apart. Her problems were organizational ones. That was fine.

It was before the winter break when he found his substitute Shinigami badge in his backpack and put it in his closet.

It was less than a month before she stopped getting any reports at all about how he was doing.

He kept in shape and took up regular exercise. It wasn't that he really cared much about staying fit for its own sake, even though there were practical benefits. The main thing was it kept him occupied. It gave him a different perspective. He would eventually lose his body, but he wouldn't lose his mind.

She kept up her studies and took up kendō. It wasn't that she much liked zanjutsu, but she'd always excelled at kidō first and foremost, and practice made perfect. The main thing was it kept her focused. It gave her a different perspective. She might lose life and limb, but she would never again lose hope.

They focused on the basics—on surviving.

He wasn't one for numbers, but the math was pretty simple.

A Gillian was made of thousands of souls, and they were expendable foot-soldiers, so there had to be at least thousands of them. That accounted for millions or billions of souls. Adjuchas and Vasto Lordes, though much rarer, likewise must have been composed of many thousands or millions of souls. Soul Society was, of course, constantly burying the souls of the dead, liberating them from Hollows, and creating new ones, only for all of them eventually be reincarnated.
A few thousand Shinigami could oversee the whole thing if Hollows were mostly limited to a select few places like Karakura. They sent weak Shinigami because in the end it didn't actually matter whether you got a soul burial or were eaten by a Hollow; you were in their system either way, and they'd get to you sooner or later. It was a recycling system. They were glorified garbage handlers. They were all grist in a vast machine. Suffering was simply the currency of the realm.

She wasn't one for numbers, but the math was pretty simple.

On a long enough time-scale, everyone's odds of survival dropped to zero. It could be an accident the next day or it could be a peaceful death in a hundred or so years on the outside—maybe more depending on how the medical science of the Living World advanced—but it was all the same in the end. Everybody who didn't go to Hell for some heinous crime would wind up in Soul Society sooner or later.

Everyone with reiryoku—his family and friends—would likely end up inside the Seireitei. It was impossible to say where he would wind up. Thinking about it was pointless. He'd live his life and then he would be split up from everyone he'd ever known or cared about, lost somewhere in Rukongai—just like she had been—unless he once again had reiatsu. He'd lose everything yet again, for the third time. They were just gears in a vast machine. Suffering was simply the currency of the realm.

He wasn't suicidal or fatalistic. It wasn't his style.

She wasn't sulking or anguished. It wasn't her style.

He took solace in handiwork and crafts. He learned to cook and clean from Yuzu, and even learned how to wash clothes by hand.

She took solace in arts and poetry. She learned ikebana and shodō from Byakuya, and even learned how to appreciate Noh theater.

They'd both always been lonely. Maybe that was part of why Aizen had so gleefully picked them out as his chief pawns. Maybe he'd felt some kind of twisted affinity for them. Maybe it'd just been circumstance. Regardless, their loneliness predated him, and although he wasn't technically dead, it postdated him too.

His greatest newfound inspiration wound up being *Enter the Dragon*. When Bruce Lee was asked 'What's your style?' and replied 'My style? You can call it the art of fighting without fighting,' something in his head just clicked. He looked up works on Jeet Kune Do at the local library and often thought about its commandment to 'be like water.'

Her greatest newfound inspiration wound up being *ame ni mo makezu—Be not Defeated by the Rain*. The lines 'not losing to the rain / not losing to the wind / not losing to the snow nor to summer's heat /' resonated with her. She resolved to read it daily and often thought about its commandment 'count yourself last and put others before you / watching and listening / and understanding / and never forgetting /.'
He didn’t ask for her to visit. He didn’t often think of her. Both were deliberate.

She didn’t ask to visit him. She didn’t often think of him. Both were deliberate.

In the end, he thought of it like the title of one of the James Bond movies: *You Only Live Twice*. Life was just training. They wanted to see if he could get back to where he’d been from where he was. It was nothing personal. He fought without fighting, all alone.

In the end, she thought about it like a famous haiku by Issa: ‘The wren / Earns his living / Noiselessly. /’ Duty was just training. They wanted to see if she could grow stronger than she’d been. It was nothing personal. She watched and listened and understood, all alone.

No one seemed to notice. It wasn’t that they concealed any of it from anyone, it was that nobody ever asked and they never felt the need to talk to about it.

Kurosaki Ichigo became a kind of model high school student. He was always at school on time, his grades were just below the top of the charts, he socialized as much as he was expected to, he did what people asked when they asked it unless it was ridiculous, and he got a job to save up money for when he was finished with school.

Kuchiki Rukia became a kind of model fukutaichō. She was promoted to the position in short order, she was always on duty on time, she finished her reports and paperwork before they were due, she was the very picture of order for the 13th Division, and she worked on getting new recruits acclimated and ready just like Kaien once had.

Neither of them thought of themselves as depressed—technically speaking, they weren’t. Everyone else saw whatever it was that they wanted to see.

**Saturday, July 27, 2002**

Beams of morning sunlight slowly skimmed across the Seireitei through shifting cloud cover, casting the office of Yamamoto-sōtaichō in a dull, slow strobe. The man himself was seated behind his desk as usual, his hands resting flat upon it.

Ukitake stood some distance from the other side of the desk, managing to appear almost as though he’d always been there, like some sort of office fixture. His bearing was relaxed, but every bit as atypically inscrutable as the set of his features.

"What is so important that you needed to seek an audience with me on such short notice, Ukitake?" Yamamoto finally rumbled.

Ukitake was silent for a moment as he considered his words. "Kurosaki Ichigo has disappeared," he said at last. Trying to sugarcoat things by beating around the bush would simply provoke Yamamoto’s ire. Being direct was infinitely preferable. There was no simpler way of articulating the matter in a neutral fashion, and given his audience, he had finally just chosen to address the human by his full name.
A beat passed and Yamamoto opened his eyes a fraction. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"We don't know where he is."

A second passed that conveyed something between disappointment and disdain. "You do not know where he is." There was no 'we' in this affair; this program had been Ukitake's responsibility in its entirety. "Did you not take steps to monitor him?"

The rebuke rolled over Ukitake without any visible effect. "Shortly after his recovery in the Living World from fighting Aizen, he left the badge I gave him following his initial incursion into Soul Society among his personal belongings. He hasn't moved it since. As he has no real reiatsu to trace, we've been relying upon reports from his friends and the current guardian of Karakura, Kurumadani Zennosuke, to track his movements," he said.

"Why are you only bringing this to my attention now?" Yamamoto's tone was only slightly lower—that was enough to convey his irritation to someone so familiar with him.

"He's occasionally done this before. In each such case he would leave Friday evening, and reappear no later than Sunday night. His family showed no alarm when questioned about this behavior. It would always turn out to be something trivial, like camping nearby or socializing with other friends. I wanted to make sure this wasn't a false alarm, and I've had people searching for him."

Yamamoto took note of the rather strange phrase 'camping'—why would the boy be in an encampment like he was conducting a siege?—but ignored it. Ukitake's command had been producing voluminous and bizarre reports regarding the Living World as of late, and this was surely something to do with more of the same. "How long has he been missing?"

"Including the previous Friday when he was last seen, today is the eighth day. He's presently on summer vacation and not expected back at school for some time." Ukitake knew the specific date was September 2nd, but saw no reason to mention it. Soul Society still utilized a lunisolar calendar, as Japan had before adopting the Gregorian calendar. He was adept enough to translate between them, but as he already had to invoke several new and foreign concepts in his explanation, it seemed imprudent to expound too much upon them.

"I take it his family didn't know?" Yamamoto continued to ignore the superfluous information.

Ukitake furrowed his brow a little. "He'd informed them he would be spending the break with some of his friends on the island of Hokkaido. Upon questioning those same friends, it became evident both that they had plans of their own that would take them elsewhere, and that they had never heard any such proposal from him." This effort at deception was what was truly concerning, in his estimation.

Yamamoto closed his eyes and let out the slightest exhalation. Ichigo was indisputably a hero of Soul Society for his actions during the war against Aizen, and a great future asset to the same. It was simply unacceptable for him to go missing without any indication as to where he'd gone or what he intended, and with no guarantees as to his personal safety.

The only saving grace to the matter was that, given these circumstances, it sounded unlikely that he'd do anything drastic. Furthermore, as someone with no notable reiatsu, it was highly improbable that he would draw the attention of any Hollows. Still...

"I assume you've already turned Karakura upside-down looking for him?" Yamamoto prompted. The way he said it conveyed that it wasn't really a question; given the time Ukitake had taken, nothing less would suffice.
"We're certain he's not there," Ukitake said.

"How many people have you had looking?"

"Everyone we could spare without raising suspicion, so only six non-seated soldiers." Ukitake left unsaid whose suspicions he was most concerned about. It had become increasingly difficult to conceal even so few unscheduled troop deployments from his ever-vigilant fukuaichō, detail-oriented as she was. Having to coordinate matters through Sentarō and Kiyone again had left him with both an even deeper appreciation of her, and a sense of unease and heartache. Not for the first time, he found himself doubting the righteousness of his decision to conceal the matter from her. Ichigo was her...

"And his friends have no idea where he might have gone?"

"They're as surprised by this as we are, and they've been helping to look for him. So has Urahara-san. I haven't asked the Visored." There was a note of reservation to Ukitake's last sentence. When Shinji, Rose, and Kensei had once more accepted positions as taichō within the Gotei 13, they'd done so with the understanding they had the authority and leeway to interact with their comrades staying in the Living World. He didn't have authorization to do the same, and would've needed Yamamoto's approval to approach either side and enlist them in the effort.

Yamamoto's tone grew sour. "I am by no means an expert on the Living World, but I understand that with a week's head start he could be almost anywhere now."

"Postcards from various places in Hokkaido have been arriving at his household since the fifth day of his disappearance. These have borne messages from him, and were no doubt sent to reassure his sisters, though these may also be an effort at further misdirection. We're—I'm certain he didn't have the financial resources to go even that far on his own."

"You were also apparently certain he would not go anywhere at all," Yamamoto rebuked.

Ukitake lowered his head in contrition. They both understood one another well enough for that to be sufficient, and there was a long pause.

"Has Urahara Kisuke made any progress with the device he's working on?" Yamamoto didn't like having to rely upon the exile, but he'd proven himself a trustworthy—if not quite forthcoming—ally. His loyalties still clearly resided with Soul Society. He also had little choice in the matter, as no matter how much he'd been threatened or provoked, Mayuri had steadfastly refused to work on the project, either on his own or in cooperation with the former head of the Shinigami Research and Development Institute.

"He's said it remains slow-going. The technical problems he described were beyond my understanding."

"I suppose it cannot be helped. I will call a meeting immediately. Send orders to your division to get everyone you can spare ready—our search efforts will be primarily derived from your forces." Yamamoto rose and made ready to depart.

"Even..." Ukitake began.

Yamamoto had advanced sufficiently that they stood beside one another, and he turned his head fractionally. "Who did you think would be leading the effort? Kuchiki Rukia knows him best, does she not?"

With that, he left.
Ukitake stood in contemplation for a time. At last, he pulled out a soul pager he'd brought along just in case of such an event, and began issuing orders. His mind wandered as he did so. Rukia hadn't really been the same since the war had ended—not that she would ever admit it to anyone. Still, maybe even so dire an event would bring some light back to her smile after all.

"The situation confronting us is this: 185 hours ago, the forces of the Gotei 13 lost track of Kurosaki Ichigo." Yamamoto paused for a split second and glanced toward Ukitake to punctuate his words; although this had been Ukitake's mistake, as far as he was concerned, it had become the problem of the Gotei 13 as a whole. "His current whereabouts and status are unknown. We have reason to believe that he remains within Japan, but the only thing presently known for sure is that he is not in Karakura, and none of his associates know where he might have gone."

There was an immediate uproar from the assembled taichō.

Yamamoto banged his walking stick and continued on. "The effort to search for him is being expanded immediately. The bulk of the allocated soldiers will be pulled from the 13th Division. However, I expect all of you to deploy forces totaling not less than ten percent of your available strength. Their composition is at your discretion. This effort will be coordinated and led by the 13th Division fukutaichō, Kuchiki Rukia, for reasons I would hope are readily apparent. The safety of Kurosaki Ichigo is to be regarded as a paramount strategic concern."

Again there was an outcry, as the taichō clamored in response to both the personnel requirements and the leadership of the effort.

Yamamoto once more silenced them. "Kurosuchitaichō, as our chief technological expert, do you have any particular contributions to make to this effort?" His stare made it clear he hadn't forgotten the man's refusal to assist with other matters involving Ichigo.

"Not really," Mayuri replied lightly, drawing glances.

"Meaning?"

"In Soul Society, tracking an individual is relatively straightforward," Mayuri lectured. "However, in the Living World, it becomes much more technically complex. The best that could be done right now is providing a localized geographical area that wouldn't much improve on these efforts."

"Are you really that useless?" Kenpachi immediately asked. His disgust was palpable.

Mayuri rolled his eyes theatrically and pulled out a soul pager, playing with it for a moment. "He's still within the Greater Tokyo Area at present."

"Well, that's a lot smaller than all of Japan," Shinji muttered, rolling his eyes.

"It's 3.5% of the area, but still 29.9% of the population to comb through; give me another week and I can find the exact path he's been taking." Mayuri waved a hand dismissively and briefly regretted the fact he'd never had opportunity to infect the boy with tracking microbes, like he had Uryū.

"For a matter of this importance we do not have another week. You have your orders, execute them! Dismissed!" Yamamoto concluded.

The first that anyone else heard about the circumstances was from an announcement that came over the loud-speaker system shortly after the meeting ended: "All fukutaichō and seated officers, report to your divisions for immediate briefing by your respective taichō. I repeat, all fukutaichō and seated
officers, report to your divisions for immediate briefing by your respective taichō. This is not a drill."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was last edited on March 14, 2018.

The following terms are going to remain transliterated (and, other than the last seven, italicized as is common practice in English for foreign words) because I feel they're either more compact or artful than their English equivalents:

- zanpakutō - "soul-cutter sword" or "soul slayer"
- shihakushō - "garment of dead souls"
- reiatsu - "spiritual pressure"
- reiryoku - "spiritual power"
- reishi - "spirit particles"
- gigai - "faux body"
- senkaimon - "world penetration gate"
- zankensoki - n/a; compound word representing the next four concepts
- zanjutsu - "art of the sword"
- hakuda - "hand-to-hand combat"
- hohō - "fast movement"
- kidō - "spells" or "demon arts"
- sōtaichō - "Captain-Commander"
- taichō - "Captain"
- fukutaichō - "Lieutenant" or "Vice-Captain"

Shinigami - "death god" or "soul reaper"; this isn't a proper noun but is sort of treated like one as a group identifier, along with Hollow and Quincy

Gotei 13 - "13 Court Guard Squads/Companies"
Onmitsukidō - "Secret Tactics" or "Stealth Force"
Seireitei - "Court of Pure Souls"
Rukongai - "Wandering Soul City"
Senzaikyū - "Palace of Penitence"
Sōkyoku - "Twinned Punishment"

Technique names (e.g., Byakurai, Getsuga Tenshō) won't be translated, zanpakutō release commands will. Some incidental foreign words (e.g., ikebana, shodō) won't be because they refer directly to particular foreign concepts with only approximate equivalents in English (e.g., "giving life to flowers" vs. "flower arrangement" or "Japanese calligraphy" vs. "calligraphy"). For flavor, some honorifics and terms of endearment will remain transliterated rather than translated.

Italics will also sometimes be used for emphasis of a single word, but are usually used for thoughts.

Particular words considered in dialogue, quotes in dialogue, and dialogue that is being recalled will all be in single rather than the normal double quotes to indicate they're not being spoken aloud in the present moment.
Saturday, July 27, 2002

Rukia arrived outside of the 13th Division's Headquarters only just after Sentarō and Kiyone had, sliding to a smooth halt on the Seireitei's ubiquitous polished tile as she stopped flash stepping. The only reason she'd come second to their collective first was how busy she'd been implementing the mobilization orders that Ukitake had sent beforehand. She still didn't know what those were about, but their priority and nature had required her to run all over the division's grounds.

The 13th Division's section of the Seireitei was shaped quite unusually compared to most of the others, occupying a relatively thin band on the outer edge of it, and following the walls almost a full quarter of the way around its circumference. In other words, getting anywhere tended to take a lot of legwork. It was also a hot, muggy day, and the clouds above made things worse, holding no promise of rain and serving only as thermal insulation.

She ignored the sheen of sweat she'd gained—trying to wipe it off would only prolong her distress and sully her uniform, and was beneath her regardless—and briskly made her way to where the other two were waiting.

While Rukia was tempted to ask them what was going on, it was plain from their expressions that they didn't seem to know any more than she did, and so she merely stood with them in tense silence, waiting.

The three of them were rapidly joined by the other eighteen seated officers of the 13th Division, who quickly formed two parallel ranks, facing each other. All of them read the mood of the senior officers and stayed quiet.

Rukia spent her time trying to figure things out on her own. For orders to be broadcast over the speaker system across the entirety of the Seireitei was highly unusual—the last time she could recall having heard them was when she'd been imprisoned in the Senzaikyū. She pushed that thought aside, along with everything else that came with it. This was not the time. She ignored the little thought of Is there ever a time? that followed, and focused. Surely this had something to do with the orders Ukitake had sent earlier...

She didn't have long to contemplate the connection before Ukitake elegantly dropped out of flash step at the head of their formation, between all of them and the headquarters building.

All eyes were upon him, and he wasted no time in launching into his briefing. "I'm sure you're all wondering what's going on, and are curious as to the nature of the earlier mobilization order. There's no way for me to sugarcoat this, so," he paused and briefly made eye-contact with Rukia, "the situation is that Kurosaki Ichigo has disappeared."

As far as he could see, Rukia didn't even flinch at the news. She didn't move a single muscle. Her only reaction was in her eyes: he saw her pupils contract momentarily and dilate again, and that was it. Kuchiki, have you really become so tightly controlled...?

Rukia herself noted the moment rather differently. To her it was like time slowed down and a low, droning noise fell onto everything, like static from one of the Living World's televisions. That sound
swelled and swelled and everything grew brighter and brighter until both were all-consuming, a
grating roar that filled a white-out world.

Just as suddenly as it'd started, it stopped, and she found herself back in the moment. The humidity
no longer bothered her—she felt chilled. She realized she was covered in goose bumps, and her
sweat had run cold. What... How long...?

In actuality, Ukitake had only just resumed speaking. "As of right now, we've been searching for
him for over 185 hours. By order of the sōtaichō, our search is to be expanded, with each division
contributing no less than ten percent of their active strength. Our division will be taking the leading
role: we'll be committing forty percent of our personnel, and Kuchiki-fukuaichō will be heading the
effort. Questions?"

The twin ranks of seated officers were immediately a cacophony of queries, but Rukia's voice cut
through the myriad others like a clarion call. "What's the search region?"

Ukitake returned his focus to her, channeling a degree of contrition onto his face and into his voice.
He knew she was too professional to immediately demand an explanation from him—she'd changed
so much from the unseated officer she'd been during the war. The kind of outbursts she'd made then
after Inoue had been kidnapped... the Rukia standing in front of him would save that sort of thing
until they were in private, where it might truly make a difference. Still, she would definitely demand
an explanation sooner or later, and he knew he owed her one. For the moment, all he could do was
express his apologies through other means. "We've only narrowed it down to the Greater Tokyo
Area."

A beat passed. Rukia's thoughts had been a frenzy ever since she'd found herself again, and she
already had the basis of her plan. She immediately called out eight names. "You eight are with my
search effort; assemble your teams. We'll convene at the senkaimon in one hour. Ukitake-taichō,
please inform the other divisions to send their representatives there as well, and ask them not to be
late. Let's go, anything could be happening out there!" she commanded. Her tone was one of resolute
authority, like this was any other assignment.

Having issued her instructions, she turned and flash stepped away, going to prepare and bring her
own affairs into order. There was no point in treating this any differently than anything else she did.
It wouldn't make her or anyone else perform any better. She had to stay cool and focused. If she
didn't... who would? So she told herself, over and over again.

The eight seated officers she'd named immediately disappeared to make their own preparations.

Ukitake was left standing with the remaining officers, and found himself in something of a daze at
what he'd just witnessed.

"Taichō, what about the rest of us?" Kiyone asked.

The question broke the spell that'd transfixed him, and he was already looking her way when he
realized that a subtle frown was contorting his face. Scowling more for a second to banish it, he
ordered "Continue with normal operations, and make ready to cover for the indefinite leave of those
being deployed." With that, he too departed, turning and walking into the building.

Rukia clinically surveyed the forces that had been marshaled in front of the senkaimon.

Her division had assembled some 90 Shinigami, whereas each of the others had dispatched around
20—including, rather unusually, the 4th Division, which was normally prohibited from traveling to
the Living World. A corner of Rukia's mouth twitched at that. It seemed that this was indeed being taken very seriously.

In addition, Suì-Fēng had also dispatched a cadre of the Onmitsukidō's executive militia, totaling about 40 in number. All told, there were approximately 370 personnel at her disposal, or one for every 90,000 or so people in the Greater Tokyo Area. Among those she fully recognized were Renji, Matsumoto, Kira, Momo, Ikkaku, and Yumichika. There were no taichō in attendance.

After mentally reviewing her plan yet again, Rukia took in a breath and steeled herself. Exhaling one last time, she raised her voice so as to be heard, not bothering with any introduction. "Eyes on me and listen up!" she exclaimed. "You all know why you're here, so let's get to it! Here with me are 400 networked soul pagers!"

She tapped her hands on two boxes, one to either side of her, which held 200 each. They were new touchscreen models. "Each of them comes with a fairly recent photo of Kurosaki Ichigo in case you don't happen to know what he looks like! Queue up, take one, and form back up with your division! It'll ask you for identifying information when you activate it." She'd already motioned for them to start even as she'd continued issuing instructions. "Come on, move!"

Renji found himself stunned by her commanding demeanor. It wasn't at all what he'd expected when he'd heard the news... Then again, he hadn't been entirely sure what to expect. It certainly hadn't been hearing Rukia using Ichigo's full name...

Fortunately for Rukia, she had quite the pair of lungs. "You'll be acting under the supervision of your division's highest ranking attendant officer! Personnel from the Onmitsukidō will split up among each division and report to the same to assist in establishing search patterns! Each highest-ranking division member reports to me in turn! You'll be going from here directly to the Greater Tokyo Area, and are assigned to the following geographical areas," she exclaimed, before belting out a combination of divisions and the specific wards and cities they were tasked with searching. "Abarai-fukutaichō, you're over here with me! Next-highest-ranking in the 6th Division is in command of that effort!"

Renji made his way up to Rukia with more than a little confusion and grabbed his own soul pager, punching in his information while she continued on.

"As for Kurosaki Ichigo, he has no reiryoku or reiatsu whatsoever, so he won't be able to see or respond to you no matter what you do! If and when you find him, you are to directly call either myself or Abarai-fukutaichō right away! One of us will call your division leader! Most importantly, you don't let him leave your sight, no matter what! I don't care if a Menos Grande appears and tries to kill you, you follow him! That's our only objective here! Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!" came a collective shout. Her attitude demanded an enthusiastic response.

"Good! If you have further questions, direct them to your division leaders so they can relay them to me! Each division has been assigned hell butterflies keyed into the centers of your patrol areas! Once you're formed up and ready, deploy immediately! I and Abarai-fukutaichō are going on to Karakura to establish the facts on the ground there and acquire gigai—we will be functioning as both the command and final pursuit unit! You have your orders!"

Her briefing concluded, Rukia swept her gaze over her forces one last time, then turned and snapped her fingers.

With that, a hell butterfly fluttered down toward her, taking up a lazy little orbit above and behind her left shoulder.
Without any further pomp or circumstance she marched resolutely toward the *senkaimon*. The sooner they got this show on the road, the sooner they'd find Ichigo, and the sooner she could relax.

"Uh... Rukia?" Renji asked, following after her.

"What?"

"Are you really going to keep calling me 'Abarai-fukutaichō'?" he continued, rubbing the back of his head.

She said nothing in response. As they approached the gate of the *senkaimon*, the attendant members of the Kidō Corps dutifully opened its doors. They'd just barely brought them clear as she strode through them without slackening her pace.

Within moments they were through a *shōji* door, standing in the empty lot in front of the Urahara Shop.

"Rukia..." Renji began again, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?" Her continued use of Ichigo's full name weighed on him—it reminded him of no one so much as Byakuya.

She paused for a second, and then shrugged his hand off. They weren't just colleagues, they were friends—good friends again, in fact, because of Ichigo—but that only counted for so much. She had never confided in Renji, and he had never confided in her either. They could joke, drink, roughhouse, conspire, gossip, and throw shade together, but they didn't reveal their inner selves to each other, and they likely never would. They didn't speak of their dreams to one another, and that limitation had always demarcated an unmentioned but bright boundary between them, one topped with concertina wire and dotted with armed checkpoints. He had no business treading upon such sacred ground of hers.

Rukia made for the door, saying only "Don't be a fool, Renji," before she knocked.

Tessai was inside, grim-faced, and after opening the outer door, he nodded her and Renji toward another at the back of the shop without a word.

After passing through it, they found Urahara, Yoruichi, Ishida, Inoue, and Chad seated around a *chabudai* table, tea cups in front of each of them.

"Oh, Kuchiki-san, Abarai-san, it's good to see you both again." Ishida greeted, seeing them first. Chad nodded deeply in agreement, adding a heartfelt "It's been too long."

"Kuchiki-san! Abarai-kun!" Inoue said, jumping up to hug them both.

Both Shinigami took it somewhat awkwardly, but without resistance.

Rukia gave a tight smile. "Hello, everyone. I wish that we were meeting again under better circumstances."

Renji said nothing, studying Urahara and Yoruichi.

Both seemed rather distant and didn't meet his gaze, although they were paying particular attention to Rukia. They seemed almost sullen, and the mood of the room as a whole felt strange given the contrast between their attitudes, the earnest concern of the teenagers, and whatever was going on with Rukia.
Rukia paused for just a moment, settling things in her mind before continuing. "Since time is of the essence, I'm afraid I have to be brief. We've determined that Ichigo is still somewhere in the Greater Tokyo Area. Renji and I will be going into the city to coordinate the search, while everyone else that's involved will be arriving there shortly. Since we'll be using the senkaimon to transit directly there, I'm afraid that we'll be going on alone. I'll have to ask you to please trust me when I say that we're deploying enough Shinigami that any added effort wouldn't really help."

Renji had heard the pause before she'd said 'Ichigo', as if she'd intended to say 'Kurosaki', but hadn't noticed reactions to it from anyone. Nobody looked happy at the assertion they weren't coming along, but it seemed that they trusted Rukia enough with the matter not to object, even if felt like she was blatantly cutting them out. He had the sense that if it had been anyone else that'd said what she had, including himself...

"Is there anywhere in particular in Tokyo you can think of that he might go to?" Rukia asked.

Their three friends seemed to seriously consider the question before each said 'No' or shook their head. None of them could recall Ichigo ever being enthusiastic about anything in the city.

Urahara and Yoruichi settled for simply averting their gazes.

Rukia sighed. "That's unfortunate. I guess we'll have to do it the hard way. I'll keep you informed of our progress. Urahara-san, do you have our things ready?"

Urahara stood, saying "Right this way, Kuchiki-san, Abarai-san," in a rather noncommittal way. He watched Rukia from under his hat all the way until he'd turned, and led them to two rooms deeper in the shop.

Some minutes later, Rukia and Renji stood in the empty lot again. Both had gigai clad in light but plausible summer fashion.

Rukia's gigai wore a knee-length sundress, but was temporarily under Chappy's control, as she herself was using her zanpakutō to reopen the senkaimon.

Renji was attired in jeans and a t-shirt, and toting a pair of bags. They were taking additional clothes and some supplies, as it wasn't clear how long the search would take.

The rest of Ichigo's friends and associates stood by, waiting to see the two of them off.

Renji glanced over a shoulder at them; they all looked worried in their own ways. He felt the need to say something, and eventually settled on a self-assured little grin. "Don't worry, we'll definitely find him."

Each of the others reacted with small nods or smiles except for Urahara and Yoruichi, who still seemed to be watching Rukia.

She had already reclaimed her gigai, and went through the senkaimon without another word.

Renji exhaled and followed after her.

They arrived in a rather typical-looking residential back alley somewhere in central Tokyo. It was midday, and the air was more humid than in Karakura. There was no one around.

"That was pretty cold," he finally said, keeping any notes of judgment out of his voice.
"What?" Rukia pulled out her soul pager to begin coordinating the search.

"Back there."

Rukia frowned up at him in a way that signaled a lack of comprehension, and quickly returned to checking the status of her force's deployments.

"They're your friends too," Renji continued.

"What are three more people on foot going to do in a city of this size?"

"That's not the point..."

"Maybe you'd like to tell me what your point is then," she snapped. "I'm here to do a job, not to comfort people, and the sooner I get that job done, the better an outcome everybody gets, and the sooner they'll stop worrying."

Renji met her gaze levelly and found her glaring at him as hard as a diamond. He had nothing productive to say in response so he averted his eyes, letting her continue to work. Even so...

They hadn't actually hung out that much since the war had ended; she was almost always able to come up with an excuse whenever he tried to get her to socialize. It was usually some division activity she'd previously scheduled. Even when they had, she seemed really distant, like her mind was always still at work. He realized that he scarcely recognized how she was acting.

If she'd changed so much, what had happened to Ichigo? The only reason Renji could come up with as to why he would've disappeared was that something similar was going on with him. Both of them tended to keep things bottled up, and he'd had to deal with losing his powers too. If she was this way as a result of the war, what would he be like? And how had his friends not seen it? Then again, Rukia was his friend and he hadn't really seen this happening to her...

"If you're just going to stand there being useless then I'm going on without you," she called out to him.

Renji was pulled back into the present moment.

Rukia had moved off down the alley and was looking at him expectantly.

He rubbed the back of his head and followed after her. He found himself hoping they found Ichigo soon, before she piled on one straw too many. In any event, this definitely couldn't be allowed to continue.

Ichigo crouched down and reclined against an air-conditioning unit on the roof of Saint Luke's Tower in Chūō, taking in the view. He was 51 stories up, right in the center of Tokyo.

He probably shouldn't have been there. Technically speaking, roof access was restricted, but it was interesting what one could get away with—if one acted like one belonged there and had no shame about breaking a few rules, anyway. The view was good and unlike say, Tokyo Tower, there were no tourists, so it was also quiet. There was a nice breeze at this altitude, so even though it was still humid, it felt rather pleasant for summer.

He took in the city for a time, and then pulled a copy of *The Book of Five Rings* by Musashi out of his bag, quickly finding his bookmark. He immediately began to read from where he'd left off.
Ichigo had come to Tokyo both to get away from Karakura for awhile, and to prove he could.

He lived on the outskirts of the biggest city on earth, yet he hadn't been anywhere else but other dimensions in quite awhile. So he'd saved up, walked to Naruki, and hopped on a Japan Railways train that'd eventually connected to the Tokyo subway system, and there he was. He'd made a budget and had a plan: between capsule hotels, hostels, and public bathhouses, he could safely sleep and stay clean, and he had enough to eat modestly.

The story about going to Hokkaido with Mizuiro and Keigo had been plausible enough given the former's tendency to woo women of means, and he'd rather easily acquired a bunch of postcards to send back home that would detail a made-up trip in order to keep Karin and Yuzu from worrying.

It was dishonest, but if he'd said 'Hey, I'm gonna wander around Tokyo for a month on my own, see ya', he knew it wouldn't have gone over well, even if he had been allowed to go off to Soul Society and Hueco Mundo previously. He was 'normal', so that logic no longer held, even if he was 17. He'd estimated the odds of anybody noticing as low—nobody asked questions of him anymore.

So far he'd spent most of his time just finding interesting places to read. It made it easier to remember what he read because he could mentally link each book with a place. He'd gotten the books he was carrying through the Tokyo Metropolitan Library system. *The Book of Five Rings* was pretty short; to him, the most interesting thing in it was the 'Fire Scroll' and its ideas of 'Mountain and Sea Changing' and 'Knocking the Heart Out'.

After going through it a second time, he put the book aside and looked out over Tokyo for hours as he thought.

Rukia and Renji's initial base of operations was a fairly typical coffee café. The drink was a novelty for both of them, and they idly sipped at different concoctions as they spent the first few hours organizing the beginnings of their search effort. Their conversations were all business.

Renji found he was fine with that given her continuing attitude.

Rukia certainly wasn't bothered by it either.

Perhaps either in fear or awe of her introductory briefing, the Gotei 13's forces had deployed in short order, and their formations were rather quickly organized by their respective leaders. The 13th Division had the biggest area of operations, centered on the middle of Tokyo, with the others were arrayed outward in a sort of radial fashion from there. There had been, on average, three personnel from the Onmitsukidō's executive militia per division, and they were assisting the regular Shinigami with setting up a search pattern, having more experience with that subject.

Fortunately, their new soul pagers worked as multi-function programmable maps, and that combined with Ichigo's limited financial means meant that unless he was deliberately hiding out somewhere, there were a relatively limited number of places he could actually be.

With Ukitake's assurances that Mayuri was continuing to work the problem, they would probably only need five days at most to figure out exactly where Ichigo had gone.

Rukia and Renji stayed in the coffee shop until long after dark, and it was only once the caffeine began to fail them that they departed, looking for a reasonably-priced hotel to overnight at.

Renji had thought about trying to use the downtime to talk with Rukia and get her to open up, but she was purely mission-driven. They'd gotten separate rooms at her insistence, and she immediately retreated into hers—he simply never even got a chance to really talk to her.
Exhaustion wasn't what drove Rukia to solitude, though. Even after she'd showered off and slipped into pajamas, she spent hours staring at the ceiling. When sleep finally claimed her, the thought on her mind was still the same as when she'd flopped back into bed: Ichigo...

Monday, July 29, 2002

All of the Gotei 13’s efforts on Saturday and Sunday had come to naught. Shinigami could, in theory, continue to endure for well beyond a day without the performance drop-off that humans would usually experience, but by the second night, establishing work shifts became an organizational concern that needed to be addressed.

They'd gradually been able to reduce the size of their search regions as Mayuri had refined his own investigation; apparently, his tracking would become exponentially better as time went on for various arcane reasons. As Sunday had dragged on, Rukia had been able to watch as their dragnet inexorably closed around the still-invisible Ichigo. She spent hours studying the dark spaces within the probability-colored wireframes on her soul pager's screen. He was somewhere within them...

She and Renji had relocated to a hotel close to a key central subway station, Kasuga Station—she'd delegated him with the job of figuring out the Tokyo subway system, and it'd been his suggestion.

The Monday morning update which woke up Rukia indicated that the search zone had been reduced to the 23 special wards of Tokyo proper. In the absence of directives from her or Renji, the divisions had simply collapsed their own search areas accordingly.

She rolled over in bed to lay on her belly, pleased with their initiative, and briskly issued refinements to their orders through both text and voice, before getting up to quickly shower and dress.

Rukia was finishing up when Renji knocked on her door. After letting him in, she'd just started to tell him about the changes she'd made when a call came in.

Stopping mid-word, she checked her soul pager. The caller was the 10th Division's 7th Seat, Kōkichirō Takezoe. For someone of his rank to be calling her directly at that stage... Her heart skipped a beat before she answered on the second ring. "Yes?" she asked, not trusting herself to say more.

"I definitely have him! He's on foot in Honchō, out of Nakanosakae Station! I spotted him before he went into the subway, but couldn't call until after we got out. There was no signal," the voice on the other end said.

"Stay with him. I'll call your division in," Rukia replied, forcing all the calm she could into her words.

"Yes, Kuchiki-fukutaichō!" he replied, and hung up.

"Renji, it's Ichigo! get your stuff, we're going!" she commanded, before immediately dialing Matsumoto and throwing the few things she had out back into her bag.

By the time Matsumoto picked up and answered "Moshi moshi?" Rukia was heading out the door of her hotel room with her things in tow.

"Takezoe-san found him. Get everybody you have and move in around him, just in case," Rukia ordered.

"Whew! I was starting to think this would never end! Don't worry, Kuchiki, we won't let him out of
our sight!" Matsumoto replied, and the call promptly ended.

Renji was right behind Rukia as they made their way to the lobby. They’d paid in advance, and didn’t spare the concierge a second thought as they hustled together toward the nearest subway station. It wasn’t really practical to use the senkaimon in an active pursuit like this, so they had no choice but to get there through conventional means.

"He got off at Nakanosakae Station," Rukia said as they went, "What's the fastest way to get there from here?"

Renji scratched at a temple with his free hand as he quickly thought it over.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was last edited on February 23, 2018.
Ichigo was making his way through an alley in the final few blocks to his haunt for the day when he was stopped by a too familiar voice behind him: "You've had a lot of people pretty worried . . . Ichigo."

For a moment he froze. For a moment everything crumbled. It was disbelief as much as it was shock. He honestly hadn't expected to hear her voice again for who knew how many years, if ever. It was her tone that snapped him back into the moment. She sounded disappointed and something about it made everything spontaneously reassemble itself. He turned as he said "Yo, Rukia, long time no see!"

The instant their eyes met they both found things that neither had expected in the other. Ichigo found that Rukia regarded him with a saturnine expression and her look was flinty and cool. Rukia found that Ichigo looked at her with a cavalier countenance and his eyes smoldered with insolence.

He'd expected her to look a lot friendlier. She'd expected him to look a lot more morose. Each reminded the other very much of when they'd first met and both of them were taken aback by it for a moment, just long enough for their pupils to dilate and refocus on each other.

"Renji," Ichigo said as he finally noticed his friend, "you're here too?"

"Hey, Ichigo," Renji said cheerlessly.

He looked to Ichigo to be basically the same as he remembered, but his lack of mirth made it plain he didn't much like whatever was going on.

Rukia's eyes narrowed fractionally.

Ichigo sighed slightly as he finally realized the full implications of what their presence meant. "So, if you guys are here then . . ."

"We've had 374 Shinigami looking for you for the past two days, Ichigo, and six for the week before that," Rukia said, her tone turning more severe.

"Wow, I didn't know I was being such a problem," Ichigo said with a genuine note of penance. He had no idea they'd mount that kind of effort for him . . . or any at all really.

"You didn't think Soul Society was watching out for you?" Renji asked incredulously.

"Not really," Ichigo said with a shrug. "Why would you be?" It didn't fit.

Rukia marched up to him then, grabbing him by the collar "Even you can't possibly be that naïve! Do you think this is a game?!" The fact he was so blasé about it and the insinuation that they had abandoned him were together a step too far even for him.

Ichigo looked down at her hand and then into her eyes. She watched as his gaze hardened in a way that she'd previously only ever seen when he fought but he made no moves of any kind. "I guess nobody ever made it clear to me my movement was restricted," he said coldly, "so I just decided to do what I thought you all left me to do."
"And what is that?" Rukia asked. Her eyes gleamed with a threat of violence at his nerve.

"Live my life," he growled. It was clear from the way he said it that he considered it to be a bad joke.

Her other hand came up immediately to slap him but in a gigai her reflexes were only human and she found her wrist securely in one of his hands. He used just enough force to restrain her without hurting her. Their eyes locked then and something like mutual outrage flickered between them.

Renji was between them in an instant, pushing them apart. "What the hell is wrong with the two of you?!" he exclaimed. It hadn't at all been how he'd expected they would reunite. "You," he said while pointing at Rukia, "have been acting bossy this entire goddamn time, and you," he turned to point at Ichigo, "are acting like a punk. Knock it the hell off, both of you!" Weren't they friends? Weren't they . . .

Rukia let out a "Hmph," and crossed her arms, turning to one side. Ichigo hissed out a "Tch," and turned his back on them. There was a long silence between the three of them.

"If this is one of those 'Come along peaceably' deals then I guess you might as well take me in. I figure you've already got this place surrounded and I can't stop you," Ichigo said in a low voice that carried no admission of defeat or hopelessness. It was simply a statement of fact.

"That's not why we're here," Rukia said flatly. Once they were on site she'd told Takezoe to pull back and form a perimeter with the rest of the 10th Division.

As quiet fell over them once more Renji let out an irritated sigh, saying to Rukia "Well, we found him, and it's your show, so what do you want to do?"

Rukia glanced at Renji and then at Ichigo's back before pulling out her soul pager and walking back up the alley, calling Ukitake. It only rang a few times.

"Kuchiki?" he asked after it connected.

"We found him, taichō," she said simply, before adding "He's not hurt or anything."

". . . I see. What was he doing out there?"

Rukia looked back down the alley at Ichigo. "He hasn't given us a straight answer to that yet but he seemed to earnestly believe we weren't watching him."

"What?"

"I have no idea either," she said with irritation.

"Kuchiki . . . hold on," Ukitake replied, and it became clear she'd been put on hold. She focused on calming herself while she watched Ichigo do what appeared to be stretches. Renji was just looking between the two of them with an expression like someone had killed his dog—not that he had one.

After a minute a new voice spoke up. It was Yamamoto's. "Kuchiki-fūkutaichō?" he asked.

"Yes, sōtaichō!" she replied immediately.

"Ukitake tells me you've located Kurosaki and he's unharmed?"

"Yes, sir!"

"And he said you believe Kurosaki didn't think he was being observed by Soul Society?"
"Yes, sir."

"So you don't think he was doing this for attention?"

"... No, sir," she said after a moment of thought. For some reason it hadn't immediately occurred to her that one precluded the other.

"And what reason did he give you when you inquired as to his motives?"

She paused before saying "Sir, his exact words were 'I just decided to do what I thought you all left me to do... live my life.'" She let her tone of voice echo his.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. At last Yamamoto said only "I see. Please hold."

He was gone before she could say anything. Ichigo appeared to be idly chatting with Renji.

"Kuchiki, tell your search team to report back to Soul Society immediately," Ukitake suddenly said in her ear.

"What about Kurosaki, taichō?" she asked.

"By order of the sōtaichō, you are being reassigned to observe him, effective immediately," Ukitake said.

"... Eh?" she asked.

"Until we understand exactly what provoked this incident we can't allow for a potential repeat of it. You know him best of anyone. Your assignment is to keep watch over him until you figure out what's going on with him. Is that understood?" Ukitake continued without emotion.

She suddenly found she didn't want to say yes, and that appalled her more than anything else that had transpired. It wasn't that she had a choice. "Yes, sir."

"Report regularly," he added, and ended the call.

Rukia found herself looking at the soul pager as if the world had just crashed down around her. After several long seconds she forced herself to connect a call to the entire network. Even Renji's down the way began to ring. She watched him as he took the call and looked at her. "This is Kuchiki-fukutaichō," she said calmly, "We found Kurosaki. Good work. Everybody rally up with your Division and go home." There was nothing else to say. She ended the call and put the soul pager away, walking back down the alley.

"That's it?" Renji asked.

Ichigo had gone silent when he'd taken the call and said nothing.

"Yes," Rukia said.

"What about Ichigo?" the crimson-haired Shinigami continued.

"He's my responsibility now. Meet up with the 10th Division and head back, you can return the gigai to Urahara later," she said.

"What?" Renji asked, frowning.

"'Until we understand exactly what provoked this incident...' 'Your assignment is to keep watch"
over him until you figure out what's going on with him,'" Rukia repeated. She glanced at Ichigo expectantly for some sort of taunt or put-down but it never came. He seemed to be thinking.

Renji narrowed his eyes and looked between the two of them several times. He turned away from them but tilted his head fractionally over his shoulder before saying "If after leaving here I ever find out that anything like what you two just did happened again, I'll beat both of you senseless." Without another word he started walking up the alley, lifting his soul pager to call Matsumoto so she'd know to wait for him at the rally point.

They both watched him go until he was out of sight before they turned to one another and their eyes met again. They still had the same faces and stares as when they'd first looked at one another. Each regarded the other for some unknown time before something in Ichigo's eyes shifted and he was suddenly bowing rather deeply to her. "I'm sorry," he said with sincere contrition. It was clear he was both apologizing to her and thanking her for her concern.

It was so out of character for him and so at odds with his look that she found her eyes widening and couldn't think of anything to say for a moment. "Don't . . . don't be a fool," was all she could get out in the end.

He didn't move in the slightest, holding the bow.

"Ichigo," she said at last, before sighing, "stop." He slowly stood up straight and she could see that nothing in his gaze had changed. In an instant she mentally recalled all his many looks, all the many emotions she had seen flash through his eyes, and she couldn't shake the feeling that what she saw in them was perfectly emblematic of how he'd been when he'd had no doubts about anything and no respect for anyone. Even as the rest of his look had matured, even as he apologized so . . .

Ichigo found it was both hard and easy to say what was different about her. Her new haircut made her look more mature but it was her expression that told the whole story: she looked just like the imperial, goal-oriented Shinigami that had entered his bedroom the year before. If she'd been ordered to cut him down he almost wouldn't have been surprised to find a sword in his chest. Her look both did and didn't remind him of Byakuya; it was just as arrogant, but lacked the patience or reserve. After some time considering her, he closed his eyes and smirked. "So, you hungry?"

"Eh?" was all she said, thrown off-guard.

"Because I just realized I'm starving," he replied, opening his eyes as he rubbed the back of his head.

". . . No, I—" she started, before her stomach loudly grumbled. She blushed slightly in sudden mortification and averted her eyes.

Ichigo softly laughed at that before turning and slowly making his way down the alley. It ruined the image and let him know the Rukia he knew was still in there. "Come on," he said, "There's a pretty good yakitori place near here that's not too expensive."

"A fukutaichō now, huh? Congratulations," he said with just a small smile.
"How do you know that?" she asked, looking up at him.

"I heard you say it on the phone when you called Renji; he'd cranked the volume up on that thing like it was a walkie-talkie," he replied. He seemed to consider her for a moment in a new way. "You look good, Rukia," he said.

"You don't look too bad yourself, fool," she said, returning the look before she again sipped at her tea. Time passed. "Ichigo, what did you mean when you said—" she began again.

"Not now," Ichigo said in a way that was still polite but made it clear he wouldn't budge on the subject.

She blinked at him before narrowing her eyes in confusion.

He smiled regretfully at her. "I'm not dumb, you know. With the way you repeated your orders to Renji I know you'd rather be back in Soul Society doing your job. I'm not so selfish as to keep you here when you don't want to be but I also don't feel like explaining myself all at once in a yakitori restaurant." He watched her expression soften marginally at his frankness.

"It isn't that I'm not happy to see you again," Rukia said directly.

"Just not like this, right?" Ichigo replied, meeting her gaze. Once more it seemed like something flared between them, but that time it was melancholic.

"That's not what I meant," she said.

Ichigo looked up momentarily from her then in thought before looking back as he said "I want to show you something."

She raised an eyebrow at him and so he got up, gesturing for her to follow him. She did so and they paid before leaving.

"Are you sure this is legal?" Rukia asked dubiously as Ichigo played with a lock in front of her.

"It definitely isn't," Ichigo said as he finished picking it, unlocking the door. He pushed it open and stepped through it, holding a hand out to invite her onto the roof of the Shinjuku I-Land Tower. After a moment's hesitation she joined him and he let the door close, walking after her. They were on the eastern side of the building; its roof was bisected by an arched rise and there was a helipad on the western side.

"I never thought you'd graduate to being a full delinquent," Rukia said in judgment.

"I think the technical term is 'urban explorer'," Ichigo corrected, leading her to the southeastern corner. She followed after and soon they found themselves looking over a ledge at the rest of Shinjuku and Tokyo's southern arc. Mt. Fuji was visible to the west. Rukia had been in Tokyo for two days but had spent the whole time at ground level. To see it from above was completely different. She found her breath taken away by how much bigger it was than Karakura. They stood in silence with each other for awhile.

"Normally a guy would take a girl to Tokyo Tower, but the main observation deck isn't as high up, it's usually pretty busy, and I figure you wouldn't want anybody getting the wrong idea," Ichigo said.

Rukia glanced at him without comment before looking back to the city. It made the Seireitei look tiny.
Ichigo made his way over to the ledge in front of her and sat down against it before she could say not to do anything dangerous. "This is . . . kinda what my inner world looked like," he said after a moment.

Rukia stared at him then as she fully grasped what he was saying. He wasn't just showing it to her as a novel thing to see in the Living World, he was showing it to her to try and communicate something personal.

"Usually when I would go there I'd wind up on the side of a building, and there were a lot more tall ones than even here, and it was never this cloudy . . . well," he broke off and gave that rueful smile again, "it was usually sunny, but it was a lot like this."

Rukia found she didn't know what to say and after a few seconds she made her way to him and sat beside him, just quietly listening.

"I just needed to get out of Karakura for awhile," Ichigo continued, "it was driving me crazy. So I saved up and came here to just wander around for awhile and think about things. That's all really. The story about Hokkaido just seemed like a good way to keep people from asking questions or trying to stop me. I didn't think . . ." he trailed off. "Anyway, I can't exactly ask you to travel around with me until the end of summer break, can I?"

Rukia looked sideways at him, assessing. He still had that obstinate look in his eyes, as if even revealing all of this changed nothing for him. His face changed, but his eyes didn't seem to.

"I guess everybody else already knows something's wrong, that's how you guys probably found out," he said after some thought, "Probably dad and Karin and Yuzu too, so going back early won't change anything and then I could at least apologize. I wouldn't feel right being here if everybody was worried about me."

Rukia's gaze became sympathetic as her perspective of what was happening turned. She recalled that the day he'd disappeared from Soul Society's perspective had been exactly one year since Renji and Byakuya had taken her back there. From there, her thoughts flowed naturally. She had been a captive in Soul Society for just under three weeks. Inoue had been a prisoner in Hueco Mundo for little more than a day. Ichigo had in some ways been a captive in Karakura for almost eight months. And while she had stared down a death sentence, he was looking at a life sentence.

"So I guess there's nothing for it but for us to go back, huh?" Ichigo said with a contrite smile as he turned to face her. He stopped and the smile faltered when he saw her expression. She looked genuinely sad, if reservedly so, and he could tell it was pity for him. It was the first look he'd seen on her that day that hadn't been cold in some way. Even as he understood it he found that he couldn't stand to see it. Not for him. His expression firmed up and he closed his eyes as he said "Rukia . . . please don't look at me like that."

"Ichigo—" she began. His reaction was all the confirmation she needed as to her suspicions. He was looking at the whole world like it was a prison cell.

"Please," he said again, turning to look in front of him again before opening his eyes.

Rukia did as he asked and looked away from him. They sat beside one another in silence. "I guess it can't be helped," she said at last without intonation, fishing something out of a pocket.

Ichigo glanced over at her to see her produce two mobile devices. One of them looked very different and he discerned it was a soul pager of the kind he'd seen her and Renji use earlier.
Rukia opened that one first, manipulating it in some way with her fingers before holding it to an ear. "I need access to the special account," she said. The other side of the conversation wasn't privy to him. "You know who I am," she continued, "No, I don't care about your orders; I have my orders too." She closed her eyes and exhaled before opening them again and he saw that same cutting expression he'd observed earlier as she icily declared "If you want to explain to Yamamoto-sōtaichō why you're interfering with a mission he personally delegated to me I'd be more than happy to connect you to him." There was an extended silence before she said "Thank you," and hung up.

"You've gotten scarier, Kuchiki-fukutaichō," Ichigo said idly, beginning to piece together some observations of his own. This wasn't the Rukia who'd opened up a little over the course of making friends in the Living World. She wasn't the reserved Rukia that had lost her powers, the fretting Rukia at the Senzaikyū, the breezy Rukia who'd returned to Karakura, or the self-assured Rukia who'd suggested they split up in Las Noches. This Rukia was a soldier that saw obstacles and thought of ways to demolish them. They'd never had a chance to talk about the war. Did it really change us both so much . . . ?

She deliberately ignored him and picked up the cell phone, calling someone.

"Moshi moshi?" Isshin's voice said on the other end.

"Hi, Uncle," she said with sudden cheer, "I'm just calling to let you know I've found that package of strawberries that never arrived."

"R—Rukia-chan?!" he whispered hoarsely. She could imagine him moving to hide under his work desk from Yuzu and Karin.

"I don't suppose that your girls have noticed it hasn't shown up? Rukia asked.

"Ah . . . no, no, they haven't, they still think it's . . . in transit," Isshin replied, finally catching on to the way she was talking.

"Oh, that's great! In that case, I'll just hold onto it for awhile until I can bring it over myself! It's going to be awhile though, so you should probably expect it to show up on the originally scheduled delivery date!" Rukia continued with no less mirth.

"I—I see, that's fine then, as long as it arrives in good condition. Thank you very much for looking into this!" Isshin said gravely.

"Right, later!" she said, hanging up. Her disposition instantly reverted to being disaffected.

". . . 'Hold onto' me, huh?" Ichigo muttered, giving her an impudent sideways glance. It was calculated as much as it was spontaneous.

Rukia punched him as hard as she could in the arm, storming "Shut up! That's no way to talk to someone who just agreed to sign-off on and subsidize your summer vacation!"

"Sorry, Kuchiki-fukutaichō," Ichigo said truthfully, only to earn another barely less powerful punch.

"And stop acting like you're sorry all the time now, it's really weird!" she continued to scold.

Ichigo smirked and repeated "Sorry, Kuchiki-fukutaichō," catching her fist this time in one of his hands as he started laughing. She tried to punch him with the other only for it to wind up in a similar situation.
She pushed him over as he continued, trying to free her hands. "Let go already," she muttered.

He did so and looked up at her with the first fully genuine smile she'd seen from him since they'd been reunited before he turned his gaze to the city. "It is nice to look at, isn't it?"

Her eyes lingered on him for a moment as she sat back before she looked over to the skyline beyond them. "Yes. Yes it is," she said at last.
Monday, July 29, 2002

They looked out onto the city without saying anything for about a half-hour, lost in their own thoughts next to one another. Rukia eventually stood. "We should go."

Ichigo stood up beside her without complaint. "Where?"

"First we have to get what I ordered earlier," she said, making her way back to the door.

He raised an eyebrow before following, putting together that it had something to do with the 'special account' she'd talked about on the soul pager. After they were back inside he said "Hey, wait up a minute," and rapidly set about locking the door.

"Why are you locking it again after you went to all that trouble to unlock it?" she asked with no less skepticism than she had when he'd opened it.

"Because we're done up here and I don't want some salaryman or kid or something to wander up here and throw themselves off the building," Ichigo said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Rukia felt her mouth form something like a smile at his thoughtfulness and gave him a moment. He finished quickly enough and they were soon on their way back down. They descended another floor before getting in an elevator. Rukia pulled out her cell phone once they were aboard. "I said I'd keep everyone updated and finding you is what they've been waiting for," she said, looking to Ichigo.

"It was your promise," he replied, "so go ahead."

She opened her mouth before shutting it, considering something. "They're going to want to know why we're staying here and they'll probably ask if they can talk to you and if they can come here to make sure you're okay. I don't have good answers for those questions; not good enough to speak for you, anyway," she said, letting her eyes meet his.

He held her sight for some seconds before saying "Yeah, I see what you mean."

She gave him a thin smile as she added "Plus if you talk to them you'll wind up apologizing and I'll have to punch you again."

He smirked for a moment and turned to watch the floor count drop. "A real puzzle then." He closed his eyes for awhile until a memory occurred to him. "Do you remember when we met up in Hueco Mundo and you lectured me about trusting allies?"

"Of course," she said, before muttering "I had to punch you in your dumb face because you didn't get it."

"And you told me you didn't ever want to have to do it again," he said.

"Yes," she said.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "Then I guess we don't have any choice but to tell them the
truth and trust they'll understand," he said, before holding up a finger "It's a good thing I remembered, because I had something that was true enough and would've done the trick." The elevator came to a halt and the door opened, and they walked out into the lobby. He led her toward the front door.

"And what would that have been?" she asked.

"You're already going to punch me for apologizing to them, I don't want to get punched another time for something I came up with before remembering your lesson," he complained mildly.

"Maybe I'll punch you for not telling me," she said as they went through the front doors. It mostly sounded like a joke—mostly.

"Another real puzzle," he said, rubbing the back of his head. They walked out into a plaza that among other things had a copy of a somewhat famous piece of pop art: the sculpture LOVE, in red letters. Ichigo knew it because it'd been parodied on the cover of Rage Against the Machine's album Renegades. He looked at it curiously as they took seats at a table to finish their conversation. "My first thought was if you told them I'd had a nervous breakdown, didn't know what I was doing would make people worry, and that I needed time to recuperate, that would be quite close to the truth and less likely to make them ask questions or worry," he said after awhile.

Rukia stared at him for awhile before she looked to one side. "You thought it'd be easier for them to accept that you went a bit crazy and it's okay because I'm here . . . than it would be to say 'Sorry, I just needed to get away and don't really want to be around you right now'?'" she asked. She felt she already knew why he'd be willing to do that which was why she wasn't outraged by him voicing it, although she still didn't like it one bit.

"One is telling somebody the fault lies with you, the other is telling them that maybe the fault lies with them," Ichigo said plainly, before looking up at her. "Which of those would make you worry more?"

She met his look and said nothing before looking away again. Ichigo, would you really take such a burden upon yourself just for a little more peace of mind for others? . . . Of course you would, that's what you always do . . .

"Yeah, I guess it is kinda twisted," Ichigo said mildly, "so that's why I'm glad I remembered what you said so you never had to say it again. Go on and call them already, the sooner you hit me the sooner I'll stop being sore."

"I'm not really going to punch you for apologizing to others, fool," she said, looking back to him. "Just . . . don't be weird about it and stop apologizing to me."

Ichigo gave her a small lop-sided smile before his eyes slid away to apparently consider a tree.

Rukia looked at her phone before placing it on the table. "Ichigo—" she began to say.

"Uh-uh," Ichigo said, suddenly looking at her again and wagging a finger. "No," he said with conviction.

She blinked at him in confusion before becoming a little incensed. "You didn't even listen to what I was going to ask!"

"That's because it's not your turn," he said.

"What?" she said, not understanding.
He pointed up at the building they'd recently left. "You asked last time and so I told you something. Now it's my turn, and I'm not going to ask you anything because . . ." he remembered the gist of her words to him yet again, "I don't have a method of stepping into the depths of your heart without getting it dirty, so I'll wait, and when you want to talk, you tell me something."

Her eyes widened a bit in recognition before she looked down, suddenly feeling chastened at having forgotten her own rules.

"Hey, don't feel bad," Ichigo said reassuringly as he saw her sudden change of mood, "we didn't set the rules at the start and that was awhile ago, so it's okay if you forgot." He smiled at her mildly. "Let's call them now, yeah?"

Rukia looked at him again before picking up the phone and calling Ishida.

"Moshi moshi?" said the Quincy's voice.

"Ishida, it's me. Are you with the others?" she asked.

"Yes, Kuchiki-san, we're all here. What's the news?"

"Could you please put me on loudspeaker?" she asked. There was a pause and she heard something change as Ishida presumably enabled both loudspeaker and speakerphone on his end.

"You should be good," he said, sounding somewhat different.

"We found Ichigo, he's alright," she said, looking at him as she said it. She could hear sounds of relief from the other end and thought she heard Urahara as well.

"Can we talk to him?" Inoue asked.

"Yes," Rukia said, "hang on." She held the phone out to Ichigo.

He took it from her and held it up to the side of his head, not once breaking eye-contact with her. "Hey, everybody, sorry for making you worried like this," he said with humility. He stopped, waiting to hear out any recriminations.

Predictably it was Ishida who obliged, although his tone was pedantic rather than angry. "What were you thinking, misleading everyone like that?"

"You're absolutely right. There's no excuse for my behavior," Ichigo said solemnly. Rukia found she couldn't turn away from the look in his eyes. "All I can do is tell you why and trust that you'll understand and forgive me for troubling you," he added, pausing again.

There was no response that time.

"I needed to get away for awhile, by myself. It's nothing personal; I just needed to think things over. I felt that if I said that directly everyone would try and stop me, so I lied. I assumed that no one would notice and nothing would come of it. I should have thought better of you all and trusted that you would understand my decision if I brought it up directly with you," he continued.

"Kurosaki-kun . . ." Inoue said.

"It's not like you weren't coming back," Chad said. There was a surety in the way he said it.

"Are you coming back now?" Ishida asked.
"No," Ichigo said softly but firmly. "I'll make this up to you all in whatever way I have to, but my reasons remain unchanged."

Rukia saw something in his look change but couldn't place it exactly.

"No, that's not quite right," he corrected himself, "There's something I have to do here now. I couldn't leave until then even if I wanted to."

"Let us help," Ishida said.

Ichigo closed his eyes. His tone of voice and expression didn't change at all. "If you could, I'd let you. This isn't like that. Not right now anyway. Maybe it will be soon, but maybe not. Despite my untrustworthiness, I have to ask you to trust me," he said.

"Kuchiki-san is in the same way as you are," Urahara said calmly out of nowhere. Ichigo hadn't been aware he was there with his friends. He realized it wasn't actually a statement for his benefit, but for the others.

"Yeah," Ichigo affirmed without explaining further, opening his eyes again to look at her. A very long silence passed in the conversation.

"Do your best, Kurosaki-kun," Inoue said gently.

"Yeah," Chad added.

"Call us if you need anything," Ishida said, "anything at all."

"I will," Ichigo said, before pulling the phone away from his head and ending the call. He closed it and lightly tapped it on the table in thought before sliding it back over to her. He looked up at her with a small smile, finding she was looking elsewhere. She couldn't have heard what Urahara had said, but he knew she could piece it together even so. "Well, that wasn't so bad," he said, scratching at the back of his head "I'm pretty stupid for not having just trusted them to begin with, huh?"

Rukia inhaled rather sharply and then let it go before looking at him with a resolute expression. He said nothing and waited. "You were right that I didn't want to be here," she said at last.

Ichigo looked aside for a moment before sitting back and returning her gaze, listening.

"There are so many things to do as a fukutaichō," Rukia continued. She looked to a column behind and above Ichigo as she fell into thought. "Earning the position was easy after what happened, but the position itself . . . there's so much paperwork relating to everything from training regimens to logistics reports. There are so many personal and personnel problems to oversee. Managing Kiyone and Sentarō alone is a full-time job. Doing it all while practicing at zankensoki, while working toward bankai, while having time for oneself . . . requires a lot of diligence and fortitude. I worked for months to get ahead, to get on top of it all," she said, pausing.

He could see her again then as he had earlier: Rukia as a soldier, as a hard-nosed no-nonsense commanding officer doing what was necessary to keep her subordinates in fighting condition, to keep them alive. She was a warrior seeking to improve herself to carry their burdens when they themselves couldn't. He could hear in her tone how much she'd worked to harden herself to the rigors of combat and command. He could hear the brittleness it had engendered as well, and had already seen the same.

"When it was revealed you'd gone missing, I was worried about you. I also looked forward to seeing you because I was sure nothing truly terrible had happened or would happen to you," she said. The
way she said 'sure' told him that it was standing in for something else. "But I also thought you must have been acting out to get our attention. I couldn't imagine that even you would do something so reckless, and I didn't think that you would believe we were just done with you. And so to me this was just another mission, one that distracted me from the actual work I had to do. That I still have to do."

Ichigo felt his jaw clench involuntarily and very deliberately loosened it again.

Rukia's eyes came back down to meet his again. "It wasn't fair to you to make those kinds of assumptions. You had no way of knowing how things have changed because of you. Nobody ever told you. The last time you really talked to anyone higher up off the battlefield it was the sōtaichō telling you not to pursue Inoue, so you probably still saw Soul Society as being not much different from when you went there for the first time . . . as being callous."

He looked away from her then. The fundamental crux of his post-Aizen worldview had just been shattered and most of the things he'd built upon it tumbled down along with it. Even if that was actually welcome news it was no small thing to watch months of thoughts and assumptions collapse like that.

"And so . . . although I didn't want to be here at first," Rukia concluded, "I will be, and not just because I was ordered to, but because you're my ally and I'm yours."

Ichigo's eyes snapped back to her then. He found her smiling softly at him and he couldn't help but mirror it as wreckage rained down around him inside his mind. They looked at one another for some unknown time, and even as it felt to him like the world was collapsing again, his smile only grew. He watched as hers did the same until they were beaming at one another.

"What?" she finally asked with a small laugh. It was wonderful to hear.

"I was just thinking that this is how it should've started, that's all," he said.

"Fool," she said gently, standing. "Come on, we still have to get something."

Ichigo rose and followed after her. "This has to do with the 'special account', right?"

"Yes," Rukia said, pulling out her soul pager. She searched for the nearest branch of Mizuho Bank and it reported the nearest one was the Shinjuku Shintoshin branch which was . . . right across the intersection from them in the Shinjuku Center Building. "Well, that makes things easy." She led Ichigo across the two street-crossings between them and it.

"Your replacement card, Kuchiki-dono; please do be more careful with this one," the assistant bank manager said as he handed her what looked like a debit or credit card.

"Thank you very much for giving this matter your special attention," Rukia said, politely bowing. Ichigo bowed slightly too although he was still unsure exactly what was going on.

"No, thank you for your continued patronage, Kuchiki-dono," the man replied, bowing deeper before taking his leave.

"So, what exactly is that?" Ichigo asked.

Rukia held it up for him to see and it still looked to him like some kind of financial card. It was black overall with an interesting pink and white pattern of streamers and sakura blossoms on it. It had Rukia's name on it along with the usual numbers and was emblazoned with the JCB and Mizuho
Bank logos. She just as quickly pocketed it. "This gives me access to the special account."

"So did you actually lose the last one or . . ." Ichigo began.

"Don't be a fool," she said, crossing her arms, "I've never had access to the special account before."

"Alright then, what is the special account?" he asked instead.

"The Shinigami special mission finance account! You didn't actually think that we're all beholden to bumming around in the Living World like a bunch of vagrants, did you?" Rukia said haughtily.

Ichigo rubbed the back of his head. He was remembering Rukia's reliance on his bedroom closet and the desperation of the Shinigami team that responded to the Arrancar when it came to finding places to sleep.

"That didn't merit using the special account!" she said, divining what he was thinking and kicking him in the shin for his impudence.

The action drew a few glances from the other bank patrons and so he politely pulled her along outside so they could talk less conspicuously.

She only halfheartedly resisted.

"So, wait, how much money does that have on it and how does Soul Society convert *kan* or whatever into Yen?" he asked.

She looked at him like he was stupid.

"Forget it," he quickly said, "I don't want to know anyway." He finally noticed she had been toting around a small purse-like bag the whole time. "What's in there anyway? You never wear a purse."

"How very forward," she said, disapproving of the fact he would dare ask a woman such a thing before stating "Spare clothes."

Ichigo raised an eyebrow before realizing it must have been related to the search. He arrived at the logical conclusion with only modest dread. "Well, if we're staying here for awhile I guess there's no choice but to take you shopping."

Rukia's eyes lit up slightly as if she hadn't thought about it before. If there was anywhere she would ever be able to find clothes that actually fit it would be in a city as big as Tokyo. She was brought back to reality as a thought suddenly struck her. "Wait, where are your bags anyway? There's no way even you would wander around in the same clothes for over a week."

"All of my stuff is still in the hostel I was staying overnight at," he said, not rising to her insult of his hygiene. He watched as she assumed a contemplative look, presumably applying her skills as a *fukutaichō* to plan what they would do.

"We'll get your things first, move them to wherever we're going to say, and then go shopping," she quickly asserted.

"The nearest subway station is Shinjuku Station," he said, "I was staying in Nakano and took the Tozai line to Ochiai, walked to Higashi-Nakano to get on the Oedo Line, and got off at Nakanosakaue instead of Shinjuku to stretch my legs a bit. We can go to Shinjuku and otherwise do the reverse to get back to the hostel."
"Eh?" Rukia said. The entire idea of the subway system was confusing to her and she was beginning to regret having let Renji handle it.

"Don't worry about it too much, just follow me," Ichigo replied, leading her east from the bank. Shinjuku Station was only a few blocks away.

She deferred to him and walked alongside him.

"So, Rukia," he said after they'd walked awhile, "Byakuya wouldn't approve of his sister staying somewhere cheap, right?"

"I can already tell you're planning to take advantage of Soul Society's generosity," she said, looking askew at him in disbelief.

"I just don't want to get in trouble for being small-minded about finances when it comes to the treatment of a member of the Kuchiki clan," he said grandly.

She peered at him suspiciously.

"Here, let me see that fancy soul phone thing," he said, asking for the soul pager. She turned it over after only a moment's hesitation. Its touch screen was initially confusing but surprisingly easy to use, although some of its terms for things were obscure and archaic. He hadn't really looked at luxury information about Tokyo for obvious reasons but he knew enough to know what to look for. After a minute he handed it back to her with four recommendations highlighted: the Park Hyatt Tokyo, the Grand Hyatt Tokyo, the Imperial Hotel, and the Cerulean Tower Tokyu Hotel. They were all five-star establishments in good locations and were unimpeachable in terms of class. "Pick one of those; which and what level of accommodations is up to you, Kuchiki-dono."

She glared at him for the apparent slight but began to review the suggestions without comment. They continued in silence to the station and on to the hostel he'd been staying at and she remained deep in consideration the whole way. It was a tough choice.

Ichigo was walking back out of the hostel with his bags right as she made her decision. "Grand Hyatt Tokyo, one room, grand executive twin," she said conclusively.

"Eh?" was all Ichigo said.

"I don't have to explain myself to you! You said it was my choice and I'm the one who's paying! Well . . . I'm the card-holder anyway!" she declared dictatorially.

"Yeah, but, one room?" he asked.

"Don't say that like we didn't sleep less than two meters apart from each other for two months!" she said, kicking him again. The simple truth was her mission was to watch over him and find out what was up with him, her duty as a friend was the same, and she could tell that earlier he'd decided something similar with regard to her; separate rooms didn't help with any of that. It was the optimal balance between expense, luxury, and practicality; if she was ever questioned on it she could defend it as such. She found the Imperial Hotel and Cerulean Tower too plain, and the Park Hyatt Tokyo too sterile.

Ichigo subtly rolled his eyes and said "As if I could forget. The simplest way to get there is to take the same route back, but go past Shibuya Station on the southern leg to Roppongi."

"You don't have to explain the route every time if you know where we're going," she chided.
"I want you to understand where we're going too," he said, starting to walk back to the station.

She exhaled and followed along after him.

Chapter End Notes

I found out the Grand Hyatt Tokyo opened in 2003 after writing this but, well.
Rukia made a reservation on their way to Ochiai and got what she wanted without issue. They made their transfer to the Oedo Line by foot for the last time and rode a train to Roppongi Station quietly, both lost in thought.

Ichigo touched her shoulder when they arrived at their stop and together they got up and went topside. It was a short walk to the Roppongi Hills development, which consisted of a massive cylindrical tower that looked complete but was still apparently being fitted out. The Grand Hyatt Tokyo was on its southwestern side, opposite from them, and faced in the same direction.

They both immediately felt out of place upon entering the lobby. It was fashioned out of interesting combinations of polished stones, metal, and wood, and featured heavy use of warm inset lighting to create a rather refined atmosphere. The lobby itself was somewhat spartan and centered on the concierge and check-in desk. Walking up to the latter, Rukia confirmed their reservation and paid in full through to Friday, the 23rd of August. She would give Ichigo four work weeks of her time without question. That left nine days at the end of his break as a flex period and they could evaluate what to do with them later. The clerk immediately became more attentive at that, and took great pains to explain the location of their suite and the amenities that were available to them during their stay.

With their keys in hand they made their way further inside, finding the place seemed to become more expressive as they went while remaining restrained. The use of interesting lighting effects and materials in conjunction continued throughout. Even the elevators were fancy in comparison to the ones Ichigo had seen in office buildings. They shortly arrived on the 18th floor and made their way to their suite. The grand executive suites, being larger than the average room, were positioned at the southernmost corner of the building. The suite's living room was warmly lit and decorated with reserved but classy furniture, including a work desk and an entertainment center with all the bells and whistles. Like the building, the window looked off to the southwest toward Mt. Fuji, with a few interesting buildings including the spurned Cerulean Tower in the distance.

On either side of the entertainment center was a door leading to the bedroom area, which was equally spacious. It had additional seating including a reclining couch, its own TV, and a window that faced southeast. That view was much more impressive: Tokyo Tower was visible along the left-hand side amid a sprawl of high-rises, and beyond the towers of the Rainbow Bridge were also visible against the beginnings of Tokyo Bay. Ichigo had the feeling it'd look amazing at night. The bathroom came complete with a tub, a rain shower, another TV, and complimentary robes.

Ichigo set his bags down by one of the beds, claiming the right one relative to the room's entrances. That left Rukia the one with closer access to the bathroom. They were only slightly separated from one another. He conservatively estimated the bedroom area alone to be twice the size of his room back home. "This is ridiculous."

"It is kind of small, isn't it? But it's quite densely furnished so maybe that's why," Rukia replied, considering it.

"Do you always compare everything to the Kuchiki manor?" Ichigo asked with just a hint of bitterness.

"Of course," Rukia said proudly. As if she would do anything else.
"Since you led the search you know something about how Tokyo is structured, right?" Ichigo asked, changing topics.

"That wasn't really something I was paying attention to at the time," Rukia replied politely, setting her bag on the left bed and sitting on its edge. It was really soft.

"So," Ichigo began as he went to one of the chairs, sitting and facing her, "we're in the Minato ward. Probably the most interesting districts for us here are Roppongi, which we're in now obviously, Odaiba, and Aoyama, which all have some shopping and restaurants. Northwest of here is Shibuya ward, which is one of the biggest shopping and fashion centers in Japan. Northeast of here is Chūō ward's Ginza district, which is the most upscale shopping area in the city. There's a lot more to the city besides, but I figure explaining any of that can wait until later." He had absolutely no interest in going to Akihabara; his life was already an anime and he didn't want to have to stop Rukia from murdering *otaku*.

"So if we're going shopping we should go to Shibuya or Ginza, hmm?" she asked, breaking it down.

"You're shopping, so your choice," he said.

Rukia seemed to consider something before looking him right in the eyes and saying "Show me your clothes."

"What?" he asked.

She snapped her fingers and adopted an authoritative tone. "Come on, do it!"

Ichigo stared her down before letting out a sigh and unpacking his bag, pulling out his day clothes. He'd packed relatively lightly, bringing five days worth of rather plain clothing with the intent of washing it regularly. He'd last washed it all Sunday night, so he was spared any further humiliation beyond letting Rukia inspect it all.

"As I thought," she declared solemnly before sticking a finger in his face "We're in a classy place and I'm not letting you wander around in t-shirts and jeans here, so we're shopping for you too." Ichigo began to protest before she immediately shut him down, saying "The decision is final." She touched a hand above her heart in an aristocratic fashion, adding "*Noblesse oblige*. Now do you want to go to Shibuya or Ginza?"

"Shibuya," Ichigo said. They were likely to get more there, with Ginza holding relatively many fewer items. He figured quantity would outweigh quality and if they were going to piss off Soul Society's theretofore secret army of accountants they might as well do the most damage they could in the shortest amount of time possible before someone pulled the plug.

"How practical," Rukia teased, before saying "Fine, we'll head to Ginza tomorrow. Let's go then, Ichigo!"

She was already making for the suite's door and he found himself wondering if he'd made a massive mistake. He got up with a sigh and followed her.

---

Ichigo realized on the elevator that the route to get to Shibuya by subway was somewhat convoluted and the soul pager reported it was a bit of a walk at over two and a half kilometers so they asked the concierge desk for advice. They were informed a bus ran regularly every few minutes that would get them there in 15 minutes. They opted for that rather than a taxi, electing to maybe use the latter on the way back.
They argued with one another while they waited and were on the bus as to exactly how many days worth of clothing and accessories they were buying and what additional items they should get. Ichigo tried to be conservative while Rukia threw what amounted to an unlimited credit line in his face repeatedly. In the end they settled on a limit of sixteen normal outfits each, figuring they could mix and match, and no more than four nice sets of clothes the next day from Ginza for a total of twenty. They were allowed a reasonable number of other amenities like socks and underwear, one bathing suit each for the pool and spa, and only at most one item of jewelry, the last of which was also to be deferred until the next day. They also had to get some luggage to transport it all in. They'd just finished compromising by the time they reached their destination. It was early afternoon.

Rukia was floored by the sight of Shibuya Crossing. Although it was by no means at its peak of activity she'd never seen such an intensely commercial district before, let alone so many people all in one place.

The next six hours were a blur of stores and dressing rooms as they shopped with one another and critiqued each others' sense of fashion remorselessly. Ichigo had to practically swat Rukia away when he finally went to look for boxers whereas she taunted that he wouldn't dare follow her into the ladies' section; on that score she was more than correct. Eventually they returned to the dusk-awakened neon glow of Shibuya Crossing with most of their wares in the luggage they'd purchased. Ichigo was responsible for carrying most of it. They called the concierge to schedule a taxi to pick them up and sat beneath the hard commercial aesthetic in awe.

Within twenty-five minutes they were back in their suite, setting the luggage and bags down. The scene that greeted them outside the bedroom window was exactly what Ichigo expected. Tokyo Tower was lit up in a striking white glow and beyond the Rainbow Bridge's towers were multicolored, both set among the red aircraft warning lights and blue-tinged office windows of the high-rises. It was captivating and Rukia openly gawked at it. Ichigo found he couldn't help but smile at her wonder. "I told you it was nice to look at," he said after awhile.

"It's a lot prettier at night," Rukia said, continuing to stare. She turned to him with a small smile. Ichigo just nodded. They sat on the edges of their beds and just studied it for awhile. At last he got up and went to the suite's collection of literature on the hotel and its environs, returning after a minute with the 24-hour in-room dining menu. He sat back down where he had been and said "How about this since it's kinda late: we get room service tonight, and tomorrow we dress up in whatever we buy and have dinner at one of the fancy places here." He didn't think of it as a date personally and he didn't think Rukia knew much about dating anyway.

"Kurosaki Ichigo," she said with theatrical incredulity, "Are you asking me out on a dinner date?"

"No," he said, scowling as much at how he'd assessed wrong and walked into it as at how gleeful it made her.

"Oh, then I guess you'll never know how I might've responded," she said coyly, teasing.

"Do you want to eat or not?" he asked, waving the menu.

"Hmph, fine, be a fool," she rebuked, getting up and moving to sit beside him so she could peruse the menu at the same time.

Rukia played it safe and got a beef teriyaki donburi, while Ichigo decided to experiment and picked a BLT sandwich that came with what he assumed were french fries. Their orders arrived after another brief interlude of city-watching and they went to the living room and surfed through TV channels while they ate. For room service, and for simple meals, the food was surprisingly good.
He went to wash his hands off and had a thought as he was returning. "Hey, how about you go shower for bed while I get all my stuff arranged and when you're out I can shower while you do yours?"

She blinked before asking "Why would we need to fold clothes separately from one another?"

"Do you want me to watch you pulling tags off your underwear before you load it into your dresser?" he asked with dry sarcasm. Although they'd lived in close proximity to one another for awhile and that always chipped away at privacy, and Rukia's school outfit combined with their prior activities had made for the occasional risqué scene, neither had ever really seen the other in even an advanced state of undress. Their teasing aside, they were both still quite modest around one another.

She blushed a shade before looking askance. "Fine, but you go first," she conceded, "I have to pick out sleeping clothes from the purchases."

Ichigo shrugged and retrieved clean night clothes from his previous set before going to clean up. The bathroom had two separate hampers for dirty clothes so they didn't have to worry about that. The rain shower kept him in for a lot longer than usual. By the time he'd finished dressing and brushing his teeth and was back outside Rukia had produced quite the pile of tags and boxes, apparently just having squared everything away.

He started on his own clothes once he heard her exclaim "Ooh, steamy," upon entering the bathroom. It took awhile to clip all the tags off but he had more than enough time to do so, put the clothes up, and call room service to take away the trash and their dishes and cutlery before she got out. He turned off the TV and all the lights except for the individual directional one above her bed, flopping down onto his own and looking out over the city. He was personally fine with leaving the windows open to look out upon it; there was something comforting about it.

Right as Ichigo was starting to drift off Rukia popped open the door to the bathroom and stepped out in pajamas that even he would admit were kind of cute. She had capri-length pants and an extra short-sleeved top. Both were, of course, done up in rabbit prints. She looked confused at the lighting for a moment before she spotted him and turned off the bathroom light and fan. She then hopped onto her bed and turned off its light. The city gleamed out in front of them. "That's the best shower in the world," she said happily after a minute.

"Right?" Ichigo replied sleepily, before asking "Are you okay with leaving the blinds open?"

"Mmhmm," she said without elaborating.

He shifted with effort and got himself under the uppermost blanket, settling in against the pillows and relaxing again. He could hear her doing something similar.

"Rukia?" he asked as he felt himself starting to fall asleep again.

"Yes?" she asked softly.

"I'm glad you're here," he said.

There was something of a pause. He heard her say "Me too," right before he lost consciousness.

She looked over toward him and smiled lightly before glancing to the city and closing her eyes, likewise soon slipping away.

---

Tuesday, July 30, 2002
Rukia woke up late into the morning, having sheltered under her blanket and sheets from the sunlight that had crept into the room hours prior. She hadn't slept long on either night of the search. She sat up with a yawn and looked over to Ichigo, finding she couldn't even see him under the blanket. She laughed quietly before getting up, stretching, and picking out her clothes for the day. Letting him sleep in would deconflict using the bathroom at any rate.

When she was back out she was wearing a knee-length skirt, blouse, and a light half-jacket. She found him still asleep and smirked, deciding to have just a little fun. She knelt down beside his bed on the side closest to him and leaned against it, starting to quietly call his name. "Ichigo. Ichigo. Ichigo we're gonna be late. Ichigooo," she said in a slowly evolving permutation. She watched him start to stir and wake up with some amusement. She kept doing it until she was sure he was mostly conscious and just resisting before cupping her hands around her mouth and shouting "Wake up already you lazy carrot-top!" in her best command voice at him.

Ichigo immediately bolted upright and brought his hands up into a defensive posture as if to defeat his father, looking about nervously at the unfamiliar room. He saw her only after some seconds, looking up at him with a smug, superior smile. He glowered at her more than usual, and wordlessly picked out some clothes, going to the bathroom.

She suppressed a laugh to a giggle until he was gone.

Getting to Ginza from Roppongi was a simple matter of riding the Hibiya Line for enough stops and took about ten minutes. They'd decided to skip breakfast given their late dinner and to have a light lunch while shopping instead.

Although they accompanied one another from store to store, they denied each other the opportunity to see what they were actually buying. They'd learned a lot about one another's aesthetics the day prior and had a pretty good idea of what the other would say in advance, and so it became something of an unspoken game of surprise. They paused in the early afternoon for lunch at a trendy little udon restaurant before getting back to it. By the early evening Ichigo was totting eight different outfits over his back by their hooks, one hand to his shoulder. In the other he carried their sundry other purchases in various bags. They took the subway back this time since it was only enough to burden one of them.

The sun was starting to set just as they made it back to the suite. Ichigo set all their things down on the couch and leaned against it. "So any idea which of these restaurants you want to go to?"

"You pick," she said. She had a smug little smile he couldn't quite place.

"The Oak Door," he said. Of the hotel's many restaurants, it was the most singularly focused: its service revolved around cuts of meat supposedly cooked to perfection using wood-burning ovens in a kitchen open for viewing.

"Hmm, okay. Now I get to pick how we handle dressing up," she said, revealing her plan with a cryptic smile.

"Eh?" he said.

"Neither of us knows what the other bought, so we have to surprise each other at the same time. I get the bedroom and you get out here. If you want to go freshen up do it now," she said, making it clear by her tone she wouldn't let him in otherwise.

Ichigo sighed in resignation and went to go use the bathroom and clean up a bit. After some time he
was back outside, finding Rukia had moved all of her things to her bed.

She cheekily waved him off like he was an annoying child and shut the door after him.

He began to assess his purchases as he could hear her starting up the shower. "Well, that's not fair," he muttered. He exhaled and took his time selecting what he wanted to wear.

"Oi, are you ready yet?" Ichigo called about thirty minutes after her shower had finished.

"Just a minute," she responded irritably.

He sighed and went back to idly watching the news just to give his brain some noise.

"Alright, listen, here's how this works," she said after some time, pausing for a second to make sure she had his attention.

He turned the TV off.

"When I say so we both close our eyes and I come out there, and then likewise when I say so we open them again. If you peek before then I will know and you will die, understood?"

"Fine, fine," Ichigo said, waving a hand dismissively even though she couldn't see him.

"Okay, close your eyes now!" she said.

He did so and heard the door open, heard her walk out on the wooden floor.

She was only wearing her shoes inside because they'd never been worn before and stopped when she heard them hit the carpet. She stood for a second before saying, "And open them . . . now!"

They both did so.

Ichigo wore a charcoal grey pinstripe two-button suit with only the top one buttoned. Below he wore a non-button-down maroon dress shirt. His tie was diagonally striped with moderately-sized white bands offset by more intricate ones matching the suit and shirt and he had a matching pocket square. He'd undone a couple of buttons on each cuff just to show he could. He had on a black leather belt and black leather dress shoes and on his left wrist was a heavy-looking, black, all-metal watch that poked out beyond the dress shirt with stark red and white face elements. His hair was irreverent as ever.

Rukia wore a classic black dress very much in the style of the one made popular by Breakfast at Tiffany's. It was ankle-length and had slits up to the lower thigh, was sleeveless with a collar up around her clavicles, and it was partially but conservatively backless. She had on black gloves that anchored to her middle fingers—similar to those of her shihakushō, although Ichigo wouldn't know it—and modest black heels. On her left wrist was an intricate bangle of white tungsten, sterling silver, and white gold in subtle patterns that were hard to make out and which resembled nothing so much as Sode no Shirayuki in its shikai state. She'd pinned her hair back over her ear on the left side but left her trademark troublesome strands in place and was wearing just a touch of makeup to highlight her eyes.

They blinked at one another and stared for just a second before each of them deliberately put on composed expressions, turning their momentary looks of surprise into an impromptu staring contest.

"Still sure you don't want to call it a date?" Rukia asked, lowering her eyelids with an exceedingly elegant mischievous smile.
"I don't even know what you're talking about," Ichigo said, giving one of the most arrogant smirks to have ever graced the earth.

They found their sneers turning into genuine smiles and Ichigo closed his eyes for a second before walking to the door and holding it open for her, saying "Come on."

She walked by him with all the poise he would expect of a Kuchiki and he closed the door, moving back up alongside her on their way to the elevator.
They were fortunate in three ways. First, it was a slow evening so there weren't many other patrons and they didn't need reservations. Second, they looked like an extremely attractive and well-to-do young couple. Third, they were staying at the hotel in a grand executive suite. For all these reasons they received the doting attention of the wait and service staff. They opted to sit outside since the weather was pleasant and it was empty—they had the whole patio to themselves.

They cleaned off their hands with the provided wet cloths as they waited for their waiter. They declined a starter and asked for water with their tea. Ichigo wound up ordering beef sirloin medium-rare with chimichurri sauce and a side of mashed potatoes. Rukia got beef tenderloin medium-rare with horseradish cream and a side of assorted grilled vegetables. It was as she was finishing her order that Ichigo saw something in her gaze flicker as if she'd reached a decision.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, could we also have a table-side bottle of plum wine?" Rukia asked.

"Of course, miss. Would you prefer Yamazaki Umeshu, or Hakkaisan ginjo?"

"Yamazaki Umeshu," she said with a smile. She didn't really know the difference, but it was actually called plum wine and that was good enough for her.

"I'll have the drinks out for you right away," the waiter said, leaving immediately with their orders.

He hadn't even seemed to consider asking for any identification and Rukia felt a little smug at how well she'd read the staff's responses to them. Technically it hadn't been an entirely empty play—Urahara had provided her and Renji with a few different IDs when they'd picked up their gigai. The one she'd picked from the selection had an age of 20 listed. If they'd carded Ichigo, well . . . but she had been sure it wouldn't have come to that.

"What are you doing?" Ichigo asked quietly with more than a little incredulity.

"Ichigo, do you remember how when we first met I told you that I was around ten times your age? That means not only am I legally of age to drink literally everywhere, but also that you should trust me when I tell you to live a little," Rukia said, smiling at him with only a slightly patronizing look.

"And you called me a delinquent for picking a lock," he muttered. "What if he'd called your bluff?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, lifting an eyebrow at him approvingly. "What kind of 17-year-old looks like that? They probably think we're fashion models or something, don't worry about it."

He fumed a bit at her hypocrisy but didn't complain further. Her version of high praise of his appearance wasn't lost on him. In any event the waiter was returning with all their drinks.

"Confidence will always take you a long way," Rukia said after the waiter left. She started to open the bottle.

"You know that with how you just said all that you sound like an older woman trying to get me drunk while giving me 'advice', right?" Ichigo said dryly with an up-quirked eyebrow.

Rukia turned bright red at his assertion but continued trying to open the bottle even as she became
enormously flustered. "Th—that's not what I meant at all and you know it!" she exclaimed. She would've kicked him but it wasn't the venue and more importantly the table didn't easily permit it with how it was structured. Still, she wasn't willing to cause a big scene over it, not that night.

Ichigo leaned forward and took the bottle out of her hands, opening it easily. "Now who's a fool?" he asked idly, glancing up at her with a small smile.

"Don't push your luck, Ichigo," she hissed.

He took her glass, put some ice cubes into it from the metal pail of them they'd been provided, did the same for his own glass, and poured some of the plum wine into both. He placed her glass in front of her and set the bottle and ice bucket off to one side of the table.

"Are you sure you haven't done this before?" she asked with a hint of skepticism, her blush fading as she watched him.

Ichigo ignored the second opening at mocking her commentary and lifted his glass to a toasting position as he said "Never."

Rukia picked up her glass and clinked it against his. "To reunions."

"To confidence," he replied. "Kampai!"

She looked away from him as she sipped at the wine in mild annoyance at his sudden display of the same in making fun of her.

Ichigo lifted the glass to his lips and took a drink, smelling it as he did so. It was a bit dry but a pleasant mix of sweet and sour and had odd notes of vanilla that contrasted with the plum. He found he actually liked it. Rukia seemed similarly pleased with it. He set the glass aside for awhile, sipping at his water. Even if he indulged her by drinking—and the plum wine wasn't that strong—he knew he should only really start after having something on his stomach.

There wasn't long to wait; their dishes arrived rather quickly. They both began to cut up their steaks and sampled them along with the sides and sauces; they were divine. He motioned that they should try one another's as well, and both found they liked what the other had ordered too. The food was simply too good to converse over and so they wound up dismantling the steaks and digging in silently.

The waiter checked in on them occasionally in a Western fashion only to always catch them with their mouths full, so Ichigo took to just giving him a thumbs-up.

After he'd demolished the steak and potatoes Ichigo sat for a moment savoring the aftertaste. He cleansed his palette with the water and then took a long drink of the plum wine that was distinguishable from a gulp only in how long it took. Somehow, although the ice had diluted it, it tasted much richer. He set the glass down. "That was . . . the best steak ever."

Rukia was still eating but gave him a look that basically communicated 'tell me about it'. He let her finish and sipped at the plum wine, continuing to revel in how ridiculous their circumstances were. Compared to how he'd been eating last week the yakitori they'd had after meeting up had been great; their current meal was like being on some other planet. It was almost as if . . . a memory hit him with the force of a train: his father saying You're way too young to be burdened by something cool like sadness. He was suddenly staring into the distance in thought.

"Ichigo?" Rukia asked after a minute. She'd seen his expression turn instantly from celebratory to
moody.

He looked back to her and gave a wan smile, saying "I was just thinking of something, that's all." He'd only narrowly avoided putting 'sorry' at the front of it.

She gave him a small assuaging smile before taking a drink of the wine. He saw then that she'd finished her meal. "If you're worried about ruining the mood, don't be," she said, "I didn't ask for the wine to get you drunk . . . 'To confidence', remember?"

Ichigo glanced at the glass in his own hand before looking back to Rukia. "Liquid courage, huh?"

"I thought it might help," she said, "for both of us." Her tone was gentle.

Ichigo looked at her for a moment before lifting the glass and polishing it off in a single swig. He gave himself more ice before pouring another.

"Fool, I just said this wasn't about getting drunk!" Rukia berated as her eyes went a bit wide at his action.

"Don't talk down to me just because I haven't had alcohol before," Ichigo said hotly, "Even if I abided by the law, I'm not the sort of person who has no idea about such things!" He took a sip of the undiluted wine for comparison's sake before setting it aside, switching to water and then nursing his tea for awhile.

She studied him for awhile as he walked himself through whatever it was he'd learned from his peers about knowing one's limits. At the same time she was continuing to gradually work her way through her own glass. She let out a soft exhalation once she was down to the bottom third of the glass and tipped it back. Maybe he had a point. If it was really there to help there was no point in being timid about it.

Ichigo looked up from their seating area. The restaurant was on the 6th floor on the northeast side of the main tower, nestled in between it and the massive Mori Tower next door. There were outdoor seating areas for some of the other restaurants adjoining them, but they were unoccupied. It was oddly intimate for such a large space by virtue of that. It was just him and Rukia. His attention was drawn back to her by the sound of ice on glass; she was pouring herself another drink.

It was then that their waiter returned yet again, asking "May I get anything else for the two of you tonight?" as he collected their plates.

"Yes, if we could have another bottle, a refill of water, and the check, please?" Rukia said with a winning smile. Her tone and the nature of her request made it subtly clear those would be the last things they would need from him and they would afterwards prefer not to be disturbed. The waiter bowed, left, and returned with the requested items. Rukia tendered her card and with only the slightest curious glance at the fact she was the one paying, he disappeared again to return with the receipt before leaving them be. She signed it and set it aside. Tipping wasn't a thing that was done, even at a Western-owned establishment.

They sat quietly with one another for awhile, building and monitoring their individual progressions. At 660 milliliters the bottle was only good for about six thin drinks or four stout ones, and they'd been generous. As they finished their second ones they both had a faint blush: Ichigo was fit enough that even with no previous experience or tolerance he could handle it; Rukia wasn't much of a drinker but it was far below her capabilities even accounting for her size. He topped both of them up again and then they ignored the drinks, regarding one another.
"I really did think it was the end," Ichigo said eventually. He did so without any remorse, like it was just a fact. "Since I've got no reiroyoku . . . well, I don't know what'll happen, but I figured . . . I figured I would just have to live out my life trying to manage as best as I could, and eventually I would wind up in Rukongai and take stock then. Either I would have an aptitude again and I could make it into the Seireitei or I would just be out there until one day I wasn't anymore," he said.

Rukia said nothing and watched him.

"All of this . . . gets taken away from us. I mean, that's true even if you don't know about Hollows or Shinigami so it's no excuse not to live, but once you know there's another side, another part to the story, it becomes really easy to think of this as an extended training session. The stakes aren't quite so high anymore. There's not as much of a need to rush or worry about small things," he continued, "The best thing you can do is try not to trouble others too much while preparing yourself." He took a drink of water for a moment, thinking things through before looking her right in the eyes. "You know my dad's a Shinigami, right?"

She glanced down at the table in wordless acknowledgement. She'd suspected something was off about the Kurosaki family since the first day she'd met them. When she and all his other friends had arrived in Karakura after the defeat of Aizen she'd felt Isshin's reiatsu. It'd been incredibly weak and she'd only barely noticed it, but it'd stood out against the others she knew for its very unfamiliarity. When she'd become a fukutaichō, she'd done some digging and . . .

"He's the one who taught me the technique that . . ." he trailed off. He wasn't willing to get into that at the same time. "Anyway," he resumed, "when the battle was transitioning from the fake Karakura to the real one, things looked pretty bad. At one point he asked me 'Will you sit there and cry that you couldn't protect anyone?', and I've been thinking about that ever since." He paused to take a long drink of the plum wine. Explaining everything forced him to wander across subjects and the alcohol both was and wasn't helping.

She found herself mimicking the action, and when she looked at him again he was staring into her eyes as if he could see right through her.

"I never told you about how things were before my mom died, even after everything that happened," he said, "and I didn't tell you how that changed things. The most important thing to know is that she was like the sun, and we were all in her orbit. Without her . . . we had to orbit each other, or we'd have flown apart. And so without ever discussing it, without so much as a word on the subject, we took up roles. My role was to protect. And now . . . I can't do that really. I haven't been able to." He paused again, switching to water once more.

Rukia glanced away so she wouldn't stare at him in sympathy again. She thought back to her feelings in the Senzaikyū, comparing them to how she'd treated him upon her return to Karakura. She'd misjudged him so tremendously, and had resolved to never do it again. To see him like this rekindled that pitying feeling once more, but she wouldn't insult his honor in such a way again after the incident in Shinjuku.

"But," Ichigo said with a sudden shift in attitude, "I thought about what my dad said to me then and I thought about Karin. Karin wasn't handy like Yuzu, or hardy like me, or a joker like dad, so she decided her role was to never make us worry no matter what. She was like the ultimate straight-man, the perfect tsukkomi." He sounded both proud and sort of cocky as he said "I'm not stupid; I know she's been going to see Urahara to help out with Hollows and Pluses. So . . . now I'm the one who's never supposed to make people worry, no matter what!" Rukia's eyes were drawn back to his at the iron in his voice and she felt them widen a bit at how determined his gaze was.
Ichigo met her look and focused on her as he said "And that's why I resolved . . . it sounds stupid when I say it after something dramatic like that, but I saw this famous martial arts movie sometime after on TV, and the hero, he had this line about 'the art of fighting without fighting', and so that's what I resolved to do! Even if I have no reiryoku, no reiatsu, no zanpakutō, no anything, I will continue on!"

Her mouth fell open a bit at his intensity. It was very much Ichigo as she had always thought of him in her heart. It filled her with pride to see him so. You—you're not even sad at any of this at all, are you, you idiot? If anything you're . . .

He took his wine cup in hand and finished it in a single drink, setting it down firmly on the table as he leaned forward to look at Rukia more closely. "So now you can see why your search and all of that was a problem for me. It makes me happy that Soul Society is concerned about me—maybe that means that someday or somehow I can get my reiryoku back—but I'm already resolved to keep fighting! I'll stand by everyone however I can until both my body and soul die!" he said with a confident grin.

Rukia abruptly jerked her head to the left as if she'd been physically slapped by the memory he invoked. The words and the attitude were yet again all-too-close to something Kaien had once told her and the talk of Isshin's status had primed her with the thought that . . . she'd instinctively turned such that her hair would still hide her eyes and some token errant thought of hers congratulated itself that she'd only pinned one side of it back. She told herself that it was the wine loosening her inhibitions as she squeezed her eyes shut to keep away tears she could feel forming at their corners.

Ichigo blinked at the sudden motion and felt rising concern in his gut. "Hey, Rukia, are you—was it something I—" he began.

"I'm fine," she said, grasping her water glass and taking a drink. Neither her voice nor her hand trembled in the slightest. She turned back to him with an apologetic smile but her eyes still betrayed her. "It was just a sudden stomach cramp. I think the steak was too good; I ate too quickly," she covered with a small laugh.

His expression gradually softened and he sat back up fully. Even so, he knew her well enough to know when she was lying to him. His dad's words echoed in his mind again but with a different emphasis than how he'd actually said them: You're way too young to be burdened by something cool like sadness. His mind turned to the start of dinner as he smiled at her. "Drinking so quickly probably isn't helping, you know," he chastised to cover his thoughtfulness. Rukia . . . what happened to you in the past that's stained you with so much pain . . . and why do I remind you of it?

She drew up an annoyed expression, pointing at him "Like you're one to talk, making drunken declarations like that!"

"I'm not drunk," he said, glowering back at her a bit. He added a "Tch" for theater and finished off what was left of his tea.

"Ichigo," Rukia said after awhile to draw his attention, her tone somewhat more serious. He looked to her and she sighed lightly before continuing. "This isn't my turn, it's just some things you deserve to know. First, I only fully knew about your father after the war was over, so please don't think I was concealing that from you from the start. Second, the way that we were keeping tabs on you was your badge. In addition to everything else, it functions as a transmitter: it's constantly relaying information on the user's position and reiatsu. It can also function as a communication device, either one-way or two-way. When you put it away—"

"Don't worry about it," he said, cutting her off.
"Eh?" she asked, her eyes widening a bit in surprise.

"That kind of thing doesn't matter," he said, meeting her gaze. "I don't doubt your intentions and since Soul Society has asked you to be here I don't doubt theirs either."

Rukia's expression became a little softer and she gave him a small but keen smile. She looked almost impressed at his maturity.

"Anyway, that was all kind of heavy for dinner," Ichigo said casually, "so let's just enjoy finishing this wine and get back, yeah?"

"A true romantic," Rukia scoffed, finishing her glass and pouring out the last of the second bottle equally between them.

"You really need to knock it off with that stuff, people will get the wrong idea," Ichigo muttered.

They sat with each other largely in silence, enjoying the company of one another over their last drinks.

Ichigo flopped backwards onto his bed, feeling like he was sloshing around a bit at the sudden lack of motion. It had been the second bottle—the second bottle had been the one to watch out for. He'd been drinking far too quickly while giving his speech. Even something weak like plum wine could add up.

"Don't fall asleep in your suit!" Rukia admonished.

"But it's the true salaryman experience," Ichigo said airily as he closed his eyes. He opened them again as it became clear from the motion of the bed that Rukia was sitting down on the edge of it next to him.

She turned her head over her shoulder and pointed at the dress. "Can you help me unzip this?" She could tell from his expression how he'd taken it and swatted him only somewhat less hard than usual in deference to his state. "It wasn't an offer, you fool! It's just that I can't reach the zipper easily!"

Ichigo grumbled and reached up from his position, bringing his hands up to the back of her dress. He found the concealed zipper and pulled it down to where it ended right at the bottom of her lower back. Due to his position and the backless nature of the dress his fingers wound up brushing against her skin and he found himself looking away in embarrassment at how soft and warm she was. She got up the moment he was done and said only "Thank you," as she went to the bathroom to change.

He just lay on the bed and closed his eyes again.

She surprised him by coming out again relatively quickly in her pajamas. "You're not going to be sick, are you?" she asked as she moved to hang the dress up in the closet they'd agreed was hers. There was an unusual note of concern in her voice.

"No," he replied. He was quite sure he wasn't, he was just oddly tired and didn't care to move. "I'm shocked you're not hogging the greatest shower in the world."

"I showered before we left so it's fine, I just had to wash the makeup off," she replied. With that she was once more standing beside his bed and was pulling him up into a sitting position. She was surprisingly strong given her size and weight. "Plus it means you can't fall asleep like this. Come on, you're going to have to get up."

Ichigo pushed himself up mostly to spite her and stood, making his way over to the bathroom door.
"Do you need help getting undressed?" Rukia called after him. It sounded only halfway like she was teasing. The other half was more of that same concern.

"Make up your mind about whether you're propositioning me or not!" he shot back as he got inside and closed the door behind him. He made sure to turn the fan on to obscure any sound he made. It did prove trickier to get undressed than he imagined. "Damn woman gets me drunk illegally and then has the nerve to make fun of me for it," he muttered.

After moderate struggle he managed to hang the suit back up on its hanger properly. He could only assume she'd moved it in there for him because it certainly hadn't been there before. At last he was free to receive the tender mercies of the rain shower. He was sitting beneath it when he heard her call through the door "You better not fall asleep in there either!"

"You wish!" he snapped to be heard above the water. Sometime later he finished, dressed, brushed his teeth, and opened the door. Rukia had all the lights off and was lying on top of her blankets considering the city. He saw she'd pulled back his bed's covers and blankets for him and almost found it endearing. He plotted his course before turning off the bathroom fan and lights, setting off in the dark. "Don't you even dare offer to help me," he warned as he transited in front of her, "The effect started wearing off by the end of the shower." He slipped into bed and pulled the covers over himself.

Rukia said nothing for awhile before asking "Ichigo, it was fun, right?"

What she heard in response sounded like "Yeah; go to sleep."

She watched the lights of Tokyo as she listened to his breathing. Awhile after the sound became regular she slowly got up walked over to his bed, tucking him in properly. She found she couldn't help but smile a little at his sleeping face. He looked peaceful. She then went and closed the blinds in both rooms before returning to her bed, lying back onto it as she had before. She pulled her soul pager out from the sheets and began to write her first report to Ukitake.

Even after she finished, hit send, and crawled under the covers it was a long time before she fell asleep.
The first thing Ichigo was aware of was a headache and the second was that his forehead was damp. As he started to sit up and reached for his temples he felt a pair of hands on his shoulders gently holding him down.

"Don't get up yet," Rukia said quietly.

He opened his eyes to find the room was really dark. He could just barely discern that she was sitting next to him on the bed. "Rukia . . . ? What—What time is it?"

She lightly shushed him and pulled what he realized was a cool washcloth from his forehead. "I'm here. Just take it easy and don't move for now." She gently slid a hand under his head and slowly lifted it up, putting another pillow underneath to elevate him. "How bad is your headache?"

"Really annoying but not debilitating or anything," he replied.

"Do you feel nauseous?" she asked.

"Just thirsty; my mouth feels weird," he said.

She brought the end of a bottle of mineral water to his lips. He lifted a hand and took it, drinking at his own pace. "Sorry," she said, "I should've made you slow down while you were talking last night. Letting you have four drinks in under a half hour on your first night was stupid." She sounded guilty.

"That probably would've just encouraged me," he said honestly. He'd wanted to play it cool, and felt he'd made a decent attempt. Rukia brought a hand up to his forehead to check for signs of fever or sweating and he found something comforting about her touch.

"As hangovers go, this is pretty mild and about what I would expect for somebody who had the sense to hydrate and drink on a full stomach, so hopefully it won't be too regrettable," she stated. "Keep drinking the water; I have some more here when you finish that one." She removed her hand.

Noting what could be interpreted as a compliment, for once Ichigo did what he was told and finished the water bottle, holding it up.

She took it and gave him another one.

After he was halfway through that one he asked "How'd you know?"

"You started making noises in your sleep and you were sweating when I checked on you," she said.

He finished the rest of the bottle, accepting the third and sipping at it. He was starting to feel less thirsty already. "You never said what time it was."

"It's 2:16 PM," she replied after a moment.

"Our schedules are gonna be messed up at this rate," he muttered with a wince.

"Don't worry about that right now," she said.

"How long have you been up?" he asked, looking to her.
She paused before saying merely "Awhile."

Even as Ichigo's eyes adjusted to the darkness he found it was hard to see Rukia clearly. From her word choice and affect he could tell she wasn't in a mood anything like she'd been the night before. He reached out a hand to her, winding up putting it on one of her pajama-clad knees. "Hey, if this is about me, don't worry. I'll be fine. It's a pretty mild hangover, you said it yourself. I had fun last night —" he said to assure her.

"It's not about you," she said. There was a pause that he felt communicated 'mostly'. "It's about me," she said with a sigh.

He withdrew his hand and very slowly pushed himself up, ignoring the throbbing in his head that accompanied it.

She made no move to stop him that time. They sat beside one another in the dark, the only sound being him taking the occasional drink of water.

He could tell something was coming from the atmosphere between them and so he waited.

"I was thinking about things. About how removed all this is from everything . . . there's a lot you don't know about me, Ichigo. The time I've spent around you is less than half a percent of my life," she said softly. She would have to move very carefully to skirt the topic she still had to avoid. She didn't know if she would ever be able to address that one in full to anyone, even and especially to Ichigo but she chose to talk about what she could right then. "In that less than half a percent of my life, I've faced death more times than in all the rest put together by far. I'm not talking about fights, even ones where I could've died; I mean times when I was going to die—when I should've died."

He said nothing and looked sideways at her. She was looking into the darkness contemplatively.

Rukia went on without really stopping: "I can only think of one time before I met you. Since I've met you, there have been nine times. Those nine were at the hands of Fishbone D, Shrieker, the Sōkyoku, Aizen, Grimmjow twice, Aaroniero, Zommari, and Yammy. Of those nine I only managed to survive on my own against one. In every single other case I was powerless to stop my own impending death."

Ichigo was surprised as she turned to face him and then disturbed by the small smile she offered. Her eyes showed no humor in them whatsoever. The pounding in his head somehow seemed very far away although it hadn't stopped.

"I don't want to die, Ichigo, but I'm also not that afraid of death. If I was then I wouldn't be here. That's what being a soldier necessitates. So understand that when I tell you this it's not because I'm afraid or live in fear of these memories." Her tone was cold like a grave.

He met her look resolutely and gave only a small nod. He would've never suggested otherwise.

"Some of those had extenuating circumstances, but even so. You saved me from Fishbone. Chad saved me from Shrieker. You and everyone else saved me from the Sōkyoku. Urahara's benevolence saved me from Aizen. You and then Shinji saved me from Grimmjow. Nii-sama saved me from Zommari. And then it was you who saved me from Yammy. The only one I managed to kill, even as he almost—should have—killed me was Aaroniero," she said.

She put more venom into that last name than he'd ever heard her use before. He watched as her view returned to some point in the distance.

"It's not that I'm ungrateful, or that I resent it, or that I think I'm weak, or even that I'm fatalistic. It
just . . . really pisses me off!" she snarled with sudden heat. There was a lot that went unsaid. There
were only three times she'd saved someone else as she herself had been so frequently saved: she'd
kept Fishbone from killing him, kept her brother from doing the same, and saved Kon from being
destroyed. There was much that she carefully avoided. But there was also a lot that on display. She
hadn't even been able to keep him from getting a hangover; she'd actively caused it.
Ichigo stared at her in sudden recognition. He could tell there were things there beyond just rage at
her occasional powerlessness. One of them had something to do with the kill she'd secured. What
about the one from before that she hadn't mentioned at all? Were they connected somehow? Did that
have something to do with her sadness the other night? And apart from all that, it sounded almost
exactly like how he felt. She seemed to be unwilling to continue on and so after waiting for quite
awhile he sighed and said "I . . . didn't beat Aizen."
Rukia turned to him then with a look of pure confusion, even as it was clear her own anger still
boiled.
He met her gaze calmly and related the outlines of the story: "I don't know what Urahara told you
guys but I'm guessing he gave me virtually all the credit. Like I almost said last night, dad taught me
the 'final' Getsuga Tenshō. The ultimate attack of it was called Mugetsu. I used it on Aizen and
crippled him temporarily but . . . using it made me lose my powers. He was getting back up and
ready to continue on right as Urahara arrived. Urahara had done some kind of kidō earlier in the
battle at fake Karakura that finally activated and sealed him. I was stronger than him, but in the end
all I did was weaken him. Urahara beat Aizen. He's the real hero of the war. All the rest of us were .
. . pieces they moved around against one another."
Her expression wasn't disappointed in or even disbelieving of him. It read to him like she didn't
know why he was telling it to her.
He continued on after only a short break. "I didn't beat Gin, and it turned out he wasn't even a real
enemy. You know I didn't beat Yammy. I didn't beat Ulquiorra either. He . . . basically killed me.
Anyone else would have just died there. It was the Hollow that got up and fought and killed him
before using high-speed regeneration on me. I didn't even beat Nnoitra, Kenpachi did. The last guy I
beat was Grimmjow and it was beating him that left me too weak to do anything but get kicked
around by Nnoitra. And now I realize . . ."
Rukia watched as Ichigo glanced down from her for a moment before meeting her gaze again. There
was something cold in his eyes rather than the heat she'd become used to seeing in them again.
"When you beat Aaroniero," he said, opting to work through it chronologically, "I felt
your reiatsu fade. I was going to investigate when Ulquiorra arrived and claimed you were dead. I
didn't believe it and kept trying to leave, but when he revealed it had been him who had kidnapped
Inoue, I fought him since it was clear I wouldn't be able to get past him otherwise. I was losing when
Grimmjow showed up and sealed him away temporarily before challenging me to an even fight. And
now I learn that during that time Zommari was going to kill you. That's bad enough, but even if it
had been entirely otherwise, who knows if I could've beaten Zommari?"
She stared at him and he stared back. Their eyes didn't search but just communicated things there
weren't quite words for—not words either of them would readily accept from the other anyway—like
guilt, regret, sympathy, and contrition.
"If gramps hadn't sent reinforcements, we'd all be dead several times over. It's not quite the same, but
. . . I understand why what you said pisses you off," he offered with certainty, before looking to one
side. He winced as the headache that had seemed so far away suddenly returned to hold a rock
concert in his head. He fought against it as a new memory vaulted into his consciousness. "I know


when we split up in Las Noches you told me 'don't waste your care on me' and I remember Renji saying it was 'only an insult', so don't take it as—" he started.

She cut him off by raising a hand and placing a finger to his lips. He stopped instantly, looking back to her. She seemed to be assessing something. After only a split second she moved her hand to his forehead and started to lightly press him backwards, saying "Lay back down and drink your water, you'll make your headache worse if you strain yourself."

"Rukia . . ." he protested, although he didn't resist the motion and cooperated.

"Ichigo, we're not on a battlefield right now. Don't worry about it," she said softly, "For once, just let me look after you." She gave his forehead a light brush before sliding her legs off the bed and standing, going out to the living room and quietly shutting the door behind her. After a moment he could hear her talking, presumably ordering room service for them.

He realized then that he was oddly hungry in addition to still being thirsty. He continued to work through the water bottles as his mind processed what had just happened. He was, even still, a bother to and burden upon others, but he could tell she felt the same way about herself. Both of them had resolved to hold the whole weight of the world up by themselves and didn't want to offend the honor of the other in doing so, even as they each wanted to help share the load and as they were crushed by it. It was depressing to think about. They were . . . a very difficult pair of allies.

After finishing the fifth bottle of water he slowly sat up to go to the bathroom.

Ichigo had gotten back to bed and was finishing a sixth water bottle when Rukia opened the door and poked her head in, saying "There's some food here if you're hungry."

He followed after her into the living room. The lighting was quite dim and the TV was on but the volume was low.

She'd set it all up on the table in front of the entertainment center and had gotten him a rather traditional set of white rice, miso soup, pickles, and what appeared to be some kind of smoothie. For herself she'd chosen to be adventurous and gotten linguine al carbonara and what looked like cappuccino. She was sitting on the floor next to the table rather than on the couch proper and waiting for him.

He sat down beside her and said just "Thanks," before starting to eat. The smoothie seemed to have flavors of banana, almond, and soy milk. It was a weird compliment to the meal, but he figured there was some kind of logic behind it. They ate in silence for awhile, just kind of idly watching TV. It was a foreign film, something to do with some sort of school for wizards. Ichigo wasn't really following along with it. Rukia only sort of seemed to be paying attention to it herself. He found that the more he ate the better he felt, and so he did his best to make his way through the meal relatively quickly. At last he asked "I take it this isn't the first time you've had to do this?"

"Not by a long shot," she muttered, twirling up some of the last of the pasta and eating it. She was surprised at how good the Western dish was. "Eating things with salt and sugar seems to help most people recover quicker and having something simple and starchy like rice can calm the stomach."

"Sounds like the Gotei 13 knows how to party," he said with just a small laugh. He couldn't imagine any other way the normally reserved Rukia would've acquired so extensive a knowledge of dealing with intoxication other than by being around drunkards. She'd never seemed the party type and having spent time around Soul Society's officers, especially those of the 11th Division, it was the only thing he could think of that fit.
"It's not funny, you know," she said, looking over at him. Despite her words she had a small knowing smile. "At any given time we routinely have something like ten percent of our troops inebriated; it's no way to run a fighting force," she said dismissively.

"One of your duties as a fukutaichō is to yell at the drunks to shape up, isn't it?" he asked with a tone that gave away he knew what the answer was.

"Maybe," Rukia said with a small huff.

"No wonder you're so pissed off," Ichigo said with a smile.

She tried to frown at him but found she couldn't quite manage to do it. Her small smile was too stubborn.

They finished their meals and she called to have the dishes taken away. Without ever really discussing it both seemed to agree to laze about on the couch watching TV. They made it through a movie about a complicated heist at a Las Vegas casino by a team of attractive misfits and were in the middle of one about illegal street car racing when Ichigo heard Rukia lightly snore. He turned to see she'd slumped over to one side and fallen asleep on her half of the couch. He realized she must've not gotten much sleep at all. Had she been that concerned for him? Or had she been that brooding? Or both?

He got up and went to pull her sheets back before returning to her and slowly scooping her up, taking her to bed and tucking her in. He watched her for a bit and made up his mind about a few different things before going to turn off the TV, showering, and getting dressed in some of the clothes he'd arrived in Tokyo with. Taking pains to be quiet, he left a note for her on the bathroom door in case she woke up and went to the hotel gym for several hours to clear his head.

She was still asleep when he got back so he showered again, changed into night clothes, watched another movie, and went to bed early after setting an alarm on his cell phone. He would make it all up to her the next day.

---

Thursday, August 1, 2002

Rukia woke up with a yawn and was surprised to find she was in bed and that something smelled good. Opening her eyes and sitting up slowly she found a tray of food on two swing-out legs resting below her torso. On it was an omelet, a small salad featuring cucumbers, and two rice dumplings—all her favorites in one way or another—as well as some sort of fruit drink. She blinked and looked around. Ichigo was sitting on the regular chair, eating a sandwich of some kind. The blinds were partially open and morning sunlight came through in blades.

"Oh, seems that Sleeping Beauty finally woke up," he said with a smile as he noticed her. "Who knew it just took a hot meal?" he added dryly.

She frowned at the unknown reference, thinking he was just making fun of her. It immediately turned to confusion. "How did I get here?"

"You passed out yesterday afternoon. I put you to bed and since you were still out when I woke up I figured you were exhausted and would appreciate some food," he replied around his croque monsieur sandwich.

"How uncharacteristically gentlemanly," Rukia said, taunting. "I'd almost think you were concerned for my well-being, Ichigo."
"I have my moments," Ichigo said idly. He finished the last bite of his sandwich and after getting up to wash his hands returned to find her digging in. "Anyway, eat up and get dressed, we've got stuff to do today."

"Eh?" she asked. She hadn't heard of any plans.

"You'll see," he said with a cryptic smile.

She frowned again suspiciously but went back to eating; she was starving.

"You still haven't said where we're going," Rukia said, peering at him. She was wearing a one-piece summer dress and had her bangle on again.

"That's because it's a surprise," Ichigo replied matter-of-factly. He was in a fairly nice pair of slacks and a polo shirt and retained his watch.

They'd taken the Hibiya Line to Ginza Station before transferring to the Marunouchi Line to get to Tokyo Station. They'd then boarded an actual Japan Railways train on the Keiyo Line and raced through light industrial, residential, and dock areas along the edge of Tokyo Bay. Ichigo had taken care with their seating and had also been subtly provoking Rukia for the final 15 minute leg of the trip to keep her focused on him instead of looking outside. She'd seemingly not really noticed the composition of most of the other passengers. They'd gotten off at Maihana Station outside Tokyo proper in Chiba Prefecture and were heading toward the main gates and ticketing booths.

"And what's with your attitude today?" Rukia muttered. She was beginning to notice that their surroundings were getting increasingly stranger.

"Sometimes I just get really irritated when you don't trust me," Ichigo said crisply.

"You know I trust you, Ichigo," Rukia said with only a bit of injury in her tone.

Ichigo felt a little bad for leading her on but was sure the surprise would make up for it. Arriving at the ticket booth, he ordered for them, and got Rukia to hand him her ID. He was able to secure a 1-Day Junior Passport for the main park for himself but she had to get an Adult one. The price difference wasn't great at any rate. He kept her distracted long enough that she didn't notice what was being said and just turned over her card.

On entry he was saved from having the surprise ruined by her exceedingly poor grasp of written English and lack of pop-culture knowledge outside of anime and manga. They walked into what seemed to be a large building only for it to reveal a thoroughfare that was entirely enclosed above in glass and bordered with shops in what Ichigo knew to be early-20th century American architecture. The crowds were a bit thick and parents and excited children were everywhere.

Rukia looked about in confusion as they walked. "So what is this place anyway, some kind of shopping center?"

"Yeah, something like that," Ichigo said as they continued making their way forward through the throngs of people. It wasn't much farther.

"What kind of mall makes you pay to get in anyway?" Rukia said in consternation and disbelief. She'd never heard of such a thing.

Ichigo said nothing in response.
"Are you even listening to me? This mystery trip is starting to get kind of old, you know!" she remonstrated.

"Look up," he said simply.

She blinked at him and turned her head forward. They'd come to one end of the thoroughfare and the slanted glass roof ended on two metal pillars that visually cut the open space beyond into arch-topped thirds. Perfectly framed in the center was a majestic ivory castle with soaring spires and towers, each topped with a steeply-sided conical blue roof. It'd been cloudy earlier in the morning and they were still scattered about; right as she saw the castle a cloud somewhere up above finished transiting between it and the sun, causing it to suddenly light up. It practically glowed. Rukia had never seen anything like it before. "Wha—what is this?" she said, her eyes going wide with wonder.

"The Happiest Place On Earth," Ichigo said with theatrical confidence.

Rukia turned to him, still in shock, to find him broadly smiling down at her.

"Tokyo Disneyland," he added, "it's a theme park."

Rukia blinked again, not really getting the meaning of the phrase, before looking to the castle once more. "Can . . . can we go up to it?"

"Of course, anything you want," Ichigo said. He lightly placed a hand on her nearer shoulder to move her forward with him.
"So they're characters from anime that's made in America?" Rukia asked.

"I'm pretty sure the order of events behind saying that is wrong, but close enough," Ichigo said. He seemed to remember having once read somewhere that anime had been heavily influenced by Disney's animation. It became apparent to him that she was trying to mentally reconcile the place that produced *Ocean's Eleven* and *The Fast and the Furious* as being the same place that the stuff in the park had come from.

"That's weird," she said at last.

Ichigo mentally calculated the risks of letting Rukia watch something like *Aladdin*, *Toy Story*, *Mulan*, or *The Lion King*. He'd seen them mostly by virtue of growing up around Karin and Yuzu. To his knowledge Rukia had never been one for song. He didn't want to be woken up by being serenaded with "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" some day. Even so, he could only laugh as he was struck by the image of her singing "I'll Make A Man Out Of You," to her subordinates. If there was blowback it would go both ways and maybe that was good enough.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Nothing, nothing, I'll show you some of the movies sometime. We can probably get them through the hotel's on-demand system or something. Promise," Ichigo replied with a small smile.

She crossed her arms and looked at him for awhile with her eyes half-lidded and her lips pursed. "I'll hold you to that," she said at last. She looked down as if in thought.

"I don't think you'll be able to convince the *sōtaichō* to make Chappyland," Ichigo said flatly. He was privately pleased that Disney didn't have a major rabbit-based character and the minor ones they did have hadn't impressed Rukia.

"That's not what I was thinking about, you fool!" she exclaimed. It was just then that they came to a halt. It had been their second ride on the tea cups of Alice's Tea Party. Ichigo had taken to not watching their surroundings whirl about to avoid getting ill. They both got up and made their way off the ride. Rukia appeared determined to march back to the start of the line. It was definitively her favorite thing in Fantasyland.

"Kuchiki-*dono*, not to call your choices into question, but there are still other areas to explore," he said mildly.

She stopped and turned to him, putting her hands on her hips as she declared "What could possibly be better than this?" before gesturing at Alice's Tea Party.

He gave a smug smile. "Space Mountain."

Rukia tilted her head at him in confusion.

His smile turned slightly ominous.
"Ichigo, you idiot, what was that?! I thought we were gonna die!" Rukia exclaimed. She was trying to kick him and he had to restrain her wrists to keep her from hitting him, but he could tell it was mostly theater. She'd been increasingly nervous as the ride had begun and had screamed her head off once it had really started. She was just mad at him for not telling her what a roller coaster was in advance.

"Want to do it again?" he asked with a smirk.

She looked up at him with a faux-angry expression. "I'm not afraid!" she declared.

"Come on then," he said, letting go of her and heading back to the start of the line.

She exhaled loudly and followed after him.

While they were waiting he said, "You know, there's an amusement park by Mt. Fuji that has one that goes over three times as fast as this one . . ."

Rukia kicked him in the shin and crossed her arms angrily. "If you think you can con me into doing something three times as ridiculous as this just to prove I'm not scared you're sorely mistaken, Kurosaki Ichigo!"

Before breaking for lunch in the middle of the afternoon they'd ridden Space Mountain three times, Big Thunder Mountain an equal number, and Gadget's Go Coaster twice. The fastpass system had made it rather easy to orbit between them all without much waiting. They eventually wound up at Tomorrowland's Pan Galactic Pizza Port and got calzones for lunch. They were filling and decent for what they were but Ichigo resolved they would have to have real Italian and good pizza at some stage.

They'd been eating in silence for awhile when Rukia glanced to him with a dithering and mildly apprehensive look. "So . . . tell me about this place near Mt. Fuji," she said quietly.

Ichigo genuinely smiled. "Oh, decided you like roller coasters, huh?"

"Maybe," she said, without committing to it.

"The place is called Fuji-Q Highland, and it currently has four roller coasters. Two of them are small and one of those is way smaller than even Gadget's Go Coaster here. However the other two, Fujiyama and Dodonpa, are huge. Dodonpa just opened last year and accelerates to 172 kilometers an hour in under two seconds; it's the fastest roller coaster in the world," Ichigo explained. He'd thought about trying to go there on his own and done some research before dismissing it as impractical. Plus going to a theme park alone was kind of sad in his view.

Rukia looked to one side dubiously. "I'll think about it," she said after awhile.

Ichigo decided not to tease her about it—it was kind of cute that she liked them.

They wound up going through all of the bigger attractions except for Splash Mountain. Ichigo had warned Rukia off doing it unless she wanted to risk getting soaked. It looked to be something of a gamble in that regard. Pirates of the Caribbean was definitely the highlight of the slower rides. They went through the Space Mountain queue one more time as the sun was starting to dip low on the horizon and returned to the park as the sky was splashed with color. They likewise went to Alice's Tea Party again for a final spin. He got her back into the vicinity of the lit-up castle as the sky turned
fully black.

"It's beautiful," she cooed. It had been pretty in the sunlight but at night it gleamed like a beacon.

Ichigo checked his phone to confirm the time and smirked. The castle abruptly went dark.

"Eh?" Rukia said with a note of concern.

It suddenly came back on in a slowly shifting display of colors as white arcs flared up behind it, detonating into multicolored explosions while the strains of "Fantasy in the Sky" came on over loudspeakers. They were right underneath the main display area and the fireworks launched up in waves of increasing intensity. Ichigo hazarded a glance at Rukia and found she was staring up in amazement. He followed her gaze up. After a few minutes the display reached a crescendo and the whole sky lit up in a spray of rainbow hues. The heavens fell dark again and the castle settled back into its previous white lighting, the music fading.

Rukia said nothing and Ichigo looked down to her to find her beaming happily at what she'd just seen. He couldn't help but smile a little in empathy. It was as he did so that her eyes shifted over to him. She kept smiling and gave him a look that seemed to express genuine thanks for what she'd just seen.

"You must have seen fireworks before in Soul Society," Ichigo said. He remembered they were Kūkaku's specialty.

"Not like that," Rukia said with surety. Her smile didn't waver at all as she'd never seen anything like it before and knew she'd never forget it. She had no idea how to thank him for the memory.

Ichigo found himself smiling back just as much and they regarded one another for some time without a word. After awhile he glanced aside toward the park entrance before looking back to her. "I think there's a parade or something in a bit, but my counter-proposal is we get out of here and catch one of the movies I promised you over delivery pizza."

"I'd like that," Rukia said simply.

"Then let's go," Ichigo said, turning to walk toward the entrance.

She followed alongside.

"So do you want to see a movie about a lion who learns to become king, or one about a young woman who becomes a soldier to save her family and an empire?" he asked idly as they went. He was pretty sure they'd be available and if they weren't they'd have a DVD delivered. He wanted to stay away from direct romances and Toy Story was a bit melancholy.

She looked sideways at him at those descriptions, wondering if there was supposed to be a deeper poignancy behind suggesting those two movies in particular. "Which is nicer?"

"Probably the one about the woman actually—I think it's loosely based on a Chinese legend. The one about the lion is a little sad in parts I guess," Ichigo said. He only sort of remembered them as it'd been awhile. What he did remember was Yuzu bawling about the death of Mufasa to the annoyance of Karin and the fretting of their dad.

"Then let's see that one," Rukia replied.

He nodded.
It quickly became obvious that housekeeping had been in while they'd been out. It turned out the on-demand system actually did have a large selection of titles for kids, and *Mulan* was there. Rukia ordered the pizza—they'd decided on a Super Korean Purukogi from Pizza Hut—and started the movie. Ichigo went to get the food when it arrived so Rukia could continue watching without pausing. Lacking plates, they ate carefully with napkins.

He found the movie a bit saccharine but a look over at her revealed she was enjoying it, so he kept watching. It was good enough if it made her happy. He was more interested in the pizza; it was spicy in an interesting way and a lot more engaging than the calzone had been. She only had a few slices and so he wound up eating more than half of it by himself. He excused it by reasoning he was still growing.

Sometime later the movie ended and Rukia glanced over to him with a small smile. "That was cute."

Ichigo closed his eyes and shrugged a little since she was the expert at that. When he opened them again he found she was leaning toward him and was pointing a finger right in front of his nose. He was surprised at how fast and quietly she'd moved.

"Tell me why you were laughing on the tea cups when you promised we'd watch some of these movies." She raised an eyebrow to emphasize the demand.

Ichigo met her look directly. "They always have musical numbers, and I was imagining you singing that 'I'll Make A Man Out Of You' song to your troops," he said with only a hint of humor. In this case honesty seemed like the best policy.

She blinked at him before laughing.

After a moment he found he was starting to laugh with her.

She poked him in the forehead only a little bit hard at that, saying "I don't sing," without any great emotional attachment. She got up and started making her way to the bedroom. It wasn't really true . . . it was more that she hadn't sung for a very, very long time.

"I bet you sing very well," Ichigo said after her. His tone was perfectly earnest. He wasn't really teasing.

"I don't sing!" she called back plainly. As she thought about it she decided that might be her surest way of surprising him with a memorable experience in return for what he'd given her.

"So does that mean karaoke tomorrow is cancelled?" Ichigo asked. That time he was teasing. He heard the bathroom door shut and the fan come on, shortly followed by the water.

He didn't think she was really mad so he smiled slightly and turned off the TV, disposing of the pizza box before returning to the suite and turning off the lights in the living room. He went to the bedroom and turned off all the lights there as well, considering Tokyo in darkness from his bed before his thoughts turned to the day that had just passed by. It had been quite something. Sometime later he failed to notice the sound of the water and fan turning off but did hear the bathroom door opening. He turned his head and saw it was dark inside.

Rukia stepped out into view. She was wearing a different set of pajamas but it was her attitude that stole his attention. She moved with an effortless grace. As she saw him she began to sing the song he'd pointed out from the movie, her voice having a pure, resonating quality to it, like that of a bell. There was a measured mix of sadness and hope in the way she delivered the lyrics, even for so martial and aggressive a set of words. She sang only Li Shang’s lines and took a few liberties with
the timing to make them continuous, making the song her own. She was looking directly at him but her affect was as though she didn't see him at all. As she continued singing she began to slowly but smoothly dance out into the open, silhouetted and lit by the skyline. Whenever the lyrics would invoke the word "you" she would turn in time to look through him. She delivered her final lines with a flawless pirouette and leaned forward as if to address the last words directly to him.

It was then that he saw her eyes come into focus as she actually looked at him. His mouth was agape and he could only just barely close it, let alone say anything.

She smiled softly at him before poking him in the forehead again and turning moving to her bed, her motions once more those of Rukia as he knew her.

He sat completely stunned for awhile, before his eyes tracked over to her. She was doing something with her soul pager. "Rukia . . ." he managed to get out.

"You should get ready for bed," she said gently.

"Rukia," he repeated, starting to find his words, "that was—"

"Ichigo," she said with the same gentle tone as she looked up to him, "I told you that I don't sing. But thank you very much for the nice day out."

He saw then that the expression in her eyes was soft, and he understood. That had been meant only for him. It had been meant as an appreciation of what he'd done. He'd given her a memory she would treasure with the fireworks and so she'd decided to return the favor. "It was . . . my pleasure," he mumbled after a moment, getting his own sleeping clothes and somewhat awkwardly going to shower. He stayed in longer than he intended, finding his memory repeatedly going back to what he'd just witnessed. It was haunting.

By the time he'd finished with everything and opened the door, she was tucked into her blankets and fast asleep. He turned off the light and fan and went to mostly close the blinds. Returning to his bed, he sat on the edge of it and looked her way for a minute. Other memories flickered to mind amid those of her song, and after a minute he lay back and turned, pulling his own covers over himself. You . . . really turned that one around on me . . .

"Abarai-kun, please, come in," Ukitake said with a polite smile, standing aside and holding out a hand to invite Renji in.

Renji obliged and walked into the office, taking a seat opposite Ukitake's desk and looking about sort of awkwardly.

Ukitake sat behind the desk and gave him a conciliatory smile. "I'm sure you're wondering why you're here."

The fukutaichō nodded, because he honestly had no idea.

"I would have preferred having you here yesterday, but Byakuya is protective of keeping you at your duties," Ukitake said, before looking at Renji directly. "I'd like to have your independent assessment of the events in Tokyo, if you would please."

"Taichō, I'm not sure I understand the question, I delivered my report—" Renji began.

"I've read it," Ukitake said, lightly cutting him off. "That's not what I'm asking for. I've known Kuchiki since shortly after she was assigned to this Division, and I know that the two of you were
once good friends, and have been again ever since her return to Soul Society last year. Would I be correct in saying you consider her as one of your best friends?"

"Yes," Renji said without reservation.

"And would you say that also applies to Ichigo-kun?" Ukitake asked.

"Yes," Renji said again.

"So, what I'm asking for is your independent assessment of their status as your best friends. Please don't misunderstand me, Abarai-kun, I don't doubt your report, it's just that the information I want to hear isn't in it," Ukitake said. He had a look of genuine if reserved concern.

Renji met his gaze before glancing aside. Rukia always spoke highly of Ukitake and he had a reputation for being quite friendly and considerate. The 13th Division was famous for its sense of camaraderie. Although this meeting was somewhat unusual, he felt there was nothing nefarious about it. "Neither of them was how they were before the war," he said, pausing. "Rukia was bossy, irritable, irritating, and cold. Ichigo was . . . I didn't have much time to interact with him, but he was different too."

"Different in what way?" Ukitake asked.

"He . . . reminded me of when I first met him. Something in the way he handled himself, something in his eyes. He was like a stubborn punk again," Renji said. He sighed and looked at the floor for a moment, hoping he wasn't making a mistake. "The very first thing they did was to try and pick a fight with one another. I'd never seen them do that before. Not like that, anyway."

Ukitake seemed to consider that and reached into a desk drawer, pulling out a piece of paper and setting it in front of the fukutaichō. It was a hard copy of Rukia's report from Tuesday. It wasn't very long, so Ukitake waited for Renji to read it.

Renji picked it up and scanned through it. "If Rukia wrote this, then I believe what it says."

"I do too," Ukitake said, "but I'm asking for your impressions."

Renji looked it over again. "It certainly sounds like Ichigo, forging on recklessly ahead no matter what. I could definitely believe he didn't have a clue and also wouldn't hold a grudge against Soul Society at the same time." Ichigo was clueless about a lot of things, and didn't tend to hold onto things unless his friends were hurt.

"And what about Kuchiki?" Ukitake asked.

"What about her?" Renji said, not entirely comfortable with discussing her status in greater detail.

Ukitake drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment in thought. At last he said "The sōtaichō sees this as being about supporting Ichigo-kun both because he feels we owe him a great debt and because he still views him as a future asset to Soul Society at the same time." Ichigo was clueless about a lot of things, and didn't tend to hold onto things unless his friends were hurt.

"And what about Kuchiki?" Ukitake asked.

"What about her?" Renji said, not entirely comfortable with discussing her status in greater detail.

Ukitake drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment in thought. At last he said "The sōtaichō sees this as being about supporting Ichigo-kun both because he feels we owe him a great debt and because he still views him as a future asset to Soul Society. This information doesn't leave this room: there's an ongoing effort to try and find a way to restore his powers."

Renji blinked at that.

Ukitake continued "I agree with the sōtaichō on both counts and support that effort wholeheartedly. That being said, as Kuchiki's superior, my personal interest is in her well-being. Although we're gaining a clearer picture of the situation with Ichigo-kun, I think we both know that she isn't doing much better." He looked Renji directly in the eyes.
Renji's felt his expression harden. He didn't like hearing it from other people, but if anyone would be in a position to come to a similar conclusion as he had it would be her taichō.

"What I'm really asking you is . . . do you really think they can help one another even when both of them are damaged?" Ukitake asked. He looked officially concerned.

Renji looked sideways before closing his eyes and reviewing his memories of the two of them together. He opened his eyes again after a minute and gave Ukitake a small grin. "Yeah, I do. In fact, I think that's exactly why they'll manage to help each other. Those two have always been troublemakers together ever since they met. If they can open up to anyone, it's each other." He'd seen the way they looked at one another, even as they denied there was anything between them—especially to themselves. He'd liked Rukia, but . . . well. It was clear how she thought of him even if she'd never said it, and he'd made peace with that. Not engaging with her for almost 50 years put the fault squarely upon him.

"I see," Ukitake said, considering the man's certitude. He smiled softly, gladdened by his optimism. "I suppose that as a best friend to both you should know that Byakuya has been making noise about their circumstances," he said rather conversationally.

"Is this where you ask me to spy on my taichō to keep him from interfering or to be their wingman or something?" Renji asked with a smirk.

Ukitake's smile widened at how quickly the fukutaichō had seen through his intent.

"They'll kill us if they ever find out, you know," Renji said as he rubbed his chin in thought. "You're asking me to do a very dangerous thing." He smiled back.

Chapter End Notes

I tried to imagine what Orikasa Fumiko would sound like delivering the song based on listening to "Echo".
A Breaker At High Tide

Friday, August 2, 2002

Rukia sat up, squinting at the lines of sunlight that were coming into the room before checking the time; it was 9:09 AM. A look at Ichigo revealed he was sleeping soundly and she watched the rise and fall of his covers for a moment. His teasing aside they didn't have any plans for the day and she didn't want to wake him needlessly early. He'd been kind of sweet lately and she felt he deserved to sleep in.

After stretching she got out of bed, going to the living room and quietly shutting the door behind her. He clearly hadn't been that interested in the movie the night before for its own sake but had wanted her to see it. She was interested in the other one he'd mentioned but wouldn't force him to sit through it with her. She padded over to the couch and sat down, working through the menus the way they had the night before to find *The Lion King*.

Ichigo's eyes snapped open as audio invaded his mind: "In the jungle, the mighty jungle, The Lion Sleeps—I can't hear ya buddy, back me up!" He sat up, realizing he was hearing it from the other room; it was rather quite loud and it was the rest of it that had driven him to consciousness. Just as his head jerked to one of the doors he heard "Ee-e-e-ah-Pumba-bumba-weh!"

He got up and slid the door beside his bed open, looking out into the living room to see Rukia sitting on the couch with her legs crossed, rapidly reducing the volume with the remote. She brought her other hand to her chin and regarded him with a smugly superior smile and half open eyes, clearly enjoying whatever expression was on his face. He realized he was scowling heavily at her having somehow divined the gist of his fears the prior day.

She laughed at him and said "I watched the whole thing already; I thought that since it was going on 11:00 you could do with a wake-up call." Her tone was just a little mischievous.

Ichigo's sour expression didn't budge a millimeter as he leaned against the door frame.

"Do you have any ideas about what we should do today?" she asked breezily.

He seemed to ponder for a moment, losing some of his grimness in the process before shaking his head. "Nah, I hadn't really thought about it and don't have much in mind."

"Then come over here and help me figure it out, fool," Rukia said with only mild rebuke. She tapped a spot next to her on the couch with one hand while she pulled the stack of the hotel's literature on things into her lap with the other.

Ichigo plodded over and sat beside her as they looked through what there was to do in the hotel and nearby area.

"This 'Nagomi Spa and Fitness' sounds nice," she said.

"It also says spa guests must be over 18, and I have a feeling they'll definitely check," he replied to preemptively cut off whatever dubious thoughts she might be having. "You can go there on your own at some point, I don't mind. I could just hit the gym or something."

"That's less fun," she said simply.
"It's a spa, it's kind of an individual activity to begin with," he said. "We could visit the whirlpool or the main pool. Technically you count for adult supervision."

"Don't say it like I'm not mature!" Rukia reprimanded, hitting him only moderately hard even as she softly laughed. She found it funny how many barriers Ichigo was running into because of his age. "The whirlpool could be nice," she said after a moment.

Visually there was little difference between seeing one another in bathing suits, in their underwear, or in towels or less, but it wasn't necessarily about the visuals, it was about the consensuality and intimacy of the situation. Swimming with someone, catching them undressed, and bathing with them were all very different things. Rukia and Ichigo were both fine with the first, easily embarrassed by even the thought of the second, and likely to be rather awkward about the third in anything other than a public setting and still moderately so then.

She flipped through a list of nearby attractions and remembered something he'd said to her shortly after they'd been reunited: Normally a guy would take a girl to Tokyo Tower. That in conjunction with a map she saw gave her a few ideas. Although they rapidly formed into a concrete plan she acted like she was still considering things so they'd have ideas for the next few days.

They assembled a list of major features—including, among other things, Toshimaen amusement park, various parks, shrines, museums, and neighborhoods—in addition to those they'd previously discussed. They agreed they would stick to only window-shopping unless they found something truly amazing. Rukia expressed interest in Akihabara despite Ichigo's continued reservations. They both avoided bringing up onsen as neither of them saw a point in going to bathe with strangers and public mixed-gender establishments were unusual in major urban areas.

Despite that, she noted that an onsen right next door to Toshimaen called Niwa no Yu had mixed-gender areas that required bathing suits and mentally filed it away.

Ichigo surreptitiously took note of the best karaoke places. He was still haunted by her song and really wanted to hear her sing again—he couldn't get the idea out of his head. Maybe she would only sing for him, perhaps even only that one time, but she was so phenomenally good at it that he decided if he had to make a fool of himself to have even the faintest hope of hearing it again he would. As he thought about it he decided he'd invoke reinforcements if he had to. A plan began to rapidly form in his mind then: if not just he, but some of their friends sang, maybe it would put her at ease enough that she'd sing again . . . he knew that none of them would be nearly as good as she was but putting in the effort would be a show of good faith. She could hardly be embarrassed in comparison.

As they began to run out of things to consider Rukia said "Alright, let's do this for today: we ride the subway to Hamarikyu Gardens and walk back through Kyu Shiba Rikyu Garden and Shiba Park to Tokyo Tower, then come back and visit the whirlpool to relax." Despite the superficially similar vocalization to what lingered in her mind, the characters were completely different and she refused to consider it at any rate. It went unsaid but understood they could stop at things they happened to find along the way that caught their interest.

He seemed to ponder it for a bit but only said "Okay, fine."

She smirked inwardly at the fact he didn't seem to realize he was agreeing to what he himself had said would result in people 'getting the wrong idea' but she chose not to push the point. He would probably be irritable after staring at plants for more than an hour soon enough anyway. She pushed him away suddenly with moderate force. "What are you waiting for then, fool? Get dressed," she said with a chill tone.
Ichigo gave her a glare but got up and went back to the bedroom to get some clothes.

Rukia continued looking through the listings for anything they might've missed before starting to enter places into her soul pager, using it to try and figure out optimal ways of structuring future trips.

"And that is why I'm requesting your authorization for his release to this duty despite the general prohibition on members of the 4th Division visiting the Living World," Renji finished. The 4th Division's contribution to Rukia's search effort had been done on the sōtaichō's order and had been a special circumstance.

"I see," was all Unohana said for a time. Renji waited patiently without moving or even shifting his gaze. "Isane, please accompany Abarai-fukutaichō to speak with Hanatarō. The decision as to whether to accept is his," she said at last.

Renji bowed and said "Thank you, Unohana-taichō."

Unohana said nothing as Isane departed with Renji, and Isane didn't inquire further as they walked together. They didn't have to go far, finding Hanatarō tending to an inventory. "Hanatarō," Isane said lightly to get his attention.

"Oh, Isane-fukutaichō," he began, turning. He stopped when he saw who she was accompanying. "Renji-san!" he said in disbelief.

"Yo," Renji replied, before telling him exactly what he'd told Unohana and Isane.

"Re—Renji-san, why would you ask me to—" Hanatarō said in response as he finished.

"Five reasons," Renji said simply, counting them each off on a finger, "First, you know them both decently well. Second, your loyalty to them isn't in question. Third, you don't ask questions and you mostly follow orders. Fourth, the 4th Division are the closest things to psychological specialists we have. Fifth, you're the highest ranking person that can be spared." He clenched the fingers back into a fist, asking "So, are you in or not?"

Hanatarō looked down at the floor for a moment. His shoulders squared up and he looked at Renji with uncommon resolve. "This is really . . . to help Ichigo-san and Rukia-san?"

"Yeah," Renji said firmly, "You have my word."

"Then I'll do it!" Hanatarō replied.

Renji smiled just a bit and looked to Isane, who nodded.

Ichigo decided conclusively on his course of action while in the shower and kept calm while getting dressed and brushing his teeth, leaving the bathroom in good order. "Alright, it's all yours," he said casually to Rukia upon entering the living room. She was still messing with her soul pager as she had been when he'd last seen her.

She nodded, stood, and they went by one another, Ichigo taking a seat on the couch. He turned the TV to a random channel and acted like he was sort of paying attention while plotting out how he would explain what he intended. He also kept track of the sound of Rukia getting her things together. He waited until he heard her turn the water on to be absolutely sure she was preoccupied before getting up and quietly leaving the suite, going out to the elevators and making his way to a section of the hotel where he wouldn't disturb anyone.
"Moshi moshi?" Ishida answered on the second ring.

"Ishida, it's me, I have to ask you a favor," Ichigo said.

"Is it related to—" Ishida began seriously.

"Well, yeah, sorta," Ichigo interrupted, "it's complicated. Look, I don't want to have to ask this and it's going to sound stupid but I need you guys to be ready in case I have to call you in."

Given the intro Ishida somehow felt he would regret it but he'd promised his support with anything. They all had. "What do you need?"

"I need everyone to get good at a different karaoke song!" Ichigo said with complete seriousness.

Ishida stopped in place and a long silence passed before he just said "What."

"Ishida!" Ichigo said, and the Quincy's eyes widened slightly at the rarely-heard urgency in his friend's voice, "Rukia is . . . really amazing at singing! I can't even begin to explain to you . . . I will do anything to hear her sing again! And to do that, I might need you all to help me put her at ease! Please, I—"

"Kurosaki," Ishida said calmly, adjusting his glasses, "Stop. I'll help you. We'll help you." He could read between the lines and understood what was happening. This had as much to do with getting Rukia to open up and communicate through song things that couldn't be communicated in speech as it did Ichigo's patently obvious interest in her.

"I have to ask you something else," Ichigo said.

Ishida closed his eyes and exhaled without a sound. "Yes?"

"I want each song to be something that reminds us of or is a message to Rukia. The song I want to do has a second singer—it's a duet. If you can sing it with me, you don't need to do a separate song," Ichigo said. It was clear from his tone he didn't want to ask for it but had to. It'd occurred to him in the shower on the basis of their sharing game and what he felt was underneath it all.

The Quincy felt an eyebrow start to twitch as he asked "What song?"

Ichigo told him.

Ishida opened his eyes narrowly at it and stared through the world. As usual when confronted by the ridiculous he would bear it in the name of the pride of the Quincy. "I'll do it," he said at last.

"Thank—" Ichigo began.

"Save your thanks, Kurosaki, just make sure that I won't upstage you if and when the time comes. It would be embarrassing if you were outshone in front of Rukia," Ishida replied frigidly. "I'll tell everyone else," he concluded, ending the call before Ichigo could say anything else.

He stared at his phone for a moment at the absurd enterprise he'd just been roped into before dialing Inoue. She picked up on the third ring. "Ishida-kun?" she asked, ignoring phone etiquette.

"Inoue-san, are you at the Urahara Shop right now?"

"Yes, but Sado-kun isn't here," she replied.
Ishida suddenly had an epiphany about how to get revenge on Ichigo for his request without compromising the odds of success—by in fact augmenting them. "Is Yoruichi-san there?"

"She's here . . . why?" Inoue replied with a hint of confusion.

"I'll explain when I get there. Please call Sado-kun over. I'll be there soon," Ishida said. He changed course for the Urahara Shop.

Ichigo was back in front of the TV just as lazily as he had been quite awhile before Rukia got out, and after only a moment to collect some of their things they promptly set off. They took the Oedo Line from Roppongi Station to Shiodome Station and it was a short walk from there to Hamarikyu Gardens.

Hamarikyu was surrounded by the skyscrapers of Shiodome and it made for quite the contrast. They toured the gardens themselves for about three-quarters of an hour, mostly just enjoying the company of one another and the scenery. Clouds were moving in but it was still pleasant. They concluded by going to the tea house at the park's center to partake of traditional matcha tea in a tea ceremony. Rukia was—of course—well versed in it and had to lightly scold Ichigo with regard to doing it properly even though their roles were strictly limited by their lack of traditional attire.

Departing, they walked a short ways south to Kyu Shiba Rikyu Garden. It too was surrounded by high-rises, which only accentuated its traditional beauty by contrast. It was rather smaller than Hamarikyu and so after a half hour of exploring it they went on their way.

They got to Shiba Park in good time and picked up some okonomiyaki from a food stall on their way through as lunch, eating as they went. The weather seemed to be turning as the cloud cover became thicker and the horizon grew dark and so they hurried on to Tokyo Tower to avoid being caught up in it. Figuring rain was no good reason to scrub their plans they paid for access to both observatory decks and made their way up through the attractions at the tower's base, FootTown, arriving at the main observation deck as the weather broke. It was largely empty owing to the conditions and time.

"Wow," Rukia muttered, looking out upon the panorama of the city. The effect was striking as rain came down—the city gradually disappeared in the distance behind curtains of it. The skies grew darker still and the lights started to stand out as they would at night.

"Hey, Rukia, come take a look at this," Ichigo said. He was standing on a section of the floor that was made out of glass and enabled one to look down to street level.

"Fool, what if it breaks?!" she warned harshly the instant she saw what he was doing.

"It's heavily reinforced," Ichigo said duly, beckoning her over. "Come on, it's perfectly safe, like four million people come through here every year."

Frowning severely, she walked over to him, only stepping out onto the glass with him after a moment of looking through it. Materials science and structural engineering weren't things she knew anything about, for obvious reasons.

"See, I told you," Ichigo said matter-of-factly.

They stood together for a few moments, Rukia's expression easing up a bit. It was then that the first tremendously loud, crackling roar of thunder washed over the city, apparently stemming from the lightning rods high above them.

Ichigo instantly found himself impacting the floor, a moderate weight on his chest. It took him a
shocked moment to realize that Rukia had tackled him off of the glass. They were sprawled out, he on his back and she on top of him. Her hands were clamped hard around his shoulders, fingers dug into his shirt. He blinked down at her as he put it together: at the first sign of danger she had instinctively . . . he fully realized then that she'd thought the glass was failing. "Rukia," he immediately said. He was suddenly aware of her heart racing against him and her hard breathing. If she'd feared for their safety—his safety?—enough to do that then her adrenaline would be pumping. "We're okay," he continued, pushing himself up into a sitting position with her. The few other visitors—it became apparent they were there to watch the lightning—gave them curious looks before going back to their own business.

She shuddered slightly then but made no sound. Her grasp didn't slacken in the slightest even as she didn't resist his motion and she had her face pressed to his chest. The sky outside the tower flickered with long serpentine flashes of light. Another thunderclap rolled over them.

There was nothing to say that would make it better if her fight-or-flight response had triggered. Ichigo let out a breath and with only a little hesitation slid his arms around her waist and hugged her. All he could really do was hold her. He had to try and say something anyway. "We're okay, Rukia. I'm okay. Everything's fine," he said softly. He lifted a hand to the back of her head, continuing to do his futile best to gently reassure her. "I know what you thought happened and it's okay. Just let it out, take your time, we're fine." Her grip eased but she didn't move at all from her position. An endless procession of consolation fell from his lips as he sat with her in his lap for what seemed like ages, feeling her pulse and breathing rate gradually slow.

The storm intensified, crashing down into the lightning rods of Tokyo Tower, the nearby buildings, and points beyond. Sheets of rain slapped at the windows next to them. It was a terrifying display. Ichigo was totally oblivious to it. In actuality it was only minutes later when Rukia let go of his shoulders and brought her hands in front of her. He fell silent, moving his hands so they only just lightly rested on her sides. He didn't want to upset her by embarrassing her more than she might already be. She had all the time in the world.

"Sorry," she said at last, her voice restrained. "I thought—"

"I know," he said, "don't apologize for it."

She looked up at him then. To him she looked bashful and apologetic but fully under control, even her eyes.

He smiled softly at her. "It's okay," he said for the last time.

She hesitantly gave an awkward and sheepish smile back. Shadows cast by the lightning flickered across both of them. She blushed just a shade as she realized how they were situated before she pulled away, standing up and stepping aside.

Ichigo likewise stood.

She cleared her throat and they found themselves looking out the window to a very different kind of light-show than the one they'd seen the night before.

"I . . . take it being here is safe?" Rukia asked without intonation after a minute.

"Yeah," Ichigo said.

They stood side by side in silence for a long time in the face of nature's fury, not really caring about it in comparison to what had just happened.
Renji and Hanatarō stepped out of a *senkaimon* in front of Urahara Shop, both clad in *shihakushō*. Renji had returned his last *gigai* late on Monday. It was late afternoon and overcast. They weren't expected.

Hanatarō looked around, it being his first time in the Living World.

"Come on, let's go," Renji said, making for the door. It slid open right before he reached out for it. Their *reiatsu* had easily given away their arrival.

The one to meet them was Yoruichi. "Yo, Renji," she said curiously, before raising an eyebrow at his compatriot. "Hanatarō? . . . What are the two of you doing here so suddenly?"

"We're the guys the *sōtaichō* agreed to send to watch the watcher to placate the watcher's brother," Renji said wryly. Hanatarō just nodded.

Yoruichi's eyes narrowed in both confusion and amusement for a moment before she looked down, letting out a short laugh as she figured out what was probably happening. "Oh, I see, so that's what's going on," she said with humor, before looking back up at them. There was a playful look in her eyes as she added "What an interesting coincidence of timing. Come on in." She led them inside. "Oi, Renji," she continued as they made their way through the shop proper, "How do you feel about singing?"

"Eh?" he replied with some confusion.

The Flash Goddess didn't elaborate and they entered the back section of the shop to be greeted by Urahara, Chad, Inoue, and Ishida.

"I guess we should start paying attention to the weather forecasts," Ichigo said conversationally, rubbing the back of his head. The storm outside had started slackening awhile ago and it was simmering rather than boiling over.

"Yes," Rukia said quietly.

He turned to face her while still leaning on the railing. "Hey, we did pay for access to both observatories; you still want to see the special observatory? It's probably not that much better to look at than this one, but . . ." he offered.

She said nothing in response.

"Rukia, if you want to wait for the rain to end and call it a day, it's fine," he said after a moment. His tone was placating. He wouldn't push her—not after what had happened.

It was only a second before she turned to him and met his gaze. The expression in her eyes was hard to read. It looked more analytical and contemplative than anything else. She gave him something that was halfway between a small smile and a smirk and said "Let's see the other observatory, Ichigo," before turning and heading for the elevators.

He watched her for a second before following after her.
Friday, August 2, 2002

The special observatory deck put them even higher up than they'd been at the Shinjuku I-Land Tower. Rukia both kept close to and kept her distance from Ichigo as they watched the city interact with the atmosphere. The lightning was coming down slower and the rain came and went in panes sliding across the urban landscape, walling off parts of the city from view only to reveal them again, lights gleaming. It was like watching the movements of some sort of vast machine.

She glanced over at him occasionally when he seemed distracted by the weather. She wouldn't admit it but she was still rattled by what'd happened. If he had really fallen . . . It'd been a stupid and irrational fear considering whatever strange glass that floor was made of, but she hadn't been able to shake it from the moment she'd seen him standing on it. She'd pushed the gigai as hard as she possibly could've the moment she felt her apprehensions were coming true and made a buffoon of herself. She reflected on why she was so protective of him since meeting him again and tried to tell herself it was because he was just an ordinary human. She knew that wasn't true.

Then there had been his reaction. He'd discerned what she intended and had understood her state afterwards, understood what a flash of panic would do to someone regardless of its validity. He'd been so quick to try and comfort her, had been so willing to do so. Ichigo had never been pretentious with her, had always been authentic in some way or another to himself, and she'd always appreciated that about him. When he'd held her then she'd enjoyed it, she'd enjoyed it even as she had been horrified at the thought of losing him. It had felt right. It had felt so right. Everything about their time together did. Just like when she'd been around Kaien . . .

"Looks like it's starting to pass by," Ichigo said as he surveyed the city.

She looked up from her thoughts and found he was correct: the cloud cover was starting to thin and the rain was becoming increasingly sporadic, more and more of the city's lights coming into view around them. "Yes," she said.

"Hey, Rukia, let's get some food. We can buy some umbrellas or something if it hasn't ended by then. We've been in this tin can for two hours now," he said irritably, making his way back to the elevators. They'd gradually been joined by an increasingly large number of other people as the weather cleared; it was Friday night after all.

She followed after him without objection, still deep in thought. They went back down to FootTown and visited the Tower Restaurant. Ichigo got curry rice and Rukia got katsudon. They ate in relative silence before going to check the weather. It was still raining so they purchased some cheap umbrellas from the complex’s FamilyMart and made their way back on foot since the subway wasn't convenient and neither felt like calling a cab or riding a bus.

Rukia knew Ichigo well enough to know he was agitated and knew it had to do with what had happened up in the tower, but he was dealing with it externally. He was constantly trying to engage her with a mix of humor, irascibility, and self-deprecation that made clear his increasing discomfort with her own thoughtfulness. It was how he was when he was nervous about something and trying to fill dead air.

"Ichigo," she said, cutting him off from one of his tangents, "do you like this kind of weather?"

"Eh?" he said, caught off guard.
"When it's like this," she said, holding out a hand to the rain.

"Not really," he said after awhile, looking off to one side.

"I don't mind it so much when I'm in good company," she replied, looking to him with a small smile.

He looked back to her curiously and raising an eyebrow fractionally. "I guess it's not so bad then," he muttered, looking askew again.

"When you're under an umbrella in the rain, it's kind of like being in your own world; people go by one another trying to hurry on with their business against the weather," she said contemplatively, "So being able to walk side-by-side with someone in the rain, umbrella-to-umbrella, is kind of like linking worlds in a way, don't you think?" She let her smile widen a little at him.

This time his gaze shifted over to her slowly as he discerned there was some deeper meaning to her words. "Yeah," he said after a moment, "I can see that." He smiled a little back.

Rukia laughed softly at him as she reached an internal conclusion: she would force the issue. It couldn't go on like this and she wouldn't let it. The timing was such that they arrived at her immediate goal just then too; this atmosphere couldn't go on either.

Ichigo wasn't at all prepared for the hand she shoved out that knocked him over into an enormous puddle. He toppled into it with a great splash, spraying more water about as he struggled to get up while hanging onto his umbrella, the rain cascading down upon him. He was instantly drenched head to toe.

She had a look that was simultaneously self-satisfied and victorious as she gave him a wide, snide grin. She pointed a finger in accusation. "Then understand that banishment from my world is your punishment for scaring me halfway to death, Kurosaki Ichigo!"

He looked completely shocked for an instant before his face contorted. "What the hell?!" he shouted.

She turned her look into a playful smile and immediately took off running toward the hotel, gripping her umbrella with both hands and leaning it forward so as to better control it.

Ichigo scrambled to his feet and took off after her, dragging his umbrella behind him only to be slowed down by the air resistance it created. He clumsily closed it so he could run faster and catch up. "Oi, Rukia! That's not funny! I could catch pneumonia or something and die! And don't say that like you're not dead already!"

"Only if you catch me, you washed-up substitute Shinigami!" she called back, laughing. She led him on a chase through the backstreets the rest of the way to the hotel, both shouting abuse at one another the entire way. They caught up to one another near the lobby entrance, but Rukia slowed at the doors, pulled her umbrella closed, and calmly walked in before Ichigo could reach her. "You really should be more careful," she scolded in something like her schoolgirl voice as he followed in after her and they passed by the check-in desk, "you're dripping water everywhere, it's so inconsiderate!"

She turned to look at him in time to catch an expression she knew connoted a restrained outburst and smiled broadly.

He followed her without further comment to the elevators, simmering.

Ichigo immediately headed to the bathroom to wring out his sopping wet clothes and put them aside to dry before taking a brief shower, shuffling into night clothes temporarily. Rukia took over the bathroom upon his exit and he changed into some of his plain clothes and grabbed his swim trunks.
and a beach towel. She likewise briefly showered and came out in a rather simple outfit, getting her
even effects. They made their way together down to the pool reception area, which was clad in
smooth hardwood decking, as was the poolside proper. After verifying their status with the hotel—
and confirming Rukia was Ichigo's adult supervision, to his chagrin—they had their complimentary
access to the pool and locker rooms and split up.

When they returned he wore knee-length swimming trunks while she had on a relatively
conservative two-piece. The pool itself was spacious, and to its right two enormous red granite pillars
rose with inset lighting top and bottom. They bracketed the whirlpool, which protruded slightly into
the pool proper and was ringed in brilliant white lights. There were deck chairs for relaxation off
behind it. It was at once both elegant and sort of cozy. They were the only people there, everyone
else apparently preferring more public activities on a Friday.

They eased into the water opposite one another, both of them slowly sitting and getting in up to their
necks. Ichigo further sunk down to just below his nose and Rukia reclined back against the edge
with her arms behind her head. It was indeed quite relaxing and she meditated on how to proceed.
She figured when they were both relatively at ease and unable to easily get away from one another
was the best time. She gathered her earlier thoughts from Tokyo Tower and reviewed them.

She remembered just over a year prior when she'd been asked by Ichigo's classmates if she liked him.
She'd said he was just a friend. Her own thoughts then were etched into her memory and echoed
back to her: Whether I like him, whether I hate him, it's just . . . all so troublesome. Love,
companionship, and friendship . . . it's nothing but trouble. She no longer felt that way about such
things, mostly due to him. Ichigo was nominally her ally and was really her best friend. That left the
question of how she felt about him.

She considered their past few days, her time alone, and the times they'd had before. The difference
between how she felt around him versus how she'd felt on her own was undeniable. The feelings she
had experienced were inescapable and these past few days they'd only gotten stronger. The previous
night had been . . . he was the only person who seemed to free her from her inhibitions, and she felt
she was the same for him. They weren't really just best friends, if she was honest . . . maybe they
hadn't ever been.

She . . . did like him. She liked being around him, she liked his presence, she liked to look at him,
she liked his voice, she liked his touch. She liked him.

Admitting it so directly was alarming. She was terrified of losing him or hurting him. But . . . to do
nothing was even more terrifying. Who knew what could or would happen then? Couldn't she just as
easily lose or hurt him by doing nothing? Her mind turned to their conversations. Hadn't she raged
over that very kind of thing?

Part of her wanted to deny anything was happening; part of her wanted to run away; part of her still
ached over Kaien; part of her wanted to just keep things as they were forever; but another part, the
part that yelled at recruits, the part that allowed her to swing a sword at her charges in the name of
making them stronger, the part that was there to scold Ichigo for his idiocy, that part screamed at her
to stop being such a coward. Things couldn't stay the same and were changing more and more
between them already. Ichigo wasn't Kaien, no matter how much he could remind her of him and no
matter their relation. To keep him at arm's-length because of the past wasn't fair to him and it wasn't
fair to herself. It wasn't fair at all.

She wasn't ready to look deeper into the nature of her feelings, she wasn't ready to discuss Kaien,
and she wasn't ready to do the former until she did the latter. She wasn't ready for a thousand things,
but . . .
It wasn't wrong to have feelings. It wasn't wrong to like someone. It was bad enough that she couldn't control things that truly mattered, but to not even be able to control her own thoughts and words? That was intolerable. At the very least she had to stand up for herself and try to seize the reins of her own fate. Before she could talk herself out of it she cringed and envisioned it as if drawing Sode no Shirayuki . . .

"Ichigo," she said seriously, fixing him with a cool stare and a narrowed gaze.

His eyes turned to her questioningly.

"Do you like me?"

She wasn't sure what she'd expected him to do in response but it wasn't what he actually did. He sat up in the water and leaned forward, peering at her. His expression was firm and his eyes were clear. He stared her down for a moment before saying "Yes."

"I see," she said, closing her eyes and crossing her arms underwater in front of her. She could feel her stomach flip flop. Silence passed.

Ichigo suddenly jumped up, standing in the middle of the whirlpool, sloshing water everywhere as he stabbed a finger outwards at her in irritation. "What the hell is that?! You can't just ask something like that and then say 'I see' like you're Byakuya! That's no way to treat such a serious issue!"

His sudden loss of his cool almost made her laugh despite it all. She knew then that he'd been thinking similar things and that it was no easier for him. Instead she critiqued "Like saying only 'Yes' as a response is really any better." She opened her eyes again as she heard his palms slap against the edge of the whirlpool on either side of her head.

He was leaning forward then, his face perhaps twenty centimeters from hers, his gaze steadily meeting hers as he asked "And what about you? Do you like me?"

She stared back at him coldly for a moment as her heart skipped a beat. "Unfortunately," she said, tilting her head to one side in disapproval and letting out a breath. She lifted a leg and brought a foot up into his chest with moderate force, knocking him back into the whirlpool's center.

He surfaced an instant later, glaring at her.

She glared back.

Both their expressions decayed into smirks that turned into smiles the longer they considered one another. At last he let out a chuckle and tilted his head to one side, closing his eyes. "Well, I guess suddenly we're stuck like this then, so what now?"

"Don't ask me that like I'm supposed to know, fool," she said primly, giving him a pouting look.

Ichigo moved up alongside Rukia and sat down beside her, putting his arms on the edges of the whirlpool, one behind her. He looked sideways at her. She rather dubiously returned the look. They wound up smiling at one another again in silence for a long time.

"It's not going to be easy," she said gently. There was a lot to talk about still, even if they'd established a basis on which to talk about things beyond just their sharing game.

"I know," he replied.

"And it's not going to be fast either!" she added severely, sticking a finger in his face for emphasis.
She wasn't going to rush anything.

"I know," he said again.

"And there will probably be heartache and maybe even some bloodshed," she warned. She didn't refer to just two of them.

"I know . . ." he continued.

"And—" she began, lifting the finger professorially.

Ichigo primed the arm behind her and pushed her forward into the whirlpool unceremoniously, declaring "I get it already!"


"Don't even start, right now the score is 2:1 in your favor in terms of dunking!" he proclaimed, glowering at her.

She let out a "Hmph," and moved back to where she'd been sitting beside him. Neither looked at the other, but Ichigo brought his hand forward, resting it lightly on her opposite shoulder. After a moment she leaned slightly toward him, letting her other shoulder come to rest against his. She exhaled then, letting go of everything and relaxing. His fingers brushed at her and she could feel him shift as well. She suddenly felt drained and glanced over at him.

His eyes seemed to track to hers instinctively. He looked tired. They exchanged small knowing smiles before looking away from each other again. They could talk later. So they sat with one another quietly and unwound, losing themselves in their own thoughts and memories.

Renji shouldered the larger duffle bag that Urahara had provisioned them with, leaving Hanatarō with the backpack. It was less an act of charity and more one of efficiency.

"Since you didn't ask for clothes I take it they extended you the use of the special account?" Urahara asked conversationally from the doorway. Everyone else was inside plotting, while Tessai, Ururu, and Jinta were working in the shop inventory.

"Yeah," Renji said, "although we're under orders to use it minimally. Apparently some other activities group is using it robustly and that's caused concerns."

"I wonder who could possibly be doing such a thing." Urahara pondered, scratching at his chin.

"The world wonders," Renji replied, before turning back to him. "So you guys are just gonna hole up here until they give the call, right?"

Urahara nodded.

"In that case . . ." Renji started, glancing toward Hanatarō before looking back to the shopkeeper, "do your best with that other thing you're working on."

Urahara's eyes seemed to gleam a little from under his hat. "Oh, so you know about that?"

"No, I'm just a backup monitor," Renji said plainly, turning around and moving up to Hanatarō. "Let's get this over with; it's getting late."

The medic nodded and said "Yes." His reiatsu fell away before he opened their senkaimon. Renji
suppressed his own output maximally as well. With that, they walked through it into a back alley in Roppongi. It was immediately clear it had recently rained.

Renji pulled out his soul pager, checking their position relative to the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. It matched with his sense of Rukia's reiatsu. "Alright, let's scope this place out so we personally know where it is and then find somewhere to stay," he said, starting to search for the cheapest nearby accommodations as he walked.

"Renji-san," Hanatarō said as they went, "...is there a reason nobody asked me to pick a song?"

The crimson-haired Shinigami just laughed and shook his head.

---

Ichigo sat down on his bed and yawned.

"Hey, have you ever used the soaking tub in the bathroom?" Rukia asked from her own bed. They'd used the showers in the locker rooms and just rotated into the bathroom to change into pajamas after returning.

"Nah, never had time," he replied. It had looked inviting though.

"Hmm," she said. He glanced over at her and she immediately said "Don't get any ideas," without looking up from her soul pager.

"Don't automatically assume I was thinking of something like that!" he said pointedly.

"Was that supposed to be an admission that you were?" she replied with lifted eyebrows, glancing up at him from the device.

"Would you mind if it was?" he shot back with a moderate scowl.

She only said "Hmm," again at a slightly higher pitch.

Ichigo exhaled and flopped backwards. "So what are we supposed to be anyway? Dating? Boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Why does it need a label?" she asked interrogatively.

He said nothing.

"You know I gave you no less than two opportunities to call Tuesday a date," she said with a light smirk.

"Yeah, well... then what was Thursday?" he said.

"That was you misleading me and then trying to scare me with some ridiculous modern intervention!" she admonished.

He snickered at what sounded like the continuing evolution of her love-hate relationship with roller coasters. His mind returned to the fireworks and her song and then transitioned through that day. He blinked as the bed shifted and looked up, finding her sitting next to him.

She smiled a bit at him and asked "What would you like us to be?"

He grinned lazily. "You're supposed to be the mature one, why don't you tell me?"
She swatted him lightly and chided "A boyfriend shouldn't be so rude to his girlfriend," before giving him a smirk and going back to her own bed, turning out the light. The room fell into darkness, lit only by stripes of the city beyond. "Goodnight, Ichigo," she said, her covers rustling.

"Goodnight, Rukia," he replied, before crawling under the sheets himself.
Saturday, August 3, 2002

It was dark and Rukia was deep in the woods. She was staring down the side of a cliff. "... Kai... Kainen... dono," she felt herself stammer. The scene had repeated itself so many times—so, so many times. No, no, not again, not now, not again... She could never change it no matter how much struggled to. Her every move and her every word was locked in. It always had been.

"Why... do you say my name so many times? Are you that worried about my safety, ojō-san...? Do you care about me that much...?" came that voice, so very wrong, from the thing that was no longer Kainen, the thing that wore his body, the parasite that had linked itself to his soul. His all-but-dead face looked up to her, tongue-wagging: "Am I that... special to you ojō-san?"

Not again! There was a sudden blinding flash of blue-white reiatsu between them that tore up the ground on its way toward him. It looked just like... As it dissipated she saw Ichigo standing before the scar in the earth it had left. His back was to her, and he wore a shihakushō, Zangetsu held aloft as if to cleave down the-thing-that-had-been-Kainen.

"Ichigo!" she called out in shock, suddenly in possession of her voice. Her eyes went wide. No, this had never happened before. Was this... was this some new nightmare? Was that thing going to jump to him? Run, she wanted to say, run away! She opened her mouth as if to scream at him to do so but he preempted her.

"Shhh, I'm here," he whispered, his voice still carrying to her across the distance somehow. His zanpakutō glowed and hummed oddly and she saw the ground breaking apart and drifting up under its pressure. "Everything's okay," he added. He brought Zangetsu down smoothly.

Everything went white, and then it went black.

Ichigo opened his eyes fractionally, instinctively aware that something was wrong. He was groggy but some purpose filled him and his gaze shifted for a moment as his consciousness caught up with his senses. The sky outside was only the darkest shade of blue beyond black, with a brighter tinge down on the horizon. He heard the reason he'd woken then: Rukia was making distressed sounds. He immediately flung his covers aside and sat up, getting onto his feet and making his way over to her bed.

She was curled up tightly in a fetal position under her covers and gripped at them. Even in the darkness he could see her face was anguished. She was muttering something he couldn't make out and whimpered. He carefully sat down on the bed beside her, not sure if he should try and wake her immediately.

"...Kai... Kainen... dono," she whined.

He snapped to a decision and reached down, cupping her hands in his as she clenched at the blanket and sheets.

She quietly gasped at the touch and murmured "Ichigo..."

"Shhh, I'm here," he whispered back. He kept one hand on hers, gently squeezing them, and brought the other up to her forehead. "Everything's okay," he said, reassuringly brushing at it as she had done to him during his hangover. Her expression relaxed somewhat and her grip eased. He let out a breath
he didn't know he'd been holding and smiled down at her just a little. He continued to soothe her and hold her hands long after her breathing returned to normal. As he comforted her his mind worked.

There was her mention of almost having died before she met him that she hadn't detailed at all. There was the pained reaction she'd had to what he'd said on Tuesday. There was her hatred for Aaroniero. Then there was this Kaien. He realized he'd seen something like her reaction before, on the bridge to the Senzaikyū. He'd thought she'd just been concerned for him then but . . .

Suddenly things that had never made sense to him popped into his mind. He'd had a lot of time to think about everything that had happened when he'd been a Shinigami substitute and there were several small things that never really added up.

The way Byakuya had said during their first encounter: *I see now, Rukia. This boy . . . resembles him, a lot.*

The look of recognition Ukitake had given him on the bridge to the Senzaikyū before asking Byakuya: *Who is that?*

Byakuya's look of recognition when he'd defeated him and told him: *I would definitely fight that code.*

He resembled someone to Rukia, Ukitake, and Byakuya; he reminded them of someone. He looked down at Rukia and realized then that it had to be this Kaien.

Something else suddenly hit him: in the aftermath of the invasion of Soul Society, Inoue had told him Rukia was missing, and they'd finally found her with Kūkaku and Ganju. Her nose had been bloodied and it'd looked like they were arguing about something but settled it amicably before he'd gotten within earshot. What business had she had with the Shiba anyway? Was Kaien . . . a Shiba? That might explain the honorific . . . but if he'd been Kaien Shiba and Ichigo reminded people of him, why hadn't Kūkaku or Ganju given him looks like Byakuya or Ukitake had? Or . . . had they? The sort of familiar way they'd both acted with him had been weird . . .

A new thought abruptly entered his mind: in the aftermath of the invasion of Soul Society, Inoue had told him Rukia was missing, and they'd finally found her with Kūkaku and Ganju. Her nose had been bloodied and it'd looked like they were arguing about something but settled it amicably before he'd gotten within earshot. What business had she had with the Shiba anyway? Was Kaien . . . a Shiba? That might explain the honorific . . . but if he'd been Kaien Shiba and Ichigo reminded people of him, why hadn't Kūkaku or Ganju given him looks like Byakuya or Ukitake had? Or . . . had they? The sort of familiar way they'd both acted with him had been weird . . .

A new thought abruptly entered his mind: what was up with dad's *shihakushō*? He had the torn up *haori* of a *taichō*. His strength had certainly been that of a *taichō*. If there'd been a Kurosaki-*taichō*, wouldn't at least one of the people he'd fought have made the connection? Someone in love with his own sense of superiority like Byakuya would've relished throwing that he was the son of an exile or deserter or whatever in his face. It had never happened. No one had ever commented on it, so there couldn't plausibly have been a Kurosaki-*taichō*. So what had his dad been called? That must have been part of what he'd wanted to say in fake Karakura . . .

He didn't have all the pieces, but he had enough for a working hypothesis. His dad had been a Shiba. Kaien had been a Shiba. He resembled Kaien because he was related to him somehow. Kaien was dead, and how he'd died had scarred Rukia severely and almost gotten her killed. Had Aaroniero done it? He was just guessing at that point.

Ichigo focused on Rukia again. She was breathing softly and regularly and seemed fully relaxed under his touch. She looked serene. She looked . . . He continued to caress her as he felt he finally had a new level of understanding of her. He was sure she would tell him the rest in her own time, but the fine details didn't really matter except in so far as she needed to express them. Nothing she could tell him would bother him.

He very slowly stopped brushing her forehead and gently took her hands in his, bringing them under the covers before letting go. She was sleeping deeply and didn't stir. He pulled her blankets and sheets up a little and tucked them around her securely before carefully getting off of her bed.
The sky was by then a gradient and the heavy cloud cover was flared orange and red from the sun's rays that were about to creep above the horizon. He shut the blinds fully and went back to bed. It was fine for them to sleep in on the weekends; their bigger plans could wait for weekdays and the weather looked iffy. It was fine for Rukia to sleep in.

As his head hit the pillow and he pulled his covers back over himself he thought it would take him a long time to fall asleep again. He glanced over at where he knew she was sleeping and realized he was still exhausted. He immediately fell away as he shut his eyes.

Renji yawned loudly before taking a final sip of the coffee he'd gotten to try and wake up. He'd found he kind of liked the drink after having had it the past Saturday. It kept him focused and if it was done up right it was pretty tasty. He looked over at Hanatarō. The poor kid looked halfway dead. He really wasn't cut out for field missions outside of his specialty, but there they were. The sun was only just rising.

They'd finished rigging up the sensors Urahara had provided in inconspicuous places around the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. Rukia was pretty easy to track both through her reiatsu and soul pager and was reporting regularly at any rate; there were no real concerns about her going off the grid again. The sensors had been programmed to look for both of them, but were mainly there to tip them off if Ichigo ran off screaming into the night on his own. That wasn't any likelier in Renji's estimation given Rukia's presence but it hadn't seemed likely before either and that had been how the whole thing had started. Sometimes orders were orders.

"Alright, let's head back. We'll take shifts; I'll take first shift while you sleep," Renji said, rising.

Their official mission was to simply serve as backup monitors for Rukia in the event something bad happened. She still had primacy on the case. Of course it was far more complicated than that owing to Soul Society's politics.

The sōtaichō remained adamantly convinced of the strategic utility of supporting Ichigo but had to account for other pressures. While extremely large, the special account wasn't infinite, and although Ichigo and Rukia weren't so much as putting a dent in it the bean counters were annoyed and wanted some kind of oversight. Byakuya had his own concerns regarding their arrangements. While Renji was rather quite sure his taichō didn't hate Ichigo, per se, and understood something of his importance to Rukia and vice-versa, he also didn't seem to like the idea of them staying together completely unsupervised for a month. All that together with other token political pressure meant Yamamoto'd had to do something. Byakuya trusted Renji, or gave the appearance of doing so, and so he agreed to his appointment.

Of course, Ukitake had his own agenda and had also gotten to Renji, and upon arrival he'd been roped into the Urahara Shop's plans to help Ichigo, which had expanded beyond the latter's own requests.

Finally, Renji had plans of his own, because Ichigo and Rukia were his best friends and he was going to help them, which was why once he'd gotten the authority he'd hauled Hanatarō along just in case. He didn't truly know how things had proceeded over the last few days and was taking no chances even if Rukia's reports sounded productive.

He was no less than a quintuple-agent, reporting to Yamamoto, Byakuya, Ukitake, Urahara and Yoruichi, and himself.

Since no one's agenda except maybe Byakuya's involved intruding on the pair and Renji regarded that as counterproductive to his own aims, they were there mostly to observe and report when the
two went out and to serve as a rapid reaction force in case something went wrong. Renji knew Ichigo and Rukia well enough that he felt he could figure out where they were in things from the first observation and either pass that along to or hold it back from his various taskmasters as necessary. In the last resort he could clue them into what was going on around them.

Right then he and Hanatarō had to work out setting up sleeping schedules and working shifts while they could. Fortunately they were unlikely to be disturbed. That part of Tokyo was sufficiently far away from the jūreichi effect of Karakura that it was quite hard for Hollows to enter; the degree of development had reduced the spiritual pressure of the region even when accounting for the tremendous density of souls. It was exceedingly quiet in comparison.

Hanatarō muttered some sort of affirmation and stood up with him. He had some vague idea of the situation but was really just there because he believed in the cause.

They made their way back to their hotel.

Rukia woke all at once from nothing, suddenly staring at one of the walls. She blinked a few times and slowly sat up, feeling deeply rested. The room was dark and the blinds were closed. Hadn't they been partially open when she'd gone to sleep? She searched a bit for her soul pager and widened her eyes a little at the time: it was after noon. She looked over to Ichigo's bed and was immediately struck by the memory of the nightmare as she saw that he was still asleep.

What . . . happened?

She pulled her covers back and stood up, walking over to his bed and cautiously sitting down on it. He stirred a little at the motion but stayed asleep on his side. After watching him for awhile she lightly brought a hand to rest on his forehead and brushed through his hair. His eyes slowly opened and he looked up at her. "Seems like your moonlighting caught up with you," she ventured with a small smile.

"I figured a Kuchiki princess was entitled to her beauty sleep," he said drolly.

"I'm not a princess," she corrected. She was a noblewoman and there was a difference.

"News to me," he replied with a smirk.

She lightly flicked one of his ears before withdrawing her hand. "Thank you," she said sincerely. She didn't know how he'd known or what exactly he'd done but if it meant she had to endure that memory one less time she wouldn't question it.

He pushed himself up and shifted his legs out from behind her, sitting on the edge of the bed beside her. She looked at him sideways and blinked as she felt his hand clasp her on her far shoulder. "We don't have to do anything adventurous today," he said lightly, "so why don't you go try out that soaking tub?"

"But—" Rukia started.

"Rukia," Ichigo said with sudden irritability and a world-weary expression, "just because I'm your boyfriend now and I saved you from a bad dream doesn't mean I'm going to help scrub your back, you're old enough to bathe yourself you know!"

She blushed suddenly before frowning at his insolence in turning their teasing the night prior back around on her. She immediately brought her nearer elbow back hard into his stomach. He collapsed backwards with a groan as she stood and declared "Fool!"

By the time he stopped wincing and sat back up she'd already collected her clothes and shut the door
to the bathroom. "That's better," he said with a small laugh before flinching. It really did hurt.

After a moment of considering exactly what to do while she was relaxing he'd flopped backward and promptly dozed off again. He hadn't been in the mood to read since she'd turned up, TV was boring, and anything he could do in terms of preparing for singing was something dreary like memorizing lyrics or working on English pronunciation. There'd be time for that later.

It was well over an hour later by the time she'd bathed, gotten her pajamas back on, and returned to criticize him. "Wake up, you good-for-nothing mortal, you're going to ruin your sleep schedule!" she exclaimed. She was messing with her soul pager again as she so frequently was lately.

"Holidays are for resting the body and mind, you know," he countered with heavy disinterest, before asking "What are you always doing with that thing now anyway? You never used to use one that much." He didn't move from where he was.

Her response sounded perfectly serious even as she didn't look up from the device: "I'll have you know that I spend quite a lot of time writing reports on what a jerk you are. It's a full time job. I've secured a column in Seireitei Communication for it and everything. You're going to be the talk of Soul Society, Kurosaki Ichigo."

He chuckled at the idea and humored her. "Think it'll be a permanent feature?"

She powered off the screen of the soul pager and crossed her arms before smirking at his insinuation. "It had better be."

"Well since your journalistic career hinges on it and all I guess I don't have a choice but to help out," he said like it was one more bother among many. "You want to interview me or something?"

"I don't know," she said, tapping a finger to her chin, "I have such a big back catalog to work through already . . ."

"This is some brand new and completely exclusive material, I promise. Come over here and I'll tell you all about it," he said sarcastically.

She rolled her eyes and let out a theatrical sigh before walking over to his bed, pushing herself up onto it and sitting in the middle of it with her legs crossed.

He looked up at her with half open eyes.

Rukia looked back at him with a soft expression and a small smile.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Mnhmm," she said, bringing up a hand to brush against his forehead and through his hair again.

"How long has that been happening?" he asked mildly.

She hesitated for a second before saying "A long time. It comes and goes."

Ichigo knew better than to ask more and closed his eyes.

"That's the first time I haven't had to remember the whole thing," she said quietly.

"How was the soaking tub?" he asked, changing the subject so she wouldn't have to.
"Oh, it's really nice," she said, her voice becoming wistful. "I feel like maybe it was missing something though," she added coyly.

"I can't imagine what," he said with a completely straight face.

"It's a mystery," she said, letting her fingers brush the back of one of his ears. "We're missing out on Tokyo, you know," she continued with only the slightest hint of a reprimand.

"No, we're not," he said with quiet confidence, "I'm pretty sure this is the best part of it and the rest will still be there tomorrow."

She smiled.

"Have you been plotting out trips on that thing?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "When I'm not writing exposes on your barbaric behavior anyway."

"Maybe we should hit the town after all since Byakuya will be coming to kill me soon," he mused.

"Don't be ridiculous. Nii-sama only writes for the magazine, he has far too much class to actually read it," Rukia said stiffly.

Ichigo opened his eyes a little and glanced up at her in mild disbelief. "What's his column called?"

"All About Etiquette," she replied.

He laughed, earning a gentle pinch to an ear in reprisal. "Oww! I guess it's a kinda catchy title, at least," he conceded. "What're you gonna call yours?"

"I was thinking about King of the Fools but that makes you sound too cool, so maybe it'll be titled My Idiot Boyfriend or something like that," she pontificated.

"I bet the Shinigami Women's Association would love that," he said smarmily.

She pinched him again before laying back beside him. They both became quiet as they just lazed with and appreciated their proximity to one another.
"What do you think Byakuya will do?" Ichigo asked after quite some time had passed. His tone was quiet but sober.

"I'm not sure, and nii-sama is probably doing something already," Rukia considered, "but I don't think it will be anything too drastic."

He turned his head to look at her and found she'd turned on her side and was already facing him. Her expression was calm and self-assured. He turned toward her and let his eyes search in hers at her statement.

She brought a hand up and lightly tapped him on the nose with her index finger. "Just like Soul Society has changed because of you, nii-sama has too . . . not that he would ever admit it. Regardless of what exactly happened you're still a hero and you sacrificed on behalf of everyone else. He respects that. You've also shown you'll go to any lengths to protect me and your character isn't in doubt. He respects that too. He might not always agree with you, but once he understands . . . what's happening . . . he won't move against us." The corners of her mouth ticked up even as her eyes came down a bit. "Even if you are still a rude and uncivilized brute."

He suddenly realized one of the things she'd been trying to warn him about had been Soul Society's politics. "There will be suitors trying to woo you or something, won't there?" he asked. He only vaguely recalled studying things about the way the nobles of the feudal era had conducted themselves. "And there'll be resistance to you spending much time here—" he started to continue.

She brought her finger up to his lips as she had days prior, holding it there. She didn't like to see him so doubtful and brooding. He fell quiet. She smiled a little more at him. "I told you it wouldn't be easy. There will be obstacles. But I can stand up for myself and what I want in my own way, even against nii-sama and the clan. I know he'll stand with me once he understands. And that's assuming he doesn't already. There are also other things at play. We'll make it work, Ichigo. Your role for now is to make sure no one worries about you, right? Then let me protect you and trust me," she said softly. Her finger stayed against his lips. She still remembered his teasing on the way to Disneyland, even if it had been to distract her.

He stared at her for a moment, dumbstruck. Despite everything he'd decided and what he'd declared to her it was still hard to stand back and let others carry burdens, especially his. He'd done it for so long that it was an instinct and it hurt to have to ignore it. He suddenly saw how protective of him she'd been since their reunion, even from the very first day. He'd thought her concern during his hangover and at Space Mountain had really just been their usual antics, but . . . when had she become truly aware of it? Had it been yesterday? He closed his eyes and very lightly brushed his lips against her finger.

She blinked and blushed just a touch, pulling it back in surprise.

"Rukia, you know I trust you," he said, locking eyes with her again. He would find a way to put it all aside and out of mind for her if not for himself, until perhaps he could protect her again in return. But even so . . . he reached out a hand of his own past hers, bringing a finger to rest against the pajama fabric covering her sternum. Her eyes widened a bit and her blush intensified. "In return, trust me to protect your heart," he said without any reservations.
Her pupils contracted at his words and he knew it was the sign of a flare of pain in her. He knew it was something in his word choice or in the way he'd said what he just had.

"Especially against that!" he added immediately, forcing all the resolve he could muster into his own expression.

She didn't look away and her pupils dilated again as she refocused on him. "I trust you too, Ichigo," she said. Her tone was clean.

He held her gaze for long seconds before lifting his hand to her face, stroking one of her cheeks. She closed her eyes and slowly turned her head toward it, doing the same thing to his fingers as he'd done to her one. He flushed a little red and withdrew his hand as she looked back to him, smiling tightly. He found he wanted nothing more than to hold her.

Her expression firmed up into a mildly superior look. "Well I'm glad that's settled, otherwise I'd have to beat you up and file another report. You create enough paperwork for me as it is," she chastised.

He understood and played his part with her. "I am your job, you know," he said after a second in a snippy way, giving her a standoffish look.

"I'm all too aware of that, and there's so much work left to do," she responded, tilting her head in toward him a bit and regarding him with a half-lidded smirk.

They stared each other down for awhile. We . . . really are a difficult pair, Ichigo thought, before moving one of his hands next to one of hers and letting their fingertips touch. She glanced toward the renewed contact before looking back to him. Her ultramarine eyes seemed to soften as her light blush returned. She genuinely smiled.

Rukia ran her fingertips back against his, watching him smile in return as his chocolate eyes mellowed. They let their digits play for some unknown time. She found she wanted to be in his arms again but at the same time stuck by her stance from the previous day. They were both demure in their restraint. Despite that, even little touches and looks said more than almost any words ever could.

Ichigo finally withdrew his hand and closed his eyes for a second. When he met her gaze again it was with a newfound if understated resolve. "Kuchiki Rukia, would you let me take you out to dinner?" he asked. If they were really going to do this, he wanted there to be at least a token effort at normalcy behind it.

"I'd like that, Kurosaki Ichigo," she said.

"How does tomorrow night sound?" he asked, growing more confident.

"Perfectly agreeable," she said, letting her tone become more proper.

"Then it's a date," he replied.

"Yes, it is," she confirmed.

The atmosphere between them lingered for awhile before Ichigo's stomach suddenly growled. He averted his eyes and sighed at the mood being so crudely ruined.

Rukia laughed at him before her stomach did the same thing. She abruptly reddened and likewise looked away. They glanced back at one another abashedly. "Get cleaned up and we'll get something to eat," she offered.
"And I thought I was going to get to use the soaking tub too," he said with chagrin, letting a vague but aggressive expression of disappointment onto his face.

"I told you it was missing something anyway, fool," Rukia reminded him with a look that was at once both cheeky and aloof. She sat up and started to shoo at him. "Go already!" she commanded.

He sat up and scolded back without heat: "I'm not some cat or puppy to be dismissed at your leisure you know!" He glared at her mildly before standing and getting some clothes, going to the bathroom. Rukia didn't press the point and changed into something presentable in the bedroom while he was occupied.

Both wondered at how they had in many ways reversed roles with respect to just after they'd first met. Then it had been Ichigo who protected Rukia and she who'd tried to guide him and help him with his heartaches. They would stand by each other again in the other's previous place, even as things between them had changed with their roles.

After Ichigo finished dressing they briefly discussed where to go. They decided that since he'd gotten to pick where they'd gone on their last night out, Rukia would pick for the date the next day and he would pick where they ate that day. He remembered reading in the hotel guide about a small nearby Thai restaurant called the Rice Terrace. Although neither of them had ever had Thai cuisine before they both agreed to try it for lunch in the spirit of exploration as it was an opportunity not available in Karakura. They could figure out dinner later. They made their way through the hotel and out onto the streets of Tokyo without their recently acquired umbrellas.

Renji was shaken awake by Hanatarō.

"Renji-san, they're moving," he said plaintively.

The crimson-haired Shinigami groaned and sat up. It was just like them to choose to do something when he'd only had two hours of sleep. There was nothing for it. He reached for his soul pager and closed its notifications on their movement, checking the sensor grid that'd been established and the movements of Rukia's own equivalent. Both reported the two were moving at a leisurely pace due west from their hotel. From their speed it was clear they were on foot and from their direction they weren't headed toward a station.

"We'll leave the gigai here," Renji said, getting his Soul Candy dispenser and popping a soul pill into his mouth. Hanatarō followed suit and so they stood in shihakushō opposite their material counterparts. "Stay here and don't cause any trouble," Renji warned the artificial souls.

"We—we won't go anywhere, uho!" said Hanatarō's Blues.

"Can we at least watch TV, nyah?" asked Renji's Ginnosuke.

"Do whatever, just don't leave!" Renji said with irritation. He grabbed up the backpack Hanatarō had previously carried and said "Come on, we'll have to catch up with them," before phasing straight through one of the walls.

Hanatarō followed after, saying "Yes!" before shouting "Ah, Renji-san, I can't use flash steps!"

"Ehhh?" Renji said in disbelief as he looked back to him. He frowned at his own oversight and made up his mind immediately. He grabbed the medic by the wrist and said "Hang on then!" He was soon using flash steps to leap across the roofs toward Ichigo and Rukia's signal, Hanatarō protesting as he
tried to maintain some level of sure-footedness without being dragged along or smacked into things.

It was a kilometer to the restaurant and Ichigo and Rukia took it side by side, looking at western Roppongi's shops and establishments as they went to see if there was anywhere they wanted to stop again in the future. As they walked, she considered the idea of asking to see a movie the next day but had no idea what was playing or worth watching. They arrived at their destination fifteen minutes later with a final detour off the main road near a large local cemetery.

The restaurant was rather small and intimate, having seating for only two or three dozen people. There were a few other patrons there for what looked like late lunch. They waited to be seated and wound up in the front of the restaurant at a table for two near some of its slatted windows. The windows were open and a refreshing breeze was coming in. They considered their menus.

"Just so you know," Ichigo offered with a glance up at Rukia, "if it tells you something is spicy it probably means it." Although he'd never had Thai he knew that much.

"You should probably be more worried about yourself in that regard," she replied smugly without looking up.

"Eh? Are there spicy food-eating contests or something in the Seireitei? Are you some kind of reigning champion?" he asked just a bit sarcastically.

"No, it's just when we were kids I'd torment Renji by putting spices in his food because he hates anything hot, so I got used to eating it when he'd refuse to do it," she said, looking up to him with a smile that was just a touch wicked.

"You two grew up together?" Ichigo asked, honestly curious. He'd never really known the basis for their friendship and finding out Renji was like Rukia's version of Tatsuki—or vice-versa depending on how one looked at it—was news to him.

"Kind of; we met in Rukongai. It was a long time ago. I'll tell you about it some other time," she said as she looked back to the menu.

Ultimately they got lunch sets, having just barely made the cutoff. Rukia got green curry chicken while Ichigo got red curry chicken. She asked for it hot and he wasn't one to be outdone so he followed suit. Their meals came with white rice and sides; both picked salads, also asking for cold tea. They sat silently for a few seconds.

Rukia looked at Ichigo and studied his face, thinking through the last few things she wanted to say before committing. She'd been contemplating the subject in question to various degrees ever since they'd talked at the Shinjuku I-Land Tower but their new relationship had complicated the matter. Their earlier conversation had finally settled it for her. "Ichigo... I'm going to request to be permanently assigned to watch over you until such time as you regain your powers."

He stared at her in silence as a hundred questions immediately ran through his mind. She looked completely serious about it. He remembered her speech to him about her duties on their first day back together. "What about your responsibilities as a fukutaichō?"

She replied "I've given it a lot of thought and I'm not suggesting it lightly. It's not just that I want to be beside you either. The sōtaichō considers you a strategic asset worthy of protection, which is why we searched for you and is why I'm here to begin with. When you return to Karakura you'll still need someone to watch out for you. Kurumadani is... not the most competent Shinigami, and everyone else can't be expected to look out for you full-time. Karakura is the responsibility of the 13th..."
Division, I know you best, and someone of at least fukutaichō rank should be on hand considering the number of Hollows that attack there. Sentarō and Kiyone are experienced at keeping the Division running. I don't know if there's some faster way to get your powers back or not, but being around my reiatsu couldn't hurt either."

Ichigo considered her for a bit. If she was so seriously willing to put aside her duty to safeguard him then that coupled with her earlier request to trust her meant that complaining would just be an insult. Plus the truth was that he really liked the idea of her not leaving. After a second he nodded gravely and said "Okay."

She smirked a little. "Just like that, no objections?"

"I'm sure there'll be a lot of details like where you'll be staying and how Byakuya will react to it and all of that but you asked me to trust you and I agreed so that's just how it is," he said irritably, looking off to one side.

Rukia smiled, seeing right through it. "Good," she said, "I think it'll also help with staying here."

He looked back to her in mild confusion.

She exhaled slowly before saying "My mission is to watch over you until I can fully report on what had caused you to disappear. Technically I had the answer to that by Wednesday, and I certainly have it now." She glanced away as if in thought for a second and when her eyes settled upon him again she said "We both have our demons and we both won't open up to anyone other than each other. The real reason for all of this was that no one told you what was going on and you had nobody to talk to. You were lonely."

He felt his jaw clench and found he couldn't look away from her eyes. They had that soft look that was becoming increasingly common.

She leaned forward without breaking eye contact and said lightly "And so was I." She found his eyes taking on that mild look they so often had lately.

Ichigo involuntarily reflected on the fact they'd only really been split up five times after meeting without knowing if or when they'd see each other again: when she'd been taken to Soul Society, when she'd chosen to stay there, when he'd gone to train with the Visored, when the sōtaichō had ordered them not to pursue Inoue, and when he'd lost his powers. Only one of those had seen them both willingly leave the other with anything like happiness; the others were all forced. She was taken away twice, he'd run off once, and in the end they had been wrenched apart. Two images of Rukia disappearing behind the door of a senkaimon and the audio of a third time replayed in his mind. Each hurt and he didn't want to add a fourth. "Yeah," he said quietly, refocusing on her.

She was giving him just the slightest consoling smile, having noticed.

"I . . . don't want to lose you again," he added, not wanting to reiterate what he'd just remembered. She probably already knew.

"I know," she said, "so the sooner we can move to retask the mission to one that keeps that from happening, the better."

He merely nodded.

Before Rukia could say anything else their food was being placed in front of them, bowls steaming. They gave each other a lingering glance before starting to eat, trying their own dishes and then one another's. The flavors were very unique. Ichigo refused to complain about how spicy it was even as
he felt he'd perhaps made a mistake.

"Renji-san, is it true you knew Rukia from back then? And that you hate spicy food?" Hanatarō asked quietly.

"Shut up!" Renji whispered harshly. He was tired, trying to pay attention, and irritated that he was a point of humor between his friends.

The medic offered no further commentary and so they continued to lay prone beside one another, watching Rukia and Ichigo. They were on a rooftop across the street and several buildings over. Each had binoculars and had on headphones and mics hooked up to a long-distance listening device that Urahara had handed over. Why the shopkeeper had it had never been addressed and frankly Renji didn't want to know. They could hear what the pair was saying while still talking to one another through the headsets. They listened and watched in silence. They could only really see Ichigo well because of how the two were situated; Rukia had her back to the window.

Their meals were being delivered when Renji said "Well, damn," even as he couldn't help but smile a little. It'd always been obvious to practically everyone else that there was chemistry between Ichigo and Rukia. It seemed they'd at last figured it out, and there were all the interesting problems that would cause . . .

"Renji-san, I'm not sure I'm comfortable with continuing with this," Hanatarō stated.

The pair was discussing how tasty their food was. Ichigo looked like he was starting to break out into a sweat.

"I doubt they'll say anything more revealing than what they already did," Renji muttered.

"I think Rukia-san said it pretty clearly . . . they're not depressed. It does sound like they have some trauma," the medic said, recalling some of the expressions he'd seen on Ichigo, "maybe even deep trauma, but it doesn't sound debilitating and they seem to be working through it together." Hanatarō lowered the binoculars and turned to look at his crimson-haired counterpart. It felt wrong to spy on them if there was nothing to really be done in terms of counseling them. "There's no reason for us to be here."

"That's where you're wrong," Renji said, not looking away, "Even if we can't or don't need to really help them with whatever they're personally dealing with, we still have to help them.

"Eh . . . ? What do you mean?" Hanatarō asked.

Renji watched as Rukia laughed at Ichigo's obvious discomfort. "We have to help her plan succeed," he said. Her reasoning had been sound even if it served her interests and Ichigo's and there was a plan already in motion to get Ichigo his powers back that she didn't know about. It was unclear how long it would take Urahara to do whatever he was doing. He lowered the binoculars as he could still hear the couple in his ears and looked to Hanatarō. "We have to make sure they can keep helping one another."

There was one regard in which all of the quintuple-agent's bosses, including himself, were in agreement: they all had a vested interest in seeing Rukia, Ichigo, or both stable and happy and helping one helped the other. Even Byakuya couldn't disagree; there was no way he hadn't noticed the change in Rukia's demeanor and if being around Ichigo was what it took to make her happy then surely even he would concede. He'd become much more attentive to her after the invasion of Soul Society and especially after the war had ended.
Hanatarō looked back down to the restaurant for a time before nodding in support.

"Let's pack this stuff up. We have to get back to the *gigai* and rendezvous with these two. Today," Renji said, taking off the headphones and starting to break down the gear. The last thing he heard was Rukia scolding Ichigo on his competitiveness as the latter was holding a mouthful of tea to try and neutralize the spiciness of his food.
"It wasn't that hot," Ichigo said dismissively. He couldn't really feel his tongue.

Rukia gave him an incredulous half-lidded sideways glance. "Are you even going to be able to eat dinner?"

"Who said I was hungry for dinner?" he muttered.

"We could stop for ice cream," she offered in a suddenly chipper way, leaning toward him and smiling. They were walking beside one another back toward the heart of Roppongi.

He glanced at her contemptuously and sighed. "Fine, I guess," he sneered. Despite everything he could see through the act and felt sure this was some sort of self-serving mockery of mercy rather than genuine concern for his well-being. Rukia wouldn't possibly be that considerate.

She was already using her soul pager to locate the nearest ice cream shop. It turned out there was a Hobson's not too far away. They made their way there and Ichigo got cappuccino flavored ice cream while Rukia got hers royal milk tea flavored. They each stole a spoonful from one another before continuing on their way, walking as they ate and window-shopping.

"Are you still sending your sisters postcards from Hokkaido?" she asked idly after a minute.

"Yeah, I've been sending them out every other day," he said.

Rukia considered that for a moment. To her it didn't honestly seem like that big of a deal to let them know they were actually in Tokyo, although the truth might have to be massaged a bit. On the one hand when—not if—she went back to Karakura with him, explaining their accommodations in Tokyo and how things had changed could be awkward. On the other hand not explaining how they'd reunited at all would be even more awkward. "Have you thought about how to explain how we met up again?"

"Not really," Ichigo said, "we've still got plenty of time to come up with something."

"Hmm," she hummed, savoring the flavor of the ice cream. "We might want to let them in on the fact we spent some time here in Tokyo."

"I guess . . . I wasn't really looking forward to having to completely make up a story anyway," Ichigo said a little sourly. He supposed there was some way of transitioning the narrative of his vacation toward the truth, but telling them that he'd spent most of it alone with Rukia would just get them talking, especially Karin. He focused on his ice cream for awhile as it was helping. "I guess I could say there was a change of plans and let them know I'd come here after a bit and met up with you or something like that."

"You could send postcards from places we've been or are planning to go," she said, looking to him before adding "Maybe we could write them together?" She liked his sisters. They were both sweet in their own ways and they'd been very welcoming of her and clearly cared about him deeply. She'd understood why he'd wanted to keep them from being worried, even beyond his new outlook.

Ichigo visibly pondered it and smiled at her a little, nodding. "Yeah, let's do that. I know they'd like hearing from you."
Rukia smiled and pointed out some places where they might be able to find some postcards since they didn't really have any plans otherwise. They started wandering back toward the vicinity of the hotel while also stopping at stores that'd carry such things.

They were in the fifth such shop studying a postcard display when they were surprised to hear a familiar voice behind them.

"Yo, Rukia, Ichigo," Renji said. He sounded only somewhat as tired as he felt.

Their heads both turned to him surprise. He was in a rather generic t-shirt and jeans with the main oddity being a baseball cap he had on at a strangely jaunty angle. He had his arms crossed and looked rather disgruntled. "Renji?" Rukia asked as much in disbelief as confusion at his sudden presence. She couldn't feel his reiatsu.

Ichigo was about to add his own two cents when both he and Rukia noticed who was standing beside him. "Hanatarō?!" they both exclaimed at the same time. He was rather more incongruous and had on a Hawaiian shirt and jeans.

The medic waved limply and laughed nervously.

The petite Shinigami blinked before frowning. She could put together what was happening. "You're here to check up on us or something, aren't you?"

The one-time Shinigami substitute glanced at her before looking at the pair with newfound suspicion.

"Um, we were kind of, sort of—" the medic began with apprehension.

"We're here to spy on you," the crimson-haired Shinigami said flatly.

Both of his friends gave moderately shocked expressions at how direct the admission was before adopting scowls, immediately trying to figure out if this was brand new and if not how long they'd been under observation and what had been seen.

Renji blew out a breath and went from appearing agitated to exasperated. "Look, it's pretty complicated, I'm not exactly happy to be here either. Can we go somewhere to talk?"

The couple glanced at one another before looking back to their shadowing pair. "Yeah, fine, let's go," Ichigo said irritably.

Some minutes later they were all seated at a table in the park to the immediate east of the Mori Tower, northeast of the Grand Hyatt Tokyo.

"You'd better explain yourself," Rukia said with a note of disappointment.

"I didn't even have to come tell you any of this you know," Renji muttered defensively.

"Get on with it already," Ichigo grated.

The 6th Division fukutaichō exhaled and walked them through the situation that had developed around them, explaining how Byakuya and other parties had demanded Yamamoto provide oversight for this project, how Ukitake had wanted someone to check up on Rukia, and how Urahara and Yoruichi were likewise concerned about Ichigo. He carefully left out anything that indicated he knew about Ichigo's request to his friends. He also explained why he'd hauled Hanatarō along. He
put off discussing what Urahara was working on until later.

"Let me get this straight: you report to the sōtaichō, my taichō, your taichō, and Urahara and Yoruichi?" Rukia asked with obvious doubt.

"Don't forget myself," Renji replied. Nobody had instructed him to do what he was doing; this initiative was all his own.

Hanatarō was looking everywhere but at the table, clearly wishing he wasn't present.

"How long have you been watching us anyway?" Ichigo asked.

"And why are you telling us all this?" Rukia added in a demanding fashion.

"We got here this morning and the only thing we've been present for was the first half of your lunch. That was enough to convince us that we should take this course of action," Renji responded plainly. It was the truth, and they didn't need to know about the sensor grid or the fact he could track Rukia's soul pager . . . or how they'd observed the lunch. Furthermore, there was no point in explaining what they'd heard as all parties had been present for it. He looked to Hanatarō who demonstrated he was listening by looking back to the table and nodding.

"We want to help with your plan," the medic said mildly.

"Why?" Rukia reiterated. She looked less suspicious and more concerned. If Renji was beholden to that many interests then revealing his mission to her and Ichigo this brazenly put him at serious risk for reprimand and consequences.

"Because you're my allies and helping you get what you want is the best way of satisfying the interests of all the parties involved," Renji said without any great attachment. He had no interest in rubbing in how obvious the change in their behavior was when they were apart versus together or what else he'd heard. He was okay with dangerous missions but not suicidal ones and he was already in the teeth of the tigers.

"Ichigo-san, Rukia-san, everyone can see that . . ." Hanatarō began, before being stopped dead in his tracks as their gazes swiveled over to him, almost seeming to dare him to complete the thought. "T—That," he stammered. "That the two of you open up more around each other," he managed to finish.

Rukia and Ichigo exchanged a look. She suddenly smirked at him. "So you saw his face when he had that curry, right?" she asked as she turned to the other two.

Ichigo frowned heavily at that and looked directly to his crimson-haired friend. "Oi, did you really let her screw with you by spiking your food like that?"

She summarily jabbed him in the side with an elbow, proclaiming "Don't drag him into this!"

After he recovered she found herself the victim of having her sides pinched and tickled as he exclaimed "You just started it by asking if they watched us eat!"

Rukia swatted his hands away and got up in his face, hissing "Asking them about something they witnessed isn't the same thing as asking about something that was mentioned!"

Ichigo leaned in and glared back, growling "It is when the guy in question was the other party in the story!" Their noses were only a couple centimeters apart as they stared one another down and fumed.

Renji smirked heavily at the exchange but had the wisdom to not say a word; this was how he'd
supposed it would be the first time.

"Um," Hanatarō began, only to stop as they both turned their irritation toward him. "Never mind," he said, waving them off with a please-don't-hurt-me smile. The couple stared each other down again for a second before they crossed their arms and hmpah, looking away from each other.

Renji deliberately let go of all the provocative things he could potentially say, especially 'Get a room,' and cleared his throat. "There's one other thing."

All parties turned to him expectantly, the couple looking particularly dubious.

"Ukitake-taichō told me not to tell anyone this but . . . he mentioned there was an effort to try and get Ichigo's powers back," Renji said calmly, "He didn't give any specifics but when I suggested to Urahara-san that I knew something about it, he more or less confirmed it was his project. I don't know how it's going, if it'll work, or how long it'll take to finish, but knowing that's going on in the background strengthens the case for Rukia's plan." He looked at her directly, adding "Even if you can't tell anyone you know when making your case, and neither can I."

The couple stared at him with surprised looks and their jaws seemed to be set looser than normal. Rukia turned to regard Ichigo and from her eyes alone her happiness for him was evident. The rest of her face made it radiate.

He looked back at her and seemed to smile in empathy at her look more so than out of his own glee.

Renji very deliberately looked elsewhere, giving them their moment. It was both out of respect for their privacy and because although he was happy for them and glad to see them once more like how they should be it still stung just a little.

Hanatarō had long since returned to studying the buildings.

After some time, Rukia looked to Renji and asked "So I take it you have a plan?" Her tone was considered. She knew why he was doing this and knew that trying to stop him was pointless. He both genuinely believed that it was the right thing to do and probably still felt some degree of guilt for not having pried more since the war. She did appreciate it.

Renji's tone became studied as he said: "Obviously you're going to tell Ukitake-taichō about your request in the expectation he'll pass it on to the sōtaichō. Since Hanatarō and I clearly overheard you discussing it, I'll leak it to all parties in advance. I'll also pass along my own personal recommendations to each of them. Ukitake-taichō will probably go along with it because it makes sense and helps you out. Urahara and Yoruichi will go along with it because it'll help Ichigo out and free them up to focus on whatever they're doing. Kuchiki-taichō will probably be at least satisfied that this seems to be helping you out. And the sōtaichō will probably be able to dismiss concerns about your expenses as being money well-spent." Despite being tired, he'd had plenty of time to think about this in advance.

Ichigo just blinked at the intricacy. Rukia narrowed her eyes in thought.

The tattooed Shinigami leaned forward against the table as he continued: "So Ukitake-taichō and Urahara will probably pressure the sōtaichō, and Kuchiki-taichō will have less desire to sustain any criticisms of his own. By the time your actual request comes in, the tide will have turned. Hanatarō's observations go in my and give credence to your case. We were never here having this conversation, of course."

"Doesn't all that depend as much on what's in your reports as it does on the interests of everyone
else?" Ichigo asked with disbelief, realizing that at least half of the plan relied on Renji's ability to sell the story.

"It's not like you've ever even read one of my reports and know how good they are," Renji stated irritably.

"And how are they not gonna figure out that you leaked this to each of them in an effort to play them all off against one another?" Ichigo continued, still not convinced.

"That's a risk but sometimes you just have to roll the dice," Renji muttered. He was banking on everyone suspecting everyone else and being too satisfied with the outcome to really notice.

Rukia cleared her throat to cut them both off. "How about we work out the reports right now? Renji, you can write out what you want to say so it's in your voice and we can all discuss it together to see if anything needs changing," she said diplomatically.

The crimson-haired Shinigami glanced at the two of them and to Hanatarō before exhaling and pulling out his soul pager. He began writing the general report of what he'd observed before working on the individual ones, taking into account input from the others. They all spent the next few hours critiquing, debating, and arguing with one another about what should and shouldn't be included and what worked and didn't in each of the five messages. Both Rukia and Ichigo were adamant about how their interactions were presented in the communiqués despite their various admissions to one another. Renji humored them verbally while keeping most of his observations in for veracity's sake.

"So, what assurance do we have that Byakuya isn't going to show up here tomorrow after you send this?" Ichigo asked at last.

"There's usually a protocol for coming to the Living World that involves a lengthy confirmation process and it's especially stringent for taichō; he'd never break it," Renji replied, "You've got until Rukia sends her own message at the very least before something happens."

"I'll send that on Monday," Rukia said, giving Ichigo a meaningful and serious look. She wouldn't run the risk of compromising their night together tomorrow.

He nodded at her subtly, taking her meaning.

Renji yawned loudly. It was after dark by then and he was hungry in addition to being tired. "Great," he said, "can we eat or something?"

Ichigo poked his tongue at his teeth. He honestly wasn't that hungry but he had an idea. He looked at Rukia, asking "Are you very hungry?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, how about this, I know a place we can go," Ichigo said, "We'll put it on our card and split an appetizer while you two get entrees; it'll look like it was just us on the statement and you can have something decent."

Both Hanatarō and Renji smiled at the first truly good news in hours.

Rukia gave Ichigo an approving look for his consideration.

They wound up at the Hard Rock Cafe Tokyo, which was a short walk northeast. The couple split an order of nachos while Renji got a hickory-smoked pulled pork sandwich and Hanatarō got fish
and chips. They had various sodas and water.

"So what have you two been doing anyway?" Renji asked.

"This delinquent tried to get us killed on a modern death-trap called a roller coaster," Rukia deadpanned.

"This woman got me drunk illegally in public," Ichigo countered without humor.

"He had a hangover after only four glasses of plum wine," she whispered incredulously to her counterparts.

"When we went to Tokyo Tower and went out onto the glass floored observation area she legitimately thought we were gonna fall through and die," Ichigo escalated.

They wound up glaring at one another again. This time both the observing Shinigami wound up laughing at their predictability, earning angry stares in turn. They stayed seemingly sullen and bickered with one another all throughout the dinner.

After they’d all finished their meals and were idly sipping at their drinks Renji pulled out his soul pager and held it up symbolically before flipping it open and rather theatrically sending all the reports. With that he stood, saying, "Well, you're on the clock now. We'll leave you two to it. Have a good night."

He started to walk off and Hanatarō smiled at them wanly before getting up to follow.

"Oi, Renji, Hanatarō!" Ichigo called after them, "... Thank you."

Rukia just gave them a look of gratitude.

Renji turned and smirked before continuing on, muttering "Don't thank me yet," under his breath. He was followed out by the medic.

The pair idled at the restaurant for a little longer in thought before paying and walking back to their hotel. After they entered the suite Ichigo got Rukia's attention with a touch to the shoulder and asked "Want to try filling out one of these postcards?"

She nodded with a pleased look and tugged him over to the thus-far unused work desk that was near the entrance. They sat opposite one another and pulled out the collection of cards they'd accumulated, choosing from among the places they'd already been to.

"So what exactly did you tell them you were doing again?" Rukia asked. She'd never actually been briefed on what Ichigo's cover story had been and only remembered his remark on the first day regarding the story about Hokkaido which he'd reiterated earlier.

"I'm supposed to be touring around Hokkaido with Mizuiro and Keigo for a month," Ichigo said. In truth, Mizuiro had gone off with a girl to Australia or something and Keigo was with his sister Mizuho somewhere on the shores of the Sea of Japan. It still wasn't entirely clear to him how he'd been figured out but presumably Inoue, Chad, or Ishida had checked in with them.

"Hmm," Rukia said, leaning back in her chair and thinking. "The easiest thing would be to just say Renji and I were sent to look out for you and there was a Hollow attack that ruined the trip. Mizuiro and Keigo wound up going elsewhere and we treated you to a vacation somewhere safer."
"Isn't that a little simplistic?" Ichigo asked. There were a lot of holes in it and he was inclined to be conspiratorially minded after the earlier discussion of Renji's reports.

"I don't think they'll really ask questions as long as it's clear you're safe," she said, looking to him. It was a bit dishonest but it was making the best of a troublesome situation.

Ichigo met her gaze and considered for a bit before nodding. He picked out a postcard of Tokyo Tower and started writing down a brief explanation on half of the back before passing it over to her.

Rukia took it and wrote her own message on her half. He was shocked at how much her penmanship had improved but said nothing, only to do a double-take as she began to doodle in the margins in a way that was completely unchanged from before. He let her continue for awhile without comment before saying "Hey, how about you get cleaned up so I can try out the tub without holding you up?"

She lifted an eyebrow at him, discerning it was an effort to impede her artistic endeavors. "And what if I want to use the soaking tub?" she asked sincerely.

He snatched the postcard away and looked it over while she was distracted. "You never stop talking about how it's missing something so I figured you were pretty over it."

"Hmph, fine, see if I care," she said with false derision, before getting up to shower. Ichigo watched her leave and waited for the shower to come on before leaving the suite to send off the postcard. On his way back he used his phone to look up the lyrics for the song he'd mentioned to Ishida and spent the rest of his time on the couch considering them with the TV on as cover.

When Rukia got out they swapped places, she starting to work with her soul pager on her own report, and he going to shower and try out the tub.

Rukia eventually moved to her bed. She glanced up at Ichigo when he finally left the bathroom, looking much more relaxed. She briefly reviewed and then saved the message she'd been working on.

Ichigo sat down on his bed and looked her way. "Finish?" he asked. He forced himself to put the mental echoes of her teasing about the tub out of mind and found himself hoping the reason she kept mentioning it was she had to deal with the thoughts too. It was a bit boring idling by oneself and there definitely was space in it for two.

"Mostly—I want to look it over more," she replied. She looked at the soul pager before shutting its screen off and setting it aside, turning to face him as she debated with herself. She still didn't question what he'd done to dispel her nightmare that morning, but she also didn't want to risk enduring it again. She'd been thinking about Kaien more than a fair amount lately and she knew that was what was causing the nightmares to happen. "Ichigo, about this morning . . ."

"I held your hands and soothed you until I was sure you were sleeping soundly," he said directly, meeting her look. He wasn't bashful about telling the truth about that and he wasn't ashamed of anything he'd done.

Rukia stared for a second before looking aside. She realized that in the dream she'd probably interpreted his touch as him using his powers; that was still how she thought of him in her heart of hearts. She inhaled and released it slowly. "Would . . . you mind holding my hands again tonight? I have a feeling . . . that'll be happening more often," she asked, not willing to meet his look directly. It was an embarrassing request, even if it wasn't necessary for them to share the same bed. Both were practically right next to one another and it was more than possible to maintain contact across them;
they could even move them together to do so more comfortably.

"Are you sure you're okay with that?" he asked. He was giving her a serious look.

"Don't say it like that, fool, it's just that I don't want to be a burden," she said quietly, glancing to him before looking away again.

Ichigo studied her for a second before getting off his bed. He pushed it a short distance forward such that it was firmly up against hers, the frames clacking as they made contact. He got back onto it and underneath the covers, turning so he was lying on his side facing toward her, and looked to her expectantly.

Rukia gave him a gladdened if slightly sheepish expression. She turned off her light, getting under her own covers and likewise facing toward him on one side. It was hard to see his face in the darkness as the curtains were mostly closed, but she could see incidental light reflecting off his eyes. She slid her hands out toward the slight gap in the mattresses that marked where the two beds met.

He brought his hands forward likewise, letting them touch hers. He was much more aware of how soft and delicate they seemed than he'd been that morning and brought his hands securely around them, holding them.

She blushed at the feeling and was glad the darkness hid her reaction from view. His hands felt warm and strong. She realized she'd tensed up and fought down an instinct to move closer. After forcing herself to relax she settling in against the bed, becoming aware of her pulse against him. She felt his hands ease a bit as well and closed her eyes.

Neither said anything to the other as there seemed to be no great need to. It took Rukia quite awhile to fall asleep as her mind kept refocusing on the contact, but she eventually drifted away into a deep and dreamless state. Ichigo was likewise distracted, for once his thoughts not wandering to other topics. It was when he heard her breathing softly that he at last let go of consciousness and joined her.
An Angel Sliding Up To Me

Monday, December 3, 2001

Ichigo sat on the ground, watching the river that lazily flowed by. The sun sparkled up at him from it. It was the same spot he always returned to—the place his world had already collapsed once. The ground was cold, the air was chill, and the sky was cloudy; He noticed none of these things. He hadn't been able to get away the day before, hadn't been able to be alone until he fell asleep. His friends and family hadn't let him, and he hadn't been able to bring himself to push them away. No matter how desperately he wanted or needed to, it wasn't who he was.

From the position of the sun some subconscious part of him knew it was around noon. He was supposed to be in school. None of that really mattered. He could have one more day to himself. How many of these kinds of days would he accumulate? First June 17th, and then December 2nd. How many times would the world fall apart?

When he'd arrived it had started like a sharp pain in his chest, like when Byakuya had pierced his binding chain and soul sleep. It had become the dull ache of a sword lodged in him. He cut himself to ribbons as he grappled with it. He refused to make a single sound about it, let alone cry. He knew what it was. It didn't need a name.

This is farewell, Ichigo. Her ultramarine eyes looked up to him in sadness, looked back as if searching for a last impression, disappeared even as they were closed off. Was she watching him even then? No, she wasn't actually like that. She wouldn't haunt him. Not in that fashion, anyway.

He heard footsteps and knew who it was without looking.

She said nothing.

He stared at a momentary eddy in the current beneath the sun.

She watched him.

She knew this was new and different and she knew that violence wouldn't work. It was a long, long time before Tatsuki quietly stated "You'll see her again," as if it was the most irrefutable fact in the world.

Not you'll be able to carry on. Not you'll be able to protect again. Not you’ll be a substitute Shinigami again. You'll see her again, a perfect encapsulation of how tied up Rukia was in all his various fears and needs. Everything traced back to her somehow. How had Tatsuki known what ailed him? How did she know exactly how the pieces fit? How did she have such confidence in the prediction?

He was silent, much farther away from her than a mere meter or two. For the first time, as he sliced himself apart grasping at the blade jammed in him, he found its hilt and grip. He clenched at the newly discovered purchase and even as he realized it wouldn't budge something new ignited within him. Someday, somehow, he would pull it out, even if he would bleed out from the wound it left
when he managed it.

He would see her again. He'd do anything. He'd even forget how much he missed her if that's what it took to make it to then. It was much later still when he stood.

Rukia sat in a tree, staring out at a still pond. The moon reflected in its calm waters. It was cold but that didn't bother her. She was deep into a wilderness area of Rukongai, having nowhere in particular she wanted to be and simply needing distance to be alone with her thoughts. She'd been kept busy by various responsibilities upon her return the day prior, had been practically dragged off to a social event by Renji, and had worked all day. She wouldn't go absent without leave from her duties. No matter how much she had to, it just wasn't who she was.

She hadn't been able to get away until the evening and so she'd gone as far as she reasonably could from the Seireitei. There was nothing out there that was a concern to her and she knew she could make it back in the morning. It seemed that most of the bad things always happened in places like this; what was one more?

When she'd arrived she'd felt a great emptiness form inside her, had felt her hopes and dreams and feelings fall away into it. From its edge she stared into it numbly. She struggled to see where everything had gone even as she didn't dare look at what she knew was actually at the bottom. She made no sound, didn't tremble, didn't cry. She replayed the collapse, knowing exactly what had triggered it.

*Bye, Rukia.* He refused to meet her look, even as he saw it, even as she turned away, even as he must've seen her disappear. A thousand emotions in those chocolate brown eyes had never looked sadder. He hadn't wanted her to see it directly. She'd told him she could still see him but she wouldn't. She knew all she'd see were echoes of that sadness.

She felt a sudden arrival below her then and knew who it was immediately.

*His reiatsu* was tightly reined in, but he was there all the same.

She didn't look down.

He said nothing.

She watched the moon faintly ripple.

His gaze fell upon her.

She said nothing.

He'd seen this sort of thing before, had felt it, and he knew exactly what it was. Some unknown time passed before Byakuya said "You will encounter him again," without any doubt or judgment whatsoever.

Not you will forget. Not you will carry on. Not you will see him again. You will encounter him again, an equation of equality in engaging again that reflected how central Ichigo had become to her life. Everything came back to him, subtly or overtly. Was she that transparent to her brother? Did he not judge her for her weakness because of his own heartache? How was he so confident of that assertion?

She was quiet, considering the void that loomed before her. For the first time she spotted something embedded on the side of its slopes without peering all the way down. She focused intently on the
new discovery, moving along the rim and ever so carefully making her way down to it as something new ignited within her. Someday, somehow, she would rescue all these things from this pit, even if it took her to the very bottom to confront what lay there.

She would encounter him again. She’d do anything. She would even move on and forget if that’s what it took to keep moving toward him. A long time passed before she dropped to her feet.

---

**Sunday, August 4, 2002**

Ichigo’s eyes opened fractionally. Something warm and soft was resting against him. He glanced down. Even in the dim circumstances created by daylight leaking through the almost fully closed blinds he knew that he was looking at a full head of silken, raven black hair. He became aware of several things all at once. They were on their sides against one another as close as could be with their hands still clasped, snug against both their hearts. Her pulse was slow and relaxed like a metronome. Their legs came together just above the knees. She’d brought her head in beneath his chin. Her breath against his neck was warm and regular. She smelled good.

A part of his brain processed all of it and declared *panic* but every other part replied *no*. There was something about it that was too perfect to be destroyed no matter what the consequences. He didn't move a muscle. His eyes slid sideways. They were on his bed. Had he pulled her to him? Had she pushed up against him? Did it really matter? He regarded the brace of their hands and arms between them as both a blessing and a curse for how it limited the intimacy of their position. Her breathing suddenly shifted just a little and her head tilted back. Their eyes met. Chocolate and ultramarine stared at one another. She looked sleepy.

Rukia looked up at Ichigo's drowsy face, even as she became aware of everything he had and her mind wondered at the same things his had. Something inside her shouted *shame* and everything else whispered back *no* and so she didn’t move. They stared into one another for what could've been seconds or hours. Both started to blush a bit, although neither the breathing nor pulse of either started to race. Neither shifted and neither said a word. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back down, pressing he face back against his neck. She felt his chin come down against her hair. He smelled right.

They dozed off beside one another again.

Rukia woke up again sometime much later. They hadn't moved at all. She stayed still and let her mind wander as she indulged in his proximity. It wasn't clear how they'd wound up against one another and Ichigo had seemed just as confused by it. She wasn't mad. There was nothing wrong with a girlfriend and boyfriend sleeping against one another. She was very careful to not think of it as 'with'. She'd fought against a longing for that kind of contact since Friday and greatly enjoyed having it again even if it worked against her previously stated principles.

It was just a thing that had happened. The question was: would it keep happening? Should it? If they'd done it subconsciously weren't they just being honest to themselves and each other? Was it right to stop something like that or even to try and slow it down?

Everything they'd ever done together had been on or near a battlefield. They'd put their lives on the line for each other from the very start. They'd brought their very souls together. They'd come to think of each other in specific ways, in terms of obligations and duties and protection, because they'd never had time to do otherwise. What other people saw as fighting was a kind of affection, appropriate for their circumstances. It was how they kept each other going. But at least for a little while they were away from all that. Was that why things were different? Who were they each trying to protect when
they held themselves back? Was it each other, or themselves, or future versions of the same? Was it really right to treat what they had together as if it was normal?

A new thought came to her: was this natural? Had Urahara messed with her gigai somehow, yet again? She'd always previously held the Living World's mortal vagaries in slight disdain and thought of being in spirit form as more pure and true, but with Ichigo that didn't matter. Was that just paranoia? She couldn't be sure. It was all so confusing. She still didn't really know what to do.

Rukia pulled her head back a bit and tilted it up to find he was already looking back down at her. She blinked. How long had he been awake? He regarded her with a hard to place expression in his face and eyes. It took her a moment to place it as indecision, so rarely had she seen it on him. Their eyes searched in each others' for a moment as neither seemed to quite know what to say. "I slept well," Rukia said at last. It sounded lame.

"I'm glad," he responded. It sounded no better.

"Ichigo . . ." she started, grasping for words. Why did it always have to be like this with them?

"Rukia, we don't always have to be so . . ." he started, before searching for the right word. It wasn't that they were inauthentic, or even really self-censoring, it was just that they had a very particular way of doing things. "So . . . proud," he concluded. "Sometimes we can just . . . be."

Her eyes widened a bit as she realized they'd been considering the same things.

"You're not mad, are you?" he asked, a small smirk forming on his lips as his gaze firmed up.

"Fool," she said affectionately, giving him a sly smile as her eyelids dropped a bit. She pulled her hands apart, breaking his grasp on them. She let her fingertips stroke his palms as she pulled her hands away and pushed herself up into a sitting position, stretching. She became aware that she was on his bed. She reached out and got her soul pager to check the time as she heard him sit up behind her.

One of his hands lightly came to rest on one of her shoulders.

It certainly wasn't the first time he'd ever done it but this time she shifted into it, taking note of how strong and comforting it felt even after having just broken contact. Damn you, Ichigo, what are you doing to me? Her hands clenched in resistance at her own response.

"Have you thought about how you want to handle getting dressed?" he asked.

She blinked and turned her head over her shoulder to look at him in confusion before she suddenly remembered it was their date night. How had she forgotten? Her heart skipped a beat as it only reinforced the feeling that things were running beyond her control. "No . . . I hadn't really considered it," she managed.

"Well, do you want to surprise each other again?" he asked.

Yes, that's exactly what I want. Things in her shifted, wiping away all the doubt and indecision. An impish smile came onto her face and her eyelids came down. She had the perfect weapon already in hand. "We've done that so it's not really a surprise anymore," she replied in a tone that was completely free of any subtext, "so how about the surprise is in the process instead of the result?"

Ichigo blinked and a look of bewilderment came over him.

Rukia couldn't tell if it was because he didn't understand or didn't believe what he was hearing, and it
didn't really matter which it was anyway. "We can get ready together," she offered, letting her smile become more genuine. "You owe me a back scrubbing anyway." Mixed-gender public bathing was common in Rukongai and the Seireitei, as it had been in Japan before the end of the Edo period and the importation of Western ideas of modesty. She wasn't the biggest fan of it but her childhood in Inuzuri had seen her bathe and more around boys and she was more than capable of dealing with it. She would do it if it meant regaining some surety of control over how things progressed between them. It was okay for them to be less modest as it would happen sooner or later, deliberately or accidentally, and so it may as well occur directly and jointly and in a controlled way. She wasn't truly afraid or embarrassed, not with Ichigo.

He immediately turned red and she knew she'd finally gotten out ahead of him. "R—Rukia," he stammered.

She turned to face him fully and crossed her arms, giving him the haughty look and tone she reserved for when he was disappointing her by being cowardly or despondent. "What's with that face? Ichigo, are you sincerely telling me that you've never bathed with a girl or woman before? What about your sisters?"

"That's different!" Ichigo immediately replied. He hadn't done that since before meeting her because it was getting awkward but even then, bathing with family was entirely different from . . .

"What about Yoruichi-san? Nii-sama told me all about her! You expect me to believe you spent all that time around her and she never once did anything shameless?" Rukia continued, leaning in.

"That's different too, and it's not like I wanted it to happen!" Ichigo growled, becoming sufficiently flustered he didn't even think to deny it. He deliberately locked the memories of Yoruichi's first transformation in front of him and the time at the Sōkyoku Hill training ground's hot spring out of his mind.

"How is it different?" she demanded.

"Because you're—you . . ." he started.

"Is it that you're attracted to me?" Rukia asked plainly.

Ichigo went mute and regarded her with a shocked expression. She may as well have slapped him.

She turned her head a bit to regard him disapprovingly. "I know that you're a young man with raging hormones but are you saying you can't even be around a woman you like in a familiar and socially understood setting like that? I know you're not a pervert, Ichigo. Are you just that easily embarrassed?" she asked, her tone growing grim.

One of his eyebrows was twitching as he hissed "You . . ."

Rukia closed her eyes and turned her nose up at him in disbelief. "You know it's gravely insulting to ignore your girlfriend asking you if she's attractive, don't you?" she declared in a way that was cold and made it clear it wasn't really a question. There would be consequences to his next statement.

Ichigo was silent, watching Rukia as she sat immobile as a statue. The degree to which he was suddenly doomed left him stupefied. At last he closed his eyes and said "You're . . . stunning," with sincerity.

"That's not what I asked you," she replied coolly.

". . . Of course I am," he said quietly. His relationship with thinking of her in that way was
complicated and he did his best not to do it with any frequency. That was already being sorely tested.

"The Kurosaki Ichigo I know wouldn't have any concerns about conducting himself appropriately to the situation and I trust him implicitly in all matters," Rukia stated imperiously, looking down her nose at him again. "So what is it? Are you afraid of being judged?" she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"No," he replied. He didn't feel inadequate.

"Then tell me, Ichigo," she said, fixing him with a serious stare, "Out with it already."

"I just don't want to rush that kind of thing, even if it's innocent and a thing a lot of people regularly do," he said, looking back with matching intensity. It was more of a rural thing those days but it was still common.

Rukia let her expression soften a little and gave a hint of a smile. "Rushing it, like how we wound up sharing a bed together on our sixth night back together?"

"That's different!" he repeated.

"Is it?" she asked sincerely.

Ichigo found he didn't know exactly how to argue the point.

"There's no such thing as normal between us, Ichigo," she said quietly. "We saved each other from death within our first ten minutes together. I put my zanpakutō through your heart to turn you into a Shinigami. I lived out of your closet for two months. You invaded Soul Society to save me. It goes on and on. There's nothing normal about any of that, for humans or Shinigami."

He stared at her, processing her words. He'd been thinking the same thing earlier.

"I know what I said about it not being fast and I stand by that. But there's no model or guide for us. All that matters is that we're both okay with something!" Rukia declared adamantly. Everything about her seemed to soften then. "All that matters is if you're okay with it. If you're not that's fine and we won't do it. But you don't need any other reason; you don't need to invoke any other authority. We can just . . . be," she finished, repeating his words back at him.

They stared each other down as they so often did but it was understanding that crackled between them. They didn't need to structure things with one another as they'd been doing. After some time Ichigo closed his eyes and smirked. "I was right all along: you really have just been giving me 'advice'."

"W—What?! No!" Rukia replied immediately. Her cheeks flushed as she caught his meaning and the reference to their first night out.

Ichigo leaned forward and leered at her. "Are you saying you're not interested in seeing me naked?" he teased.

"As if!" she protested, scowling even as her blush intensified.

"It's not fair to demand I answer whether I think you're attractive in that way and then deny you feel the same way, you know! Like you'd have decided we were boyfriend and girlfriend if you didn't think that!" he complained loudly.

Rukia looked off to one side testily and muttered "You're sexy," under her breath, just barely loud enough for him to hear.
"I don't think I heard that," Ichigo said, leaning in and scowling back.

"I said you're sexy!" she stated, meeting his gaze with a sour look.

"Well, the Kuchiki Rukia I know would always classily handle herself and I trust her implicitly in all matters," Ichigo stated with only the barest hint of sarcasm. "If this is what it takes to get you to shut up about the soaking tub then fine, I'll scrub your back," he added with a decisive scowl.

She said nothing and glared at him.

"Did you make reservations?" he asked.

"We've got a few hours," she replied.

"Then I guess we better go," he said.

"Fine!" she responded.

"No peeking!" Rukia instructed severely.

"That goes double for you!" Ichigo grated in response.

They undressed back to back and turned to face one another with their eyes both distinctly held above a certain plane, glaring at one another as if to challenge the other to look down first. Neither did and so after their impromptu staring contest they got into the bathing area. He started the tub filling with hot water while she started the shower. They once more stood facing oppositely, soaping themselves, stealing occasional glances at one another when they thought the other wasn't looking. They caught each other precisely once and both immediately jerked their heads away as if it'd never happened, blushing. Ichigo wound up soaping up her back, and Rukia did the same for him despite never having offered. Both lingered only for a moment and only reached so far down. After using their shampoos and rinsing off fully, he turned off the shower and they went together to the soaking tub, averting their eyes from one another and sinking into it.

It overflowed tremendously into the floor drain but that was to be expected. They sat side by side in the water, shoulder-to-shoulder. They found themselves glancing at one another, both deliberately not looking down below the water's surface. She broke off eye-contact first and reclined backward against the edge of the tub, relaxing.

He promptly followed suit. They kept their shoulders together and sank deep into the water. It was somehow different than it'd been before. It was more tranquil than the whirlpool but much less lonely than it was by oneself. There was something peaceful and comforting about it. Both felt all their questions and worries melt away as the heat seeped into their muscles. They didn't even find themselves dwelling on having affirmed their impressions of one another. It felt like some deep unease had been washed away.

It was much later when, underwater, Ichigo brushed the thumb of his near hand against hers to draw her attention. Rukia opened her eyes narrowly and looked to him. He was already looking back at her. "You were right," he said simply.

She tilted her head in a superior way at the concession and said only "Of course I was," with a small smile before glancing off the other way.

"Rukia," he said, still looking at her, "how are we gonna get out?"
"By standing, you fool," she muttered, which she promptly did, stepping out of the tub.

Ichigo looked away in deference and stood, following; he only glanced down at her once. She threw a towel at him over one shoulder, catching him in the face with it, and by the time he'd pulled it away and put it around himself she'd gotten one around her torso and was putting another over her hair. They dried themselves off without paying much attention to one another.

She left before he did, calling back "Now was that really so humiliating?" as she got some panties on.

He walked past her without looking, letting a finger brush across the back of her neck as he went. She started at that as he said "No, but don't expect it to be a regular thing either." It had been proof they could fully trust one another with anything and everything, not a new normal of casualness. He would make sure of that for both their sakes.

"Hmph! Fine by me, washing your back is a pain. Help me with this," she demanded.

He hazarded a glance over to see she'd discarded the towel and was holding the straps of a bra behind her back. "Are you serious?" he asked mildly.

"It's been a long time since I've had to wear these stupid modern clothes and I'm still not good at it again yet," she said defensively. She was much more used to wearing a sarashi when she wore anything over her chest at all.

Ichigo exhaled and helped her fasten the hooks in the back without further protest, looking away as he did so. She turned without thanks and busied herself retrieving her dress from the closet while he got on boxers and an undershirt. He moved up alongside her to get his suit out; the four he'd acquired were the only thing in the closet with her clothes.

They found themselves shoulder-to-shoulder again and once more shared a glance, that time with small smiles. If they could handle being stripped of all defenses next to one another then they could handle anything in time.
Sometime later they were fully dressed.

Rukia wore a Chinese *cheongsam* in darkest blue with an ultramarine butterfly print and brilliant yellow piping along with her heels and bangle, and had put on slightly more makeup, the most notable change being heavier eyeliner and eye shadow that was flecked with gold. Once more the entire ensemble seemed to draw attention to her eyes.

Ichigo wore a black three-piece three-button suit with a jade-colored dress shirt and an off-setting, intricately patterned tie in shades of gold with traces of orange and jade that tied together with the shirt and his hair. He once more had a matching pocket-square and retained the same watch, belt, and shoes.

She thought he looked much more imposing than before, like an unusually young businessman as opposed to a trendy model. He found she looked much more exotic, like a mysterious foreigner rather than a fashionable socialite. As she'd predicted, watching the transformation had been just as surprising as seeing it all at once, albeit in a different way. There was less sudden shock at seeing one another look so different, and more a marvel at coming to watch each other fill out their chosen outfits and make them their own. They stood by the door regarding one another for awhile. Neither could get over what a change it was from seeing the other completely bare of anything.

"So, Kuchiki-*dono*, where have you made our reservations tonight?" he finally asked with reserve as he opened the door for her.

"Chinaroom," she said simply, leading the way out. Another of the hotel's restaurants, it prided itself on a one-two punch of upscale and modern atmosphere combined with relatively traditional if finely-tuned Chinese classics. Rukia had picked it because she'd never really had food from elsewhere and being in Tokyo had given her something of a zest for culinary exploration.

Ichigo followed and they headed to the elevators to go to the 6th floor.

They discovered it'd been cloudy all day and had rained occasionally, so upon confirming their reservations they opted to sit inside only to learn there was no outside seating anyway. Although it was busier than the Oak Door had been, owing perhaps to the day and time, their appearances once more got the attention of the wait and service staff. After declining semi-private dining accommodations they were brought to a window-side table for four, in plain view of but still somewhat separated from the rest of the restaurant. Ichigo pulled Rukia's chair out for her and they sat opposite one another. They asked for water while they considered their menus.

"Ever have the feeling we're being used as a showpiece?" Ichigo asked quietly, not looking up from his copy. They were drawing looks as much for their perhaps thematically appropriate dress as for their features; Rukia's eyes and Ichigo's hair marked them out wherever they went. That they seemed to symbolize the dual values of the restaurant wasn't lost on them.

"Just bear it with grace and take it as a compliment," Rukia replied calmly.

He glanced up at her before returning to consider the menu. "No alcohol this time."

"Swearing it off?" she gently teased.
"No, it's just unnecessary and risky," he said firmly. He wouldn't need to fortify his nerves for what he wanted to say anyway.

They went a la carte and ordered steamed pork dumpling dim sum as an appetizer along with some puer tea. Ichigo got wok-fried shredded Japanese beef with bell peppers while Rukia got the Chinese hot pot, which included various meats and seafood. The dim sum came along shortly with the tea, apparently being in high demand, and they munched on it happily. There were three and they split the last one—their decision to have a light dinner the previous night had come back to haunt both of them.

"So, want to tell me about how you met Renji?" Ichigo asked as he sipped at the tea. It had an unusually deep and complex flavor and was interesting but he wasn't sure if he liked it.

Rukia raised an eyebrow at him, finding it an odd conversation topic for a date night.

"Getting to know you better is its own reward," he explained. He raised his hands in mild supplication. "Fine, I'll start. I met Tatsuki in a karate dōjō when we were four years old. She was probably the first girl to ever make me cry," he said somewhat irritably, before continuing "She beat me every single time we had a match until the 6th grade, which is when I finally bested her, and we haven't fought since. Well, not in an official way, anyway."

"No wonder she always gets so angry with you," Rukia said with a small smile. "It's really cruel to deny someone their favorite hobby like that, Ichigo."

"I'm sure she would cheer you on for taking up the cause if she were fully aware of your true character," he deadpanned in response.

Rukia ignored the slight and said "We both grew up in the 78th District of South Rukongai, Inuzuri." She paused for a second, wondering how much to say and not wanting to bring the mood down. "I had a sister, Hisana, who was much older than me. I was just a baby and she couldn't take care of me and had to leave me, and so I grew up mostly by myself. I . . . never knew her. One day much later I saved Renji and some of his friends after they stole some water . . . souls with reiryoku still have to eat and drink. Anyway, I joined up with them. Eventually he and I were the only ones left, so we decided to become Shinigami and entered the academy. Renji was put into the advanced class and that's where he met Momo, Kira and a lot of others. It wasn't very long until I was adopted by the Kuchiki clan and was moved directly into the Gotei 13. We drifted apart then for . . . well, decades really. I didn't know it until after the first encounter with Aizen, but nii-sama's wife had been Hisana and she'd asked him to find me and treat me as his sister as her final wish." She'd looked away as she told the story. Although she'd made peace with all those things, compressing so much felt strange.

Ichigo stared at her in sympathy and surprise as the story unfolded and found he didn't know what to say. Her sister had been that desperate but never given up on her? She and Renji had been hard-scrabble orphans and hadn't talked to each other for decades? She'd been placed almost directly into the Gotei 13? Byakuya had been married? It made his story about Tatsuki sound trite and pathetic. What could he say at finding Rukia had endured so much? And that wasn't even what . . .

"Don't look at me so sadly," she said with a little bit of cheer and a smile.

He refocused on her suddenly.

"That was all a very long time ago now and . . . well, you shouldn't be depressed for my sake anyway because you're what changed a lot of it. It's because of you that nii-sama told me the truth of what happened, and it's because of you that Renji and I reconnected the way we did," she said. There was an air of gratitude about her.
"What?" he asked. He thought back on the events from Rukia's abduction the previous July through to the end of the war. He'd never really noticed how strange it was that in four months Renji and Byakuya had gone from trying to kill or capture her to being her friend and older brother. Could that . . . really be attributed to him? He'd just done what he had to . . . Rukia was beaming at him and he was struck by how achingly pretty she looked.

"I told you that you changed things, Ichigo," she said with reserve that belied her true feelings. "Urahara might have beaten Aizen . . . but you're still the true hero of the war to me."

Ichigo's eyes went wide and he was about to say something when their dishes were suddenly being placed in front of them. The aroma of the food was otherworldly, familiar but not, and after a glance back to Rukia he set his thoughts aside and they started to eat. As had become their custom they sampled one another's dishes and once more liked what they found.

They ate in relative quiet aside from occasionally stealing food from each other and chastising one another for it. They continued to draw the occasional subtle looks for their behavior; they seemed unusually familiar with one another for such a young couple to everyone else. It was almost as if . . .

Much later their plates were completely devastated and they were sipping at their respective cups of tea. Ichigo mentally filed away what he had wanted to say before the meal had begun in earnest and instead focused on the thoughts that had been brewing since their shared bath. "Rukia," he said to get her attention, his tone unusually serious.

She glanced up at him expectantly.

". . . I don't actually know the words for what I want to say, so let me say some other things first so I'm clear," he began. He looked her right in the eyes. "I like you. I think you're attractive in every sense of the word. I understand why what happened earlier did. I don't regret it any capacity whatsoever. I had fun. So what I'm about to say isn't in any way a reflection on you or your actions and if you get upset about it I'm gonna be mad, okay?"

Her expression became slightly concerned but she nodded slowly, not looking away.

He glanced down in thought before looking up to her again. "You said there's a lot I don't know about you, but this is your first time dealing with this kind of thing too, isn't it?" he asked. His tone was completely free of any judgment. He felt he knew enough about her to assume that, and despite her occasional bursts of confidence he was sure she wasn't actually much more experienced than he was, if any—which was to say not at all.

She nodded again. It was at least the first time she'd acted on it.

Ichigo rubbed the back of his head. Part of him wished she actually had gotten drinks again. It was difficult to lay out what he wanted to say. "Everything you said was right. There are no models or guides for us to follow. The only people we're accountable to when it comes to each other . . . are each other and ourselves. And if we're both okay with something, we have every right to do it. But . . ." he trailed off and picked his words carefully for a second. "At the same time, that doesn't mean we always have to move forward. We can also stay where we are and be okay with that," he said

Rukia found she wanted to say something but remembered to try and listen and understand.

"We've always had a . . . tension . . . between us. We can get violent. We can get passionate. Now we're getting . . . Like I said, I understand why what happened did. Sooner or later we're both going to want to get closer to one another and if we still treat even just seeing and interacting with one another as awkward or embarrassing, we could wind up acting rashly and inadvertently hurt each
other, right? Maybe even badly?" he asked. He understood it as a kind of mental training although he
didn't like thinking of it that way.

Her eyes widened at his understanding and her cheeks went a bit pink as she looked away.

"Whether or not that's what you really intended, I know it was in your head," he said gently, "We
have . . . a lot of power over one another, precisely because what we have is so unique, right? So we
have to be careful with it, even when . . . especially when we're close to each other. I also know that
you wanted things to keep advancing, at least a little, because I did too."

Her blush intensified.

"And I'm . . . I'm scared too," Ichigo said, letting out a long breath.

Rukia couldn't help but meet his gaze. It was strong though his expression was uncertain and
wavering.

"I'm scared of hurting you. I'm scared of not moving fast enough. I'm scared of moving too fast. I'm
scared of not making up for lost time. I'm scared of what'll happen. I'm scared that I can't do anything
about it. I'm scared of you sending that message. I'm scared that . . . this might be our last night
together again," he said, laying out all his fears on the table between him. If he could be defenseless
before her in body he could do it in mind as well. He'd done it in soul long ago; in heart was still a
different story. "I'm scared of losing you again," he finished.

"You won't," Rukia said at last. Her voice was quiet but assured.

"You know I trust you but you also know I can't help it," he said with a small smile. "And I know
it's the same for you. You've always pushed me, Rukia. Whenever you sensed doubt or uncertainty
in me you would push me to try harder, to do better, and to get stronger. You've pushed again twice
now. But this is different, because it's not just about me, it's about you. It's about us. I don't want you
to push yourself along with me just for my sake. It's not a fight. There's no enemy. We don't have to
advance. It's okay for us to stand still with one another. It's okay for us to be scared. It's okay . . . as
long as we have each other."

She found she didn't know what to say to him and her cheeks still burned with embarrassment. She
looked down and stilled herself before locking eyes with Ichigo again. "I'm scared of losing control
and I wanted to get out in front of things. I did consider what you said about . . . acclimating to each
other, but that wasn't really why . . ." she trailed off.

"The only thing here is us, Rukia. We don't need to be in front of anything, just beside each other,"
he said. He reached out a hand across the table and placed it on one of hers. They stared at one
another for a long time. They had to go beyond modesty, but there was neither a rush nor a lack of
one. There was only the two of them.

She glanced away for a moment before adopting a small smirk and looking back, whispering "Even
if something does go horribly wrong I know even more surely than I did before you'll be there for me
somehow."

Ichigo raised an eyebrow slightly at what was supposed to be even more assuring than what they
already had.

She sat up straight in her chair with poise and drew her hand back from his, gesturing down at
herself with both hands in a flourish as she said "You have a fuller understanding of what you'd be
fighting for," with only a hint of teasing. Her expression was supremely confident.
He blushed a bit at this and looked away into the restaurant. "You shouldn't say things like that in public," he muttered.

"I didn't say anything obscene or that wasn't the truth, Ichigo," she replied.

He glanced back to her before sipping at his water. That was technically true.

"Would the two of you like anything from our dessert menu tonight?" a voice intruded from one side, having discretely observed there was a lull in the emblematic couple's discussion.

The pair shared a glance that left the decision with Rukia. "Can we split a mango pudding with almond bean curd custard?" she asked.

"Of course, miss," the waiter responded.

They were left alone again and stayed silent with their thoughts, enjoying their tea. The pudding was soon between them along with the check. Rukia once again paid and they took their time savoring the dessert, idling a little and discussing the meal before leaving. They drew just as many glances on the way out as they had coming in.

"So, can I at least walk you home?" Ichigo said as they headed for the elevators.

Rukia glanced at him with confusion before discerning what he was doing. "It was a nice enough night out so I suppose that'd be acceptable," she replied coyly.

They were on the elevator when he said "You live near here too, huh? I've never seen you around before. I'm sure I'd remember."

"I'm a new arrival," she said with a small smile. It was sort of cute in a silly way.

"Really? Where from?" he asked.

"It's very far away, I doubt you've ever heard of it before, good sir," she said.

"You'd be surprised at how well-traveled I am," he replied.

"Oh?" was all she said as they got off on their floor.

"I might've even been to where you're from," he offered.

"Maybe so, but I think I'd remember if I'd seen you," she stated.

They arrived at the door to their suite. "I guess so. Wow, it looks like we're neighbors," he said with fake shock.

She exhaled theatrically. "Yes, I suppose I should invite you in then," she said with a touch of exasperation.

"I couldn't possibly impose," Ichigo said with a smile even as he unlocked the door.

Rukia took hold of one of his wrists, pulled him inside, and returned the smile as she declared "I insist."

They changed into sleeping clothes separately and stored their outfits, the point of their earlier mutual
challenge fully understood by both of them. Having slept in so late they wound up on the couch and watched two movies that were playing on the hotel's access channels, *Moulin Rouge!* and *Zoolander*. Their taste in films still didn't seem to quite gel.

It was after midnight when they finished and Ichigo noticed Rukia starting to lean against him heavily. "Need me to carry you?" he asked without too much criticism.

"I can get to bed on my own, fool," she said.

They stood and made their way to the bedroom, he turning off the TV and lights. He found her sitting on her bed, considering his, which was still pushed up against hers. He sat down beside her. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," she said truthfully.

Ichigo reached beyond her to where he saw her soul pager and grabbed it before scooting next to her and handing it over. "Let's do this first then, together."

Rukia took it and looked at him, her features firming up in agreement. She brought up the report and they reviewed it one last time. After looking to one another they both nodded and she pressed send. That, at least, would be in Soul Society's hands. She put the soul pager aside and turned to face him. "We'll get up in the morning and do one of our plans," she said confidently.

He got out his phone and programmed an alarm into it in response, before looking back to her. They both exhaled. "We can sleep beside one another just in case," he said.

"You can move the bed back and we can still hold hands over the gap," she replied.

They went quiet. They could do both. They didn't have to permanently commit to one or the other. Ichigo turned to consider Tokyo's lights. They'd leave the blinds open so the sun could help them wake up. "What would your true hero do?" he asked quietly, looking back to her.

She turned a bit red at the question before whispering "He'd do what he thought was right."

Ichigo leaned past Rukia to turn off the light and they sat beside one another in darkness for a moment. He lightly pulled her to him much the way he had in Tokyo Tower. She leaned in against him. He shifted with her and lay back so they were on their sides, pulling her covers up. They kept together loosely, just sharing the space with as many points of contact as not. Nothing in his head said *panic* then. Nothing in hers said *shame*. The next night they could ask again, but that night they'd hold one another in comfort against whatever the past and future brought.
Rukia woke up with mild irritation at the sound of Ichigo's phone alarm going off and more so at him shifting to get it and shut it down. They were still only loosely intertwined, although she'd once again pushed her face against his neck and chest. He soon returned to the position he'd been in previously against her and she sighed to let him know she was awake too. She pulled her head back from against him and brought it up alongside his on the pillows they were sharing, looking to him.

He seemed tired but was smiling at her weakly. "We can sleep in a little more, you know."

"We really should get up," she chided without any severity, adding "What time is it anyway?"

"8:30 AM," he said. He lightly brushed one of her arms "Sleep well?"

"Mnhmm," she said with a beguiling smile, "seems like you're a pretty good protective charm."

Ichigo smirked at her more before squeezing her arm a little "I'd have to be to be your hero, hmm?"

Rukia crossed her arms and adopted a put-out expression, letting her voice betray it was an act as she said "You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"No," he replied, "but don't feel bad because I feel the same way about you."

She blinked in confusion, not yet awake enough to even pretend to guess what he meant.

He reached up and brushed her hair into place from where sleeping had disheveled it. His uncompleted thought from their dinner together was back in his mind. "In a way you were my hero before I was ever yours. You showed me a way to change things, so I guess I just had a good role model to learn from." With that he sat up.

She turned a bit pink at that and the deeper meaning behind it before sitting up beside him. The light coming into the room was limited for the hour and she saw it was because it was rather cloudy outside, the sunlight coming down in dramatic rays. She suddenly remembered they'd sent the report and found her soul pager. There were no new messages. They'd sent it late so maybe it was only just being received and processed or maybe there was no great need to respond. "Hey, get dressed."

"Don't you wanna go first?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she replied. "I'll check the weather and narrow down where we could go today while you're in there."

Ichigo nodded absentmindedly and got up without complaint, getting some clothes and heading into the bathroom.

Rukia busied herself with her declared plans and also moved his bed back into place as they were more likely to either sleep on one beside one another or to sleep separately with contact over both than to need to put them together. She picked out her clothes, found out it wasn't expected to rain, and was looking at the travel plans she'd put together when he was back out, apparently having decided to move quickly.

"All yours," he stated.
"There's no rain expected," she said, "and I'll think some more over where might be best to go," moving past him and shutting the door.

Ichigo picked up her soul pager and reviewed the plans himself to form his own opinions. She'd put them together on the basis of closely located places they'd both been interested in. After looking them over he spent some time memorizing his karaoke song's lyrics and then went out to the living room and turned on the TV, considering the movies that were on offer. He felt there must be something they'd both like and so far it didn't seem likely to be another romance or comedy—he found the former far too often schmaltzy and she was often lost with the latter due to the heavy reliance on modern culture and references. He considered the action section as so many of their experiences together revolved around precisely that—maybe that would hold their attention equally? He was considering the listings and was pretty sure *Die Hard* would be a winner—he'd seen it once before and remembered liking it a lot—when there was a knock at the door.

He glanced at it curiously and got up, carrying the remote without really thinking, and unlocked it. He found there was no one outside. He looked down the hallway and poked his head out, looking to either side of the doorway. There was still nobody to be found. There's no way someone could've knocked and run off quietly in that amount of time . . . He stopped as another possibility hit him and his eyes drifted back toward the center of the hallway right in front of the door. Hollows could definitely affect the material world even if they were invisible to people without *reiryoku*, and so it followed that Shinigami could too. He let out a breath in a particularly disgruntled fashion, muttering "Well at least you had the decency to knock."

He stood aside from the doorway and with the utmost disdain held out an arm toward the living room. "Well, come on in then, it's not like I can stop you anyway. Rukia's still busy getting ready," he said.

He waited for awhile before shutting the door, meeting no resistance. "This is really awkward you know," he complained, "not only do I have no idea who's even here, I don't even know how many of you there are. No wonder people thought I was weird for talking to ghosts." He waved a hand in disgust and used the remote to turn the TV to a channel that had programming to 'entertain' whoever was there. A game show was on. He didn't notice any impressions forming on the seating or anything like that so he presumed they were all still standing. "Whatever, make yourself—yourselves?—comfortable, I guess," he said, going to the bedroom area and deliberately shutting the door behind him for whatever good that would do. He had no way of knowing someone hadn't already wandered back there.

"Oi, Rukia, we've got some guests!" he called into the bathroom door.

"I know!" she called back with some irritation, opening the door only a few moments later. She had evidently hurried as her hair was still damp. She looked rather quite annoyed.

Ichigo realized she'd probably sensed whoever it was before they'd knocked, depending on where exactly they'd entered in from. He supposed in theory they could've opened a *senkaimon* right outside their suite. "So do you know who's out there?"

"Yes," she said, before opting to not bother explaining and sliding the door open. She was confronted by the sight of Ikkaku, Yumichika, and Matsumoto sitting on the couch watching TV, Hitsugaya leaning against the door with his eyes closed, and Kenpachi sitting with the utmost boredom upon the work desk. "What's the meaning of this?" she asked with reserved impatience.

"This is a really nice place, Kuchiki!" Matsumoto said with approval before winking.

"We're the retrieval team," Hitsugaya stated with disinterest.
"I haven't received any notification of my orders having changed," Rukia replied.

"This is even weirder," Ichigo muttered, leaning against the door frame in discontent. He was watching Rukia argue with what appeared to be an empty room. He did notice there were three indentations on the couch, so there were at least that many Shinigami. He still had no idea who.

"Can he really not see us?" Ikkaku asked with disbelief, frowning. He'd heard Ichigo had lost all his abilities and recalled Rukia's briefing for the search but to really see he couldn't even perceive them was somehow incredibly disappointing.

"Not at all," Yumichika said with a slight sigh, looking askew at the former substitute Shinigami. "Depressing, isn't it?" he added, before glancing toward their taichō. Kenpachi was refusing to even look at Ichigo and clearly had no interest in being present.

"That's because they haven't," Hitsugaya replied, ignoring everyone else but the petite Shinigami.

"Please explain, sir," Rukia asked, scowling at the commentary of the 11th Division members. "I don't see why approving or denying my request requires me to return to Soul Society."

"It's not that simple; it was inconvenient to bring the party to you so we're bringing you to the party," Matsumoto said. Her tone was suddenly neutral, making it clear they knew nothing about what had been decided.

"I'm not leaving Ichigo here," Rukia said with a sudden chill that made it clear she would force the issue if necessary.

The eyes of the young man in question swung toward her in surprise and concern at that.

The other Shinigami all politely ignored what they'd just heard.

"Nobody said anything about that," Hitsugaya replied, pushing off the door and pulling something from his shihakushō before pitching it toward her. "Like I said, your orders haven't changed—yet."

Rukia caught it and found it was a Soul Candy dispenser; the model type was Gringo.

To Ichigo's eyes it just seemed to kind of appear in her hand.

She looked up at Hitsugaya in confusion. "I still have mine."

"It's for him," he replied, glancing at Ichigo.

"But he can't—" she started to reply.

"I've been told that Ichigo remains a 'peculiar case'," Hitsugaya said with mild irritation, "and that considering his chain of fate was cut it should still work."

Rukia's eyes widened a bit before she turned to him. He looked to her in confusion and she glanced down at the dispenser before meeting his gaze again. Something unsaid passed between them and he nodded ever so slightly. She walked past him into the bedroom, leaving it in his hands as she went by to get her own Chappy dispenser from her things.

Ichigo considered it, glancing after Rukia and asking "What stupid thing does this one say?"

He didn't hear Matsumoto saying "'Yorosh'!"

Nor did he hear Yumichika muttering "It's not stupid, it's the one I use."
Rukia looked at him with mild concern and said "Just use it, Ichigo," before she produced her own, popping one of the soul pills into her mouth.

The change in her body language was immediate. It clearly wasn't Rukia in there anymore, but Chappy, and she seemed to be listening intently, saying "Yes, Rukia-sama, pyon!" after a few seconds.

Ichigo looked away from her. The whole thing suddenly made him much more uncomfortable than it ever had previously. Seeing Rukia's gigai with a completely different affectation felt wrong. Even the voice was wrong. He frowned and closed his eyes before using his own Soul Candy dispenser. When he opened them again he found he was standing behind himself. It was surreal to experience again.

"And you," Rukia was saying, "you do whatever Chappy says and you don't leave this suite under any circumstances!"

"You got it, yorosh!" his body's voice replied, likewise all wrong. He looked down to see he was wearing clothes like his body was, and looked over to Rukia. It was the first time he'd ever seen her new shihakushō and despite everything going on he found he really liked how it looked on her.

She looked at him and he could see visible relief on her face that it had worked without any problems. "Let's go, Ichigo," she said quietly.

He nodded resolutely only to hear Ikkaku shout "So can you see us already or are you still defective?!"

Ichigo's eyes snapped over to the living room as Gringo went to stand beside Chappy and he spotted the five Shinigami that'd been sent to fetch them. It wasn't who he would've expected. "You guys?" he asked, before glaring at Ikkaku and growling "Who are you calling defective anyway, chrome dome?!"

Ikkaku bolted upright, pointing and roaring "Don't think I won't beat the crap out of you just because you don't have any powers, strawberry!" His hand was going for his zanpakutō even as he was restrained by Yumichika.

"Like it'd be a fair fight even then," Ichigo muttered to taunt before he was suddenly aggressively hugged by Matsumoto.

"We've all missed you, Ichigo!" she proclaimed, pressing up against him provocatively.

He resisted even as his eyes moved to Rukia, finding her incensed by the action. He protested with "Rangiku-san!" while Rukia and Hitsugaya called "Matsumoto!" at the same time, although their inflections and meanings were all rather quite different. His pleaded to be let go, Rukia's demanded the same, and Hitsugaya's was annoyed at everything being dragged out further.

The busty woman let him be and stood back with a satisfied smile, apparently having confirmed something to her satisfaction.

"Yumichika, do it," Kenpachi said unhappily.

Ichigo instantly noticed his demeanor and could immediately figure out its cause.

The narcissist let go of Ikkaku and made his way over toward the living room window, which was clear of obstructions. He drew his zanpakutō and summoned a senkaimon, opening it and heading inside. A hell butterfly fluttered out and wandered over to Ichigo as he was followed by Ikkaku and
Matsumoto. Both Hitsugaya and Kenpachi didn't move, making it clear Rukia and Ichigo would leave before they did.

The petite Shinigami took her mission's wrist in hand and led him on.

He didn't resist, instead calling back "Hey, Chappy, guy-in-my-body, just watch TV or something and only order room service if we're gone for a long time! Don't eat anything weird!"

"Come on," Rukia whispered to calm him. Soon they were through the senkaimon, followed by the two taichō. It sealed behind them and disappeared.

Gringo and Chappy were left considering one another and Chappy led the way to the couch, sitting down with Gringo beside her and watching TV. It was sometime later when they realized that they were lightly leaning against one another and couldn't explain why. They decided to sit farther apart.

The entourage emerged into what Rukia recognized as part of the 13th Division's district nearest the center of the Seireitei. Once they'd all assembled, both Hitsugaya and Kenpachi immediately began to leave, drawing their subordinates along with them.

"That's it?" Rukia asked irritably.

"Our mission was to bring you here," Hitsugaya replied, pausing for a moment and looking over one shoulder, "talk to Ukitake if you want to know more." With that he and Matsumoto were gone, using flash steps. The 11th Division chose to leave in a more leisurely fashion but didn't glance back even once.

Ichigo and Rukia were left to their own devices. The former looked around at the Seireitei, still surprised to find himself back in it. The fact that the contrast with Tokyo couldn't have been more severe didn't help. He suddenly realized something had been subconsciously nagging him since he'd been handed the Soul Candy dispenser. "Hey, why did that work anyway?"

"Hitsugaya-taichō implied it was because your chain of fate remains cut," Rukia said, gesturing for him to follow her.

He did so without complaint since he had no idea where they were going. "Eh? . . . The only way Tōshirō should know about that is if . . ." he said, before trailing off. He realized they still weren't supposed to know about Urahara's involvement and he had no idea if they were being watched. It was better not to chance getting Renji in trouble unless necessary. If that really was the reason then it made sense that as a soul he could see Shinigami and more besides, which he clearly was. He put the thought aside. "I like your new outfit," he said after a moment.

Rukia looked to him with a small smile. "This is the first outfit you've actually complimented me on."

"You know I've liked both your dinner dresses," he muttered.

"Oh, I know. You just never said it," she critiqued without judgment. She understood why: he still thought of her as a Shinigami at heart, just like she still thought of him as one. To see him in the Seireitei in street fashion was odd. As they made their way to the Divisional headquarters they drew looks and greetings, both in recognition of who they were—albeit less so in Ichigo's case—and also because of his appearance.

"Is the fact that a lot of people seem to know who I am another thing that I caused?" he asked.

"Yes, although that's because about every third person or so here was looking for you a week ago as
much as anything to do with the war," she teased.

Ichigo blew out a breath and rubbed the back of his head. Everything going on was weird.

They sat opposite Ukitake; he was smiling. "My apologies for your vacation being so rudely interrupted," he said with a tone that sounded genuinely sympathetic.

"Sir, with all due respect, I don't understand why this meeting was necessary," Rukia said. She sounded merely confused, which was already quite a change as far as he was concerned.

"It wasn't," Ukitake said, reclining in his chair somewhat, "I've already approved your request; it just hasn't been relayed." He pulled out a piece of paper that Rukia recognized as a transfer order and slid it over to her across the desk. It had already been filled out with the relevant information.

"If you've already signed the order then . . . why?" she asked.

"There are several reasons but first and foremost among them, as far as I'm concerned anyway, is that I wanted to see the two of you myself. Karakura is this Division's responsibility. You're my fukutaichō, Kuchiki. And you, Ichigo-kun, as a former substitute Shinigami, are also in some ways a charge of mine," Ukitake said. "The case was technically sound and having seen the two of you in person I'm now convinced of its further merits."

The pair shared a glance at the implications of the last line. It became clear to them both that Renji hadn't been exaggerating.

"There is also another matter," Ukitake continued. "The sōtaichō has been in contact with Urahara Kisuke regarding a method by which to return Ichigo-kun's powers. If this effort is to continue forward, I felt you should be informed of that directly and officially." He had his doubts about how trustworthy Renji had been with concealing that information and had in fact told him in the expectation he'd reveal it and conspire with the pair.

Rukia looked at Ichigo just as happily as she had the first time she'd heard the news without any need to act, and Ichigo once more couldn't resist smiling back.

That was all the confirmation Ukitake ultimately needed that everything was for the best after all. "Although technically my sign-off on this decision is final, there's also the matter of another party interested in this issue," he offered after giving them a moment.

They both knew who that would be.

They left the Division's headquarters and headed away from it through a small parkland area.

"Why didn't Byakuya and Ukitake-san just go to Tokyo if they were willing to send Kenpachi and Tōshirō?" Ichigo asked.

"It's a show of force," Rukia replied. She was going to elaborate when she suddenly stopped in place and turned. Ichigo knew there was only one thing—one person—that could provoke that kind of reaction. He stopped and turned in kind as she said "Nii-sama." Her tone was polite and warm but also oddly firm.

He found himself looking at Byakuya. He was only perhaps two meters from them. He wore his hair differently and his shihakushō was also different but he was otherwise unchanged. Ichigo tilted his head slightly as he realized Byakuya’s new hairstyle sort of vaguely resembled Rukia’s.
"Rukia," Byakuya said calmly, before his eyes flicked to her charge. "Kurosaki Ichigo," he added coolly. His sister's gaze and countenance was passive but self-assured. The former substitute Shinigami, meanwhile, had an air of insolence that reminded him very much of their first few encounters. There were definitely other things in his expression and look though, things which were not quite so easily named and he couldn't recall having seen previously. They were as Renji had reported.

"Kuchiki-taichō," Ichigo said after only a moment. It carried a degree of respect that didn't match his appearance whatsoever.

Byakuya narrowed his eyes at that. He'd fully anticipated being addressed in a cavalierly familiar way.

"You didn't have to come see us off," Rukia said.

"That is not my only purpose in being here, as I'm sure you already know," he replied. He'd offered the resistance he had and put forward Renji as their observer precisely because he felt his fukutaichō would inform them. What he'd been interested in all along was this particular conversation and what could be learned from it.

"Yes," the pair both replied, before glancing at one another. Ichigo looked away first and seemed to visibly relax a degree, deferring to her. That itself was interesting.

"You've read what Renji had to say," Rukia stated.

"I have," her brother said.

"Then you know the nature of my request," she replied. Her tone didn't deviate, indicating the nature of the game that was being played.

"Indeed. I also know your feelings on the matter," Byakuya stated. He recalled her state of mourning at losing Ichigo with perfect clarity. He'd seen what it'd done to her. She seemed miraculously changed in terms of behavior and demeanor not only from then, but from her state prior to this incident having occurred. In pursuing her command she'd been hard, brittle, and aggressive, except when it came to her deference to him. Her current behavior was already very different. He turned his gaze back to Ichigo and after a moment said "What I'm interested in is the perspective of Kurosaki Ichigo. So, tell me, what is your understanding of your status with regard to my sister?"

"Kuchiki Rukia is my girlfriend," Ichigo said immediately and without any reservations. His eyes didn't move a millimeter.

Byakuya felt the tug of memories at the will on display in the boy's eyes. This Ichigo might have no reiryoku, but he didn't lack for nerve. The term was a modern one that was unfamiliar to him but it was clear enough in intent. His eyes narrowed further. "And was it you who determined that?"

"No, she did," he replied.

"Kurosaki Ichigo is my boyfriend," Rukia stated as if she was saying the sky was blue.

The 6th Division taichō looked between the two of them slowly in consideration. He briefly mentally reviewed what he'd observed of the two of them through time and all the other information he'd acquired, past and present. He'd already arrived at his major conclusions, but this conversation was happening to allow for some minor adjustments. His sister clearly loved the boy, even if she didn't fully know it yet. It was rather quite safe to say the reverse was also true. He was certain Ichigo would never do anything to hurt her, and he was technically of noble descent, even if his clan had
fallen. They'd already had a profound impact on one another's attitudes and so to oppose them wasn't just pointless but injurious to Rukia in countless ways. There were several more considerations besides that ran in their favor. It had really only ever been a question of exactly how much he would elect to interfere and impose upon the continuing progress of their courtship. "I see."

A long silence followed between all of them, none of them moving a muscle.

"I will see to your accommodations in Karakura when the time is at hand for you to once again return there," Byakuya said at last. He wouldn't leave them entirely unsupervised, but it would be largely sufficient to do so through indirect and lightly administered means—for awhile, anyway; taking a hands-off approach would perhaps make it easier to intervene later if, as, and when necessary.

Both Ichigo and Rukia blinked in surprise and confusion before they widened their eyes. He barely mouthed the word 'what' while she murmured "Nii-sama . . ." in complete disbelief.

"I will delay your return to your vacation no further," Byakuya said, turning away from them. He was gone before they could say anything else.

"What?" Ichigo asked, finally vocalizing it. He turned to look at her with incredulity. This had to be some sort of trap.

Rukia looked at him with an expression that mirrored his before her face lit up and she hugged him tightly around the waist, laughing a bit in both relief and sheer joy.

He didn't know what to do for a moment and finally just embraced her. Suddenly it felt like a tremendous weight had been lifted from him. He hadn't been fully aware of it until it was suddenly gone.

They wound up holding onto and leaning against one another for quite awhile.
I Only Ever Look At You

Monday, August 5, 2002

Ichigo and Rukia pulled apart and looked at one another with insuppressible smiles. They weren't in a heavily trafficked area and hadn't drawn any attention, which was just as well because she didn't have the heart to lecture any subordinates at that moment.

He rubbed at the back of his head as he looked away. "He made it sound like we'd be living together."

"Aren't we already?" she asked.

"Well . . . yeah, but—" he started.

"Don't worry so much," she replied lightly.

Ichigo looked back to her and the moment his eyes met hers he found himself giving a sheepish smile.

She held his gaze for a moment and let her eyelids drop and expression shift a bit in approval. "You handled that well."

"I just did what seemed right," he said, before muttering with some humility "I figure at some point I'm going to have to threaten to break some legs on behalf of Karin and Yuzu, so I just imagined what I'd have to see and hear to be satisfied in their cases."

Rukia blinked at that before laughing at the mental image of Ichigo acting like Byakuya when threatening his sisters' future boyfriends.

"What?" he asked, suddenly looking irritable.

"I was just thinking of how similar big brothers can be despite their other differences," she teased.

"Don't say things like that," Ichigo replied crankily.

"Maybe you can ask nii-sama for tips sometime," she continued, before looking about. "Anyway, we're here now, so is there anything you want to do before heading back?" They'd been gone for under an hour. In some ways the whole thing had been anticlimactic, though that was definitely preferable to the alternative.

"Not really," he said, considering. There wasn't really anybody he knew and needed to talk to or see that they hadn't already encountered recently except maybe the Shiba siblings, and he wasn't ready to press that point yet if Rukia wasn't. "We should probably thank Renji again, but crossing the Seiretei would eat up a lot of time and it'd be kinda strange after just encountering Byakuya to go to his Division," he added.

Rukia nodded and pulled out her soul pager, saying "I was thinking we could go to Yoyogi Park and some places around there."

He replied "Yeah, I was thinking maybe that or Ueno Park." Nearby were several other points of interest. "That might make more sense given the weather," he added.
"Did you look at the plans?" she asked with mild suspicion.

"I thought you'd appreciate me having an informed opinion," he said with a touch of arrogant reproach, crossing his arms.

"It's not very gentlemanly to snoop in a lady's belongings even if you do it for a good cause," she chastised while wagging a finger at him.

Ichigo let out a hmpf but took the point without objection, looking around. The weather in Soul Society was rather less dramatic than in Tokyo, being sunny and warm without being hot. "You know, going to just one set of locations isn't likely to take up the whole day unless it's the Toshimaen or Fuji-Q Highland trips, and if we burn through them all quickly we won't have much left of interest other than nightclubs, restaurants, and stores," he mused. Although he was willing to go to the major museums, parks, and shrines, he wasn't particularly interested in going to the more obscure ones and so they had to be parceled out in time.

"Are you saying you have something else in mind?" she asked curiously.

"Probably not for today, but whichever park we don't go to today we could have a picnic at," he offered.

Rukia smiled at that without comment and input an order into the soul pager for a hell butterfly to help take him back. They idled with one another until it arrived and then used a senkaimon to return to their suite.

They found Chappy and Gringo sitting at opposite ends of the couch watching TV as instructed. "Rukia-sama, that was really fast, pyon," Chappy declared as they arrived.

"Yeah, you made it sound like you wouldn't be back, yorosh," Gringo added.

Ichigo felt an eyebrow twitch at having to witness the mockery of himself and grabbed his body by the shirt collar, forcibly taking control of it back from the artificial soul. He caught it as it ejected from his mouth and flexed his other hand, ensuring everything worked. He noticed Chappy seemed to be whispering something he couldn't hear and it was a few seconds before he saw Rukia assume control over the gigai again. She discretely covered her mouth before pulling her own soul pill away.

"And I thought Kon was annoying," he muttered, going to the bathroom to wash it off. He'd figured out each Soul Candy dispenser came with multiple but the only reason to go through them was if one was lost or destroyed; keeping a particular one loaded at the top gave them a chance to better acclimate to and impersonate the user. He sincerely doubted Gringo would ever manage that and had no intention of using him again, but still . . . He was joined by Rukia at the sink as she sought to do the same thing. "At least Kon could sometimes do a passable act of pretending to be me," he continuing on.

"What happened to him anyway?" Rukia asked, looking to him. She felt no great need to mention to him what Chappy had told her and was glad he hadn't been able to see her when she'd flushed a bit at the implications.

Ichigo blinked and looked down to the sink in thought as he washed up. The last time he'd seen Kon was before the infiltration of Hueco Mundo. The mod-soul had been gone after the battle in Karakura, and he'd never really thought to question it other than to assume he'd finally actually gone off somewhere. "I don't know," he said at last. He suddenly felt bad about having forgotten him; he'd been incredibly annoying but sort of loyal and dependable in his own way, and to just ignore his fate
felt kind of wrong.

"I'm sure he's fine," she said gently, discerning the shift in his mood from his expression.

"Maybe," he said. He resolved to look into it at some point. If Kon had disappeared when Karakura had been transposed into Soul Society then it was more likely he had been picked up by Shinigami than that he'd wandered off into Rukongai. Perhaps when things settled down they could pull some strings to find out what had happened.

Rukia passed him a small towel to dry his hands and the soul pill off with before saying "Come on, let's decide what we're doing."

He finished and after reloading their two Soul Candy dispensers they assembled in the living room. "I think we should go to the Ueno Park area," he said.

She nodded, feeling no great preference for one over the other, and after again confirming it wouldn't rain they collected their things and left.

They took the Hibiya Line from Roppongi Station directly to Ueno Station, which was right beside the park. They wound up touring through it before visiting the Ueno Zoo, the Tokyo National Museum, the National Museum of Nature and Science, and the National Museum of Western Art, and the Tokyo National Museum. The zoo was sort of depressing, being rather small and enclosed, and so they'd hurried on to the museums. Ichigo found the nature and science museum the most interesting for its exhibits like dinosaur skeletons, which wowed Rukia. She found the Western art museum most intriguing, as she'd never had much exposure to non-Japanese art—the difference in aesthetic preferences was interesting.

It was well into the afternoon when they had satisfied their desire for acculturation and headed southeast into the Ameyoko Plaza and Ueno Centre Mall street markets, getting lunch from a vendor stall as they idly window shopped together. From there they wandered west, checking out the University of Tokyo's Hongo campus. Ichigo hadn't really begun thinking about college since he'd only just finished the first trimester of his second year in high school, but it was still something to see and contemplate, so they explored the campus for awhile. It was rather sedate owing to almost all of the departments being on their summer break, and so they went southeast to Ueno-Hirokoji Station, taking the Ginza Line a few stops to the end at Asakusa Station.

From there they walked a few blocks east to Sensō-ji temple, Japan's oldest. They toured its grounds and the shops leading up to it before moving on, looking through other parts of Asakusa. It was, in its own way, sort of like hopping into a time machine, taking them to a Tokyo of decades past. They generally moved back west, eventually winding up at Ueno Station again as the sun was starting to set. Ichigo decided since they still had a bit of time that they could get Akihabara done with since it was on the way back. He suggested stopping there during the ride and Rukia agreed. It was two stops back down the Hibiya Line.

Emerging from its attendant station, they went a bit west and found themselves on the main strip, Chuo Dori, in the saturated neon glow of the district's shops, displays, and arcades. There were all sorts of anime being advertised prominently, including *Inuyasha, Azumanga Daioh, Chobits*, and promos for the upcoming *Naruto* and *Gundam SEED*. There were also other media being advertised, with several ads for *Final Fantasy XI* strewn about. Ichigo cringed at how excessive it was, not really keeping up on such things, while Rukia gawked in open wonder. She'd thought Shibuya and later Tokyo Disneyland had been visually stunning but Akihabara was like some sort of fever dream.

He kept close to her and finally took one of her wrists in hand, pulling her along in her daze,
carefully avoiding the cosplayers and maid café employees while leading her on a sightseeing trip. If they received glances elsewhere for their appearances, there they received stares as people tried to figure out exactly who they were dressed as. At least once Ichigo was asked if he was supposed to be Kyo Sohma from *Fruits Basket*, to his infinite irritation. Nobody seemed to be able to place Rukia and at any rate his increasingly menacing aura coupled with his grasp on her rapidly meant that nobody even dared to try and bother her.

They had made it perhaps fifty meters up the main thoroughfare when she abruptly dug her heels in and stopped him, pulling her wrist away. "Ichigo," she demanded, "what is this place really?"

"It's basically the *otaku* capital of the world," he replied dismissively.

She peered at him suspiciously, unsatisfied with the answer.

"You know what anime and manga are; people who are particularly into such things, and less so anything else pop-culture based really, are usually called *otaku*. This place was made to appeal to them. There are also a lot of other things like electronics shops, arcades, and video game stores here too," he said.

"What does all that have to do with that?" Rukia asked, pointing at one of the maids hawking a maid café.

"It's a gimmick for getting people to attend overpriced theme restaurants," he replied, before adding "Not . . . whatever you're thinking of."

"Are you sure?" she asked with some disbelief.

"Look, you're the one that really wanted to come here," Ichigo reminded her.

She crossed her arms. On the one hand, she didn't like seeing him being so judgmental. On the other hand, she did find the place kind of creepy for all its objectification and some of the looks she was getting. It clearly catered more to men than to women. She chose to focus on him instead of their surroundings and smirked, adopting that familiar, superior Kuchiki air. "So are you angry at being seen here, angry at being mistaken for an anime character, or angry that so many boys and men are leering at me?" she asked.

"All of the above," he replied sourly, scowling.

"Kurosaki Ichigo," she continued, touching a hand to her face in mock shock, "is that overly protective jealousy I'm hearing?"

"You mean like I heard from you when Rangiku-san hugged me?" he deadpanned.

Her mood shifted instantly into a frown as she shook a finger, declaring "That's different, that woman is a certifiable menace!"

It was Ichigo's turn to smirk at her with a smug look.

"One that you were once all too happy to leer at yourself," Rukia added, considering him severely. She wasn't above using as a weapon the events in his bedroom the year prior when she, Renji and all the other Shinigami in the retrieval team except Kenpachi had been sent to fight the Arrancar.

"I've matured," he replied indignantly.

"Oh, is that so? I hadn't noticed," she said, leaning forward a bit and looking at him with hooded
eyes.

He leaned forward in turn and met her look, whispering just loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the street "Yeah, I realized I prefer petite women."

Rukia suddenly blushed before crossing her arms and turning her head to one side with a huff. "Maybe you belong here after all, fool."

Ichigo leaned over more so he could whisper in her ear "Who was it that proposed we bathe together again?"

Her blush immediately intensified and she was completely ready to cripple one of his shins before she realized their exchange was, if anything, drawing even more attention and that would only make it worse. She glowered at him icily for several seconds before asking "So what is there to do here that isn't . . . weird?"

"Well, there's a pretty cool arcade back near where we came in from," he said without any subtext, realizing he had only been saved from her wrath by the very crowd he disdained.

Rukia was largely unfamiliar with video games other than some she'd played with his sisters on the SNES and PlayStation. "Show me."

He led her back toward the GiGO Sega Building, which housed a six-story game arcade, without further comment.

"In your face, Ichigo!" she declared triumphantly, looking over at him from the adjoining WaveRunner machine. The pattern had repeatedly itself consistently. She'd managed to smash him at Virtua Fighter 4 and Tekken 4 alike, and although he'd chalked that up to button-mashing she'd done the same at Crazy Taxi and Dance Dance Revolution. She'd even earned the cheers of a gathering crowd for her unusual adeptness at the latter.

He had lost at almost everything. *Does she gain skill when she's pissed off or something?* "Maybe we should try playing something cooperative," he muttered.

She just regarded him with a cruelly exceptional look of supremacy.

They wound up playing through a variety of games including Contra III, Raiden II, Metal Slug, House of the Dead 2, and more. They made for a surprisingly effective team even as they routinely shouted indignantly at one another for everything from dying to kill stealing. If their plan was subtlety, they failed, as everywhere they went they drew more stares than usual for their attitudes rather than their looks. They had just crushed Time Crisis 2 when Rukia yawned and stretched, turning to face him.

"I'm hungry," she declared, shaking a pink light gun at him for emphasis. It was both oddly cute and vaguely disconcerting at the same time.

"I'm not eating at a maid café," he rejoined.

"Then let's go," she said, holstering the gun back in the cabinet and making her way toward the escalators back down to ground level with pride. He followed after, conceding for the moment.

They took the Hibiya Line back to Roppongi, surveying their dining options while on the way and settling on hamburgers. Not really wanting to chance an izakaya late on a Monday night, and
likewise not interested in stooping so low as to consider MOS Burger, Burger King, or McDonald's
given how well they'd been eating, they wound up back at the Hard Rock Cafe Tokyo. They
reasoned they hadn't actually really properly eaten there so it was fine to return. There'd actually been
another recently opened Hard Rock Café up near Ueno, but the travel times favored the one near
their hotel.

Rukia got a classic burger while Ichigo got a hickory barbecue bacon cheeseburger, both with fries,
with the former getting an iced caramel alcoholic coffee cocktail and the latter getting a salted
caramel café sans alcohol. She wasn't carded and forced him to have a try. They otherwise chowed
down with little conversation between them, their activities having caught up with them. It wasn't the
most spectacular food, but it was far and away above and beyond its fast-food equivalents. After
satisfying their hunger, they made their way together by foot back to their suite, playing a game of jan-ken-pon to figure out who'd get to shower for bed first.

Perhaps predictably, Rukia won again, gloating only as long as it took her to get to the bathroom. "I
win everything!" she declared triumphantly.

She shut the door before Ichigo could remind her that he'd won a couple of matches, and he put his
revenge aside for the moment, busying himself with studying his song materials while he waited for
her to finish.

He'd gotten a pretty good handle on the lyrics and was by then mostly just listening to the song on
headphones to drill it further into his brain. He was on the sixth listen when she opened the door,
plodding out in another new set of pajamas and hopping onto her bed. He wordlessly stopped the
song and brought his phone back to its main menu before taking off the headphones and going for
his turn. He idly repeated the lyrics to himself while cleaning up. It was maybe fifteen minutes later
when he was finished and back outside.

Rukia was laying on her stomach on her bed, facing away from him and idly kicking her legs as she
reviewed something or other on her soul pager.

Ichigo sat down beside her, asking "Know what you want to do tonight?"

"Since I'm magnanimous in victory, I guess you can stay over here," she said with an air of
preeminence, not looking away from the device.

"Is that so?" Ichigo replied, even as he lightly captured one of her lithe ankles in a hand.

She turned to him curiously at that right as he started to massage her foot with his other hand. Her
expression shifted to one of some confusion and she said "What are you—" before cutting off as he
really began in earnest, deeply kneading her muscles and tendons. She seemed rather tense as they'd
been standing practically all day. That coupled with the fact that his nails were just a little longer than
he normally kept them resulted in her letting out a noise in surprise at the feeling. Her cheeks went a
bit red and she looked away but didn't object, muttering "Ichigo . . ."

He continued on, replying "Because you're so gracious to the vanquished, I suppose I'm obliged to
help put you at ease."

She shifted against the bed and turned off her soul pager, gripping at the sheets with her free hand at
the intensity of his touch.

Ichigo brought her leg down so it was fully extended backward before letting go of her ankle,
bringing the other into the same position and starting to massage her other foot in the same way.
Rukia slid the soul pager away and gripped the bed with her other hand, continuing to make small noises at the sensation.

He shifted as he worked at her feet so he was on his knees with his legs apart over her lower back, keeping all his weight on them so as not to pin her. It made it easier to work with both her feet equally as he didn't have to turn at an angle. "Never had a foot massage before, Kuchiki-dono? Is that not an amenity available at the clan manor?"

"No," was all she managed to say.

He continued on until her feet seemed loose and tender, slowly reducing his grip until he was caressing them. The only thing that stopped it from being tickling was how slowly his fingers moved.

She began to twitch her feet at that, protesting "Hey . . ."

Ichigo smirked and slid his hands down her ankles onto her calves, starting to massage them too. Rukia was small but surprisingly toned and it was easy to get a grip on her muscles. She let out another noise as he resumed handling her potently. He chose not to focus on how cute her sounds were and continued until her lower legs were likewise pliable to the touch. He pulled his hands back a little more and gently worked at the back of her knees and the tendons at the base of her thighs, tilting his head over his shoulder to look at her and asking "Feel better?"

She turned to look at him likewise, cheeks still pink. He was surprised at how soft her eyes looked. She seemed to consider him for a moment before quietly saying "My back feels kind of tense too."

His eyes widened a bit before he narrowed them again and gave a small smile. He turned around and slid his hands up under her pajama top, starting to massage her lower back and slowly working his way up from there.

Rukia turned her head down to keep from vocalizing and buried her face in her arms, sinking against the bed at his touch.

Ichigo continued kneading her muscles for about half an hour, eventually withdrawing his hands and bringing them under the collar of her top to get at her upper back before working with her neck, slowly transitioning to soothing rather than massaging.

She shifted just a little but was far too relaxed to even comment, finding it was suddenly a struggle to stay awake.

He moved to one side of her and withdrew his hands, sliding his arms around her waist and turning with her so they were on their sides spooning, oriented parallel to the axis of the bed rather than perpendicular to it. He reached up with his freer arm and turned the light off before pulling the covers up and putting his arm back around her.

Rukia brought her arms down over his and found his hands, resting hers on them and sinking back against him as she felt his face come to rest in her hair. "You play dirty, Ichigo," she murmured to him. Even as sleepy as she suddenly was, it wasn't lost on her that their position let him hold her but not vice-versa.

"Seems it's the only way I can even the odds," he replied.

"No fair," she said, quieter still. She was slipping away.

Ichigo shushed and held her as she fell asleep, not too far behind.
The Sun Is Cold And Black

Sunday, December 2, 2001

"Onii-chan . . . really misses nē-san," Yuzu said quietly from her bed. They'd kept him occupied until he'd almost passed out before letting him go to bed.

". . . Yeah," Karin replied from where she lay. They hadn't discussed it with their dad for obvious reasons but even he'd seemed to pick up on it, as he'd tried particularly hard that evening to be funny. *Ichi-nii was trying really hard to act like everything was normal too . . .*

Yuzu sighed softly before saying "I miss nē-san too." Rukia had been really nice and kept them from worrying when Ichigo had gone missing for awhile. It had been sort of like having an extended slumber party. It was clear she'd been worried at first too, but she'd put on a brave face for them at every step of the way.

"Yeah . . ." Karin repeated. Yuzu didn't know that Ichigo had been a Shinigami and Rukia was one too. She'd seen them together enough times to guess at why he missed her so much, even if some of her memories were wrong and hazy. It wasn't just that she'd helped him protect them. And if she was honest . . . "I miss Rukia-nē too," she said to reassure her sister.

"How can we help?" the brown-haired sister asked with despair. It all seemed so far beyond their ability to change or impact . . .

The black-haired sister felt something in her harden at that; it sounded like Yuzu was going to cry. "You do what you always do," she said comfortingly, before firmly adding "I'll look into it." She would start with Urahara.

"But Karin-chan—" Yuzu began.

"I said I'll handle it. Don't worry and get some sleep," Karin replied.

"I think he's pretty messed up by it," Isshin said. He was in his spirit form. It had been transparently obvious how much his son had been trying to act like everything was normal.

Neither Urahara nor Yoruichi said anything. The former stared at the floor, while the latter appeared to consider a wall. Tessai, Ururu, and Jinta were asleep in other rooms.

"I don't know what'll happen," the former *taichō* continued, "so I guess we should have some kind of plan in place since we're all responsible in some way or another." He was proposing it since he was indisputably the one most responsible.

"I might have an idea," Urahara said quietly. He looked up at Isshin, eyes gleaming. "You're not going to like it."

"What else is new?" the father replied.

Monday, December 3, 2001

"I said shut up and get Urahara," Karin replied forcefully.
Jinta glared at her but it was obvious from her disposition she wouldn't take no for an answer. He went to fetch the boss.

The shopkeeper was out before her in short order. "Ah, Kurosaki-san, I had a feeling you'd be here," he said with a small smile. He sighed inwardly at the fact he'd have to inform her father.

---

**Tuesday, December 4, 2001**

Keigo and Mizuiro found Tatsuki after school while she was on the way to her karate club. "Arisawa," the latter said, "did you find him yesterday?"

Ichigo had turned up to school that day, but had been . . . off. It was difficult to say exactly what was wrong with him, but he'd at least shown up, which was an improvement over the previous day. When Tatsuki had left school at lunch the prior day it had been clear what her intent was, though she hadn't spoken to anyone about it before or since.

She turned to look at the two of them. They found her extremely hard to read. "He'll be fine," she said cryptically.

"Don't just give us that like there's nothing to be worried about," Keigo replied.

"Asano," Tatsuki replied harshly, "I said he'll be fine. Just give him some time." She walked off without another word.

The two were left to consider one another and the retreating back of the fighter.

---

**Monday, January 7, 2002**

Ichigo cringed as he heard the familiar call and sound of running footsteps behind him, instinctively judging the pace and the Doppler shift of the voice.

"Happy New Year, Ichigooo—" Keigo called, only to be caught in the sternum with an elbow.

The orange-haired student didn't look back as he said "I thought I told you to knock it off with that already."

Mizuiro walked up beside and past him, saying "You know he can't help himself."

Ichigo let out a "Tch," and followed along without further comment.

Keigo was on his other flank soon enough, becoming increasingly impervious to damage and forcing Ichigo to vary up his attacks more and more in time. "So did you do anything interesting over winter break?"

"Not really," Ichigo replied.

"I had a fun week in Nagano," Mizuiro offered.

"Nobody is asking about you and your conquests!" Keigo shouted.

"It's not my fault you live a boring life," the playboy countered.

"Don't judge how boring my life is or isn't when you're so rarely around to see it!" the jester replied, arguing across Ichigo's back after having taken on a chevron formation with him at the apex. Mizuiro
gave him a look to get on with it already. "Anyway, Ichigo! Is Kuchiki-san going to be coming back anytime soon?" he asked.

"No," he replied, with a certain dark finality in his tone.

"Eh?" Keigo followed up, even as he glanced back to Mizuiro.

Ichigo said nothing.

They playboy shook his head subtly. Whatever had happened had been pretty severe, and probably not desired by any of the parties involved. They hadn't been able to get a straight answer from anyone who might know better than they did. That would have to change.

Keigo frowned but let it go. They continued on to school in silence.

They followed Ishida after school was over. Inoue was too protective of Ichigo to be easily pressed and Chad was too taciturn to tell them everything they needed to know. They didn't get very far before he stopped and said "It's none of your concern," without turning.

"It's definitely our concern when he's our friend!" Keigo shouted. "I would think someone else who claimed that distinction would understand that!"

The archer seemed to flinch at that before saying "Kurosaki isn't my friend." Even to him it sounded empty and unconvincing. He sighed and turned to face the duo, considering them. They had resolute looks on their faces. He had some idea of what they might have endured before Ichigo had arrived at Karakura. It'd never been discussed. He adjusted his glasses before quietly asking "What do you want to know?"

"Tell us what really happened," Mizuiro said calmly.

"That's . . . a really long story," Ishida said.

"We don't have anywhere else to be," Keigo replied.

The Quincy exhaled and gestured for them to follow him. If he was going to discuss it all, it would be somewhere he could be comfortable and have something to eat and drink. They wound up at a café and Ishida made it clear he wouldn't take questions while relating the story before launching into it, breaking only for a light dinner during which nobody said anything. It was deep into the evening when he finished and finally permitted them to speak their minds.

He'd been exhaustive, although there were some gaps in his personal observations, and they found they had nothing to say, let alone ask. After an awkward silence they thanked him for his time and excused themselves. The archer stayed behind with the tea they'd ordered and his own thoughts.

"We should tell Arisawa," Mizuiro said quietly as they made their way toward their homes.

"And Honshō," Keigo said.

"Are you sure about that?" the playboy asked.

"Do you not remember that she asked us to? Don't we owe it to her after what happened?" the jester replied. "Bottling things up and hiding them will just lead to being like how Ichigo is," he added grimly.

Neither knew what to do on that score. Their friend had taken on far too much by himself, even for
All they could do was commiserate and try to come up with some kind of solution to help him out. There was one other person they knew who was bound up in everything.

"We should see that weird shopkeeper," Mizuiro said. Urahara's centrality to the story made him the obvious place to start.

---

**Monday, April 1, 2002**

Inoue kept surreptitiously glancing at Ichigo throughout the day, having resolved to ask him to observe the cherry blossoms during *hanami* that day. They'd just come back from spring break but the cherry blossoms had begun to bloom unusually early that year, having opened in Tokyo on March 16th and in Karakura on March 18th. That day marked the end of the second week and there wouldn't be many if any more opportunities. The weather was rather nice if cool, and so it was the perfect opportunity to ask.

It had been just under five months and although she would've waited longer in deference, he seemed to have firmly settled into a new kind of normal and moved on several months ago, after the winter break. She felt it was soon, but not too soon, and although she didn't want to impose, she'd been thinking about it all during the break. She hadn't discussed it with anyone, but there was no shame in seeing if he didn't feel the same way as she did. If he didn't . . . she would just have to deal with it.

From talking with Urahara, it seemed unlikely that Rukia would be coming back. Other than Zennosuke's continuing presence, not a single Shinigami had visited Karakura since that day in December. Rukia was her friend, and she knew at least some of how much she meant to Ichigo, but . . .

She waited until after school before following along after him at a distance, only catching up gradually. "Kurosaki-kun!" she called when she felt they were sufficiently alone.

He stopped but didn't immediately turn, doing so after only a second. "Inoue? What's up?" he said with a small smile, watching as she approached to a conversational distance.

She paused at what she recognized as a sign of nervousness in him. Did he know somehow? "I . . ." she started, suddenly unsure of herself, before committing: "I wanted to ask whether you'd like to go to *hanami* with me."

Ichigo kept everything about himself carefully controlled. On some level he'd known this would be coming in some fashion or another. He'd put some thought into it but had never been able to even guess at how it might finally happen, so he'd kept his thoughts focused only on his desired outcome: not to hurt her, and not to break their friendship. It wasn't that he didn't like her—it was just that he didn't like her in that way and he wasn't interested in romance. Not in that lifetime. "You know April Fools' Day isn't a big thing here, right?" he asked lightly, trying to diffuse the situation.

"I'm—I'm not joking," she replied earnestly, not entirely sure what to make of his self-deprecation but knowing it wasn't a good sign.

He realized this wouldn't be remotely as simple as he might hope. His eyes fell toward the ground. "Inoue . . ." he replied.

She understood immediately from his tone and body language it wouldn't go as she wanted and felt her heart sink. "No, no, it's okay," she said, taking a step back, "I . . . I didn't want to impose anyway, Kurosaki-kun." She suddenly wanted to run.
"Inoue," he said again firmly, looking up to her with resolve.

She found herself frozen in place by his gaze. He'd lately seemed rather like how he had at the start of the previous year, if less personally intimidating to her, but she hadn't seen a look like that on him since Hueco Mundo. Abruptly goose bumps rippled across her, and she immediately understood...

Ichigo walked through what he needed to say. He had to be completely honest if he didn't want this to end poorly. He took a moment before he said what was necessary. "You're a really great friend. You've done more for me than almost anyone else, and I'm so glad that I've gotten to know you. You're a lot smarter than people give you credit for. You're really pretty. You're funny, and caring, and kind. I do like you. I love you like a sister. But I can't . . . I can't change how that is . . ."

Inoue stared at him as he spoke, somehow sensing things under the surface of his words. He hadn't ever really moved on. He'd just . . . recontextualized his situation. What was inside him wasn't anguish. There was a kind of sadness in him, but it was beneath a deep and unending determination. She suddenly remembered something Matsumoto had said to her last year: Don't you realize it's fine like this? You and Kuchiki . . . you both know that Ichigo cannot stand alone, so . . . as of now, he needs you and Kuchiki both . . . more than ever. She suddenly saw it. This was all somehow about Rukia, although it was like he didn't think of it that way. How had she not seen it before? She was usually good at reading him. Had she been so distracted by her own thoughts all this time? Even as she was suddenly mad at herself she refused to beat herself up for her own desires, remembering what else Matsumoto had told her. "Please stop, Kurosaki-kun," she said quietly as he began to grasp for words.

He blinked and refocused on her, the intensity gone as quickly as it had appeared.

She smiled just a little, even though she had to force it at first. It hurt. But it hurt in a way she could manage and understand. She and Rukia had always helped hold him up in different ways, and it was her friend who had won that aspect of him and not her. It hurt a lot, but . . . Did either even know it? Either way, it was fine like this. If she was like a sister to him, then that was something Rukia would never know. The Shinigami could just as easily be angry at her for that! It's not like being the recipient of Kurosaki-kun's affection would be easy . . . It hurt but to burden him with the pain wasn't something she would do because she had to help him along. "It's okay," she said, her smile broadening naturally.

Ichigo seemed to be lost for words.

Inoue laughed a little. "To be honest, I spent a lot of time looking at the cherry blossoms over the break already anyway," she said. She didn't know exactly how to help, but she sensed that letting him more firmly establish himself without interference was probably for the best. She didn't think it was right to forcibly intervene and she trusted in her intuition. She just needed to be prepared and watchful for when something eventually happened.

"Inoue . . ." he repeated again, not knowing what to make of the change in her mood.

She turned, cheerily saying "I'll see you tomorrow, Kurosaki-kun, make sure to get your homework done!" before she walked back the way she'd come from. She didn't look back once, already entirely confident in her insight and using it counterbalance the ache in her. It was confusing yet clear at the same time. If Kurosaki-kun is like this, then surely Kuchiki-san is also . . . something will happen sooner rather than later! She would be ready.

She rounded the corner of the last turn they'd taken when she ran into Tatsuki. Her best friend seemed surprised at her appearance. "Orihime? Are you okay?" she asked after a moment.
"Huh? Why wouldn't I be, Tatsuki-chan? Are you going home too?" she asked in confusion.

The fighter had never told the princess about what she'd seen or said the day after Ichigo had woken up. That wasn't a thing that other people needed to know about, no matter how much they might agree to cooperate to help him or how well they knew him. But she knew that Inoue had feelings for Ichigo, and to have seen him . . . grieving . . . and to have said nothing had been to set her up for disappointment and heartache. She'd surreptitiously followed along after noticing the looks she'd been giving him all day, feeling guilty and preparing to pick up the pieces from whatever damage he did. This wasn't at all what she'd expected. "Didn't he . . . didn't he say no?" she asked. She couldn't possibly have misjudged him so severely that day . . .

"It's okay," Inoue beamed.

Tatsuki blinked.

"He told me something just as nice," she said happily. If another sister was what he needed her to be, then that's what she would be. She suddenly asked "Hey, do you want to get some ice cream?"

Her friend stared at her for awhile before she frowned a little "Isn't it a bit cold for that . . . ?"

"That just means it won't melt!" Inoue replied, before pulling her along.

Tatsuki protested but let herself be dragged off, resolving to find out what had happened and to draw Inoue, and by proxy Ishida and Chad, into the circle of trying to figure out how to help Ichigo, if they weren't already. Urahara and Yoruichi would always listen, but would only sometimes talk.

Wednesday, April 3, 2002

"I'm starting to think we should form a club," Urahara said, glancing sideways to Yoruichi.

"What, like 'The Concerned Acquaintances of Kurosaki Ichigo'?" she muttered. It was heartening to watch his friends and family rally around him in the shadows but there was only so much even all of them together could do as they waited for the situation to advance.

"Something like that," he replied. He couldn't decide whether to smile, frown, or glare, and so he simply let his hat hide his face.

"Maybe we actually should," she replied after a time, looking to him. The more she thought about it, the more appealing it was. They could function as a coordinating team for all the different input they were getting since it was impractical for everyone else to meet up without drawing Ichigo's attention. It was clear he was steadily rebuilding himself, but into what exactly nobody could yet say. She had the sense both Tatsuki and Inoue had the clearest idea, but neither would put it into words. She herself had her own idea, still remembering how she'd remarked that acquiring power was as natural to Ichigo as walking.

"Maybe we should," Urahara echoed back, meeting her gaze.

Monday, June 17, 2002

Ichigo, Isshin, Karin, and Yuzu stood in front of Masaki's grave, each alone with their thoughts.

The former's were: Mom, I'll . . . definitely keep going!
The latter three's were all some variation on: *We will definitely help him keep on!*

---

**Thursday, July 4, 2002**

"So what does it mean if he's told his family that he's going on a summer trip with Asano and Kojima and yet the two of them have never heard of such a thing and have their own plans?" Yoruichi mused.

"He's asserting himself and intends to do something he doesn't want people to worry about," Urahara replied.

"Should we follow him?" she asked. She knew this was probably the catalyst they'd been waiting for and didn't even consider the idea of stopping it.

"No, it'll make our end more believable if we genuinely don't know where he's actually gone. From what everyone else is reporting he can't get even that far and he won't do anything too dangerous," the shopkeeper replied. He'd pieced together that Ichigo had been learning to care for himself in various ways beyond just fighting from the various things they'd been told over the past few months. It wasn't the behavior of someone planning on doing something drastic.

"It's a risk," the Flash Goddess replied. She knew it was one that was necessary to draw Soul Society out, even if Ichigo didn't seem to think of it that way as he seemed to act as though they were just done with him. She still didn't like it though.

"Yes, well, sometimes they have to be taken. We'll just have to make sure everyone is informed and knows the part they need to play," Urahara stated.

Yoruichi considered it for a moment and nodded.

---

**Friday, July 19, 2002**

"He's gone," Yoruichi reported, "Nobody's seen him since after he went home to get his bags."

"Then I guess it's time to run around like chickens with our heads cut off and inform Kurumadani-san," Urahara said, adjusting his hat down and smiling.

"You haven't done something to the *gigai*, have you?" Yoruichi asked with sudden suspicion at how cheery he was.

"How could you think so lowly of me?" he replied with injury. He wouldn't interfere with Rukia like that again. Doing it once had been reprehensible, even if it had seemed necessary. Things had to be completely natural . . . at least between her and Ichigo, anyway.
Rukia blinked her eyes open, tilting her face up from where she'd buried it against the bed. She was still next to Ichigo the way they'd fallen asleep and she was immediately aware of his heartbeat and breathing, both from the rise and fall of his chest against her back and his breath as his face was against her hair. He was still asleep. His arms remained securely around her waist and she couldn't easily free herself. She didn't want to wake him and decided to put it off for as long as she could. She wasn't aware of having dreamed, and hadn't been since they'd started falling asleep in contact with one another. She was convinced it was because he warded off the bad ones and the days were too similar to good ones already.

She felt incredibly rested and limber, probably because of his massage. It'd been ridiculously unfair how easily he'd disabled her with it, but she'd asked for the second act because it'd also felt incredibly good. She'd noticed where he'd chosen to stop despite the fact her upper legs had been a bit tense too, but hadn't pushed the point. Even thinking about his hands on her inner thighs made her turn red and not because the idea displeased her or out of modesty. She carefully moved on from that thought, as she wasn't ready to think about that.

Where had he learned to do that anyway? It surely wasn't with anyone else . . . had he just improvised? She put it aside and looked toward the window. She could tell from the light that it was sometime in the morning and clearer than it had been yesterday. She slowly removed her arms from atop his and searched in front of her, finding her soul pager.

She turned the screen on, noting the time and reviewing their plans for the umpteenth time before she realized Ichigo was right. They would have to conserve the big sights or they'd run out within a week. It wasn't that Tokyo lacked for things to do or places to go, it was just that a lot of it didn't appeal to one of them or the other and a lot of what did was seasonal or otherwise time-dependent. There were a number of fireworks festivals going on. They had missed the Edogawa, Ichikawa, and Kanagawa Shimbun festival while at Tokyo Disneyland, although the fireworks they'd been privy to had more than made up for that. Their date had been the same day as the Koto festival and she wouldn't have missed that—any of the parts of it—for anything. They could at any rate catch the Tokyo Bay festival on the 8th, the Jingu Gaien festival on the 11th, and the Tamagawa festival on the 22nd. They could watch the Tokyo Bay show easily from Odaiba. The Jingu Gaien show could coincide with their trip to the park complex in the area, and that was on a weekend, so they'd get to see Yoyogi Park's various performers during their picnic too.

She didn't know much about bands and they hadn't seen many major tours coming through, and although some of the major sports were in season—she'd learned the two big organizations were Japan Soccer League and Nippon Professional Baseball—she didn't know anything about them and Ichigo didn't seem to care about either. It was the same problem that dogged them with theatrical releases of movies. Sumo wasn't in tournament season, she knew he wouldn't care about Noh, and although they could catch bunraku or kabuki shows it didn't seem that pressing.

They had about 6 or 7 days worth of things to do and at least 17 days to fill. She didn't have a problem just lounging with Ichigo, but it felt like kind of a waste. There'd be plenty of time for that in Karakura. They'd have to find a few more things to investigate. Just as she was starting to consider it by reviewing some of the things they'd skipped over she felt his arms tighten marginally around her waist and his face lift from her hair.
"I was wondering when you'd finally wake up," Rukia said quietly, letting only the barest hint of criticism into it.

"Sorry," he said, still sleepy, "have I been holding you captive?"

"Don't say it like I mind, fool," she rebuked, turning off the soul pager and bringing her arms back on top of his. Even as her mind worked she enjoyed his proximity; she'd always found his *reiatsu* comforting but since that he didn't have that—*for now* she mentally added—she appreciated his touch, dangerous as it was. From her own experiences and what Chappy had said she knew it was far more addictive. They'd been touching each other more and more with each passing day... not that there was anything wrong with that.

Ichigo was chuckling softly above her.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"You admitted you like being my prisoner," he said.

She pinched one of his arms just a bit hard at his impudence before brushing her hands along them absentmindedly. "Where'd you learn to massage like that?" she asked curiously.

"I didn't, I just kind of put it together from various things," he replied.

"It was really nice," she said earnestly, before adding "even if you are still a dirty cheater."

"I think you're just mad I didn't do more," he said idly.

She turned red again and was glad he couldn't see her. "It's not like there was more to massage," she stated.

"I didn't touch your arms," Ichigo replied, leaving the truth unsaid. He'd felt her thighs were tense too but hadn't been willing to go there without her explicit approval, just like he hadn't touched her sides because it could've brought his hands close to her chest.

Even though Rukia knew she couldn't see him she glanced up at where his voice was coming from before gripping at his arms lightly in appreciation for not teasing her too much. They stayed together in silence for awhile before she asked "Did you see the Sumidagawa fireworks festival?"

"I saw it from a distance. You would've really liked it," he said with only a bit of wistfulness.

"It's okay, we can see at least three others," she said in reassurance.

"Lift your head up," he said.

"Eh?" she replied, confused at the instruction.

"Come on," he lightly insisted.

She did what he asked with only a moment's further hesitation.

He slowly pulled her up while also pushing himself back so her head came to rest on the pillows before removing his arms from around her so she could turn to face him.

She understood and turned as he withdrew, finding him looking her way from across the pillow. The moment they saw one another they both adopted the smallest of smiles.
"You were right that we need to find some more things to do," she said lightly.

"I've come up with a few ideas, and I have some for today already," he said, his smile widening a little.

"Oh?" she asked.

"Uh huh, but we should get dressed and get breakfast. I'll tell you about it as we go," he replied. "Ladies first."

Rukia narrowed her eyes a little at his suddenly suspicious nature but didn't object, going to clean and dress.

After checking the weather Ichigo continued to work on his song practice while she was preoccupied.

After dressing they wound up taking advantage of the hotel's Grand Club for breakfast, as their suite qualified them for access. The club itself continued on in the style of the rest of the place in creating a warm, intimate setting. It offered a wide variety of Western and Japanese breakfast items and they both got a rather eclectic mix of whatever suited their fancy, taking their food to some of the more relaxed seating by one of the windows. They talked between bites as they ate. She told him about the fireworks festivals.

"So, if we're going to a bunch of festivals, we should get some yukata," Ichigo said.

"There could be up to four matsuri and something else as well," Rukia stated, adding "If we stay until the end of the month, anyway." She'd recalled the Hibiya Bon Odori was near the end of the month. Obon was usually celebrated in late July but in Tokyo it was held later because of how empty the city became around then. It gave her a second chance at being with him for it without waiting a year if they chose to stay longer.

"All the more reason and we can keep them for when we're back in Karakura," he responded. "Of course, if we're going shopping for yukata, we may as well get kimono."

"Weren't you the one who was always trying to limit our purchases?" she asked with some incredulity, lifting an eyebrow at him.

"Well, I figure since everyone has lined up against whoever was objecting to our spending habits and since your brother seems to be so graciously opting to expend clan resources on us . . ." Ichigo trailed off.

"You're incorrigible," Rukia chastised.

"Seeing to the needs of my noble girlfriend is itself also noble," he stated with distinction.

She just stared at him dubiously, even as she smiled inwardly.

"So yukata or kimono first?" he asked.

"Yukata," she replied.

They took the Hibiya Line to Kasumigaseki Station, transferring to the Chiyoda Line and getting off at Meiji-Jingūmae Station. It was a bit of a roundabout route but didn't actually add much travel time.
and required less thought than buses. After a short walk they wound up in the basement of Oriental Bazaar, looking through its extensive yukata collection together.

Ichigo's options were fairly constrained by social norms and so he settled on a rather simple dark green yukata with a black obi, along with a pair of geta sandals. It offset his eyes and hair nicely and was more unique than a blue one. He'd get a nagajuban under-robe at their next stop since it might as well be high-quality.

Rukia had a much more difficult choice in balancing cute, elegant, and characteristic. She ultimately found a yukata that matched her eye color and had tastefully blended white, pink, and black floral designs on it with a pink and white obi. She likewise got a pair of geta and came to a similar conclusion about the nagajuban.

Both found foldable fans they liked and made their way to checkout. Purchases in tow, they rode the subway back to Kasumigaseki Station and transferred to the Marunouchi Line, riding it into Tokyo Station. Their destination was immediately outside to the east and up an elevator: the 10th floor of the Daimaru Tokyo department store, which was given over almost entirely to the business of kimono. Most of the store's clientele for such items were women, but they were fully stocked for men as well. Since whatever they got would be custom-made to order they split up for measurements first and reconvened to begin going over sample fabric patterns. There were a lot of patterns to consider and a lot of pieces to plan for, as well as several accessories. They would be ready for delivery in a week and, other than their nagajuban which they intended to take with them, they opted to have everything sent to the hotel when it was ready. The prices were eye-watering but were also wiped away with a single swipe of plastic. It was just after noon as they left.

They rode the Marunouchi Line to Ginza Station and the Hibiya Line back to Roppongi Station, dropping their purchases off at their suite. Ichigo then revealed they'd be going to the Shinagawa Aquarium and a mystery destination.

Rukia had no idea what an aquarium was.

"It's like a zoo for things that live underwater," he said, "but not as depressing." From the look she gave him that didn't seem to help clarify anything. "You'll see when we get there," he assured her.

They took the Oedo Line east to Daimon Station, before taking the Asakusa Line south to Sengakuji Station. As it was quite close to the station and rather famous they briefly stopped to visit Sengaku-ji temple, the resting place of the 47 rōnin of story and legend. After a short tour, they returned to the station and got on the Keikyū Main Line, riding it to Ōmori-Kaigan Station. From there it was a short walk to the aquarium.

Shinagawa Aquarium wasn't enormous, but it was rather quite nice. Ichigo made sure to check the show times for some of the bigger events and led her inside after they purchased tickets. Rukia rapidly came to understand what he meant. Although she was impressed by several of the fish tanks there would ultimately be six highlights as far as he observed: the way she pushed up against him in trepidation at the shark hall, her cooing over the penguins and seals, her wonder at the 22 meter long underwater tunnel tank, and her enjoyment of the sea lion and dolphin shows.

She turned to look at him with one of her looks of her sincere appreciation once the latter ended. "I've never seen these kinds of animals before," she explained. It completely belied the point: she'd never really been around the ocean much, sad as that was for being from and in an island nation. The tunnel tank in particular had been like something out of a dream. He'd shown her an entirely new world she hadn't known existed.
"It's pretty common stuff," he said with humility, rubbing the back of his head and glancing away. "Ichigo," she said softly, giving him a look to not dismiss it so lightly. He looked back, silenced by the expression on her face. She held his stare with approval before reaching out and placing one of her hands on one of his. His cheeks turned a little bit red and after awhile she just said "Thank you."

He found himself wondering how she'd react to their next destination but smiled and stood, helping her up. He promised they'd get food at their next stop.

They went back to the station and rode the Keikyū Main Line south to Keikyū Kamata Station, transferring to the Keikyū Airport Line and winding up at Haneda Airport's terminal, 'Big Bird'. The exit took them directly up into the terminal's lobby.

Rukia looked around the main terminal: it was a huge building filled with people of every description, all clearly intent on going somewhere or other. Ichigo led her to its central marketplace. It was six stories tall and structured around a central open area. They made their way toward an elevator. "What's an 'airport' anyway?" she asked.

"So, the main ways that people get across short distances are walking or biking, and for medium distances they use trains or vehicles like cars and buses. For long distances, they use ships or planes," Ichigo said. "You remember the Thai restaurant?"

"Yes," she replied, with only a hint of smugness. How could she ever forget his stupidity there? "That's about one kilometer from the hotel. Earth is a bit more than 40,000 kilometers around. If you went to that restaurant once every day, it'd take just under 55 years to equal going around the whole thing. Thailand is about 4,000 kilometers away. A ship takes weeks to go around the whole world. The kind of plane you can actually get on could cross the whole thing in about two days," he explained.

She stared at him incredulously while the elevator ascended and her mind worked at the numbers. "And they do this... through the air?"

"Yup," he replied.

"We're not getting on one, are we?" she queried, suddenly suspicious.

He looked at her and smiled. "Not on this vacation."

That sat at the open-air rooftop café and observation area, sipping at drinks and eating at some pastries as Ichigo pointed out the various planes coming in and landing. Haneda Airport mostly handled domestic service and so almost all the flights they saw were headed for elsewhere in Japan. It was Narita International Airport on the other side of the city and off into the countryside which handled most international flights.

Rukia openly stared every time one of the planes started to taxi out to prepare for takeoff, stunned each time one lifted into the air. They were huge and the noise they made was incredible. She'd been worried for their safety the first time she'd heard one roar to life from across the runway. "How many people can ride in one of those?" she asked.
"Most of these are anywhere from 100 to 300 people," he said, before pointing to an enormous Boeing 747-400 with China Airlines livery, "but that one could hold almost 600." It was probably headed to Honolulu, one of the rare international flights out.

She watched the planes in silence for a while.

"There are some that are a lot faster, but those tend to be military or scientific," Ichigo said idly. He knew a little about planes because he thought they were kind of cool, but he wouldn't just start spouting facts about them at her.

"Have you ever been on one?" she asked, glancing to him before looking back to the runways.

"A long time ago we took one on a vacation to Fukuoka, but I've never been out of the country," he replied.

"Is it scary?" she questioned.

"It can be, but then again I was pretty young. It's really not that bad," he said, before gently adding "Somebody who's used to using flash steps and fighting Hollows probably wouldn't be bothered by it."

Rukia looked at him and locked her eyes with his as his remark in the elevator replayed in her mind. He wanted to share going on one of these things with her sometime? To go somewhere far away he'd never been to before with her . . . together? She didn't know what to say. It was the second time in one day he'd radically redefined the world for her, this time in a completely different way. She suddenly felt very small there with him.

Ichigo reached out and lightly touched her hand, bringing her back to the present. "Are you okay?"

She blinked and looked down at his hand, before drawing hers back from it just a fraction. She tilted it back and brought their palms together. His gaze followed hers down at the motion. She slid her fingers between his and lightly squeezed, looking back up to him, cheeks a little pink.

He turned redder that time than he had the last and brought his fingers down against the back of her hand, squeezing back and meeting her look. She once more had one of those almost painfully soft expressions about her as she regarded him. It was such a change from how she normally looked, even when she was genuinely happy.

Rukia smiled at him. They'd touched and held hands before, but not that way. It seemed more genuine than anything she could say. Someday I'll take you up on that, Kurosaki Ichigo, she promised herself.

He slowly smiled back. They stared at one another for an exceedingly long time before the sound of another plane taking off drew their focus. They both watched it soar up into the sky, feeling as though somehow something of them was going up with it.

They stayed at the café until after sundown, watching as the planes were cast in blazing hues and then as they turned into blinking lights in the darkness, continuing to idly munch on various foods rather than having a proper dinner. At last they rose to make their way back. Within a half hour they were at their suite. Rukia didn't let Ichigo's hand go once until they were inside. "We should write your sisters again," she said.

He nodded without comment and they took places at the work desk, going through their postcard collection. They'd added ones from the airport and aquarium. They selected one of Tokyo
Disneyland and filled it out in their own ways. Both added their own assurances not to be jealous without consulting one another and this time he let her doodle without complaint, asking "Want to watch a movie?"

"Still looking for something we'll both like?" she asked, glancing up to him. It was sweet that he was continuing to try.

"I think I might have just the thing," he said.

"Okay. You get cleaned up first," she replied, adding "I'll put this in the mail."

Ichigo rose and went to the bathroom while Rukia went down to the lobby to mail the postcard. As she waited for him to finish she reviewed the hotel literature for a second time and added some more destinations for consideration, starting to fill out their schedule more. He was back out shortly and they swapped, he likewise browsing the material before going back to his karaoke preparations.

It was a bit later when she sat down beside him on the couch and they started on Die Hard, watching it in English with Japanese subtitles. They were a short ways into the movie when he found her leaning against him. He glanced over at her and lightly slid an arm around her shoulders. She was a bit shocked at some of the gun violence but knew enough to know it wasn't real and was certainly no stranger to bloodshed. Although some of the issues were beyond both of them—the economic circumstances of the 1980s between America and Japan, the West German terrorist angle, the Vietnam references—its main plot and themes were pretty easy to follow.

Some of its plot points felt oddly similar in ways to some of their own experiences. It didn't fit any one event or circumstance precisely but conjured up understanding and memories in both of them nonetheless that drew them into its stakes. They found themselves entertained by its sort of dark humor and action and weren't quite aware of drawing closer to one another as the plot escalated.

When at last the credits rolled, Rukia was suddenly cognizant of how near she was to Ichigo and also of a kind of catharsis. She looked up to him just as he turned to her. They stared at one another as "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!" played, eyes searching for a moment. Neither quite knew how to articulate how familiar it had been in some ways. He tried out a small smile, asking "So how was that?"

"I liked it," she replied truthfully, sitting back up fully. She wasn't sure what to add beyond that.

He let her move without resistance.

She glanced at the time before looking back to him, adding "We should get to bed, it's getting late." He turned off the TV while she got the lights and they made their way together to the bedroom.

Rukia stopped him beside her bed. She was conflicted. On the one hand she wanted them to try sleeping separately while retaining contact again just to see how that was, and on the other hand she didn't want to push him away after the past several hours. "Ichigo ..." she started, not sure what to say.

Ichigo stood beside her in the darkness patiently. "Whatever you want is fine."

"What about what you want?" she asked, looking up to his silhouette against the skyline.

"This is already everything I want," he said quietly.

Her eyes widened and she blushed just a bit. "It's not a punishment or anything—" she felt the need to clarify, only to find one of his fingers against her lips. She couldn't see him but could somehow tell
he was smiling. After a moment she closed her eyes and lightly turned her head so her lips brushed against it to indicate she understood.

He withdrew it and walked around to his bed, getting onto it and under the covers.

She did the same. As she turned to face him and extended her hands she found his already waiting for her. She interlocked fingers with both and settled in, finding she immediately missed being against him. *Am I . . . really already that used to him . . . ?* She quietly let out a breath and focused on their point of contact and the events of the day, letting the new memories slowly carry her away.
Rukia awoke as some sort of dream was ending. She wasn't immediately sure what it had been about, only that it had been happening, as if a heavy fog had rolled in between her and her awareness of it in her waking moments. She became aware of her continuing contact with Ichigo. Yet again they hadn't moved. From his pulse she could tell he was still fast asleep. Memories of the previous day came flooding back as she stared at him. She found herself blushing a bit before looking at where their hands came together. She very slowly untangled her fingers from his before sitting up and tucking his arms back under his covers, watching him for awhile in thought before coming to a general decision. She quietly got up and retrieved new sleeping clothes before she went to the bathroom.

After turning on the fan the first thing she did was to busy herself with sorting out their dirty clothes into provided bags for laundering by the hotel. She knew to put like colors together, at least, and kept their items separated from one another, processing through them without much thought beyond that, her mind elsewhere. Once she'd done that she showered while letting the soaking tub fill, sinking down into it once she'd finished. She oriented so she could recline in it, only keeping her head above the water.

She had been severely underestimating exactly how dangerous touching Ichigo really was, even as she had known it was dangerous. It wasn't typical for either of them to be behaving in the ways they were. The degree to which they blushed around one another lately was proof of that. She had luxuriated in it because it felt right but it also felt . . . too right? She still had that feeling of things running away from her, even after their talks.

She had decided to give them the label of boyfriend and girlfriend as cover so they wouldn't feel embarrassed by admitting they had feelings for one another and as a way of providing a framework of normalcy for him that she also sort of understood. It was a structure for them and a weapon against the world, but it was also becoming a self-serving rationale to excuse what happened. She had done it to reduce the chance of drama as much as for her own reasons, but if they kept going there was a serious risk of running into drama because of it instead. Neither of them knew what they were doing.

How did he feel about it? The wisdom of his words that they could stand still together fully resonated with her then, as had his conduct the night before. He knew. He would understand. It couldn't be any easier for him, could it?

She wondered what her brother would do in a similar place as her. She recalled when he had told her the story of his time together with Hisana and afterwards. How reckless or officious had he been in pursuit and courtship of her sister? Had he always been as he was? She could scarcely imagine him otherwise. He'd said that when he brought her into the clan was the last time he'd ever broken the rules. Ever since the events in Soul Society last year he'd merely . . . creatively interpreted them. If he was willing to let her and Ichigo reside together, perhaps he had once been quite different and understood such things. Or maybe he trusted her to conduct herself appropriately. Perhaps it was both.

Rukia suddenly found she wanted to sink deeper into the water. What would her brother say if he knew what she'd already done? If anything the massage had felt more scandalous to her than bathing with Ichigo. It was one thing to look, and everyone had an imagination, but it was entirely another to touch. The only thing that had kept his hands in check had been his own decency and respect for her.
They were being so familiar as well. Was she not bringing shame to the clan? That word echoed in her head again.

She would . . . she would have to take a step back and reassess with a cooler head and a new perspective. She had to stay focused. This was supposed to be about making sure he was eventually fit to fight and psychologically sound, not about her feelings. This was supposed to be a mission! Her own voice lectured her in her mind: *One affects the other. Do you think they don't know? And if you hold him at a distance now, instead of like you should've earlier if you were really serious, what happens then? Anyway, doesn't the saying go "Absence makes the heart grow fonder?" So what about the future? Haven't you already . . . messed everything up?*

Her jaw clenched. Giri and ninjō, obligation and feeling—why did everything have to come back to them? Had she really already messed it all up? Should Soul Society have actually sent someone else? She was, once more, confronting that void within her. She could at last glance at what was at the bottom. In doing so, bits of her dream filtered back to her. It had been some sort of bizarre conflation of *Die Hard's* Nakatomi Plaza with Las Noches, the story intertwining in odd ways with her memory. The pieces she had didn't make sense, but she diverted her attention to the idea behind it.

It had been a week since they'd really talked about the war. They'd outlined their experiences to one another but not really discussed them in a substantive way. That couldn't continue. They couldn't just paper over it by saying it was in the past or it would come back to haunt them.

She couldn't really talk about Aaroniero without talking about Kaien, and she still wasn't ready to do that. But the rest she could. She remembered the look in his eyes when he'd talked about what had been happening to him at the same time. She could talk about Zommari, even if it was all second-hand from her brother. She had to. She recalled sensing a running theme in all his encounters except for the fight with Ulquiorra. She would have to address that too. He would need a long time to process the lessons of both.

She curled up in the water. Even though it was still piping hot it did nothing to suppress a chill that shuddered through her.

Ichigo woke up on his own sometime long past when Rukia had gone to the bathroom. After discerning she'd decided to get dressed he busied himself with his various usual tasks. The shower wasn't on but he just assumed she was enjoying the bath without much additional thought about the matter. He returned to bed to work on his karaoke project and to consider additional places they could go.

It was later still when she opened the door and stepped out. He could tell something was different the moment he saw her. She looked much more reserved than she had been, like she often had the year before. The fact she'd picked sleeping clothes also made her intent clear. Something in him fell at the sight, but on some level he understood—he'd been expecting it. He'd greatly enjoying their time together lately, awkward as it could sometimes be, but it was still all happening far too fast. Something had to give and one look at the critical appraisal in those ultramarine eyes told him exactly what it had been.

Ichigo gave her a distant and slightly sardonic smile. It was fine, in its own way. It was still who they really were, feelings or not. Being there with her was more than enough. It was more than he thought he'd have again for a long time. "Hey," he said informally.

Rukia seemed to relax a touch before looking away, saying "Hey," back noncommittally. She made her way to her bed and sat on it, opposite him. They didn't look at each other. A not-entirely-comfortable silence began to spin out between them.
He scratched at a temple before exhaling and saying with just a little bit of impatience "So, what do you want to cover?" It'd been a week and in the background of everything else he'd had more time to review things. He preferred to just get any discussions vented and over with.

"I know we're not doing it this way anymore, but it was my turn and I think it's important I tell you something first," she replied.

He had no objections and looked out at Tokyo to signal as much. It was a little hazy, but otherwise a hot and sunny day.

She turned to face him, making her expression and tone as passive and indifferent as could be before speaking. "Last time you said 'even if it had been entirely otherwise, who knows if I could've beaten Zommari?' The truth is . . . you probably would've lost, and even if you hadn't, I likely would have died."

Ichigo turned to face her, meeting her gaze. There was a hint of sympathy for him in her eyes, but her expression was cool.

Rukia didn't like what she saw in his chocolate eyes but continued on implacably. "You were undoubtedly more powerful, even at that time, since he was the 7th Espada and at full strength you beat the 6th, but it's not always about power. I wasn't aware during the fight, but nii-sama told me about it much later. Zommari's ability was that he could control objects by marking them with his eyes. He had fifty. If he marked someone's limb, he could seize control of it; if he marked their head, he could seize control of the whole body. Nii-sama was forced to disable both his own left arm and left leg," she continued. She took a breath before saying "Zommari took control of my body, making me cut down Hanatarō, before making me threaten to decapitate myself. Only nii-sama's use of kidō prevented that. Zommari could not control Senbonzakura." The implications were clear from how she'd introduced the event and there was no point in rubbing them in.

His jaw clenched and his fingers dug into the sheets as he stared at her while things churned in him. He'd known for a long time how desperate the situation must've been for everyone when the four taichō had shown up, had understood it if not made peace with it, and had admitted as much to her. To be told point-blank that even if everything had gone completely differently, even if he had stuck with her against her objections or he had somehow made it to her in peak condition, that he would've failed and she would've died was something else entirely. The mental sword lodged in his chest throbbed in agony.

She looked down for a moment before refocusing on him. He needed to understand that raw talent and force of will, as much as they had achieved for him, could only take him so far. She would address training him in being a true, proper Shinigami later. "When we return to Karakura, I'll have to go on patrol. Although Ishida has covered for Kurumadani, as a Quincy he destroys rather than purifies souls. It's preferable that I do what Kurumadani cannot while improving his abilities. I . . . won't let you accompany me for such activities whatsoever until your powers have returned," she carried on.

Ichigo had assumed as much but to be reminded he would be useless in the future right after being told he had been a particular kind of useless in the past burned. He smoldered in silence. He no longer really wanted to be having this conversation.

"Ichigo," Rukia said, drawing his attention. "When you do have your powers back again . . ." she trailed off, before her eyes became colder, "I wasn't there for any but one of them, but I know you and I know what you've said. Nnoitra, Yammy, Gin, and even Aizen . . . you weren't really prepared to kill any of them, were you?"
"Rukia . . ." he warned, not liking where this was going even as he had long considered the subject himself.

"You always . . . think there must be some kind of better solution!" she accused, injecting a genuine spark of anger into it. His nobility in his conduct was one of his strengths, but it was just as much one of his weaknesses. He could easily have finished off several opponents in Soul Society but had spared them to his later gain. He had just as easily gone lightly on several opponents in Las Noches, and almost gotten himself and others killed. It was hard to admonish him for a trait that had spared Renji and Byakuya but at the same time . . . "If you're going to fight, you have to be ready to kill! You have to fight as if to kill, even if you don't in the end! It's not a game! There's no place for sympathy!"

He was very still then, and the eyes that regarded her were hard and dark. It was as though he was challenging her to continue on with wherever the train of thought was taking her.

She didn't have a choice. "When you fought Ulquiorra—" she started.

"Why didn't you intervene when I fought Grand Fisher?" he interjected. His tone was like razor wire.

"You told me not to interfere," she said truthfully, not immediately sure what one had to do with the other.

"Bullshit!" he exclaimed, catching her off-guard. "You wanted to! I had to demand you stop! You were calling me a fool that whole time, but it was like I said some magic words that made you back off! Even still, you came back and were restraining yourself from fighting, even though in that power-draining gigai you couldn't have done anything, even with kidō! And now you're telling me there's no place for sympathy? You're telling me to just wait?!" he almost shouted. He narrowed his eyes severely and leaned in. "You were ready to let me die in that fight out of my own stubbornness, but you're gonna lecture me on the need for remorselessness? You're gonna hold that thing up as an example to follow? You'd better explain," he growled.

Her eyes widened in surprise and a touch of distaste at the same time. They were dangerously close to talking about things she didn't want to, and she didn't at all like how confrontational the conversation was becoming. "Kon asked me to return and I didn't want to leave in the first place," she said calmly, "Ukitake-taichō has a philosophy that there are two types of fights . . . the fight to protect life, and the fight to protect pride. I . . . didn't want to injure your pride in confronting your mother's killer!"

They stared at one another in silence for seconds that seemed to be eons. "That's crap," Ichigo said at last, looking back to the city. His voice was quiet and lacked for emotional content. He had never run into Grand Fisher again. The night Shinji had tried to convince him to join the Visored, he'd felt an Arrancar and an unknown taichō level Shinigami appear. In retrospect, it was obvious who the latter had been, and so too did it become obvious who the former had been. He didn't begrudge his father finishing what he'd started. That kind of pride wasn't really worth anything. It wasn't about doing the thing; it was about doing it when it needed to be done. He'd been stupid and emotional in that fight. To excuse it in the name of pride was wrong.

Rukia didn't know what to say. Her own words came back to her: *What is this about pride!? What is it when it's compared to life!?* They were followed by Kaien's: *But you know, Kuchiki, I think that when it comes down to it, both are telling us to protect the same thing . . . your heart.* Her eyes searched his face for a moment as she thought: *Please don't say it . . .*

He'd seen from her eyes that this had something do with Kaien. He didn't want to touch that issue if
she didn't, but this was about them—this was about the rules for them. "I can understand taking
every fight seriously," he continued, "because in some way the stakes are always high." He turned to
face her again and she could see hot steel in his eyes. "But to draw a line and say it's okay to let
somebody die for their own vanity... the Kuchiki Rukia I know would call that foolish too! If
you're dead you have no pride! And if you're alive... you can rebuild it! I would know! If you let
somebody die, what does that do to you!? You can't fix that! I would never follow such a selfish
philosophy! Pride is... keeping the people you care about alive! They're the same thing! All that
matters is not letting the other person die!" If one had to be ruthless to do that, then... well... it
was then that he saw the tears.

They fell from both outer corners of her eyes, leaving lonely glistening trails. She hadn't been able to
stop the first two. There would be no others.

He immediately stopped as though he'd just broken something priceless. The only other time he'd
truly seen her like that was when she had first been taken back to Soul Society. "Rukia," he
whispered, his eyes going wide.

She turned away from him without a word before she pushed herself off the bed, going to the
bathroom and shutting the door behind her.

Ichigo was too stunned to react. He called out her name again, louder. There was no response. He
made his way over to the door, not bothering to test the handle. "Rukia, I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."
he continued, not knowing what to say.

"Please leave me alone for awhile, Ichigo," she said quietly from the other side of the door.

It was like the blade stuck in him was suddenly being twisted. He'd never known words to hurt quite
that badly before. "Rukia," he grated out. It sounded strangled.

"Please," she repeated, even more quietly.

Everything in him seized. This wasn't supposed to happen! Everything they'd done was supposed to
prevent this from happening! He stared at the door dumbly, filled with a sudden immeasurable self-
loathing that roared against the tides of his determination. He'd fought so hard to make it there and
he'd just... he wanted to scream. He wanted to smash things. He wanted to run off and do
something stupid. He clenched his fists against such thoughts so hard it seemed they'd break. She
wouldn't forgive him for any of that. She'd said 'for awhile'. He focused very intently on those two
words. He resolved to wait at the door forever if he had to. He wasn't going anywhere. After a very
long time he released his fingers, blood oozing lazily from his palms where his nails had dug in, and
slowly turned, carefully sitting down and delicately leaning back against the door.

He didn't have to leave to respect her wishes. He swore he could feel her heartbeat through the door
—as she was leaning against it too. There were, at most, three centimeters between them, but even so it
felt like light years. There were over 30 million people around them, but it felt like he was suddenly
out at sea somewhere. He brought his elbows up onto his knees and placed his palms over his eyes,
fingers in his hair, oblivious to the small smears of blood he was leaving on his face.

When it came to the notion of someone making her cry, he would fight anybody, anywhere, anytime,
under any circumstances and conditions. What was he supposed to do when it was him who'd
caused it—or, if he selfishly shifted at least some of the blame onto Kaien, if the guy in question was
already dead? Whatever your relation to me, Shiba Kaien, whatever your story might be... we both
seem to have really messed up when it comes to Rukia. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't even
keep his promise that she could trust him with her heart. He didn't have the words and even if he did
she wouldn't hear them until later.
Not for remotely the first time, Ichigo replayed the events above the dome of Las Noches in his mind. He could just imagine what the Hollow in his conscience would say if it learned he'd made her cry. He could imagine its sneer. And he . . . might have to be more like that if he wanted to keep her and everyone safe? Self-hatred wasn't nearly a strong enough phrase for what percolated inside him. He didn't deserve her. He didn't deserve anything.

He heard her voice then, so clearly at first he thought she was talking to him: *If you're afraid of losing, just get stronger. If you're afraid of not being able to protect your friends, swear to get stronger until you can protect them. If you're afraid of the Hollow inside you . . . just get stronger until you can crush him. If you don't want to listen to others, then hold your chin up and yell those words to yourself! That's the kind of man you have been . . . in my heart, Ichigo!*

His hands slid away from his face and his gaze turned to the skyscrapers outside, the ones both so like and unlike the ones in his inner world. His sense of touch became acutely sensitive to the beat of her heart on the other side of the door. Three centimeters or three hundred trillion kilometers, out at sea or at the bottom of it, powerless or powerful, fighting or fighting without fighting, none of that meant anything. He just had to be better somehow.

Maybe he didn't deserve her. Maybe he didn't deserve anything he had. But the only way he would ever be worthy was to keep going. Rukia would show him the way. She always had. He just had to have the courage to take it and do what was right. What was the right thing to do? What would . . . her hero do? He stilled himself and drew in a breath before releasing it. He had to do what he thought was true.

"I know about Shiba Kaien," he said only loudly enough to be heard through the door. His tone was neutral. "I know you're not ready to talk about it. I know I remind you and others of him. I know if I was less selfish I'd probably try harder not to remind you of him. I know that I'm the son of a man who probably used to be named Shiba Isshin. I don't know how they were related, so I don't know what that makes me and him. I don't know what happened to him. I don't know what happened to you. I know that it hurt you a lot. I know it has something to do with Aaroniero. I don't know any of the words to make it better. I know there probably aren't any."

He stopped, and there was a long silence.

"I just kind of pieced it together after your nightmare. I'd tell you I was sorry for addressing it so directly, but that'd make you mad, so . . . just know that I know and if you want to talk about it there's no shame in that, and if you don't that's fine too. And I'd tell you I was sorry about cutting you off when you were about to repeat yourself, but you'd get mad about that too, and you were probably mad about having to repeat it anyway so . . . just know that I remember," he continued. He sat up straight, away from the door, and put his chin up. "I'll get stronger, to be like the man in your heart again," he said with a decisiveness that was light but unbreakable.

Another long silence followed, one that was ended by the quiet click of the door opening behind him.
Wednesday, August 7, 2002

Ichigo turned at the sound to see Rukia's pajama top. She was standing in the doorway. His eyes moved up toward her face right as her expression shifted to one of marked concern and she was derailed from whatever it was she'd been about to say or do. "What did you do to yourself?" she demanded.

"Huh?" he asked, suddenly confused. He was abruptly aware of the blood on his hands. "Oh, it's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Get in here," she commanded as she went to the sink.

He stood up and did as she asked without complaint. It was already not what he had expected. She peered at him suspiciously as he approached and he held up his hands to show the minor puncture wounds. "I'm telling you it's nothing," he repeated, "I just wasn't paying attention."

She gestured for him to hold his hands out and once he'd done so she engaged in what he knew to be healing kidō. He didn't object, and after half a minute she sternly said "Wash your face and hands. You should be ashamed for making me worry like that." She was already mortified at herself for having left him on his own like that; despite everything he was a young man and young men did stupid things when they were emotionally vulnerable and volatile. She was incredibly lucky he hadn't done something worse. It spoke to his maturity but it still left her cold.

Ichigo sighed but did as ordered, taking his time to make sure he cleaned all the blood off. He wasn't going to argue with her after what had happened.

She departed while he was busy and returned with some fresh sleeping clothes for him, setting them on the vanity beside the sink before retreating to the doorway as he finished. "You might as well shower and everything else while you're in here. I already split our clothes up for laundering, so put what you've got on in your bags, they're the ones on the right," she said, before shutting the door behind her.

He blinked and realized that they weren't done discussing things. He couldn't discern just what that might mean, but he reviewed what had just gone on and steeled himself for a second round as he went about his business. There would not be a repeat of what had just occurred.

As he exited the bathroom he found her sitting on the edge of her bed, considering Tokyo. He watched her for a second before making up his mind and sitting beside her. He kept his hands to himself and said nothing for awhile, likewise observing the city.

"We need to come to an understanding on what it is and isn't okay for us to do in combat in the future," Rukia said after a long time.

It wasn't what Ichigo would've started with, but he could see the logic. They'd never really agreed on how to conduct themselves on a battlefield, and the things each of them had said to one another and others over time didn't really make sense when added up. A lot of what they were discussing really hinged on their personal codes of conduct and ethics. It was why the earlier talk had blown up and it had to be addressed. He nodded slowly and was sure she'd see it in her peripheral vision.

There was silence for awhile before she stated "I once told Inoue that 'In a battle, the ones who get in
the way are not the ones that lack power, but the ones that lack resolve." She didn't comment further, making the nature of the game clear.

"I once told Ganju that I'm not a punk who can sit back and do nothing while somebody is going to die for his sake," he said in turn.

"I once told you 'I didn't come here just to be protected by you!'" she replied.

"I once told you 'That's not what sacrificing yourself is! At the very least, I'm different!'" he said.

"I once told you 'I'm not so weak as to not be able to protect you, you know!'"

"I once told you 'You always nag and worry about me. You should worry more about yourself right now.'"

A long pause stretched out between them then as they reflected on the fact most of their declarations had been to one another. They mentally advanced through what they'd said to each other since being reunited. At last Rukia quietly said "Kaien-dono . . . also felt that the philosophy of Ukitake-taichō only reflected a battle to protect one thing. He called it heart. He said that heart was born whenever people interacted, and that when you died your heart would go to your friends and live on with them, and so you should never die alone."

Ichigo deliberately kept his gaze forward. It was the first time she'd consciously said the man's name to him. He closed his eyes and carefully considered how to respond. He had some measure of understanding about why some the things he said were so familiar to her. "I stand by what I said," he replied. He opened his eyes and went on: "It should never even come to that. This isn't a judgment on Ukitake-san, or Kaien, or you, or anyone, for anything. This is about an understanding between us. Even as we each try to do the same . . . if what's necessary is to kill, or to face terrible danger, or to trample on the other's pride to save them . . . then we should accept that burden and bow before the other later to beg forgiveness, rather than bow before their grave to do the same! It should be on the one who was protected to live and forgive or not, not on the one who protects to punish themselves or not!"

She was silent. She knew when he had said what he had earlier he wasn't actually passing judgment on her for her past actions. How could he be when he didn't know them? It had still hurt, but she set it aside and moved on.

"That's what we've really been doing all along," he continued. They'd repeatedly protected one another, or tried to, or wanted to, even while admonishing one another's tenacity. It had happened again and again, no matter how much they tried to assert themselves or how independent and strong they became. It was time that they both faced the music when it came to their instincts. "No matter how much we want to stand alone to protect one another, no matter how much we trust in each other, we're always saving each other. So being prideful about being protected . . ." he trailed off.

"You're my pride," she said quietly, looking to him. She found him hard to read.

That was exactly it. He looked to her, finding her cryptic. "You're my pride," he echoed back after a moment.

They watched each other for awhile before they both looked away.

"When we go back to Karakura, I would . . . prefer . . . you not accompany me on any patrol or action until you're ready," she said. If these were the rules between them, she wouldn't explicitly forbid him anything, even if they both knew there wouldn't be much he could reasonably do.
"I'll strongly consider that preference," he responded. He would try not to endanger himself in a needless fashion. The truth was Rukia wouldn't need his help against anything that was likely to come to Karakura and he would just be a burden.

"I'm also going to have to teach you how to be a proper Shinigami since nobody else ever bothered to," she added. She should've said it to begin with.

"Yeah," he replied. He should've known what she intended.

"The Hollow—" she started, not wanting to leave that unaddressed.

"I told you I remember. I'll get stronger. When I beat him, then I've beaten Ulquiorra," he stated. He didn't qualify it. It was a direct equivalency. There would be a reckoning on that score.

"And what about everyone else?" she asked.

Ichigo paused and took an extended breath, considering what she'd said to him. "That doesn't matter. I know better now, and besides, someone important told me I'm the real hero of the war and none of it would've happened without me. I trust her, even if she seemed concerned about her own role."

"I guess if the hero of the war is okay with reinforcements helping him in moments of need, then I am too," Rukia replied quietly. Although the rules were for them, they had both been saved by their friends and allies enough times that holding onto pride in those cases was no less ridiculous. That was what friends and allies were for. They'd just have to let it go and do better.

It wasn't everything. Just saying these things didn't fully resolve the issues related to them. There was still a lot of work to be done to make the words into reality, both individually and together. But it was a script to work from and keep in mind going forward. They'd arrived at solutions and their new challenge was implementing them. "So . . ." he said, leaving it open for her to decide whether she wanted to talk about Kaien then or not.

She was quiet for an extremely long time. "Your father is the uncle of Shiba Kaien, Shiba Kūkaku, and Shiba Ganju. They are . . . or were . . . your cousins. I met Kaien-dono after being adopted by the Kuchiki clan and being assigned to the 13th Division. That would've been in . . . 1952. He was the fukutaichō. He was the first person I encountered after leaving the academy to treat me normally. He mentored me. He was present when I learned Sode no Shirayuki's shikai and my first two dances with it. He was . . . like you and not like you. It was his determination and confidence more than anything. He sort of resembled you too, but his hair was black and his eyes were green," she said, contemplatively and haltingly.

Ichigo said nothing and listened, even as his mind idly noted things. The thing that stood out the most was that if he had ever bowed to peer pressure and dyed his hair she'd probably have thought he was a ghost.

"I always felt safe and comfortable around him," Rukia continued, "Around him everything always felt . . . so right. He was really . . . He had a wife, Miyako-dono. She was the 3rd Seat. She was smart and pretty and kind. She was . . . my idol."

He understood from the word choice and the pauses. She didn't have to actually say it. She had more than liked Kaien. She hadn't done anything about it and had striven to emulate his wife instead. He didn't hold it against her or suspect that she had become attached to him because of his limited resemblance to his . . . cousin. They'd been through too much for that kind of pettiness.

"Some years later, Miyako-dono was dispatched on what should've been a routine mission. She died,
and her whole squad was wiped out. Kaien-dono insisted on going to find the Hollow that had done it. Ukitake-taichō permitted it, and I went along with the two of them. Kaien-dono likewise insisted on fighting it alone. This Hollow had two unique abilities—first, once a night it could dispel a Shinigami's zanpakutō, and second, it could fuse with another soul. It ultimately did both to Kaien-dono. For the sake of his pride, Ukitake-taichō pleaded that I not intervene, and when it all went wrong, he commanded me to run while holding it off. I ran but . . . I ran because I was afraid. I returned because I was afraid to face my cowardice, and didn't have a plan. Ukitake-taichō was, at that time, disabled by a sudden bout of his illness. I stabbed Kaien-dono through the heart because I was afraid to see him in pain. In the end, I really acted only to save myself," Rukia said quietly. Her pace quickened as she retold the events.

Ichigo pointedly kept his gaze in the distance. It sounded like a really bad situation all around. He didn't agree with the decisions of either of the two men, but who was he to judge? The parallels with his fight with Grand Fisher were undeniable. If he could go back and lecture himself, would his past self listen? If he was in Kaien's place, would he act differently? The best he could say was Kaien and Miyako shouldn't have been deployed separately, and that would've been no real guarantee of anything. To have been in Rukia's position . . .

"I took the body of Kaien-dono to his siblings. I told them I'd killed him. It was true. When I was in the Senzaikyū, I thought about this quite a lot. I didn't understand why anyone would want to rescue me, or what I had done to deserve people who would try and do so. Ganju . . . recognized me. He wanted to kill me, and at that time I viewed that as preferable to being executed. Then nii-sama arrived, and Hanatarō went to fight him, only for Ganju to go instead. He was cut down by Senbonzakura, and then you arrived . . . Kūkaku would later tell me when I went to apologize that Ukitake-taichō had told her everything, and she had just been waiting to hear me say even once that I was sorry. Ganju even stuck up for me against her before she revealed that. I realized then that I wasn't even the one most injured by his death," Rukia continued.

He winced at how much her estimation of her self-worth reflected his own feelings not even an hour ago, and at the pointless tragedy the events had precipitated. It heartened him that his cousins were so willing to forgive. He would definitely have to talk to them both at some point. He would also have to talk with his dad. Not about everything, if he didn't want to, but at least about this.

They sat in silence for awhile. "In Las Noches, when I encountered Aaroniero and he took off his mask, it was Kaien-dono that was underneath."

His eyes slid over to her at that. She looked incredibly distant. This was somehow even worse than he had possibly imagined. It surely had to have been an illusion, some sort of special ability.

"It really seemed like him at first. It really, really did. Everything was right. He told me, among other things, that the Hollow that had gotten him had been one of Aizen's experiments and had returned to Hueco Mundo to recover. That part at least was probably true. And then he tried to kill me. He tried to put his zanpakutō right through one of my eyes. He said it was because I'd killed him and he asked for my life in penance. And I said I'd give it to him after I rescued Inoue. He said it was a joke and that all he really needed was all your heads. That's when I really knew . . ." she trailed off.

Ichigo looked away from her. If Aizen had been in front of him again, he wouldn't have hesitated to do the most brutal things he could imagine. He didn't want any possibility of her seeing what was in his eyes right then.

"We fought and Aaroniero revealed the truth: the Hollow that had attacked Kaien-dono had indeed come back to Hueco Mundo, and he had eaten it, along with over 33,000 others. It was because it had been fused with Kaien-dono that Aaroniero had access to his memories, experiences, abilities,
and appearance. Aaroniero really did possess Kaien-dono's spirit body. I eventually . . . all but lost. I was impaled on the end of his shikai, Nejibana. That was when I remembered what Kaien-dono had said about heart and managed to get a final strike in at pointblank range. I didn't make it very far after that. That's why Ulquiorra told you I was dead. That's why I was helpless when Zommari and nii-sama found me."

If he had seethed with self-loathing before, he had within him then a perfect, glittering diamond of hatred. Every single time she had almost died was Aizen's fault. The same was true for him. Being told about Zommari was bad enough, but knowing that even if he'd been there for the fight with Aaroniero she would have told him to let her fight alone because of that fighting to protect pride nonsense . . . he'd told himself nothing she could say would bother him, but he'd been wrong. Nothing about his estimation of her had changed, but he understood fully why she'd criticized his restraint. Rukia was only one example of the lives Aizen had twisted. He . . . had truly deserved no quarter. Ichigo should have ended it in a single instant.

"So, you see Ichigo," Rukia said with a sigh, "I once coveted a woman's husband and then I killed him. He left his heart to me in spite of that. Then in a way I killed him again, even as I was developing an attachment to his cousin." It was an ugly thing to say, and an uglier way of putting it. The continuity with her thoughts during her imprisonment in Soul Society and even afterwards went unsaid but was plain to see: it seemed she was always hurting the people she truly liked, and so she had to keep them away . . .

He was outraged to be so consumed with hatred for Aizen rather than attending to her. *Even in defeat, you still manage to twist things!* With the utmost exertion he shoved the feeling aside, forcing his attention to the woman sitting beside him—to his girlfriend. "You did nothing wrong." It came out oddly if truthfully.

She turned to look at him. He didn't meet her gaze, and she could see the lingering fury in him even at a glancing angle. "Ichigo . . ." she said lightly.

He looked to her. "You did nothing wrong," he repeated with iron in his voice.

Rukia fully saw echoes of things she didn't like to see in him at all, even as she saw an intense sympathy for her and what she had endured. She paused at the sight. She had promised herself to stand still and step back, not to retreat entirely. She reached out a hand onto one of his, brushing it at it soothingly. She'd known this would happen, and that was why she'd led off the way she had. "Neither did you."

Ichigo placed his other hand on top of hers even as he looked down at their union.

After a few seconds she did the same, and they sat together with one another in silence, not quite looking at one another. Even as they did so, things in both of them crumbled. It was as though their time together had been spent methodically preparing to conduct a demolition of one another's edifices of guilt, drilling holes in structural supports everywhere before carefully packing them with explosives. Hands together, they metaphorically pushed down on a shared detonator, and it all began to come down, slowly at first. The contact said more than words really could. It didn't stop them from trying.

"I'm sorry that I got heated earlier," Ichigo said.

"I'm sorry that I pushed you so hard," Rukia replied.

"I'm sorry that I always forget what you've taught me," he continued.
"I'm sorry that I left you alone suddenly like that," she said.

"I'm sorry that I didn't believe you'd come back for me."

"I'm sorry that I told you to save the reunion for later."

Their eyes rose to meet.

"Rukia . . ." he whispered, finding he could finally pull the sword in him out by bloody centimeters.

"Ichigo . . ." she replied, standing at the bottom of her void, feeling it beginning to rise up and contract.

Each could see the other's eyes were liquid, although neither was teary. "I missed you," they both said at the same time. Neither really moved first. Their hands slid away and they leaned in to lightly embrace one another. It didn't feel anything like it had before when they had held one another—it was somber somehow.

In her mind, Rukia stared at where the void had been even as she gently held on to Ichigo. She had once more regained what she had once thought lost and was left to consider it all. Why does it still . . . hurt? It was different than before.

In his mind, Ichigo tossed the sword away as he put his arms around Rukia, watching it disintegrate as it flew, never hitting the ground. The wound it left was still flowing languidly. It still . . . hurts. It was different than before.

They clung to one another for some unknown amount of time, just breathing, trying to understand what was happening, wondering if they'd really laid bare everything that ailed them, and if they had, whether that would be enough for them to heal. They would need more time to know for sure. They both suddenly felt incredibly emotionally drained.

His eyes shifted over to the sunlit city. Would his inner world look like that if he was there? Had the rain stopped again? Perhaps it was only just clearing. Still . . . "You asked me if I liked the rain," he said quietly.

She said nothing but he knew she was listening.

"I hate the rain. Inside, in there, ever since mom died, it was always raining, even before I could ever go there," he went on, "You're . . . the one that makes it look like out there." He pointed a finger toward the window without moving his hands.

Rukia looked over toward the brightly lit buildings, blinking at his words.

"And even when you're here and it's not like that, you were right that it's not so bad as long as it can be shared," Ichigo concluded.

She looked up at him, finding he was looking back. They found each other hard to read again. She didn't know what to say.

He gave her the smallest of smiles, before slowly pulling back. "How about we get something to eat, and you go try out that fitness spa? You should get to try having a real professional massage."

"But——" she started. She didn't immediately grasp his intent, even as she remembered having had the conversation before.
"I'll go to the gym. They're right next door. We don't have to do everything together," he said.

She looked back to the city as she understood. He was right that they needed time alone then. Not for the first time she found herself wondering when he'd developed this maturity he kept occasionally showing hints of. "Alright," she said, pulling away and going to get dressed properly.

He didn't watch her go, considering the city.

After ordering room service and asking for their clothes to be picked up for laundering, they went down to the recreational area and split up with the understanding they'd reconvene at the suite by bedtime.

Normally the spa required an appointment but given the timing and their status, Rukia was able to schedule herself for everything they offered. She'd also brought her bathing suit and towel to use the poolside area if she needed to fill more time.

Ichigo seemed to head to the gym before making his way to the concierge for awhile and back again. He worked himself ragged for hours until his body was as weary as his nerves. It was made easier by the fact he wasn't exercising regularly on vacation. It was around sundown when he showered, changed, and left, heading for the hotel's Fiorentina Pastry Boutique and to check with the concierge again. Fortunately he had more than enough of his own money left to do what he needed to.

Rukia opened the suite door with her key and stepped inside, feeling at the same both incredibly relaxed and tired. The lighting was subdued and the bedroom door was shut. She froze as she noticed what was on the work desk. There was a simple glass vase containing some azaleas, bluebells, and morning glories, a half-filled out postcard, and a fairly small and simple if elegant black box with a pink ribbon on it. She immediately understood the flowers to mean, in *hanakotoba*, patience, gratitude, and a will to keep promises.

She moved closer to investigate. The postcard was for Hamarikyu Gardens and he had filled it out in his usual way to his sisters. She carefully undid the ribbon on the box and opened it, discovering it held a strawberry tart, various chocolates, and small cookie-like cakes and sweets. She stared at the ensemble as her expression softened immensely before looking to the bedroom door and going to it. Quietly sliding it open, she found her bed's light was on and could see he was turned toward her bed on his, covers rising and falling softly. He had a hand extended out onto hers. Her eyes lingered on him for awhile before she closed the door.

It was sometime later that she was in bed with her soul pager. She turned the light off, carefully moved his hand back to his bed and tucked him in, and brushed his forehead gently while watching over him for awhile. She set an alarm and hit send on a report to Ukitake that was carbon copied to Byakuya. It read only "Kurosaki Ichigo will assuredly be mentally prepared for combat." She got under her covers and passed out facing toward him.
Thursday, August 8, 2002

Ichigo woke as he heard what sounded disturbingly like Rukia singing to the tune of Big Ben's infamous chime pattern "Pyon, pyon! Pyon, pyon! . . . Pyon, pyon, pyon, pyon! Pyon! Pyon!—" before it suddenly cut off. He opened his eyes to see her sitting up with her soul pager in hand.

"Did you record Chappy in your gigai singing that as your alarm?" he muttered in irritation.

She turned to him, surprised to find him awake, before her gaze hardened. "It's not a recording of Chappy, fool, it's a recording of me," she declared, annoyed he couldn't seem to tell the difference.

"That's even worse," he deadpanned.

She abruptly threw a pillow at him, catching him in the face with it.

It smelled like her hair. It was in pulling it away that he finally noticed his hands were both on his side. He distinctly remembered having left one on her bed, and he hadn't moved. "Hey, did you . . ."

She'd already disappeared into the bathroom but returned with two particular bags, pulling out their nagajuban and yukata as she said "It was a very thoughtful gift, Ichigo, and I appreciated and understood it. Thank you." Since neither item had ever been worn she'd seen no issue in laundering them together. She separated them out and took hers before going to get some underwear and padding into the bathroom without further comment.

He blinked and looked at the clothes before looking back to the door, understanding she was reconfirming the message behind the flowers. They were going to need space and time. He knew she'd decided it herself before their talk, so he'd decided to affirm it while also communicating a few other things. He picked out some boxers to wear with the other items and went out to the living room as he heard the water come on.

He noticed she'd apparently mailed out the postcard, watered the flowers, and eaten all the treats he'd gotten but kept the box. He wasn't sure what to make of that last fact. After checking the weather—it was going to be partly cloudy all day but wouldn't rain—he considered his song work before instead calling Ishida. It was a more than reasonable hour and the Quincy was always punctual with his routines. The phone rang three times.

"Moshi moshi," he heard.

"Do you think you guys would be ready next Friday?" Ichigo asked without any introduction.

"Polite as ever, I see. We've been practicing quite a bit, so yes, that should be sufficient time to do a proper job," came the reply.

"Okay, Friday the 16th, 8:00 PM, Smash Hits. They open at 7:00, you'll probably want to be there then to arrange a block of performances with the emcee and situate yourselves," Ichigo said, adding on the address and the cover fee price. The date overlapped with the Fukagawa Hachiman matsuri, but that ended at 4:00 PM so there'd be plenty of time to return to the hotel, change, and eat without issue.
Although Ishida confirmed the details back to him, he did so with a note of curiosity. "What's this about an emcee and situating ourselves?" Karaoke with friends was usually done in a private booth or room.

"This place has a stage and an audience. If we're willing to sing in front of complete strangers, I figure that'll be more inspiring than just doing it privately," he replied. He'd had a lot of time to think about it and he was convinced it'd be more effective.

"I see," the Quincy said.

The once-and-future substitute felt like he could almost see an ominous gleam on his friend's glasses from his tone. "What does that mean?" he asked irritably.

"Nothing, it just makes my advice even more prudent: don't embarrass yourself in front of Rukia. I'll inform everyone else," Ishida said, ending the call.

Ichigo looked at the phone with a glare before digging into the work again. Like hell he'd be shown up by Inoue or Chad, let alone Ishida. A week wouldn't be enough time for either he or Rukia to fully process things, but it would create enough distance that they could at least begin to think about establishing a new normal to move forward from. Hopefully it would help them to express themselves and figure out how they would handle things together.

"He's calling us in next Friday," she heard Ishida say. She had become the de facto leader of the karaoke effort largely because the idea tickled her the most.

"Is that really enough time?" Yoruichi replied. She had her doubts that everyone would be ready by then, even though they had all been working diligently and done group reviews together. It wasn't at all what the Urahara Shop normally did but having a break from the usual was rather nice. Everybody deserved a vacation of some kind.

"I'm confident we can do it," the archer replied. "I have the details he provided me, can you write them down?" he added.

The Flash Goddess looked about and shortly located a pen and paper, saying "Go," before noting down what he relayed. "This is going to be sort of pricey," she murmured as she considered the cover charge and the travel costs. That was without accounting for whether they stayed for awhile to keep Ichigo and Rukia company for a day or two, which was as of yet undecided.

"I'm sure together we can all afford it. Besides, isn't Urahara-san always saying he owes Kurosaki?" Ishida replied, his tone making it clear it wasn't really a question.

"That he is," Yoruichi said with a slightly wicked smile.

"Anyway, that's not the best part," came the response as it became clear the Quincy was savoring the turn of events.

"Oh?" she asked.

"This isn't the typical kind of karaoke place. This one has an emcee, and a stage, and a random audience," he said, emphasizing each clause.

"Oh my." she said quietly. That really did change things—it put them heavily to their advantage. The expansion of the group beyond what Ichigo had ordered would come as an even bigger surprise than them just showing up.
"I'll be over at the usual time, be sure to let everyone else know. Until then," Ishida said, before hanging up.

Yoruichi considered the details on the sheet of paper before sketching out a lineup block beneath them. Keigo, Mizuïro, and Tatsuki were all on vacation or otherwise preoccupied and so, despite being part of the club, they weren't privy to these developments. She decided to mildly taunt each of them over the phone about it later. After a few moments she had a list that read:

Chad
Orihime
Karin & Yuzu
Isshin
Renji
Kisuke
Me!
Ichigo & Uryû
Rukia?

She would have to act immediately to get Renji leave from Soul Society at the appropriate time, so she went to scrounge for a soul pager. She could probably make some excuse or another about Urahara needing help. *Byakuya-bo will probably intuit that something's going on he's needed for . . .*

Some time later, Rukia and Ichigo were rather traditionally attired in their *yukata* and *geta*. She looked cute. He looked irascible and was totting a bag with various things of theirs in it. "I don't see how Urahara-san wears something like this all the time," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"He'd probably say the same about you if you forced him to wear contemporary clothes," Rukia said primly. Her distaste for certain elements of modern fashion had already been made clear.

"Yeah, right, like I can even imagine him dressing differently," Ichigo said dismissively, opening the door and adding "Come on, we've still gotta pick up some stuff."

They departed and after consulting with the concierge about where to get their still-needed supplies they left the hotel. It felt a bit strange to wander around Tokyo in such an ensemble but it wasn't actually that unusual when festivities were in season. They went to a nearby market to acquire the requisite plastic sheet, a marker, and some things that could serve as tent-pegs and weights. Adding those to their other items, they got on the subway and made their way to Shiodome Station to transfer to the Yurikamome line, riding it across the Rainbow Bridge into Odaiba.

The Tokyo Bay fireworks festival was organized out of Chūō and its official viewing areas held about 100,000 people, but getting into them required both a reservation and a donation. Since it was held over the bay, it was easy to find other places to go, which is what they were there to do. The show started at 7:00 PM, so they could tour Odaiba in the meantime.

They made their way on foot and scouted along the beachfront southeast of Daiba Park for a good spot, finding a few other people who had already claimed places. They'd thought ahead and brought shoes and socks to wear on the beach rather than trying to tromp around in the sand in *geta*, and quickly changed for their reconnaissance. After finding a place they felt would give them a good view of the fireworks over the Rainbow Bridge, they followed the usual procedure and unfurled their sheet before pinning it down. Ichigo wrote their names on it for good measure and they made their way off the beach.

They toured through the waterfront before going to examine the Joypolis amusement park and its
various strange digital attractions and simulators until lunch, when they searched for somewhere to eat. From there they ventured to the southeast side of the island and wound up at the Palette Town complex, wandering its massive Venus Fort shopping center for several hours before ending up in Tokyo Leisure Land.

Rukia stared out at its long line of bowling alley lanes in confusion before looking to Ichigo. "What kind of game is this?"

"Bowling," he replied unhelpfully. It was still ubiquitous due to a craze for it in the 1960s. As she frowned at him he held up his thumb and index and middle fingers and explained "There's a ball with three holes in it that you hold like this, and at the end of those lanes are pins. The goal is to knock down as many pins as you can by rolling the ball into them, and after several rounds whoever knocked the most down wins."

She turned to consider the lanes again. "Can we try it?"

He suddenly had a mental image of her with her fingers stuck in a bowling ball, careening down a lane while screaming at him to help. The yukata were light but not exactly the greatest for freedom of movement. "I don't know if . . ." he started. She turned to look at him with her arms crossed and a disapproving expression and he relented, saying "Fine! But we have to get shoes and bowling balls," while pointing out the counter.

Rukia opted for a 2.72 kilogram ball, the lightest they had, while Ichigo got a 4.54 kilogram one, being familiar with the game. The rental was by the hour and they paid for two, playing more than a half-dozen games. This time there were no surprises and he won by a comfortable margin every single round. To her credit, she did get a strike and scored respectably given she'd never played before.

"I can see all that Shinigami training really pays off," he said, only teasing a little. He was actually kind of impressed with how well she'd done.

"Of course!" she said proudly, "What, did you think I was going to sail down the alley?"

He looked aside while scratching at a cheek and was only just barely able to dodge a swing she made with her bowling ball still firmly clutched in one hand. "What the hell, that was close! That's really dangerous, you idiot!"

"Don't look down on me like that, fool!" she shouted, posturing indignantly. Neither noticed they were drawing interesting looks from the other patrons, but fortunately hadn't drawn the attention of the staff.

"Isn't it natural for a man to be concerned for a woman?" he growled back. He'd selected his words deliberately; since they were stepping back, he wouldn't call her his girlfriend, even if he still thought it fit and even though there had never been any decision to annul that. He'd rather extend her the extra space than not.

"Not like that, you jerk," she said testily, glaring at him. It was partly because she'd noticed and didn't like it one bit, despite everything. Although he'd been correct in interpreting her intent, their status hadn't changed.

"Tch, whatever! Come on, future Miss Seireitei Bowling Champion, time's up and we have to return this stuff," he said, collecting their bag and making his way back to the counter.

She realized it was technically a compliment but she wouldn't let him off lightly for his impudence.
and demanded a rematch in the attached arcade. After Akihabara she viewed arcades as places of power for herself. This time, he gave her a much more even run for her money and they ended up basically tied, although she retained a slight lead. He knew video games better and had excellent reflexes, but she had decades of experience at hand-eye coordination, focus, and rapid memorization of complex actions, and was just as quick. It had been his folly to underestimate her the first time simply because she wasn't used to such things.

After her hard fought victory, they went to the nearby Daikanransha, which had just a few years prior been the world's largest Ferris wheel. It was early evening and the sun wasn't quite setting but was far along on its way down. A round trip took 16 minutes and they had their car to themselves, just enjoying taking in the sights of the bay. They could see a lot of the places they'd been and it was like a short-term nostalgia trip.

They were on their way back down when Rukia drew his attention by lightly clearing her throat and saying "Ichigo."

"Hmm?" he said, not looking away from out of one of the windows.

"You understood correctly yesterday, but wrongly today," she said with reserve, not really wanting to have to spell it out.

He turned to her with a look of confusion, not quite getting what she meant by the second half of such a vague statement even if he understood the first half.

Rukia could tell from his appearance he didn't get it and sighed softly, looking back out the window. "Fool. I wouldn't have let you tell nii-sama I'm your girlfriend nor would I have told him you're my boyfriend if it was a fickle thing that could change at a moment's notice," she said. She'd chosen it as a framework, but she had also chosen it because she thought it fit. Even if she wouldn't let it become an excuse, and even if she was standing back, it still fit. She turned to him with a considered expression and added "You should have said 'Isn't it natural for a man to be concerned for his girlfriend?'"

Ichigo's eyes widened a bit before he glanced away. He knew better than to object or apologize and there was nothing to really say to that. He gave a single strong nod but didn't turn back to her. *Nothing is ever simple with a Kuchiki*, he found himself thinking, even if she had been adopted into it.

She watched him for a moment before looking away herself. His father may have taken his mother's family name, but even so she thought *The Shiba really are all strangely alike in some ways.*

They spent the rest of the ride in silence, alone with their thoughts. Once they were down on the ground again, they made their way back to the northwest side of the island, eventually getting *bentō* takeout boxes from a *kushiyaki* restaurant with skewers of various meats and vegetables. It seemed preferable to trying to eat anything that required much thought or dexterity. They likewise got drinks and made their way back to the place they'd staked out at the beach as the sun was starting to set the sky on fire.

It'd become quite crowded since the morning, and it was then that their attire finally seemed fully appropriate as they navigated the sand, difficult as it was in *geta*. They were hardly the only ones dressed in *yukata*. They found their spot, unoccupied as was to be expected, and began to deploy their things. Ichigo put out a beach towel on the sheet and they got onto it, setting out their boxes of food, drinks, and a few water bottles they'd brought along. They ate while they waited so they could focus on the fireworks when they eventually started, just absorbing the atmosphere of the crowd.
They finished sometime after the sun sank and were relaxing, and from there it wasn't much longer to go. The whole crowd cheered as the first firework streaked up above the glow of the Rainbow Bridge. For the next 80 minutes 12,000 of them shot up into view in growing waves to the continued vocal appreciation of all. Rukia joined in wholeheartedly and even Ichigo, usually above such things, found her enthusiasm and that of the crowd too infectious to resist and participated. The final crescendo lit up the whole sky in front of them and put Tokyo Disneyland to shame in terms of opulence.

They sat as the sky fell dark again, Tokyo reverting back to its usual nighttime glow. Some of the crowd milled about for awhile but most began to move to pack up to make their way to public transportation. Ichigo instead leaned back on the blanket, considering the skyline from a new angle.

Rukia blinked at his motion and glanced at him, before looking toward the opposite shore, trying to imagine what he was thinking. It hadn't been the same sort of experience as the previous fireworks show, but she had still greatly enjoyed it for what it was. She didn't know how to articulate that appropriately and after a moment she joined him in reclining, the two of them side-by-side if separated. The din of the other onlookers slowly diminished and drifted away, and they were gradually left with the general noise of the city and the sound of small waves lapping at the beach. It was a bit windy and so even though it remained rather quite warm it was pleasant.

He sometimes wondered if it was all a dream—if he'd never really woken up after the fight with Aizen, or if he was somehow going to wake up to find it was May of last year again. It wasn't even reminders of Shinigami, or Soul Society, or any of that. Just being around Rukia and her ability to veer from being seemingly a mischievous teenager to a centenarian ghost soldier like the flip of a switch could still throw him for a loop, not that he'd show it. She really was something. The only thing he would ever credit Aizen for was bringing them together, which had surely been his grandest miscalculation of all.

The more he learned about her, the more his respect for her grew. That she had been able to conduct herself as she had on the anniversary before last of his mom's death while dealing with her guilt over Kaien's demise was just one more astonishing thing. Was it because she carried a similar burden as he had? It hadn't been lost on him at the time that she had saved him from continuing to carry that guilt around with him, but after she had told her story, he realized she'd done that while doing something similar herself. She had saved him from harboring it like she had. She was always saving him, even if it wasn't on the battlefield. This vacation, wrapped up as it was in a mission, had been one big rescue on her part, one she had so easily decided to commit to after meeting him again. She might try and think of it in official terms, but . . .

To say he owed her was the wrong way of putting it—it was far too limited and cynical. It was still hard to believe they had finally admitted to liking one another and agreed to fully acknowledge they were each others' protectors—that they were boyfriend and girlfriend and each others' pride. He could still only protect her heart, and then only sometimes. What he had to protect it from wasn't just what haunted her, but from herself and him. He'd thrown her world into chaos yet again. He'd instinctually figured that out a long time before he'd been consciously aware of it, but he hadn't been remotely quick or effective enough to act on it. He hadn't even wanted to be.

It was an endeavor in which he actually had no chance of success whatsoever: get too close and he'd hurt her, get too far and he'd hurt her, and the whole time he wanted to defect and just let her have whatever she wanted, because he wanted it too. He didn't know what to do except to read her cues as best he could and be himself. He still just had to be better, and until then he had to panic without panicking. If everybody else really knew, what would they make of it? They probably just looked like a young and energetic couple. This is definitely not what teenage romance fiction tells you it'll be like. "We should go," he said airily after quite awhile, sitting up. "Otherwise I'll fall asleep here."
Rukia didn't believe for a second that he was really nodding off, but likewise sat up and began to help pack without complaint.

On returning to their suite he let her shower first, working on a postcard of the Daikanransha they'd picked up at Venus Fort and his other project before they swapped places. When he finished he found her in bed under her covers, seemingly contemplating the ceiling. He went to his own and got under his sheets, inferring she no longer wanted or needed his services as her protective charm. He switched off his light and turned onto his side away from her in case she'd programmed that weird alarm again, saying only "'Night."

"Ichigo?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah?" he replied.

"... I'm glad I'm here," Rukia said.

The parallel with their first night back together was obvious. "Me too," Ichigo replied, "Sleep well."

Chapter End Notes

It turns out the Yurikamome line has, since 2006, had each station's announcements done by a different voice actor. Daiba Station's is Morikawa Toshiyuki, who voiced Isshin, Tousen, and Tsubaki. Not in the story due to the time but sort of interesting anyway. It'd have been a good audio gag.
Need A Little More Time

Thursday, August 15, 2002

Ichigo woke up five minutes before the soul pager's alarm went off, crabby at having become habituated to it. A glance over at Rukia's bed revealed she was still asleep. He pinched the bridge of his nose and got up, peeking out beyond the curtains. It was somewhat cloudy due to the impending arrival of Typhoon Phanfone, which was currently off to the southeast of Shikoku and projected to skirt up along the coast. It wouldn't really hit until around the 18th. He yawned and got his clothes, going to get dressed before she woke up. He took his time and reflected on things while quietly singing to get some more final practice in.

On Friday they'd gone on an eclectic trip to things in the vicinity, visiting the Nezu Museum, which Rukia found far more interesting than Ichigo had. Afterwards they'd gone down to the city boundary with Kawasaki, visiting Todoroki Ravine Park. It was an odd piece of seemingly pristine nature in the middle of the city, and they'd almost begun to forget they were in the heart of a metropolis. It'd reminded Ichigo of some of the natural areas around Karakura. From there, they visited the Jiyugaoka Sweets Forest. When they'd left she was on something of a sugar high and he barely survived the trip back to Shibuya for a second look. They'd then wandered through the district's hustle and bustle, gradually making their way down into Ebisu. Along the way they'd gone from one izakaya to another rather than eating anywhere in particular, to both the amusement and consternation of more than a few salarymen and expats they encountered on the way—they definitely didn't match the common idea of a young Japanese couple.

Saturday had been their big trip out to Fuji-Q Highland, which Rukia had finally consented to. It took more than an hour to get there via no less than three rail lines as it was—ironically—farther away from them as Karakura was. The park itself had been surprisingly disappointing and although the Fujiyama and Dodonpa roller coasters were indeed tremendous and fast, they were also incredibly rough rides and had long lines. She'd screamed her head off again but this time he'd empathized as he was pretty sure he'd gotten a mild case of whiplash. They'd tried the other rides for awhile but spent as much time in the town of Fujikawaguchiko admiring the lake and an up-close view of Mt. Fuji as they had in the park.

On Sunday, they'd gone on a whirlwind tour of the central park complex of Tokyo. They'd shown up early in the morning to get tickets to the Jingu Gaien fireworks festival and had shelled out for them despite the fact they cost an arm and a leg, before going northwest to tour Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden. After an hour or so they'd gone southwest to Yoyogi Park and visited Meiji Jingu and Meiji Shrine, observing as many of the odd amateur performers the park attracted on weekends as they could. Ultimately they'd found a quiet spot for their picnic and napped for a short while under a tree after eating. They'd returned to attend the concerts that preceded the fireworks show that their tickets gave them access to, and had gone to eat dinner before retiring.

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday had each been given over to a different theme park: Toshimaen and Niwa no Yu onsen, LaQua, and Tokyo Summerland, respectively. They'd been sufficiently disappointed in Fuji-Q Highland that they had to see if the rest of Tokyo's amusement parks were any better. Each had wound up being more exciting and better maintained. They'd kept to the public bathing suit areas of the onsen to relax after Toshimaen, split up to try out the segregated spa and onsen at LaQua despite their disinterest in the same two weeks prior, and spent a ridiculously long time in Tokyo Summerland's indoor pool and water park area, trying to halfway drown each
Ichigo exited the bathroom in his yukata with a yawn, finding Rukia in the living room watching TV.

"You sure did take your time," she said in a cheeky way.

"I had to spend a lot of time thinking about how tired I am of amusement parks," he replied snidely. It was a lie, but a believable one.

"You shouldn't say it like you weren't having fun, fool," she replied.

"You still just want to go to Tokyo DisneySea," he said with a frown.

She crossed her arms and responded imperiously "Don't put it all on me. It was your idea to thoroughly investigate all the roller coasters." She did kind of still want to see Tokyo DisneySea but from what she'd gathered it was rather more sedate and based on sight-seeing rather than rides, so even if he was right it still wasn't a fair criticism.

"Tch," he said with a scowl, closing his eyes. He'd gotten her to at least finally admit she liked roller coasters the day prior. "Anyway, get dressed, we're already going to miss the start by the time we get over there," he chided.

Rukia was already moving past him and punched him in the arm rather hard as she went by, leaving him wincing and rubbing at it.

"That's not endearing, you know!" he proclaimed.

"Watch yourself or I'll turn you into sorbet instead, strawberry," she replied coldly before shutting the bathroom door.

Despite himself, he smiled a little. They'd established a kind of normalcy between them again over the past few days. An often violent and loud normalcy, but that was to be expected. He waited for the sound of the water to start up before closing the bedroom door so there were as many solid objects between them as there could be, getting out his phone and practicing more at his song.

Their continued occasional separations had proved useful for giving him more time to work at it and to actually try singing. He'd gotten more than a few odd looks at LaQua as he'd sat in a hot spring performing at a conversational volume to himself, but also a really strange amount of encouragement considering the venue. He hadn't been able to actually try it at full volume but he'd run through it a bunch and had the material and tone down cold. He didn't need the lyrics in front of him at all. All that was really giving him trouble was some of the English pronunciation and that was probably to be expected for almost any native Japanese speaker. When the time came, he could bring the power and emotion he needed to it, and damn if Ishida would be able to keep up.

The Fukagawa Hachiman matsuri was one of the three great matsuri of Tokyo and a bit of an odd one in that every third year it became a hon-matsuri and radically expanded in the scope of its activities from two days to five. As it turned out, 2002 happened to be a hon-matsuri year.

The main show would be the next day and revolved around groups carrying multi-tonne portable Shinto shrines called mikoshi along a 6 kilometer course. What made it truly unique was what had earned it the nickname of "water-tossing festival:" carrying the mikoshi in the summer heat and humidity of Tokyo was brutal on the bearers, and so all along the route they were splashed with cold
water. This was both an act of spiritual purification for the bearers and the *mikoshi* themselves and a practical measure to help them keep going. On average some 30,000 people participated, including the local volunteer fire department, and 500,000 people turned up to watch.

That day there was a procession of sacred palanquins called *horen* throughout the day, as well as some martial arts performances. By the time Ichigo and Rukia arrived in Kōtō along the route, the procession had already begun in earnest. There was a rather reserved but still festive atmosphere that presaged the next day's grand event and the two soaked in it as they watched the proceedings and explored the ward. They took a break at lunch and ducked into a *teriyaki* restaurant that faced the route.

It was as they ate that Ichigo realized something was itching at the back of his mind. It took him awhile to figure out what it was, and when he did it surprised him because he wasn't usually one for that kind of thing. Still, he couldn't shake it. "I want to try and get here early tomorrow to see if I can't join one of the bucket teams," he said after grappling with it for awhile.

Rukia glanced up at him in surprise only to find the look in his eyes was firm and decisive. She considered raising objections but his appearance gave her pause. At last she smiled broadly as she suddenly understood. She strongly approved of what she thought his decision represented. "Then I'll join you."

He nodded firmly and said "We can wear our swimwear under our *nagajuban* and bring a change of clothes and a packed lunch."

"You really think they'll let us help?" she asked.

A lot of the water-throwing was done by people associated with the event but it apparently wasn't unheard of for onlookers and local residents to get in on the act. "Yeah, especially if we bring our own buckets." He was pretty sure nobody would turn down an offer to help during a festival.

Her smile didn't dissipate as she considered him.

"What?" he asked in mild irritation, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm just surprised to see you've finally succumbed to the festive mood," she said lightly, returning to her meal without further comment.

He watched her for a moment further before taking a bite of his food, giving final consideration on how to sell his other plans. "I was thinking afterwards we could clean-up, eat, and try seeing some of the nightlife," he said idly.

"After all the complaining you did in Ebisu last Friday?" she asked pointedly. They hadn't quite made a scene but their rolling bickering between *izakaya* had gotten more than a few scowls and laughs alike from others enjoying their Friday nights. The older suit-wearing men in particular had more than once acted like they were a comedy team.

"This time I was thinking we could dress up, eat somewhere nice again, and go to a performance karaoke place," he suggested, ignoring the taunt.

She looked at him a little suspiciously but said nothing.

"It's just some entertainment to see on a night out; it'd be hard for us to get into bars or nightclubs or something," he said with annoyance as cover. He wasn't going to promise anything precisely so that it couldn't be used against him later, so being dismissive was his best bet.
"I guess that'd be okay," she offered, making her face neutral again and continuing to eat. Even if he wasn't framing it as a date, she still liked the idea of having a night out together. Establishing a full, regular schedule of things to do rather than spending all their time in the hotel had been good for them.

They finished their meal in relative quiet and went back to exploring Kōtō. After the horen procession ended in the late afternoon they made their way north to Kiyosumi Garden before it closed, then went east to Kiba Park and the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo on its grounds. They didn't have a lot of time at the museum due to its hours but Rukia found contemporary art to be strange and Ichigo didn't much care, and so after exploring Kiba Park until before sunset, they got back on the subway.

Rukia seemed to have a thought and diverted them into Ginza on the way back for a second look at it as well. They strolled under its heavy but tasteful neon lighting for awhile and ate at a nice sushi restaurant, drawing looks for their yukata. They didn't quite fit with the high-end fashion of the region at night, but were sort of charming for it. She noticed Ichigo got more than a few glances from the office ladies that frequented the area and smiled inwardly. If only they knew.

They retired back to Roppongi early to rise early as well, having their things laundered for the next day.

---

Friday, August 16, 2002

They reluctantly got up at 6:30 AM and prepared much as Ichigo had suggested. Although they'd gotten more than eight hours of sleep, both found it something of a struggle at first. After getting dressed they went to the local convenience stores to acquire small lunches, buckets, and some coffee before making their way back into Kōtō.

Things were still being set-up and the crowds were forming for the official start time when they arrived. Having scouted the route already the previous day, they went to a location they'd both liked and approached the nearest large water bucket team they could find, getting the attention of one of the participants. "Excuse me, good sir!" Rukia proclaimed in a resolute if polite way before bowing deeply, "We humbly request that we be allowed to render assistance on this auspicious day!" She held up her bucket to show they'd come prepared.

Ichigo twitched an eyebrow a bit at her Kuchiki officiousness before likewise bowing and adding only "Please," as he likewise held up his bucket.

"You might get soaked, you know," was the response, confused as to why the pair was offering, especially given their attire, but not really willing to turn down help.

"It's no trouble!" they both said without reservation.

"Doesn't matter who's slinging the water, I guess," came the reply.

Ichigo set the bag with their things out of the way where it'd stay dry, even though the contents were all wrapped up in plastic just to be sure, and they took up positions, waiting for the festival to really begin.

It was a little slow to start at first but rapidly picked up to the sound of taiko drums, bells, whistles, clapping, and cheering. The mikoshi weren't just carried but were occasionally twirled and even thrown by their teams as they went.
Although their *yukata* marked them out a bit more as they weren't remotely the uniforms of the participants, they drew little to no notice. They took to it with vigor even as they tried not to get too wet themselves, cheering and taking up the chants as they worked. They scarcely noticed the time as the day went on, and as the sun climbed higher into the cloudy skies and the bucket crew started to splash one another some to beat the heat they joined in cheerily and redoubled their efforts.

When it was time for lunch they likewise stopped to eat their light meals before getting back on station. Before they knew it the morning had somehow become the evening, and the final *mikoshi* of the day was passing by. They put their buckets down, having been drenched and dried again countless times. Ichigo stretched as if he was just getting started and Rukia surreptitiously looked at him with a smile. Helping out with such things was good for morale.

They received impromptu commendations from the rest of their team like "Hey, you two are pretty good," and "Nice work." They hadn't seemed to tire once. She took it graciously even as he was unassuming. They left their buckets with the crew, having no further need for them and finding them no great expense, and after saying their goodbyes went to find restrooms to dry off and change in. Sometime later they were assembled in plain clothes and made their way back to their hotel, satisfied at having actually actively participated in the festival.

They got ready separately and wound up in outfits that more resembled their first night out together than their second. If their first night they'd looked trendy, and the second ornate, then on their third they looked upscale.

Ichigo had on a dark gray two-piece suit with a cream-colored dress shirt and a tie with variable-thickness stripes in gold, orange, brown, gray, and black, as well as his other accessories.

Rukia had on a black one-piece dress with white accents, a fitted knee-length skirt, a collar at the base of the neck, and cap sleeves, and her accessories. She wore only the slightest bit of makeup.

He escorted her down to The French Kitchen on the 2nd floor, saying "It's really weird how we keep running into each other like this," as they went.

"Stop," she said with a small smile. She didn't want to laugh at how silly the continuation of his act was.

He smiled modestly back and cut it out, and they went on their way in comfortable silence.

The menu was rather constrained and both opted to get the simple dinner course, which let them pick an appetizer or soup, main dish, and dessert from the *a la carte* menu. Rukia got onion gratin soup, roasted Shingen chicken breast with barley ragout, and an apple tart tatin. Ichigo got lobster bisque, a lamb rack with turnips and Brussels sprouts, and a chocolate mousse. Both got tea. They sampled each other's dishes as they came out and talked idly.

"So what made you want to participate in the festival?" she asked. She thought she already knew but wanted to hear it.

"It just seemed like something that'd be good to be a part of. Helping people carry those *mikoshi* around in some way instead of just watching them do it," he said like it was no big thing.

Her suspicions confirmed, she let the corners of her mouth rise before politely leaving him be. She remembered his declaration on their first night out together and could already tell he was beginning to think in terms of helping others again.
It wasn't that he didn't notice, he just didn't comment on it. "So why'd you want to do it?"

"I just thought having an excuse to splash strangers with water was fun," she said mischievously. It wasn't wholly true but it wasn't a lie either.

"Which one of us is the noble again?" he mused.

She stole some of his turnips in retribution before lecturing "Technically, we're both about the same in that regard."

He was going to protest her theft but blinked at the assertion. He'd thought about it in a roundabout way but never quite so directly. "What happened to the Shiba clan anyway?" he asked after a moment, having evaluating whether it was prudent to ask.

Rukia's mood turned, but only a little. "Kaien-dono was the head of the clan. Without him, and then without Isshin, who was the head of the junior branch . . ." she trailed off. Kūkaku had never had an interest in leadership and Ganju hadn't been old enough. The remaining retainers and members of the clan hadn't been enough to keep it as the force it had once been, and so it had scattered to the winds.

Ichigo glanced down.

"Don't seem so sad, maybe your father will get lonely when Yuzu and Karin leave home and go back," she offered. She had no way of knowing Isshin's intent, but it didn't sound completely absurd.

"That's really weird to think about," he replied, looking back up to her only a bit sourly. As he wasn't really thinking about college himself, imagining his sisters being that age was just bizarre, all jokes about threatening their future boyfriends aside. A whole new host of questions flooded his mind before he deliberately refocused on the meal.

"Don't know what you want to do yet either, hmm?" Her tone was honest and she wasn't teasing him.

"Not really," he said, before adding "Before this I thought it'd be useless to do anything too technical, academic, or frivolous because it'd be pointless in Rukongai; it's not like being a systems engineer or a biochemist or something is a great pick when someone might go on a killing spree with a katana one day."

Rukia didn't ask what those jobs were and assumed they were the sorts of work all the salarymen in Tokyo did. She saw his point, sad though it was. "Well, you won't have to worry about that kind of thing now, so keep an open mind and do what your heart tells you," she said encouragingly.

Ichigo stared at her for a second before giving her a small grin. "You have no idea what the jobs I just mentioned are, do you?" he asked.

"Of course I don't, fool, it's probably some dumb Living World thing like all the people here do," she said dismissively, looking askew. She was irritated that he was making fun of her when she was trying to be helpful.

"Rukia," he said lightly to draw her attention.

She looked to him again with agitation.

"Thanks," he said simply.

She blinked and gave a small smile before returning to finishing off her food.
After idling for a little bit Ichigo casually checked the time and wagered they could make their way by foot to Smash Hits in under a half hour, which would get them there right before they needed to arrive. They flagged down one of the wait staff, paid, and left.
Friday, August 16, 2002

No questions were asked as to their ages upon their arrival at Smash Hits despite the fact the cover included the cost of two drinks. After paying they were allowed inside without incident. Ichigo found himself questioning exactly how hard it actually would be to get into Tokyo's various nightlife venues. He put the thought aside as they entered the main lobby. It wasn't enormous but it was fairly large and it was almost completely packed with salarymen and more than a few expats who'd flocked there to celebrate the coming of the weekend. One of the former was up on stage howling something he didn't recognize. The stage itself was rather compact and modest, but did its job.

Ichigo couldn't see his friends anywhere and steered Rukia toward the bar, which was the only place he saw two neighboring seats open, taking off his suit jacket and putting it on the stool before sitting.

Rukia immediately took advantage of the fact they had access to free drinks, asking the bartender for suggestions since she had no idea what was good. She wound up sipping at an aviation cocktail. "If you're not going to have your drinks then I will," she deadpanned, looking meaningfully at the salaryman on stage.

"Don't be so judgmental," he chided, applauding politely as the man finished before he glanced at his watch again. It was 8:03 PM. If everything had gone as planned this would be it.

"In an unusual turn, we now have a very special team lineup for you all here tonight! First up, here from Karakura, Yasutora Sado! Please welcome him!" proclaimed the emcee.

Rukia blinked and turned to Ichigo in surprise.

He pretended not to notice and clapped for his friend, not able to see where exactly he'd come from.

Chad strode up onto the stage and grasped the mic confidently, standing like a statue. He had on a work shirt over fashionably torn jeans and gave the emcee a thumbs-up. He waited passively as the piano notes of Van Halen's "Right Now" echoed out. His delivery was deeper and more baritone than the original's but equally as rousing and more demanding for it. During one of the guitar solos he started to bob his head and gestured out into the crowd to get them to follow along with the chorus, getting several people to do so. As his lines ended he earned quite a lot of applause and he finished with "Please sing, Kuchiki-san."

Rukia's eyes went wide and she started to blush as she realized what she'd been conned into. She looked at Ichigo with a mix of irritation and dread.

Before she could say anything the emcee announced "All the way from Karakura, we have Inoue Orihime! Please welcome her!"

Ichigo applauded just as much as anyone else, continuing to act like he hadn't noticed.

Inoue's arrival onto the stage was a bit diffident before she puffed herself up and took the mic, waving out into the crowd. In that moment she seemed to transform from a quirky schoolgirl to a confident pop-idol. She wore a summer dress that was at once both sophisticated and cute. She bobbed her head from side to side before giving a thumbs-up to the emcee. She immediately let out a
quiet "Heh," and then a laughing cry as she began to perform the Backstreet Boys' "Larger Than Life." Her delivery emphasized the uplifting aspect of the lyrics and she brought to it a genuine energy that was infectious and bubbly. She didn't quite dance, but she came pretty close. She earned strong applause, calls, and whistles as she bowed saying "Please, Kuchiki-san, sing for us!"

Rukia sank back against the bar in mortification.

"Here for a double feature, please welcome Kurosaki Karin and Kurosaki Yuzu!" stated the emcee.

Ichigo had almost started to get up at the words 'double-feature' and his familial name only to stop in shock as he heard his sisters' names. He looked at Rukia with an equal amount of surprise as he'd seen on her out of the corner of his eyes before turning to look at the stage again. What'd happened to his plan?

Both of Ichigo's sisters scrambled onto the stage, Yuzu in a cute dress and Karin in a typically rather boyish outfit. There were a few murmurs about their age. Karin took up the mic while Yuzu took a theretofore unused one, the two of them nodding at one another before Karin gave a thumbs-up toward the emcee. The lilting pop beats of Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" began to play. They treated it as a duet, with Karin sticking to the main lyrics and Yuzu doing the background chorus at the appropriate moments. Their sweetness was quite evocative of the original, even though their overall tenor was a little lighter. Than earned a surprisingly large amount of applause from the crowd despite its doubts and ended with both calling out "Rukia-nē, please sing for all of us!"

The petite Shinigami's cheeks went beet red and she reached out a hand to Ichigo's wrist to get his attention, glaring at him against the calls out of the crowd.

He looked back with a sheepish smile.

"Next up, please welcome their father, Kurosaki Isshin!" the emcee followed up.

Ichigo wasn't sure why he was surprised if Yuzu and Karin were there, but he was.

Isshin strutted onto the stage with a rather arrogant demeanor, clearly proud of his girls. He wore a suit and dress shirt with the tie loosened and the cuffs all undone, achieving an effect that was both dressed up and disheveled. He smugly considered the crowd before giving the emcee a thumbs-up and the key riff of Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" began. He gave the song a bit of a power ballad edge, both crooning in a more uplifting and optimistic way and giving it a deeper sadness at the same time. He occasionally glanced out to the couple in the crowd, presumably having located Rukia by her reiatsu. As he finished he bowed, earning a truly impressive amount of applause from the salarymen. "Rukia-chan, you can do it, please sing for us!" he called confidently.

Ichigo brought his other hand over to grip her wrist back reassuringly even as he didn't know what was next.

Rukia's expression seemed to soften a touch.

"From a far off town, give it up for Abarai Renji!" the emcee called.

They both pivoted their gazes to the stage and the someday-again substitute Shinigami realized their friend had surely been in on it from near the very start, even before they'd seen him last. He felt a brow twitch.

Renji marched onto the stage is if going into battle, his aura drawing silence from the crowd. He had on a dark suit and dress shirt but no tie, which combined with his tattoos made him look rather like a gangster. He gave a thumbs-up to the emcee even as he was still going for the mic. The riffs of Skid
Row's "Youth Gone Wild" immediately started as he snatched it up. He was even more aggressive and confident than the song normally called for and rocked the crowd, gesturing for them to join in with the chorus, drawing many to do so through sheer force of will. As he concluded with a flourish he drew loud applause and cheers for his attitude. He stabbed a finger out into the darkness, asking "Rukia, won't you please sing for us?"

Rukia and Ichigo quickly looked to one another again, he giving her an apologetic look as he realized he had no idea who else might be there to sing. How far would it go?

"Please give it up for Urahara Kisuke of Karakura!" called the emcee.

Ichigo said "What?" against the applause as he turned.

Urahara lazily sauntered up onto the stage, taking up the mic with seeming disinterest. He was wearing a white suit with a dark dress shirt, vest, and white fedora tilted down over his eyes. He gave an ambivalent thumbs-up and the chiming sounds of Tears For Fears' "Shout" began to play. His performance was at once both subdued and exhortative, resembling the spoken-verse nature of the original but with a more forceful tone. His eyes gleamed from under the hat as he sang, augmenting the delivery with a clarity of purpose that was almost hypnotizing. As he trailed off the crowd found itself oddly moved by the emotional content and sent up a strong and continuing applause. Urahara bowed and took off his hat, saying "Kuchiki-san, we're all hoping that you'll please sing."

Ichigo suddenly felt his eyes widen at what must surely be coming next if Urahara had sung. This had turned into as much a setup of him as it had of Rukia.

"Next up we have Shihōin Yoruichi! Please extend her a warm welcome!" said the emcee.

Yoruichi stalked onto the stage and flashed a wicked grin, already nodding her head to the beat she'd memorized. She had on black jeans and a leather biker jacket over an orange tank-top. She lifted her hands up to work the crowd into nodding with her before taking the mic and flashing the emcee an aggressive thumbs-up. Immediately the grinding sound of Bon Jovi's "It's My Life" began to blare. Her delivery was a bit harder and more punkish than the original and she injected verve and passion into it, gesturing for the volume to be cranked to keep up with her and pointing at the crowd to get them to join her for the chorus, not to be outdone by Renji. As she finished the crowd burst into applause, whistling, and calls of her name. She bowed theatrically and called "Rukia, please sing for all of us!"

"Next, Kurosaki Ichigo and Ishida Uryū in another special double-feature!" the emcee called.

Rukia's eyes widened in shock at his name being called along with Ishida's—she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

Ichigo exhaled and gave her wrist a brief pat before letting it go, pulling away from her and standing as he realized that must have been the end of it. Thankfully they hadn't called in the rest of Soul Society—probably only for a lack of time in getting them to pick and memorize songs. It was a good thing he'd decided to do this when he had before it could go any farther. He dismissed a vague fear of the future as he quickly made his way up toward the stage. He loosened his tie and undid his dress shirt's collar as he went, rolling up the sleeves to adopt a relaxed look.

By the time he arrived Ishida was already waiting. He made for a marked and deliberate contrast to the Quincy, who was wearing a white suit very much like something his father, Ryūken, would wear. They regarded one another with a glare that could produce sparks, each feeding off the other's confidence, before Ichigo aggressively took one mic and Ishida took the other, both giving the emcee
a thumbs-up. The classic beat of Queen and David Bowie's "Under Pressure" began and their
demeanors began to diverge, Ichigo getting more into it and Ishida steadying himself more. The
former performed Mercury's lines while the latter did Bowie's. Although Ichigo couldn't match the
highest notes he tried to make up for it in pure passion and raw force, backed up by Ishida's cool.
The net effect was broadly similar to the original, and as they concluded together there was a
storming applause. They bowed, suddenly back to normal. "Kuchiki-san, do please sing for us,"
Ishida said.

"Rukia . . . please sing for us," Ichigo almost begged, smiling directly at her in the crowd as earnestly
as he could.

She practically glowed red and stared straight back at him, looking completely stunned.

The crowd had by then become fascinated by whoever this Rukia that every performer had
mentioned was. It was impossible to say where the first cry came from but the chant went up and
only grew, like a three-syllable taunt at a football match: "Kuchiki! Kuchiki! Kuchiki!"

"Kuchiki Rukia! Kuchiki-san, if you're in the audience, the performers and the people alike are
calling for you!" the emcee declared, asking "Will you sing for us tonight?"

Everyone she knew who'd already performed assembled up in front of the stage and joined in with
the calls. Rukia saw Ichigo smiling broadly at her amidst them even as he applauded and called her
name. Her expression immediately became determined and the intense heat on her cheeks faded as
she stared at him like they were the only people present. She rose, making her way up to the emcee,
earning appraising looks as she went from the crowd. Was this the Rukia all these singers had called
upon?

She stood at last in front of the emcee and asked mildly "I . . . don't know English characters very
well, can you please use katakana lyrics?"

"Of course!" he responded, asking "Do you know what song you want to do?" He'd had time to
discuss it all at opening with the rest of her party and was willing to humor them considering how
excellent of a performance they'd put on.

She thought for a moment, suddenly afraid that she had no idea what to sing. She abruptly
remembered something she'd heard while wandering around Karakura one day. She'd stopped to
listen to it both for its beat and emotional content. It'd been in English and sounded a bit older.
Although she couldn't read it and only had a limited verbal knowledge of the language she knew it fit
perfectly. She hazarded the chorus as the title and after the emcee recognized it she asked to briefly
review the lyrics.

After only a minute she nodded at him resolutely before making her way to the stage, steadying
herself as she recalled the sound of it fully. Her memory of it was crystal clear. The crowd fell silent
at the sight of her in sudden wonder at her appearance and what had motivated so many people to
ask her to sing.

Her movements shifted into that preternaturally elegant form Ichigo had seen before as she lifted a
hand to give a thumbs-up, the other holding the mic. Even the motion drew a few quiet gasps. The
synthesizer beats of Pat Benetar's "Love Is A Battlefield" immediately came on. She delivered the
opening spoken verse lines looking directly at Ichigo, before her gaze shifted away. Her delivery
contained a greater depth than the original, with deeper aches and more fervent highs, her voice
ringing out clearly and passionately across the crowd. She sang as if he was the only one in the
room, pouring her soul into it. She didn't dance but did move with the lyrics, emphasizing them with
her whole body in a way that was at once refined and raw. As her final bittersweet line left her lips
there was silence for a moment before the club erupted in a thunderous applause. Calls of "Rukia nē-san!" and "Rukia-chan!" went up amid whistles. She bowed deeply as the applause continued, moving once more like her usual self as she stood up straight again. She blushed a bit at the response and hesitantly left the stage.

She found Ichigo waiting for her off to one side, smiling radiantly at her even as his cheeks were a touch red. He was backed by everyone else, all of whom wore different mixtures of shock, wonder, and pride at her performance. Only Ichigo looked like it'd been exactly what he had expected. She stood in front of him, still embarrassed as they stared at one another. It was like they were still the only people present.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Urahara Shop Karaoke Group!" the emcee said over the continued clapping. There was a standing ovation for their entire group. Most of them turned and waved, although Ichigo and Rukia remained transfixed. Everybody else could figure out what was going on from the sight and sequence of events and several more whistles and cheers were hurled their way before the club began to return to its normal rotation.

Finally the pair was interrupted by being pulled over to the booth their friends and family had been occupying.

Chad went to get their things from the bar.

Nobody noticed Yoruichi and Renji sharing a glance that confirmed all the evening's performances had been captured on his soul pager and he'd forward her a copy later.

The spell broken, Ichigo immediately began the recriminations, pointing at Ishida. "This was your doing, wasn't it?"

"I'd love to take all the credit, but—" the Quincy began smugly.

"He told me, and I organized the rest," Yoruichi interrupted even more arrogantly.

Ichigo took his suit jacket as Chad handed it to him while Rukia took her drink, glad for its return as she suddenly felt a great need to finish it.

"Where'd you get those outfits anyway, Kurosaki-kun, Kuchiki-san?" Inoue asked. She was ecstatic at what she'd seen but was trying to keep herself under control.

"I'm sure it's the same story as the hotel they're staying at," Isshin said saucily.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Ichigo growled, before catching sight of Karin and Yuzu giving him and Rukia enormous smiles. He blinked at the two of them and was about to say something.

"I guess we'd better come clean," Urahara abruptly said apologetically, although his smile betrayed his tone.

Rukia set the empty glass down, looking toward the shopkeeper.

"We were . . . really worried about you, onii-chan!" Yuzu said sincerely.

Ichigo suddenly looked pained. "Sorry. The trip was—" he began.

"Not that," Karin said, cutting him off and looking at him soberly. From the look alone he and Rukia alike instantly realized they'd known from the very start, which left the former stunned. "Thank you for the postcards though, Ichī-nii . . . Rukia-nē," she added, returning to wearing a small smile.
"Arisawa, Kojima, and Asano would've probably liked to have been here, but . . ." Ishida said idly as he adjusted his glasses.

"Everyone, you . . . since . . ." Ichigo began, his eyes widening as he didn't know what to say.

"And you!" Rukia said, looking to him with just a little heat, "When did this devious plan spring into that perfidious mind of yours?!" She deliberately provoked him to spare him from an overly sentimental moment, knowing he'd secretly appreciate it.

"Since the day after you claimed you didn't sing and then performed that song!" he said hotly.

"What song?" Inoue and Yuzu asked at the same time.

Ichigo immediately knew he'd said too much.

Urahara quietly departed to get more drinks for the adults. Although Chad, Inoue, and Ishida had all maintained they were underage, he got a cocktail for Ichigo because he had the feeling he'd need it. They were still 'free' and he'd paid for most of them.

"There was no song!" Rukia declared adamantly.

"Aww, come on, Rukia, I know you used to sing when we were kids," Renji said with a sardonic smile.

She stared daggers at him for this betrayal on top of the earlier one, hissing "You! . . ."

"We all know there was a song," Chad said simply.

Ichigo stared away into space, not wanting to die so young.

Rukia looked down at the table before muttering "'I'll Make A Man Out Of You'!"

"How appropriate," Yoruichi, Karin, Renji, and Isshin all said at the same time, their intonations making it clear they all had different meanings. Three of the four received sudden death glares from both Ichigo and Rukia.

"From Mulan?" Inoue asked, confused.

"Did this have to do with the trip to Tokyo Disneyland?" Yuzu queried.

"He kept taunting me that it'd be funny if I sang it as a fukutaichō while conducting Divisional drills!" Rukia said defensively, glaring at Ichigo.

"It would be funny!" he said with certainty.

Yuzu giggled and Karin, Isshin, and Inoue smiled. The rest had never heard it before.

"You guys did really well," Ichigo said, redirecting the conversation as suddenly some sort of drink was being placed before him by Urahara. He didn't know what it was but took a swig without comment, drawing interesting looks from his friends. It tasted like cherry and blood orange. Unbeknownst to him it was a blood and sand cocktail.

"We practiced a lot," Yoruichi said proudly.

"I'm just impressed you didn't embarrass yourself," Ishida replied, looking at Ichigo meaningfully before glancing to Rukia. He elected not to address her performance. She'd easily outshone them all
with seemingly trivial effort. They'd all had weeks to practice and she'd done it in a minute. He'd sort of doubted Ichigo's claims but they'd proved accurate and irrefutable.

Ichigo started to defend his performance before his sisters saved him from talking about the elephant in the room by demanding to know more about what they'd been up to.

The conversation revolved around that for awhile, Rukia and Ichigo turning in a rather edited and barb-filled report of their time together given that the jig was up, before Yoruichi interrupted with "So, can we at least see this swanky place you're staying at?" with an uplifted eyebrow.

The pair exchanged looks before Ichigo frowned and said "Fine." It was impossible to refuse at that point.

They got up and left as a group, having to deal with more than a few continued congratulations on their way out.

Their entourage was rather stunned by the hotel they were staying at. Even Yoruichi, once quite accustomed to opulence, had to admire the audacity of the choice. There was no way even Byakuya could object. Smart play, Ichigo.

The suite was equally as surprising for many different reasons.

"This place is huge!" Karin proclaimed.

"How much does this cost a night?" Ishida mused.

Inoue was taken by the sight of the flowers on the desk. She also knew hanakotoba and was a bit perplexed by the message being relayed. It seemed like something Ichigo would say, but . . . she looked to the couple before looking back to the flowers. They were still quite healthy but seemed to have been there for awhile. I wonder what happened . . .

Unlike their previous guests these ones had little restraint in where they went. Isshin elected not to make a crack about the proximity of the beds, knowing how sensitive they likely still were.

Renji, however, was more than willing to ask "Why is there a TV in the bathroom?"

"Look at this view!" Yuzu proclaimed after looking through the blinds. At that everyone went to look and see, all of them only covertly glancing at the arrangement of the beds in the process. The sight was breathtaking. The idea that they'd been looking out on it for weeks suddenly struck all parties.

Ichigo and Rukia were left in the living room looking just a little humiliated at one another at having what had been their personal space invaded.

The adults all noticed their absence, but it was Yoruichi and Renji who elected to stand up for them for their own reasons, shepherding everyone else out and back into the living room.

Yoruichi was the last one out and cleared her throat to get the pair's attention. "So, we didn't know in advance whether it would be an imposition or not for us to find accommodations and stay for the weekend." It was clear she was offering them the final say in the matter.

"We . . . kinda bought tickets to the Summer Sonic Festival last week," Ichigo said. It'd been another thing they'd done last Friday after casting about for things to do. To be fair, the only band he really wanted to see Saturday was Guns N' Roses, whereas Sunday had The Offspring, NOFX, and
Disturbed, and he thought Rukia might like No Doubt. "But we can probably leave after around noon to meet up, if you want to stay, although we'd have less time on Sunday." He'd make as much time for them as he could, tickets or not. They deserved it for what they'd done for him—for both him and Rukia.

"Then I guess it's settled," Urahara said with a small smile, before adding "Come on everyone, let's find a hotel and meet up with them again tomorrow!"

Everyone else took the hint and started to diligently file out, saying goodnight in their own ways, with Karin, Yuzu, and Inoue all giving them hugs before leaving. After a minute, extended by the need for everyone to get their shoes back on again, they were alone for real.

They once more stared at one another for awhile, left with what they'd sung for each other. Neither knew what to say. Ichigo looked away. They didn't have to say anything—that was the point. "You get cleaned up first," he offered.

Rukia regarded him for a moment longer before smiling and going. Ichigo's song with Ishida was first and foremost in her mind by a large margin, but there were all the others to consider as well.

He went to the bedroom and looked out over Tokyo, keeping still even as it was hard not to be overwhelmed by everything. It had been a bigger evening than he'd imagined for a lot of reasons. It seemed to be no time at all before Rukia was back out, though he knew it had been a lot longer than it felt. He took his own leave, neither saying anything.

She seemed to be asleep once he was out again, but as he got into bed he could feel her gaze on him. He turned to see she was smiling at him in the faint glow of the city's lights. He smiled back reflexively, and they shared a long look together before closing their eyes and slowly falling asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I figure listening to the songs will be more meaningful than transposing their lyrics here, or failing that, they're easy to look up.
The Club for Those Concerned for Kurosaki Ichigo and Kuchiki Rukia didn't wind up in a hotel remotely as nice as that of their *causes célèbres*, but did at last find one nearby that was clean and nice enough. Urahara and Isshin were basically splitting the bill for the endeavor, with some input from the three teenagers and Renji.

In the name of economy, they doubled up for rooms, with the allocations being Renji and Ishida, Yoruichi and Inoue, Urahara and Chad, and Isshin and Karin and Yuzu, the last two sharing a twin bed. The arrangement seemed the most compact and comfortable way of dividing up all parties involved and kept one adult in each room. They hadn't brought luggage with them as they hadn't known whether they'd be staying, but Renji was rather easily able to use a *senkaimon* to procure bags they'd prepared in advance in case. Tessai, Ururu, and Jinta were tasked with keeping Karakura safe along with Zennosuke in everyone's absence; the Urahara Shop was closed for the weekend.

Urahara had known in advance that one of the benefits of sharing a room with Chad would be relative silence. The giant kept his thoughts to himself, and Urahara felt no particular need to talk about what had gone on. It had been a nice distraction that let his mind work on other problems subconsciously, but he still had to mentally attend to things.

"Yoruichi-san, did you notice the flowers they had?" Inoue asked contemplatively.

"Yeah, 'patiently grateful in keeping promises', or something like that," Yoruichi replied, also intimately familiar with *hanakotoba* as part of her upbringing. It sounded like something Ichigo might say.

"What do you think happened?" the princess continued. She didn't really mean to gossip, but it'd been very striking and seemed quite at odds with the way her friends had looked at one another.

"I think the answer to that was in their songs to one another," the Flash Goddess responded, not feeling bad about resolving the mystery. To help was why they were there and to do so required understanding. She heard the princess take in a breath as she seemed to put the pieces together all at once. The girl could be quite insightful, but she herself had much more experience in all things.

"They opened up really quickly and then . . . " Inoue murmured, even as she searched her newest memories of Ichigo. He'd seemed very determined and his disposition had radically changed and improved. Being around Rukia had definitely helped him tremendously, but there was something new in him. Rukia seemed likewise transformed from how she'd been weeks prior in the Urahara Shop. Their songs had clearly not been about 'love' per se, despite it featuring prominently in the lyrics of both, but everything else. Even still, that word was more correct than anything else, and they probably knew it too, whether they'd admit it or not. People who only just liked one another didn't sing to each other. Not like that.

"It'll probably take them quite awhile still," Yoruichi said quietly. It was likely less that they didn't know on at least some level, and more that they were hopelessly lost as to what to do about it. Both of them were rather complex when it came to such things, and Rukia had additional considerations to take into account as well. It was actually less real cluelessness and more a deliberate and studied perceptual blindness. Having that suddenly fail them was probably highly disorienting and
disconcerting. She glanced over at the princess in consideration for a moment before asking "What about you?"

Inoue blinked in surprise and looked back before smiling broadly and saying "It was all I could do not to giggle the whole time." It was true. It had stung just a little, but that had been so far and away outweighed by what she had witnessed. To see Ichigo and Rukia like that was very special.

The Flash Goddess watched her for a second longer before smiling softly. The teenager was eccentric, but very caring and wise in her own way. A thought suddenly struck her. "I think that maybe the best thing we could do is to split them up for a day."

"Eh?" was Inoue's response.

"We could take them on a separate girl's and boy's day out. They've been around each other non-stop for weeks, giving them time to decompress with friends would probably be good for them," Yoruichi said with confidence.

Inoue was about to say something when Yoruichi's soul pager pinged.

"Oh, looks like it's here," the cat-woman said with a small grin.

"What is?" the princess asked.

"Want to watch it all again before we start to get ready for bed?" Yoruichi asked with a devilish little smile, waving the device.

"Yoruichi-san, it's not nice to record people without their consent!" Inoue admonished in a hushed whisper as she got up and sat on the other woman's bed to watch it with her. There was no way she'd miss seeing it again, plus it'd let her see her own performance.

Renji tapped at his soul pager, sending the video file to Yoruichi for posterity.

Ishida glanced over, having noticed what had been going on but not having opposed it. Still . . . "Do you have to send it to them?" he asked, knowing that wasn't the only place the video was going.

The crimson-haired Shinigami said "Yeah," before tapping out a brief message reading "These were intended as representative messages for or as personal thoughts regarding Kuchiki Rukia," in text. He paused before saying "I think it'll help anyway." He was, orders or not, still unwilling to do things that didn't assist the pair. He'd never been officially debriefed regarding his earlier efforts and so he simply intended to continue on in his own way, satisfied that his judgment had been correct the first time and likely still was.

The Quincy narrowed his eyes at the assertion but didn't say anything.

Renji hit send before he could be dissuaded, sending two separate copies to Byakuya and Ukitake before closing the soul pager and tossing it aside on the bed. "Rukia did sing when we were kids but never like that," he said. "It was never so . . . Anyway, I sincerely doubt Kuchiki-taichō has ever heard her sound remotely like that, if at all."

"Do you really think it will improve his disposition with regard to whatever it is he's doing?" Ishida asked. He didn't think either Ichigo or Rukia had taken their songs for one another as a full confession of their feelings in the understanding that karaoke was necessarily about predefined messages, but with the way they sang, the looks they gave one another, and the copious use of the word 'love' one could certainly think otherwise. In fact they'd probably been much truer than either
would ever admit . . . at least his presence on stage with Ichigo would give his orange-haired associate some cover.

"I think hearing her so free and expressive will make up for anything else," Renji said with unusual thoughtfulness. He also had the feeling the taichō knew a lot more than he let on. His attitude on the day Rukia and Ichigo had been in Soul Society had been odd.

Ishida considered that for a moment before getting up to shower for bed.

Karin and Yuzu had waited until their dad was in the shower to really start talking, even if he was unusually well-behaved that night.

"Onii-chan was really happy," Yuzu said. She'd heard it and more besides in the way he'd sung and interacted with them afterwards.

"He's really lucky to have someone like Rukia-nē," Karin said matter-of-factly.

"Karin-chan, don't say it so coldly!" Yuzu rebuked.

"It's just the truth," her sister replied. She still found herself haunted by how moving Rukia's song for him had been. A lot of things had come into sharper focus with that. "She . . . really cares about him," she added quietly. Seeing the true depths of Rukia's concern for Ichigo had tremendously deepened her respect for the petite Shinigami.

"I wonder what they talk about at night," Yuzu wondered aloud. She had noticed their beds side by side, although she hadn't thought much of it.

"Probably not a lot," Karin said, although she didn't put any innuendo into it despite often teasing her sister about the fact their brother wasn't likely nearly as pure as she imagined. There was something else in how they looked at one another. She was sure they'd talked a lot, but at the same time the whole point of the night had seemed to be there were things they couldn't or wouldn't talk about. She'd heard the teenagers and adults talking occasionally, and knew that wasn't just her opinion.

Yuzu let out a small huff, asking "Why do people get so difficult when they get older?"

"You're just naïve," Karin replied.

"Karin-chan!" Yuzu said with annoyance, before clamming up as their dad suddenly exited the bathroom.

The sisters glanced at one another as if to come up with some other subject they could pretend to have been talking about, only to be caught off guard as Isshin let out a small sigh while getting his toothbrush, saying wistfully "It is annoying, isn't it?"

Karin and Yuzu stared at one another before glaring toward him, wondering how much he'd heard and why he was acting so weirdly.

Ukitake tapped at the screen of his soul pager to pause the playback, saying with just a bit of studied criticism "If you're going to listen, you might as well come in and watch too."

Sentarō and Kiyone abruptly became quiet outside, and after only a moment the door opened, both walking in with chagrined expressions. They took up positions standing behind their taichō so they could see the footage as well as hear clearly, both silent for once.
Ukitake smiled a little to himself and resumed the playback. The message had come in while he was still working. He only sort of knew some English due to his responsibilities as a taichō, but the sentiments that were on display were clear enough, especially Ichigo's. They were just coming up to Rukia's performance.

All of them blinked as her demeanor changed on the stage and they could only stare, mouths ajar, as she actually began to sing. This wasn't the hardened fukutaichō they'd recently become used to, the unseated soldier, the prisoner in the Senzaikyū, the uncertain rookie, or the lowly assistant Kiyone'd had so long ago. Who was this new, astonishing Rukia? None of them had ever seen her before, let alone heard her. As the performance ended and she bowed she was once more someone familiar to them, although she just as much wasn't as she looked to Ichigo. She looked genuinely happy, if also embarrassed. It was a marked contrast to the sadness in the song.

The kind taichō found he couldn't help but smile.

Behind him Kiyone sniffed, drawing an extremely-rarely-seen concerned glance from Sentarō. Once, a long time ago, she'd found Rukia singing quietly to herself; it'd been quite pretty sounding, but she'd never heard it again and it hadn't sounded anything at all like that. She looked away while wiping at her eyes with one of her gloves.

"Ichigo-kun knew," Ukitake ventured quietly. It'd been obvious from his tone when he'd asked her to sing and the looks he'd given, even though he was looking away from the camera as the footage ended. He'd heard something like it before somehow.

"Taichō," Kiyone whispered, "I've only ever heard her sing one time before . . ."

It was clear to both men from her tone alone when exactly that had been before. Neither said anything for awhile. "Perhaps I should make a call," Ukitake stated cryptically, rising and taking his leave from his official duties for the night. Neither 3rd Seat followed him.

Byakuya's eyebrow came back down at the conclusion of Yoruichi's performance and his brows drew together in concentration as it became apparent Ichigo would be next. He was alone in his personal office in the Kuchiki manor, having retired there shortly after the message from Renji had come in. He'd noted the text message and had studied the video and audio with interest.

As part of his various duties as a noble he'd acquired a robust working knowledge of English as its importance in the Living World had increased and was more than able to keep up with the songs. Modern music usually left him ambivalent at best, but the messages that were being conveyed were clear enough and Ichigo's associates had obviously put effort into their performances. This had been planned. They were each in their own way trying to encourage Rukia, or both her and Ichigo.

He likewise understood that the songs had fixed lyrics and didn't necessarily reflect the full and true feelings of the singers. Nonetheless, the way Ichigo sang was from the heart. It was perhaps truer than the boy anticipated or knew. He wasn't entirely enthused about it but was unsurprised and could appreciate the sincerity. The fact he'd performed with the Quincy seemed to be an integral part of the song but also changed the emphasis. It was evident that the 'pressure' aspect of the song had been selected for over the 'love' aspect, but also clear that the latter was considered no impediment. He already knew Ichigo and Rukia had revealed they had feelings for one another so there was no shock there.

What happened after Ichigo's performance was even more interesting. The reaction of the crowd, with their cacophonous cheering of the clan name, was most curious. They'd earnestly wanted to hear his sister after all these requests, despite having surely never heard her before. The camera
eventually revealed Rukia moving forward to talk with the music operator. Byakuya noted her dress with approval. He watched as they seemed to converse in some way for a few minutes before she got onto the stage. She looked confident.

He'd heard her sing once long ago when she'd been asked to demonstrate her aptitude at the arts and she'd been halting and awkward then. She'd never returned to it and had pursued seemingly almost any other artistic pursuit she could instead in the years since. He'd always assumed she simply didn't care for it.

His eyes widened marginally as he saw the change that came over her as she prepared herself and the look she gave to Ichigo as she delivered the opening lines. Neither prepared him for her actual performance and he sat in stunned silence as she sang out from the small device. It was only when she finished and bowed to a cavalcade of applause that he managed to reassert full control over his expression. He watched as she left the stage and turned to see Ichigo, and then the video ended.

Byakuya stared at the screen for a second further before turning off the soul pager's screen and setting it down on the desk. He sat in contemplation for a moment with everything he'd just observed. His sister had also been truer than maybe even she knew. Once again the word 'love' was simply how the song went. It was everything else in the song that had been selected for.

His estimation was that the two had declared affections for one another at some level but weren't confessing their love in front of random strangers, friends, and Ichigo's family—even if the sentiment was actually accurate. Rukia wasn't the type for that and neither was Ichigo. They'd been trying to communicate a deep mutual indecision about how to proceed. He could guess why that was. His sister's reserve and observation of decorum heartened him on one hand, but on the other . . . She sounded so pained.

He allowed himself to briefly reflect once more on his time with Hisana, on his own conduct then, and on her last request. His thoughts then turned to tradition, and then more specifically to the rules of the clan. He'd been contemplating this all for some time, and returned to what he'd already decided.

Officially speaking, absolutely nothing that Ichigo and Rukia did together or could do together truly mattered until a marriage had been arranged for the latter—provided she didn't bring shame upon the clan. No such marriage had been arranged, and so all that were left were two questions: was Ichigo an apt suitor for her, and what exactly was shameful to the clan?

He'd determined the first to be an affirmative long before meeting with them and nothing in that calculation had changed. Ichigo's lineage was easily confirmed and his war record and likely future status made him a more than adequate suitor for her. The Shiba effectively no longer existed politically and so it was only to the Kuchiki clan's gain to associate with him as any possible union wouldn't be shared but theirs and theirs alone. Politically speaking, such an arrangement would 'capture' him. That granted, he was not only an acceptable suitor for her, but given she had no other suitors, there was no shame in allowing her to freely associate with him as she was doing the clan a service by doing so. That Rukia had no other suitors because Byakuya had methodically denied them access over time was unimportant. Whether there would be a union at some point in time was a different question.

Unofficially speaking, the boy had changed things and his character and treatment of Rukia were essentially unimpeachable. If they continued on he would eventually have to insist on an arrangement, but at the same time he felt that was a matter they would likely arrive at on their own, and something not in the near future at any rate. They were already trapped by one another, so adding his own entrapment on top was unnecessary.
The only consideration that was truly at hand was whether there were things Rukia could do that would bring shame upon the clan.

Officially, the answer to that was no. The clan existed in Soul Society, and Rukia was stationed in the Living World. If she drew Ichigo to them and the opinions of humans were unimportant—which they were—then there was nothing she could do to discredit them because everything she did was necessarily to the clan's gain. Furthermore, it would be easy to control information coming back as he himself was one of the main points of contact.

Unofficially, what was shameful was at his discretion. He considered how astonishingly liberated she'd seemed while singing. Something that the Espada Zommari had said during their battle the year prior returned unbidden to him then: *All things have 'sovereignty'... the moonlight is ruled by the light of the sun.* He frowned at that before the smallest of smirks appeared on his face. *Perhaps, despite your impudence, you knew one truth after all. Kurosaki Ichigo, it would seem I am yet again in your debt.* It didn't take him much thought to reach his decision: the only one whom Rukia could shame in association with Ichigo was herself. She should be free to conduct herself as she saw fit, at the pace she saw fit to do so. If she was satisfied it wasn't his concern.

Having come to a conclusion as both the head of the clan and as her brother, Byakuya picked up the soul pager again and began to issue paperwork for expediting his various requests, likewise scheduling meetings to do the same. He would have to communicate such a matter directly to her in private, and so the continuing freeze on his leave to attend to matters in Karakura not only had to be lifted, but his departure to the Living World had to be moved up. Nothing less was acceptable. He was some ways along in this effort when suddenly the soul pager's screen cut away to an incoming call. He raised an eyebrow at seeing the caller was Ukitake and accepted it.

He was far too preoccupied with his observations and everything afterwards to notice the shock of pink hair that'd been poking up above one of the office's windows the entire time.
Do You Need Some Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, August 17, 2002

Rukia disabled her soul pager by learned reflex after only the second "Pyon!" had rung out, silently cursing herself for having made the recording in the first place. Being woken up by a past version of herself was a particularly cruel experience. She blinked her eyes open and sat up with a sigh before glancing over to Ichigo's bed. He stirred but didn't wake. She was immediately hit by a flood of memories from the previous night and found herself staring at him in the mild darkness. Her expression softened after many seconds and she smiled a little, deciding to let him sleep in while she dressed. She quietly got up and retrieved clothes before going to the bathroom.

Ichigo was gently coerced into waking by a hand shaking his shoulder and calls of his name. He opened his eyes and turned to find Rukia sitting behind him. She was dressed.

"Hey," she said. It was the first thing he'd heard her say to him since they'd arrived back in the suite. He stared as recollections of the previous night washed over him before saying "Hey," back. He blinked before muttering "Crap," and sat up, pulling the covers off himself. He'd slept in.

Rukia returned her hand lightly to his shoulder to still him and gave him with just a small smile. "We're still on time," she said, "I just let you sleep while I dressed. Don't worry." She withdrew her hand and got off the bed, making it easier for him to do the same. "It's only 8:29 AM, so if you don't dawdle in there we can still get a full breakfast," she lightly lectured. The music festival's venues opened at 9:00, but the acts began at 10:30, so they had plenty of time to arrive there and get to their seats.

He nodded and went to get ready without further comment, ignoring the gibe. He'd only been 'dawdling' lately due to the need to practice at karaoke and he didn't have to do that anymore.

After once more eating at the Grand Club they went to the subway as usual. They took the same route as they had to Tokyo Disneyland, although this time they stayed on the Keiyo Line and rode it along the bay into Chiba, eventually getting off at Kaihin-Makuhari Station and making their way to Chiba Marine Stadium.

The Summer Sonic Festival was a bit odd in that it was held over two days in both Chiba and Osaka. Bands that played in one city one day would swap to the other on the next. There were three stages at each venue; an outdoor one that hosted big foreign bands, an indoor one that played smaller foreign acts, and a 'factory' stage that hosted domestic ones. That year's lineup was largely geared toward punk and rock, which was perfectly fine by Ichigo. They were there exclusively for the acts that played outdoors.

As they'd started off he'd texted Ishida to let him know everyone should take their time and get breakfast, not entirely sure what sort of schedule their friends and his family were keeping. Once again, as so often happened lately, something had begun percolating in the back of his mind as they'd shot past Tokyo Disneyland. He scratched at a temple in growing frustration as they walked before finally relenting to it. "How about after this we take everyone to Tokyo DisneySea?" he asked,
sounding grumpy and agitated about it.

Rukia glanced at him with more than a little disbelief given his complaining about theme parks the other day and how he’d made fun of her for still wanting to go. She raised an eyebrow in mild irritation without comment, choosing to reserve judgment until he explained further.

"We did send that postcard from Tokyo Disneyland to Karin and Yuzu and everyone turned out here to see us so I guess we kind of owe them and should treat them," he muttered, frowning and rubbing at the back of his head. He still felt guilty about lying to his sisters, and to learn they'd known the whole time, that everyone had known, and they had all been trying to help him in their own ways . . .

She gave him a smirking smile, skewing it so it was heavily on the side of her face away from him and he couldn't see it fully. For as much as he tried to cultivate a certain kind of image he really could be sweet and thoughtful sometimes. "I suppose that given your weighty consideration in so freely handing out Soul Society's riches, such would be acceptable," she said tartly. He didn't have to know.

"I'm just trying to do something nice," he said a bit harshly in response.

"It's truly fascinating how much your attitude improves when you can do nice things with others peoples' money," Rukia replied primly, before looking away, not willing to take it further. In point of fact she rather strongly approved, and not for selfish reasons.

Ichigo grumbled to himself before pulling out his cell phone, dialing Ishida.

She listened to his side of the conversation idly.

"So, Rukia and I want to take you guys somewhere fun," he said neutrally, before listing off the stations and routes they needed to use and when to meet. He went silent for awhile after that. "Of course I'm not going to tell you what it is, you idiot! You've already proven yourself untrustworthy and it's a surprise!" he replied hotly. "We'll use our card," he added firmly after another moment. "Fine, we'll see you there," he finished.

"You sure have a way with words, Ichigo," she taunted.

"Not everybody is gifted at communication," he said flatly, looking away.

Her eyes widened a bit at what he might mean by that but she held her tongue and they continued on, gradually encountering more and more foot traffic as they got nearer to the stadium.

Chiba Marine Stadium was mostly used for baseball and they'd gotten tickets for stadium seating rather than the standing room area in the middle of the field, which was fortuitous as it would make it easier for them to depart. It was already quite full when they arrived and filled up completely as they waited. As it was a festival rather than a concert, the headline acts were actually the openers on both days to draw crowds in earlier in the hopes they'd stay and explore the different offerings.

Arriving only slightly fashionable late after the start time, Guns N' Roses came out on stage to applause, giving out greetings and starting to work the crowd to get them engaged. Despite the hour the audience was unusually into it. It was perhaps the composition of the crowd and also the context, as a show like this was one of the few times people could really open up and get raucous without causing a scene. Worrying about face didn't matter. They went back and forth for awhile, building one another up louder and louder, and Rukia was surprised that Ichigo was starting to get into it and allowed herself to join in even though she knew nothing about the music.
Finally some sort of line was crossed and guitar riffs started to thunder out across the venue. The unmistakable sound of "Welcome to the Jungle" began to a surging roar from the people assembled. Rukia was fascinated by the delivery as it was raw and frankly not that vocally attractive yet seemed to be all the more genuine and true for it. The crowd sang along and although she didn't know the lyrics to keep up she found herself carried away by the unrestrained energy on display.

From there the band cycled through "Nightrain," "Paradise City," "Mr. Brownstone," and "Knockin' On Heaven's Door." She felt the mood shift as the arc of the songs took them into slower and more moving material, the raw lyrical quality taking on a new and completely different meaning. She found herself staring at the stage as "November Rain" played, mouth a bit ajar at how it seemed to fit their own circumstances, the actual Ichigo beside her forgotten even as the idea of him went nowhere at all. She felt her throat catch as it seemed to touch something deep inside her.

The band lingered in the din of the crowd for awhile before starting what it soon became clear would be their last song for the set. The stadium roared with cheers and applause before hushing itself to listen as the chords of "Sweet Child O' Mine" started up. Rukia put the previous song behind her and followed along intently, the musical quality of the song making her wonder if it'd be more like the first few. As the singing began it immediately became apparent it wouldn't be, and as she listened to the words she suddenly realized Ichigo had been completely silent and still since the start of the previous song.

Her eyes went wide as the lyrics advanced and she remembered what he'd told her about the rain in his inner world, about when it had started and how she was the one who stopped it. After several stanzas she couldn't stop her eyes from leaving the stage and tracking over toward him, only to find he was already looking at her. His expression was unreadable. What was in his eyes was something that burned and for the briefest moment she thought it was anger and felt a flicker of fear at its intensity, which seemed to only make it flare brighter. She abruptly realized she'd never seen the emotion in him before and couldn't immediately place it. Or . . . had she? If she had it'd never been remotely so clear, so singular . . .

Their eyes only met for a second or two before Ichigo looked away decisively, turning his whole head. How could I forget that they'd inevitably play this song? He cringed as hard as he could to keep control of his face as things slammed shut inside him like blast doors containing a conflagration or watertight bulkheads on a sinking ship.

Rukia stared at him dumbly for long seconds as the singing continued before looking away as the lump in her throat instantly returned. She kept trying to place that look in her memory as her mind tried its very hardest not to think about what she'd actually just seen. It was when she realized she'd seen it countless times in different little ways and increasingly so lately, just never so raw, that her mental shields rose up.

Neither looked at the other another again. The song continued to fill the stadium, the lyrics hammering at the two of them, until finally it ended in an earthshaking tumult of noise from the audience. The band idled in the adulation gladly for awhile, and then they were gone. Something in Ichigo's head made him check his watch. It was 11:39 AM. That same something made him get up and leave.

She followed along without a single word.

They eventually arrived at station by the twinned Disney parks, waiting quietly beside one another and acting as if they were almost strangers. Each knew the other wasn't mad or anything like that, but they were once more at a loss as to how to engage with one another. Their friends and family arrived on the next train coming from the other direction and they abruptly put on the best happy looks they
Something happened, Inoue felt from the moment she saw them. They were both trying really hard to act normal. It hadn't been a fight as their ire was extremely predictable—this was something else. She glanced to Yoruichi, who met the look for a second.

The Flash Goddess, in turn, looked to Renji, something unsaid passing between them.

"So what's the big surprise?" Ishida offered, trying to defray the feeling in the air. The tension between Ichigo and Rukia was so thick it was like they'd arrived into a fog bank.

"You're telling me you haven't figured it out already?" Ichigo replied with a smug grin that was a little too big, looking at his sisters.

They looked back in confusion, trying to mask their concern, before Yuzu's face suddenly lit up. "No way!" she exclaimed.

"Mmhmm," Rukia said leaning forward and smiling sweetly at the pair. She hadn't had the heart to continue teasing Ichigo earlier and definitely didn't have it in her to even try then.

Karin's expression suddenly softened as she caught up. Both girls ran up and hugged their adoptive sister.

Everyone else exchanged confused looks, not having really studied Tokyo's layout and not knowing the significance of where they were. Isshin caught up quickest, and looked at Ichigo with grudging but considered approval.

The raven-haired Shinigami laughed a little and hugged back as they thanked her, saying with more humility than usual "Don't thank me, it wasn't my idea." She added "We thought we'd take you to the other half and come back for the castle another time."

Both girls immediately turned to their brother who was looking askew and rubbing the back of his head awkwardly as if the whole thing was an imposition. "Anyway, let's get on with it," he declared before anything else could be said, starting to lead the way toward the ticketing booths for Tokyo DisneySea, which were in the opposite direction of where they'd gone the first time. Rukia half pulled and was half pulled by Karin and Yuzu after him and everyone else fell in behind them. The group in the back exchanged meaningful glances with one another, having already discussed Yoruichi's idea.

Rukia wound up paying for six junior tickets and five adult tickets. They made their way into the Mediterranean Harbor area that marked the start of the park and were scarcely inside when Ichigo suddenly found one of his arms locked in Renji's and the other in Chad's while Yoruichi and Inoue did the same to Rukia.

"H—Hey!" Ichigo protested, finding neither would quite look at him, "What's the big idea?!" He wasn't able to struggle much before suddenly Urahara and Ishida were pushing him along off to the left from the entrance. "Rukia!" he called out, turning his head back toward her.

She was likewise being dragged off to the right by Inoue and Yoruichi and looked to him, calling back "Ichigo!"

Their respective kidnappers told them to calm down but didn't let up one bit.

Isshin crouched down in front of Karin and Yuzu with an apologetic smile saying "We'll make sure he has fun, so do the same for Rukia-chan, yeah?"
Yuzu glared at him like it was unforgivable but Karin just sighed and turned, tugging her sister after her as she said "Come on, they look like they need help with Rukia-ñé." Yuzu grudgingly went and they parted company, Isshin likewise going to catch up with the men.

The men didn't stop until they'd pulled Ichigo all the way to the American Waterfront, reasoning they could always return to Mediterranean Harbor later. Ichigo had grown quiet both to avoid making a scene and because he had some vague idea what was happening, but he wasn't happy about it. When at last they let him go he pushed away from them a heavy shrug, grousing with a spark of anger "That's no way to handle people who were treating you to a day out, you know!"

"Don't complain so much, it's unseemly," Isshin chastised.

"Technically, neither of you are actually the ones treating us to anything," Urähara corrected.

"Just think of it as being nautically appropriate," Ishida added, "you've been press-ganged."

"We're not doing it for you; we're doing it for Rukia. She must be going crazy after spending weeks cooped up with you," Renji said a little harshly, willing to play the bad cop.

"You need time on your own," Chad said simply.

Ichigo's eyes widened at what almost sounded like a callback to the performance of "November Rain" at the festival. He narrowed them back down again before looking away as there was no way it actually was. All he said was "Yeah," rather quietly.

He wasn't prepared for Renji suddenly putting him a headlock as he declared "Unfortunately this place looks rather family-friendly so we can't drink away your problems just yet, but we'll just attend to that later! If you act depressed the whole time though we're gonna find some quiet corner to beat you up in!" It wasn't an idle threat.

The would-be substitute shoved the crimson-haired Shinigami away, snarling "Like it'd be that easy!"

"That's the spirit," Isshin said with a broad smile. Ishida, Chad, and Urähara gave similar looks.

The ladies hauled Rukia comparatively less far, dragging her deep into one half of Mediterranean Harbor. Yuzu and Karin had joined in to push her along and she'd likewise stopped actively resisting, remembering her training and bearing her humiliation with grace. She felt she knew what this was all about and it'd clearly been pre-planned even before they'd decided on going to the park. When she was released she crossed her arms and let out a huff, proclaiming "You could have just asked me to come along!"

"Would you really have agreed?" Yuzu replied quietly, looking at her with an expression that said she already knew the answer was no even if she didn't like doing this.

"Arrr matey, just pretend we're pirates and you be our plunderrr!" Inoue said with a raised fist, already getting rather too into the swashbuckling role she had imagined for herself.

"It's pretty clear Ichigo's going nuts from being stuck alone with you for so long, so we thought we'd give him a reprieve," Yoruichi said like she was bored, also willing to play the bad cop.

"You needed time alone from Ichi-nii," Karin said without any tone.
Rukia likewise reacted viscerally to what seemed like a callback to the music festival, giving a surprised expression before turning her back on the others, hugging herself tighter as she whispered "I guess so." She blinked as she suddenly felt Karin and Yuzu hugging onto either side of her before what must have been Yoruichi was doing the same from behind, which was rather shocking all by itself.

Suddenly Inoue was smiling at her with her hands on her shoulders, squeezing reassuringly, before hugging her too as the other three let go. "It's just for one day, Kuchiki-san," she said, leaving the rest unsaid before standing back up.

The petite Shinigami stared at the two girls, the teenager, and the woman before letting out a sigh and smiling weakly.

The two groups orbited through the park in ways that kept them separated from one another both in terms of proximity and line of sight, both parties relying on reiatsu to do so. Rukia noticed it early on but didn't say anything about it while Ichigo couldn't tell but guessed it was happening from the occasional odd course corrections they made. There were a surprising number of fun rides, including the Tower of Terror, Journey to the Center of the Earth, and even a small but decent roller coaster named Flounder's Flying Fish Coaster. Both groups spent a lot of time on the boats that transited between the various 'ports of call' that made up the park as there was something rather charming about them. They had lunch and light dinners as they went.

Ichigo did wind up having fun, particularly at Renji's overreactions to some of the rides they wound up on. Rukia was swept up in Karin and Yuzu's excitement as well as Inoue's. The reactions of all three thoroughly mimicked her prior feelings in the other half of the park.

After sundown the boys and girls wound up opposite one another in the Mediterranean Harbor, separated by the small bay that cut into it. The lights all about the shore grew dim before odd blue lights came on and a mist began to drift up from the water while ethereal music played.

Renji looked about uncertainly, still unnerved by the Tower of Terror. He leaned over to Ishida and whispered "This is just a show, right?"

Ishida pushed his glasses up and glanced to Ichigo before looking across the bay to where he knew Rukia and the others were. "Yes, and certainly not one that will bother you," he said quietly.

A battle horn trumpeted before the lights brightened and the music swelled. Mickey Mouse swept into the lagoon on a brightly lit boat, waving a trident about as he welcomed them all to a world of magic. After his departure a story was narrated to them of how once upon a time a water spirit and a fire spirit, Bellisea and Prometeo, had lived there in adjacent but separate worlds, and how one day they had met.

The next several minutes were given over to each spirit in turn, the elegant woman Bellisea's focusing on the water and the phoenix Prometeo's starting with a pyrotechnics display from the volcano at the center of the Mysterious Island, Mount Prometheus. Then the two were opposite one another upon the surface of the water and the former began to sing, drawing nearer to the latter who soon replied in song as well. The pair harmonized as they drew nearer before taking on aspects of each other in what was clearly a metaphor for falling in love.

Isshin felt something stir in his chest at the show and let it play out rather than suppressing it for a time. The metaphor was a bit off, but close enough . . . Eventually he glanced sideways to Ichigo, finding he wasn't watching the show but was staring longingly right at where the ladies' group was
standing. He didn't have any spiritual perception and yet . . . was it just natural instinct? Was she
doing the same? That look on his face . . . Mmm, well, you'd be looking at her just as lost if she was
here, wouldn't you? I'd know.

Rukia knew exactly where the men were but it didn't help keep her from staring in their direction.
She swore that if she focused enough she sensed the very slightest flame of his reiatsu there among
them. Ichigo . . . are you also . . . ? All the girls stole surreptitious glimpses of her but she was
completely oblivious to it.

Yoruichi looked away and sighed slightly. How Rukia felt was written all over her face; it was
starting to make her feel bad for splitting them up even just for an evening. You're really that smitten
with him, hmm? As the show continued on through its final act her thoughts turned and finally she
looked meaningfully to Inoue. The teenager met her gaze after a few seconds and she looked to
Karin, Yuzu, and across the bay.

Inoue blinked before catching her meaning and nodding, taking the twins by the wrists and sweetly
saying "Hey, why don't we go meet up with everyone else?"

"But . . ." Yuzu began, prompting the princess to smile more broadly.

Karin wordlessly started to pull Inoue and her sister along, figuring it all out.

Yoruichi watched them leave before looking to Rukia, finding she hadn't noticed. She placed a hand
on the petite Shinigami's shoulders, startling her mildly, before gently turning her toward the park
entrance and walking her off. It wouldn't do to keep them separate for too much longer.

Ishida, Chad, Urahara, and Isshin likewise peeled away, leaving Ichigo with Renji. The 6th Division
fukutaichō waited a bit with the future substitute, leaving at a staggered interval so the groups
wouldn't run into each other.

Both Ichigo and Rukia could guess what was coming.

Chapter End Notes

I later discovered this isn't actually an accurate set list for what Guns N' Roses played at
Summer Sonic 2002, either in order or content, but interestingly they did play all the
songs mentioned (and more) so I'll call it close enough.

BraviSEAmo! actually opened on July 17, 2004, replacing DisneySea Symphony, but
the latter was far less impressive and less thematically appropriate, so.
All Night To Get Together

Saturday, August 17, 2002

Rukia and Yoruichi wound up at a rather upscale bar in Ginza whose clientele seemed to be exclusively office ladies. After some cajoling the former tendered her card to open a tab for the two of them while the latter ordered. They were sipping at their first drinks in awkward silence when Yoruichi asked "So you told him you like him at least, right?"

"Yoruichi-san . . ." Rukia objected, turning a bit red.

"That's Shihōin-sama to you tonight, Kuchiki-chan," the Flash Goddess corrected with more than just a bit of arrogance, making it clear she was not going to tolerate beating around the bush.

". . . Yes," the younger noble replied, grudgingly acknowledging it.

"And he said he likes you?" the elder continued.

"Yes," the younger said again.

"And that's all you've done?" Yoruichi asked, already knowing the answer was no.

Rukia took a long sip and looked away.

The Flash Goddess let out a sigh and asked "Do you know what Ichigo is to me?"

Her junior blinked and looked to her abruptly, suddenly concerned.

"No, not that, you fool," the older woman chided with a small smile, adding "Even if he has seen me nude."

That in turn drew blushing, a look of irritation at having her favorite insult used against her, and a look of protective jealousy from the younger noble.

The former Shihōin clan head smirked and brought her eyelids down, leaning forward as she said "Don't worry so much, it was clear he only really had eyes for somebody else." She took a sip of her drink and then lifted a finger authoritatively, saying "I haven't seen my little brother in a long time, and maybe that's partially why, but I feel like Ichigo is kind of like a kid brother more than he is a student or a friend. And so that's why, when he's emotionally conflicted, it's a problem for me. Do you understand?"

Rukia nodded even as her blush lingered, likewise continuing to drink.

"The one you should've been worried about that from was Inoue, and she's already gotten over the situation," Yoruichi said plainly. It wasn't the complete truth but it was close enough.

"What do you mean?" the younger noble asked, suddenly confused. She'd seen the way Inoue had looked at Ichigo before and had noticed her attitude toward him since arriving had been rather different, but hadn't given it much thought. She suddenly felt extremely guilty for not having taken that into consideration. The teenager was her friend and she . . .

"He didn't tell you?" the older noble asked, raising an eyebrow. When Rukia said nothing she let out a short laugh and explained "She asked him out back in April and he told her he loved her like a
sister within a minute. That was when Tatsuki brought her in to really talk to us and we started putting all this together in an official way."

The petite Shinigami just stared at her. Ichigo turned Inoue down that quickly . . . ?

"I learned from Mizuiro and Keigo that Ichigo didn't go to school the day after he woke up. They both said Tatsuki left to find him. She's never told anybody what she saw that day or what might've been said, but she knew from the very start this was about you," the Flash Goddess said meaningfully, locking gazes with the younger woman.

Rukia's eyes widened as she made the immediate connection to her own behavior that day. Had it been just like that for Ichigo too? Was that why . . .

"So, tell me what else happened," Yoruichi repeated quietly.

The younger noble took a long sip before setting the glass down, looking down at the table and fretting with it to distract herself. The words came slowly at first, but picked up speed: "He asked what we were, I asked him what he wanted us to be, and he said I should pick, so I told him that we were boyfriend and girlfriend. I thought it fit, and I thought we could at least both understand it. I have . . . nightmares sometimes. He woke during one and comforted me. His touch is the only thing that's ever stopped one and I was afraid they'd happen more and more because of . . . reasons, and so we started to sleep holding hands and then we started to wind up sleeping beside one another." She stopped to finish the drink before murmuring "We . . . wound up bathing next to one another and another time he gave me a massage . . ."

Yoruichi blinked at her and narrowed her eyes, asking "That's it?" People bathed together and got massages all the time, what was the problem?

"What do you mean 'That's it?' Isn't that more than enough?" Rukia asked incredulously, wondering just how shameless the former clan head was.

The Flash Goddess smirked. "Did he look down at you in the bath? Have you gone on a date?" she asked, before summoning a waiter for more drinks.

Rukia stayed quiet until hers was placed in front of her, taking a gulp before muttering "We both looked a couple of times but only when we thought the other wasn't looking. That was in preparation for our first real date, although we basically had two before then."

"You haven't kissed him yet, have you?" the older woman asked.

"Of course not!" the younger woman proclaimed, loud enough to draw a couple of glances. She looked down again abashedly.

"For someone so assertive you really can be demure, Kuchiki-chan," Yoruichi said quietly, taking a long swig of her drink. She felt she had a pretty good idea of what was going on. She exhaled and said "Let me see if I have this right: you met back up and realized you actually liked each other and started to warm up to one another even though—no, especially because—you were scared, then you got pulled to Soul Society and even told Byakuya-bo about it. But then you both talked about some things and got too scared and that's what those flowers were about and why you're both acting so tense. Am I close?"

Rukia was staring at her. "How—how do you know about nii-sama—" she stammered.

"He's been asking us for real estate brochures and things like that, it's a real pain in the ass," the former clan head said dismissively, "Also Renji had a pretty good idea something happened because
of how he took off suddenly and his mood when he came back." She tipped her glass back, finishing it before declaring "You're afraid of him."

"I—I am not!" Rukia said, even though she wasn't sure if she meant Ichigo or her brother.

"Yes, you are. You're afraid of Byakuya-bo and what he'd think. You're afraid of Ichigo and of hurting him," Yoruichi continued assertively, "You're afraid of bringing shame to your clan." When the younger woman said nothing, she continued "I was a clan head too, you know, so I know the kind of calculations that occur. Have you ever had suitors?"

"No," Rukia said, confused at what that had to do with anything.

"Know why? Don't answer, I'll tell you: Byakuya-bo refused them. Now he's looking to buy the two of you a house. Does that sound normal? Of course it isn't. Think! Ichigo's a great prize for the clan: the last and greatest of all the Shiba when there's no Shiba clan to cut a deal with, a bonafide war hero, probably a future taichō once Kisuke gets off his ass. You think Byakuya-bo would be ashamed of what you've done? He'd be more likely to tell you to try harder!" she said aggressively.

The petite Shinigami's eyes were wide and her cheeks were bright red. Impossible! That's impossible, nii-sama doesn't hate Ichigo but he doesn't like him either, there's no way he would be thinking that I want to—that we might—that we have any interest in—that we should be . . . !

"If you don't want to believe me that's fine, he'll probably be here soon enough to tell you himself," Yoruichi said dismissively, looking away and calling for another cocktail.

"What do you mean?" Rukia asked, suddenly afraid.

"I told you he's looking for a house for the two of you. He's going to be going to Karakura. And he's probably going to come here before that now," the ex-clan leader said with irritation at having to spell it all out.

"Why?" the young noblewoman demanded, realizing there was something else to it.

"Has he ever heard you sing?" the Flash Goddess replied as her drink arrived.

"You didn't . . . !" Rukia hissed out in disbelief.

"You're right, I didn't," Yoruichi replied, taking a gulp.

"I'll kill him," the raven-haired Shinigami muttered, beginning to give halfway-serious credence to the idea of how best to murder Renji.

"No, you won't. Besides he's having a conversation very much like this with Ichigo right now," Yoruichi said with boredom, before asking "So why were you two so weird earlier?"

Rukia glared at her before looking away, saying "It was what the band we saw at the festival played."

"What band?" Yoruichi asked. She remembered what Ichigo had said the night before but had no idea who might've been playing.

"Guns N' Roses. 'November Rain' and 'Sweet Child O' Mine'," the petite Shinigami said, not elaborating.

The former clan leader rather enjoyed the Living World's music and was more than familiar with
both works. It explained a lot. She smiled at the younger woman and once more locked gazed with her. "Oh, wow. I can definitely see that, 'eyes of the bluest skies'."

Rukia was once more red. "It . . . it's more than that!" she said.

"Yeah, I can guess," Yoruichi said with the first sour note she'd really struck, looking away and cradling her drink in one hand. She'd heard about Kaien—and later Masaki—from Isshin. She knew this was as much about the various kinds of traumas that afflicted the pair as it was their inexperience, but treading into that was no business of hers. They sat in silence for awhile before she said "I'm not telling you to jump him or something, but you have to be more direct with each other."

The younger noble stared down into her drink as she sipped at it, flushing at the other woman's crudeness. Ichigo's words returned to her: *It's okay for us to be scared. It's okay . . . as long as we have each other.* She finished the glass and put it down, saying "I just don't know what to do or how fast or slow to go . . ."

"If it feels right, it is right," was all Yoruichi said in response. She made a calculation then and tipped back her drink, calling for more for both of them. "Karin-chan and Yuzu-chan are really cute, aren't they?" she asked, deciding she'd done enough and changing the subject.

Rukia blinked at her before smiling a little. "Yeah, they are."

---

Ichigo and Renji wound up in a bar in Roppongi that was a bit louder and less nice. The latter controlled both the tab and the selection, and received no questions about their ages due to his attitude alone. He asked for a full pitcher of water and some greasy, starchy food as well, commanding the former to eat and drink before letting him touch his drink. Renji remembered the anecdote Rukia had told about Ichigo's first drinking experience and wouldn't be subjected to her wrath for getting him hungover.

The orange-haired student complied irritably, likewise not wanting to find her fretting over him again. He munched at a large plate of cheese fries and quaffed water.

It was some time before the Shinigami finally told him to try the cocktail and asked "So you guys are dating or something?"

Ichigo glanced at him with annoyance before looking away and saying "She decided we were boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Hooray for small miracles," Renji replied, raising his glass before taking a long drink.

The teenager glared at him, taking another sip of the mixed drink before going back to the water.

"So what else have you done? Have you kissed her?" the Shinigami asked.

"Like that's really any of your business, Renji?" Ichigo warned.

"Tonight it's Abarai-fukutaichō to you, punk," Renji replied nastily. "I've known Rukia for well over half a century. I grew up with her. I liked her before some of your grandparents were probably even born. Don't get the wrong idea: I'm not saying this because I'm jealous, I'm saying it because it bothers me when I see she's gotten all messed up dealing with your sorry ass. I want her to be happy. Understood?"

The teenager flinched and widened his eyes, looking away as he returned to the cocktail.
"So walk me through it," the officer said, letting his tone loosen up since his point was made.

Ichigo abruptly took a much longer drink before taking a gulp of water to chase it and munching at the remaining fries in front of him. His friend waited patiently and so at last he said "Things started moving really quickly after that. She gets nightmares. We wound up sleeping beside one another so I could comfort her. She argued me into bathing together, we started holding hands, and I gave her a massage . . ."

"So you haven't kissed her," Renji said flatly after taking a long drink.

"No," Ichigo growled.

"So what's the big deal?" he added.

"I saw her naked! I had my hands over half her body! I slept beside her!" the teenager whispered hoarsely.

"You think you're the first one or something?" Renji asked with disbelief, looking at him like he was stupid.

Ichigo stared at him incredulously, suddenly on a hair-trigger to explode at what could extremely easily be perceived as an insult to Rukia's honor.

"I didn't mean it like that, you idiot! You know we grew up together. She must've told you about Inuzuri. It's not exactly the high life there. Privacy wasn't at a premium, and neither was heating in the winter. She doesn't fight fair either, sometimes you've got to grapple to win," the Shinigami explained dismissively.

The someday substitute Shinigami abruptly let it go, taking another drink and returning to the fries.

"Look, she wanted to bathe with you, and wanted you to massage her, and wanted to sleep beside you. If she didn't want any of that, you wouldn't still be in one piece," Renji said quietly.

"She also wanted to step back," Ichigo replied.

"Have you talked about . . ." the officer trailed off, leaving it unsaid as he pondered the assertion.

"Yeah, she told me, it's been over a week now," the teenager said.

Renji raised his glass in a toast and finished it, bringing it down onto the table. "Then congratulations, you know a lot more than I do already," he said sincerely.

"She never . . . told you?" Ichigo asked incredulously.

"Ha! She's never told anyone, Ichigo. Not even Kuchiki-taichō. We all know about it, but she's never talked to anybody about it. Not once. You're the first and only one," Renji said sincerely. He smirked, adding "You're the first person she's ever sung to like that as well. Not even her brother has heard something like that."

The orange-haired teen stared at him for a long time before slowly finishing his drink, and then his glass of water. "How do you know?" he asked with suspicion.

"Because of the reply he sent me when I sent him a video of it," Renji replied flatly. He didn't elaborate that he'd actually filmed all of them and passed his soul pager off to Yoruichi when he'd gone to sing himself.
"You did what?!" Ichigo all-but-shouted.

"Don't be a moron," the crimson-haired Shinigami admonished, flagging down a server and ordering more drinks. After the order was taken he continued "Look, I know Kuchiki-taichō is maneuvering to get the two of you a residence in Karakura. Does that sound like something he'd usually do to you? Why do you think the most by-the-book noble in the whole Seireitei is letting you, some human, spend a month with his sister and then arranging for you to live with her?"

The teenager blinked. He'd thought about it a lot and still couldn't believe it was really happening. He didn't have an answer.

Renji took a long gulp of his drink and set it down before smiling. "Rukia has been part of the Kuchiki clan for 50 years. In all that time she's never once been courted by a single suitor. It's not because no one was interested. Now you're being set up to live with her. Even you must be able to figure out what that means."

"No way!" was all Ichigo said, completely incredulous. There's no way at all that Byakuya would be thinking that Rukia and I want to be—that we're thinking about . . . let alone that he would ever agree to it!

"He's going along with all this because he thinks you two are really in it to win it. You're a war hero, buddy, you're a good catch," Renji said with a smirk. "As for you and her, it's real gentlemanly of you to let Rukia take the lead and not to be pushy or demanding and all, but you know she's always had trouble opening up and isn't good at communicating certain things. Not that you are either or anything, but . . ." he trailed off.

The former substitute glowered and slowly sipped at his drink, not sure what to say.

"I know Kuchiki-taichō is moving up his plans after having seen that video, and I can guess it's because he wants to come here to clarify his position to her personally. Yoruichi is talking to her about these same things right now on your behalf just like I'm talking to you about them on Rukia's. I'm not telling you to do anything inappropriate or that you're uncomfortable with, and I know the two of you are still grappling with other things, but you shouldn't be afraid to take the lead now and then. It's one of the things she likes about you," the officer said confidently.

Ichigo continued on with the drink as something Rukia had said to him echoed in his mind: But there's no model or guide for us. All that matters is that we're both okay with something! He set the empty glass down and took a long drink of water before saying "I have no idea what to do."

"Just be yourself. You'll never know if you don't try. If she reciprocates then it's fine, if she doesn't then stop," Renji said plainly. His friend wasn't the type to go too far and Rukia was definitely more than capable of asserting and defending herself. He once more called for cocktails and waited until they arrived before exhaling and saying "I bet you said something sappy to her like 'Let me protect your heart!' didn't you?"

His friend stared back like he was some sort of psychic or wizard. It wasn't anything so mystical: Ichigo really was just that predictable.

"Well, you can't do that from outside, because you're already in it, understand? You have to protect her heart from the inside! The more you're afraid of hurting her the more you will!" the officer said forcefully. When his friend continued to just stare at him dumbly he offered "So what happened earlier?"

"There were two songs at the music festival that really got to me, and I guess to her too," the student
replied after a long pause.

"Always with you two and songs now," the crimson-haired Shinigami said. He wondered what Hisagi or Rose would make of it. He should probably ask at some point. "I've likely never heard them so telling me more wouldn't mean much unless you did a lot of explaining. But if even music is making you both like that, you really have to talk to each other directly or express it somehow."

Ichigo said nothing and sipped at his new drink, mulling it all over.

"Anyway," Renji said, "What the hell was up with that roller coaster thing? No wonder Rukia called it a death-trap." He'd said what he'd needed to. He'd just get Ichigo a little bit more liquored up to put him at ease before getting him back to his girlfriend.

"You screamed even more than she did on her first ride and that one went like half as fast as the one she was on," the student snarked, glad to get in some revenge.

Yoruichi and Renji reunited their charges outside the lobby of the Grand Hyatt Tokyo, bringing them within a few meters of one another. Ichigo and Rukia stopped and stared as they were once more in proximity to one another, both rather pleasantly tipsy. Each was given only a modest shove toward the other and after glaring at their respective drinking partners they turned to one another again, eyes searching.

Renji started to politely walk off and was joined by Yoruichi, although they discretely observed the couple as they retreated. They'd have a fuller evaluation of their handiwork the next day.

"Hey," Ichigo awkwardly said after a second. He gave an uncertain smile.

"Hey," Rukia replied, not much better.

"So . . . did you have fun?" he asked.

"Uh huh," she said, slowly smiling more to make it clear she was glad to be back with him.

"Me too," he replied. There was a lingering pause. "I guess we should get back so we can get to bed. Can I escort you?"

"I suppose," she said coyly, extending a hand.

Ichigo took it and led her into the lobby toward the elevators.

Yoruichi and Renji shared a look and nodded to each other, heading back to their hotel to meet back up with the others.

Ichigo sat on the edge of Rukia's bed in the darkness, waiting for her to finish showering as he mentally reran the conversation with Renji yet again. His mind was still pleasantly fogged and he'd hurried so the feeling wouldn't leave him before she was done. He looked up at the sound of the door opening, suddenly cast in the light that silhouetted her, and stood.

Rukia watched him in appraisal before turning off the light and walking forward across the few steps that separated them. She looked up at him in the darkness, not sure what would happen but determined to meet it head on. His hands came up to rest on her shoulders and she shrugged them just a little at the feeling before moving her hands to grip his sides.
He slowly sat down again so his face was level with hers. The motion combined with their grasps drew her forward. Their faces were only centimeters apart, eyes reflecting the scattered lighting of the skyline as they looked at one another. Each could smell minty scents on the other's breath. He squeezed her shoulders a little, starting to pull her to him.

At the invitation she pushed forward, tilting her head slightly to one side and closing her eyes.

Ichigo guided her in toward him and closed his own eyes at the last second. Their lips connected softly. He put a bit of pressure into it, unsure as it was his first kiss.

Rukia pressed up against him, her grip intensifying as she kissed him in return, likewise not sure what to do.

Their instincts started to take over. He slid his hands down her arms and around to their inner sides before slipping them around her, putting the left around her waist and bracing her upper back with the right, his fingers sliding into her hair as he cradled the back of her head. She pushed him back a bit farther onto the bed before her hands brushed up across his chest and shoulders and she anchored her grip below the back of his neck.

He kissed her harder, only lightly pressing her head forward into it, needing to confirm how soft her lips really were.

She lifted one leg onto the bed and pushed herself up on it to get the other up as well, momentarily higher than him before bringing herself down to straddle his lap in the space she'd created, like she had at Tokyo Tower. She bit his lower lip gently before running her tongue against it.

Ichigo let out a quiet protest at the change only for her to advance, suddenly exploring his mouth. He fought back, eventually pushing out her tongue and doing the same to her.

Rukia let out a quiet moan at the feeling and very lightly bit his tongue to trap it more than anything, letting her own play against it as she suddenly gripped the back of his head.

They continued on until they were out of air, Ichigo withdrawing despite her murmured objection and bringing his forehead to hers, holding her tight. They panted, breath hot against each other, and he was suddenly intensely aware she wasn't wearing anything under her pajama top. He let the tip of his nose brush hers and nuzzled at her forehead before starting to pull back, opening his eyes.

"Don't," Rukia pleaded, opening her eyes to peer at him. "Don't let go." She stared in wonder at the look in his eyes. It was exactly what she'd seen earlier but it was framed completely differently.

Ichigo marveled at what he saw in her, at how amazingly liquid her eyes were. He was completely and hopelessly trapped by it. He just nodded and kissed her again, tenderly rather than passionately.

They scooted back and moved together as they held the second kiss for further seconds, shifting and turning. She pushed him back as he pulled her up, coming to rest with both their heads side by side on the pillows, leaving her mostly on top. She turned her head so they were cheek to cheek, burying her face against the pillow and the side of his head, arms still secure around his neck and legs on either side of his frame.

He kicked the covers down underneath them before using his feet and the arm around her waist to draw them up, returning to embracing her tightly beneath them. He brushed at her neck and hair to soothe her. Their breathing slowed quickly, but it was a long while before their hearts stopped racing and they fell asleep against one another.
Won't Let You Be Denied

Saturday, August 17, 2002

Isshin could practically feel the hostility coming off of Yuzu and to a much lesser degree Karin as he brushed his teeth. He sighed and continued on. They were entitled to anger after how the day had been mangled in the service of trying to help Ichigo and Rukia. Although based on what Renji and Yoruichi had said it'd been worth it that didn't change his personal situation. He didn't like it when they were genuinely mad at him. He mulled it over in the time he had. His inspiration wound up being, ironically, Ichigo himself. After he washed out his mouth he declared "As chairman of Kurosaki family activities, I have a special announcement!"

Yuzu's expression shifted to one of confusion while Karin's became one of sudden incredulity.

"We're staying through Monday, even if everybody else leaves after Sunday," Isshin continued. He would give them at least one full day with their brother and Rukia on holiday, costs be damned. "The decision is final!"

The sisters blinked before their looks turned conciliatory.

Nanao reclined in bed, using her soul pager to review one last time the footage of the various *humans* and Soul Society personnel past and present performing karaoke. She knew none of the songs but the delivery of all of them seemed legitimately good, although it was Rukia that was far and away the most outstanding. She exhaled and closed the video, looking at the requisition order she'd filled out to the 12th Division for hardware to screen the footage.

The message had come from a source that was identified as the personal device of Byakuya, although the text message that had accompanied it was very clearly from Yachiru. She didn't want to think about how the President of the Shinigami Women's Association had become aware of the footage or how she'd gotten hold of his soul pager. The matter that confronted her was whether she should comply with the order to show it to the association.

Rukia was a member and her astonishing talent should be recognized but doing it without her consent felt wrong. Nanao had encountered the 13th Division *fukutaichō* enough at their meetings to know that something profound had happened to her mood since the search mission some weeks ago and it all concerned Ichigo. It felt like they would be interfering in something deeply personal. However, Yachiru had probably sent herself a copy and would air the footage anyway even if she did object, there was the highly unusual sight of Renji singing to be considered, and there was something rather touching about the whole thing . . .

She dispatched the requisition order before shutting off the device and turning in for the night.

Sunday, August 18, 2002

This time it was Ichigo who found the soul pager by reflex, bringing it up into view and poking at the screen to get it to shut up. He managed it on the third "Pyon!" through sheer irritation, before returning the hand he'd used to find it to Rukia's side. He sighed a little even as he noted he wasn't suffering any ill effects from the night before. He didn't want to get up at all, whether some of his favorite bands would be playing or not. That didn't matter in comparison to what he was holding in his arms. He blushed a bit as he fully remembered the end of the night, before glancing sideways as
he felt her stir against him.

Rukia fractionally tightened her arms around his neck and only with the greatest reluctance pulled her head back, looking up at him as memories returned to her. He looked a bit abashed, but content. She found herself staring at him.

He smiled a little at the flush on her cheeks and the disbelieving look she had. He wouldn't tease her about the kiss. That was too special. He gave a small smirk. "You're a pretty nice blanket," he said after a second.

"I've had more comfortable beds but I guess this one was at least warm," she replied with only the slightest chill.

"Sorry," he said, making it clear from his tone he really wasn't at all.

"Don't apologize insincerely," she chastised.

"Sorry," he repeated a bit more earnestly, starting to gently scratch at the back of her neck.

Rukia leaned her head back into it and shrugged her shoulders again before starting to try and loosen her arms from him to pull away. "Ichigo, we really need to get up . . ." she said quietly.

"Don't let go," Ichigo replied, his tone suddenly different as he echoed her words from the previous night. He kept his arms secure around her although he didn't restrain her.

She turned to him again, finding echoes of the look she'd seen the previous day both on his face and in his eyes. There was also a certain kind of fragility in the latter which was so unusual to see. It immediately filled her with worry, even as things started to war inside her about what to do. She composed her own face as she quashed the internal debate with *don't ever hurt him, no matter what.* She hesitated for just a split second before closing her eyes and moving her head forward to kiss him softly. The first had been shared, the second had been his, and so this one was hers, and she needed to know what it was like with all her faculties at hand.

He held it without intensifying it, recognizing it for what it was.

After some seconds she broke it and used her position and grip on him to turn them onto their sides. She leaned back, bringing his head to rest below hers, idly brushing her hands through his hair reassuringly as he settled against her without comment. It was the first time she'd held him that way. If touching him was dangerous then kissing him was even worse, but Yoruichi was probably right. It was really far too late to worry about that kind of thing. They would just have to handle it as best they could. "Fool, like I'd ever," she whispered in an uncritical way.

Ichigo said nothing but tightened his arms around her just a little.

Rukia continued to stroke at his hair for a minute before asking "Does that last song we heard . . . really remind you of me?" She already knew the answer.

"Yeah," he said from below without further comment.

"And the one before that . . . you felt it too?" she continued.

"Yeah," he repeated, quieter.

The title of the song "November Rain" suddenly hit her much harder. It had been practically all of the previous November that he'd been unconscious, all alone. She'd gotten time off duty and watched
over him then as much as she could, but . . . how had she not seen it the other day? When she put that together with what else he'd said she clung to him tighter. She was silent for several long seconds before she said "I won't let you wind up alone in the rain again, Ichigo," with a light but endless determination.

"Rukia . . ." he replied quietly, not entirely sure what to say to the declaration.

"I won't let it rain on you," she said more forcefully.

Ichigo gently gripped at her and lowered his head just a little more.

Rukia blinked at his motion and widened her eyes as she blushed, her conviction shaken as she was unsure what he was doing.

He brought his face to rest at her upper sternum and lightly pressed his lips to the fabric over her heart. He held it for some seconds before moving back as he had been.

Her eyes narrowed down as they became soft and she continued to hold him quietly.

"They really did set us up you know . . ." he said after quite some time had passed, "Yoruichi and Renji."

"I know," she replied, adding "They weren't wrong."

"No, they weren't," he admitted, "But even so, it was kind of devious to get us intoxicated like that." He honestly didn't have the heart for revenge over it but felt the need to address it. "Did she tell you the same thing about Byakuya that Renji told me . . .?" he asked.

"Sounds like it," Rukia replied quietly. The woman's logic had been sound but she still had trouble fully believing it. If she was right though, it wouldn't be a matter of belief for very long.

"Is that why you wanted to step back?" Ichigo asked. There was no recrimination or anger in the way he said it.

"Yes, that was a big part of it," she said quietly. She sounded guilty.

He gripped her more firmly and tilted his head back, bringing it up equal with hers again on the pillow so he could look at her. When their eyes met she smiled a little, seemingly despite herself. "You know I'd have—" he started.

She slid a hand around from his neck across one of his cheeks, bringing an index finger firmly to his lips, looking into his eyes. She knew and he didn't have to tell her. There was a lot he didn't have to tell her and they could unpack it together in due time.

They watched each other for awhile before Ichigo gave her digit a peck and she removed it. They shared a long look and it was a minute before he smiled at her just a bit sardonically and said "I guess I feel alright about going now."

"Are you sure?" she asked, raising an eyebrow slightly.

"Yeah," he said with more confidence.

"That's the strawberry I'm used to seeing," she said with a little grin, tapping his nose.

"Go on already," he said with mild irritation, releasing her and lightly shooing her.
She let out a "Hmph!" of mock injury and annoyance before untangling herself from him and sliding off the bed, getting clothes and going to the bathroom. He watched her depart before getting up himself and moving to look outside.

It was, ironically, lightly raining, and he would soon discover it had been since late last night.

It was unclear if the event would be cancelled or not, though Ichigo sort of doubted it. Punks weren't the sorts to be deterred by drizzle. They hurried to have time to get breakfast and took their umbrellas and some towels, taking the same route back to Chiba Marine Stadium. They picked up light windbreakers on the way as it was actually unseasonably cool, the typhoon having brought things down to around room temperature. They discovered upon arrival that events were proceeding as planned, everybody in the stadium seating totting umbrellas as if it was nothing unusual and the people out in the field mostly just bearing it. It'd done little to alter attendance numbers. Ichigo once again texted Ishida, though this time he only had a rough estimate of when they'd be free.

The arrangements made it somewhat awkward to see, but after wiping off their seats and putting the towels down to keep dry they huddled in, finding it oddly sort of cozy. On cue, The Offspring appeared, rallying the crowd against the weather and cheering them for their dedication. Once again, the people and band worked each other into a frenzy, and soon the percussion of "Gotta Get Away" rang out. Ichigo noted how much it reflected how he'd been before the vacation but did his best not to dwell on it, singing along instead. After more than a dozen songs, the band departed to loud cheers, and was after a short interlude being replaced by NOFX, whose irreverence across more than twenty songs was mostly political.

Rukia found herself sort of lost even if she could understand why Ichigo liked their energy. They were in turn replaced by No Doubt. Rukia sort of liked "Rock Steady," liked "Hella Good," didn't much like "Sunday Morning," didn't like "Ex-Girlfriend" at all for very clear reasons, and did like 'Underneath It All" and "New." She was ambivalent about the next two songs, but it was the third that was the real surprise in the roller coaster performance. As soon as the beat started the crowd roared in approval, knowing that "Don't Speak" was starting.

It hit her like a sledgehammer from the moment the singing started, more for how she'd felt last winter than their current circumstances, even those of a day ago and earlier. Old aches surged in her even though things had changed. She let out a sniff during one of its lulls as it continued.

Ichigo turned to her at that, eyes going wide with worry at what he saw. He could guess what she felt, and it wasn't at all easy for him to sit through either. He immediately reached out a hand onto one of hers to reassure her, not sure what else to do.

She turned to him and gave an apologetic smile. His concern was written all over his face and she felt bad for it. She turned her hand around under his and gripped at him, mouthing 'It's okay.'

He continued to stare at her, holding her gaze as the song washed over them, unwilling to leave her alone against it. Once more something worked within him and as the song ended and the next hadn't yet begun he rose, taking her with him by the hand. He snatched up their things with his other hand while balancing the umbrella, leading her away.

Rukia blinked but didn't object and she hastily collected her towel. It was only when they were inside the stadium's depths and could converse normally that she said "Ichigo, it's okay, I'm okay, it's just that song made me remember how things . . . used to be." She didn't know what he was doing and didn't want it to be something rash.

"I know," he said without any judgment, stopping for a moment to pack their towels up before taking
her hand again and continuing to lead her on out of the stadium.

"Where are we going?" she asked, still a bit worried. The festival sounded distant owing to the stadium containing it.

"I want to show you something," he declared.

"Ichigo—" she said.

"We've seen enough bands I like, we should try some that you might like," he said, looking back to her with a determined smile.

She opened her mouth as if to say something but could only just smile a little back at the look on his face.

He led her across the street to the other half of the festival at the Makuhari Messe. Their passes gave them access to all the events and they made their way into the 'factory' area right as the band known as PUFFY in Japan, but Puffy AmiYumi in the US, was taking the stage. Rukia found herself blown away by the difference in the mood both from the venue and the band, not having heard a band that mixed Japanese and English yet.

Ichigo wasn't the hugest fan but her excitement drew him into it.

The assembled members of the Shinigami Women's Association sat in stunned silence as a large-screen projection of Rukia's performance ended. The video scaled up quite well. Only Nanao, Kiyone, and Yachiru were immune, having all seen it before. Kiyone was visibly displeased that it had somehow become public knowledge, Nanao was aloof, and Yachiru was quite happy that everyone agreed with her intuitions.

Unohana recovered quickest, smiling serenely, followed by Matsumoto who grinned as her suspicions were all too clearly confirmed. Rukia's performance had only briefly distracted Sui-Fêng from being shocked at Yoruichi's delivery. Isane, Nemu, and Hinamori all took their time.

"Kia-chan is the only real-life pop-star in Soul Society," Yachiru said, inventing a nickname for Rukia on the spot, before continuing "and even Ichigo, Pencil, Jiggles, Muscles, Ren-Ren, and Boobies are pretty good!" She chose to ignore Ichigo's family although their performances were certainly no worse and she'd liked the song his sisters had sung the most.

"I believe what the President is saying is that, as a member of this association, we should popularize Kuchiki's exemplary performance as an inspiration to all female Shinigami and use it to likewise benefit the standing of the Shinigami Women's Association," Nanao clarified.

"I object!" Kiyone said harshly, drawing surprised looks from everyone, especially Isane. She would defend her fukutaichō and long-time associate, especially over something so clearly personal.

"Overruled," Yachiru said blithely.

"I'm serious—" Kiyone began to continue, before the sound of Unohana politely clearing her throat cut her off.

"Your reticence and loyalty to your fukutaichō is commendable, Kiyone-san, however, perhaps in this case gaining Rukia-san the support of the women of the Seireitei would help more than anything else?" the 4th Division taichō said, making it clear there were many more things at work than there might seem to be. She reflected on Renji's request two weeks prior to borrow Hanatarō and the
briefing he'd delivered upon his return.

Kiyone wanted to reply but something in Unohana's words and tone struck home and she demurred, going quiet.

"Also, I'm pretty sure that Ichigo put all this together, and it's pretty clear there's indeed more than meets the eye to this performance, which I believe other female Shinigami would appreciate," Matsumoto offered with only a hint of suggestion. It had been rather sweet of Ichigo to draw Rukia out of her shell and the affections on display would make it a knock-out hit.

"If there are no further objections, the matter at hand is how we would best bring public attention to this," Nanao stated, adjusting her glasses. She felt that Matsumoto was correct and that it would also put the Shinigami Men's Association on the back foot. Before anybody else could say anything she continued: "I believe it's obvious we could reach the widest audience by using the Seireitei Communication. There's enough here to discuss that a special issue could be produced."

Nobody said anything in response.

"In that case, I'll talk to Hisagi," Nanao said, excusing herself from the meeting. She was already planning it out in her head: biographies of the performers, interviews, translations of the songs, and a schedule for open-air screenings of the footage itself.

Ichigo and Rukia left the 'factory' stage after having listened to a truly exceptional performance from the up-and-coming singer AYA. It had left the latter rather upbeat and she was all smiles as they made their way back out of Makuhari Messe, intending to meet up with everyone else. She suddenly stopped and turned when they were in the lobby.

Ichigo knew what must be happening yet again before he heard the words or saw the man in question.

"Nii-sama!" Rukia said cheerily, gripping Ichigo's wrist and pulling him over.

He was surprised, but only for a second, moving to match pace with her. She took them significantly closer to Byakuya than he would've liked, and he saw the man was wearing a gigai impeccably dressed in a completely out of place three-piece suit, with a long umbrella in one hand. The people milling about the lobby, particularly the women, were looking at him like he was some sort of rock star.

Byakuya said "Rukia," with what passed for exceptional warmth from him, and regarded Ichigo for only a split second before saying "Kurosaki . . . san."

Ichigo looked around for a moment to make it obvious he was picking terms appropriate to the venue before replying "Kuchiki . . . sama."

"My apologies for this interruption. I must speak to my sister in private," Byakuya continued, making it clear Ichigo was dismissed and the apology was the best he would get.

Rukia gave him a look that indicated she'd be okay as she let go of his wrist, only to find he was already looking to her with confidence. They held the exchange for a second before he turned and made his way to an open bench to wait. She let her brother lead her somewhere more private.

"You do not seem surprised by my arrival," Byakuya said.
"I was told it was likely by . . . Shihōin-sama," Rukia replied, as much to address the nature of the conversation that was had and the capacity it'd been held in as to identify whom she'd spoken.

". . . I see," he said, concealing his moderate irritation that once more the woman seemed to have gotten ahead of him by just one step. "And I assume she told you why she thought I would be coming here?"

"Yes," his sister replied. "She felt that after having seen me sing you would want to explain why you're allowing me to so freely associate with Ichigo." She left the particulars unsaid.

Byakuya narrowed his eyes marginally. The fact Yoruichi had been plotting with Renji to record the events of that night made a kind of sense. When Renji had gone to perform he'd passed his soul pager off to someone. It wasn't hard to guess who it had been. "Indeed. However, she could not have known the whole story."

Rukia looked up to him in mild surprise. What else was there to the circumstances surrounding her and Ichigo?

Her brother gave her a thin smile before saying: "There are certainly political considerations at hand. Those she could easily guess at. However . . . I promised Hisana that I would protect you no matter what. I held suitors at bay for decades to protect you. I kept you from holding a seated position to protect you. But I cannot protect you without also stifling you. You began to truly bloom despite my long interference, then a cruel winter stunted your growth, and now you blossom again. It would seem that you are governed by a particular sun which does not obey the seasons. That sun is your true protector . . . I can think of no greater way of honoring my oath than to help it shine upon you."

Rukia stared up at Byakuya with wide eyes, not able to believe what she was hearing.

He looked back to her then with what looked like actual warmth as he said "Grow stronger in the rays of that sun. Do not be ashamed to rejoice in its warmth, or to let its light become your own. No one of import will judge you."

Somehow her gaze grew wider still before she turned her head away and shut her eyes tightly, not wanting him to see her get bleary-eyed.

Byakuya halfway turned, giving her privacy, although he lightly rested a hand on one of her shoulders. "It will likely not always be easy, but I trust that you will manage. Please continue to sing beautifully, Rukia." He withdrew his hand and began to take his leave.

"Nii-sama!" she said after he'd taken a step.

He turned his head to look at her over his shoulder.

She looked up at him, eyes teary as she said "Thank you."

"If you cry, Kurosaki-san will become angry with me," he said lightly, before turning again and departing, stating "I must attend to matters in Karakura."

Rukia watched him leave, doing her best to still herself as she did so.

Ichigo was surprised when she returned without Byakuya. If she'd been happy before, she lit up the room merely by being present. He couldn't help but stare as she walked up to him. "Where's Byakuya?" he asked.
"Don't worry about it," she said, looking at him with a strange smile. "Let's meet everyone else."

He continued to watch her for a second before nodding and standing.
If All Goes As Planned

Sunday, August 18, 2002

By the time Ukitake arrived with Shunsui via flash step, Nanao had just finished showing Hisagi the video of the karaoke performance. The former of the arrivals had been tipped off by a message from Kiyone after the Shinigami Women's Association's meeting had adjourned, and had gone for backup given the gravity of what was occurring.

"Taichō?" Nanao said as she felt Shunsui's reiatsu, not entirely surprised to see Ukitake but quite shocked to see he'd immediately called in his friend and her superior. Neither looked angry, but neither looked pleased either.

Shunsui let out a sigh that indicated he wasn't happy to be dragged into the matter and said "Nanao-chan, I know you probably have a good reason for all this but even so . . ."

"You know if I don't handle this with at least some decorum, Yachiru will do it in a way that's even more objectionable," Nanao replied, looking to Ukitake even as she responded to her own taichō.

"Will she really though? Isn't she just as likely to forget after her next sugar high or something?" Shunsui asked idly, scratching at the stubble on one cheek.

"Not when it involves Ichigo-kun," Ukitake said, frowning a bit. The pink-haired fukutaichō could be unusually attuned to matters concerning the teenager and was likely even more so given how dispirited his situation had made Kenpachi. He could understand what was going on and understood Nanao was the messenger more than anything, but it didn't make him any gladder about the circumstances.

"Exactly," Nanao responded, "It's pretty clear what's going on in this video and I'm not entirely happy about blatantly publicizing it either but at least this way maybe something positive can come out of it!" She didn't know how the situation around Ichigo and Rukia had been evolving officially and unofficially, and felt gaining them popular support among at least the women of the Seireitei couldn't hurt. For everyone else it was maybe just a bit embarrassing at worst.

"Unfortunately, that's not the case," Ukitake said. "Kuchiki has already been reassigned to monitor Ichigo-kun indefinitely until his status changes. Kuchiki-taichō has already given his blessing to the matter. Yamamoto-sōtaichō is aware of all of this and approves. Bringing public attention to the matter is more likely to hurt them than help at this stage."

"Don't be so sure," Hisagi said, speaking up at last. He had some idea of what was going on from having talked with Renji. Three intent pairs of eyes were abruptly upon him. He didn't flinch and continued on. "It's clear Kurosaki and Kuchiki like each other quite a lot. It's also clear the former put this together to get the latter to express herself. But it's important to note what's off-screen too. It was a public performance. She wasn't afraid to sing in public because of all of them, and that's what they were encouraging her to do—to sing for everyone including complete strangers. That's why they all put themselves on the line. Kurosaki put together a group to do it and they clearly practiced, all for her sake. What group does Kuchiki really have beyond them?"

Ukitake's eyes widened a bit at that. It was true that he hadn't found it appropriate to interfere in her
affairs until this had all occurred, but . . . he suddenly remembered the conversation he and Hisagi had before the apex of the war while watching Inoue and Rukia train.

"Shinigami get through by sharing things as allies, or friends, or associates, or at least as comrades-in-arms," Hisagi continued. "You and I both know Kuchiki doesn't have anyone she shares things with like that. Don't we owe her some sort of support beyond just the official kind?" He looked to Ukitake in the eyes then. "Can't we make this a genuine celebration of her talent and of his and his friends and family's dedication to her? Can't it be about the true meaning of camaraderie? There's something here to actually cheer on, something exemplary! It doesn't have to be gossip! Isn't it on us to choose how to present it and what to make of it?"

Ukitake was left speechless by both the conviction of the fukutaichō and his point. It was true that in a way Soul Society at large had failed Rukia. They'd stood by without any plan, trusting she would work it out, just like they had—just like he had—when she'd grappled with the loss of Kaien. Ichigo's associates had apparently at least organized and were ready, even if they'd given him space.

"Yare yare," Shunsui muttered, idly adjusting the floral kimono he wore over his shihakushō. The degree and range of sentiment the situation was generating in people only even vaguely familiar with the pair was certainly quite unusual.

"Will you promise to make it about that, Hisagi-kun?" Ukitake asked at last, his expression making it clear he demanded an assurance if this was to go forward.

"I won't run it unless it meets with your approval," Hisagi replied, confident he and his team could match and exceed that high standard.

Ichigo and Rukia wound up reuniting with everyone else in the vicinity of Omotoesando Station near Yoyogi Park, where their associates had spent most of the day. Given the size and age-range of their group it was a bit difficult to find things to do that interested them all, but they managed nonetheless, with Karin, Yuzu, and Rukia all hauling Ichigo into the five-story toy store Kiddy Land while they were on their way to the Omotesando Hills mall.

As the early evening proceeded on toward and beyond sunset they all made their way back toward Yoyogi Park to take in Harajuku and get an affordable dinner together. Nobody remarked on the difference in the couple's attitude directly but it was clear it had changed quite drastically from the day before. Yoruichi and Renji did their best to try and determine what exactly their words had wrought but it evaded their direct detection. Ichigo and Rukia were once more bickering and bantering much as was usual.

They were lingering in the aftermath of dinner when Urahara suddenly yawned and said "Well, although this has been quite fun, if we're to get back tonight, we really do need to be heading off." He stood, adding "We'll see you next weekend or the one after that, Kurosaki-san, Kuchiki-san?"

"One or the other," Rukia ventured. She wasn't sure which it would be herself. They hadn't yet addressed it.

"Don't get too used to being here," Yoruichi said slyly with a smile, standing with him.

"We'll be back eventually," Ichigo rebuked. His three friends rose in turn, adding their own thanks and farewells. After a lengthier-than-usual exchange considering the time spans since they'd last seen each other and would next meet again, both he and Rukia realized his family hadn't moved at all. "Um, aren't you—" he began, perplexed.
"We're not going, Ichi-nii," Karin said.

"That's right!" Yuzu added.

For once it was Isshin who looked apologetic. "Sorry, but you see, I promised them we'd stay one more day to make up for yesterday and how abbreviated today was, so . . ." he trailed off, his tone making it clear he wasn't really all that sorry. "Please consider spending tomorrow with us, Rukia-chan!" he added, ignoring his son in appealing to her sympathies.

"Of course," she said sweetly, not one to turn down more time with Ichigo's sisters.

Ichigo adopted a rather dour expression at having been cut out of the decision-making loop even if he wouldn't have actually done anything differently.

This combined with Rukia's disposition drew a smile from Karin and a giggle from Yuzu. It was clear how easily he deferred to her in ways he did for nobody else. They said nothing to tease, and after departing the restaurant and making a brief stop for ice cream they made their way back to Roppongi as a group. They confirmed when they'd meet up the next day before splitting up and heading to their different hotels.

Rukia exited the bathroom to find Ichigo already in his bed under the covers, arms behind his head as if contemplating something. She knew it wasn't the Tokyo skyline, distorted by continuing rain or not. She went to her own bed, sitting down on it and considering him. After a few seconds she asked "What's on your mind, Ichigo?"

"A lot," he replied, glancing to her with a small and uncertain smile.

"Tell me," she said in a way that made it clear it was a request and not a demand. After the previous night and that morning, him being on his own bed was a statement by itself that she wasn't entirely sure how to read.

"I've been thinking about what we're going to do when this is all over and we're back in Karakura," he said quietly.

She blinked, and almost started to say something, before waiting to hear what else he might add.

She blinked, and almost started to say something, before waiting to hear what else he might add.

"I like this. I really like this. When we leave I'm going to miss it. I'm going to miss this view, and the shower, and the city. I don't regret anything . . . but I also wonder if we shouldn't start over. I'm not saying that we should forget what happened here or anything like that. It's just that everything's been so jumbled: pain with joy, hurt with happiness, fear with hope, and discovery with regret . . . I can't help but think maybe we should draw a line under this and go from there," he said quietly, grasping for words. He didn't really know how to articulate what he wanted to say. He didn't want them to be mired in the past.

Rukia closed her eyes and became still for a moment. She could understand what he meant even though she didn't fully like it. Setting that aside for a moment, she steeled herself to instead ask questions she didn't want to and already knew the answers to. She had to actually hear the words and if she going to ask them it had to be before she returned to the topic he'd just brought up. When she spoke her voice was free of accusation. "Are you sure you really want to get your powers back?"

"Don't be stupid," Ichigo said mildly.

She opened her eyes and looked at him again, finding he had on one of those insolent expressions he wore when he heard something displeasing. "I'm serious," she said, keeping her tone neutral. "This
whole time everyone, including you and me, has just taken it for granted that you want your powers back. But nobody ever asked you if you ever wanted them in the first place, or what it would do to your life if you got them back."

"It's not like I was ever normal," he said, looking down from her before his gaze returned with determination. "You helped me be who I was supposed to be, and I wouldn't trade that for anything. You're inseparable from it. So don't even joke," he said resolutely.

She wondered at that for a split second. If nothing truly bad had ever happened in his life, if he'd grown up with his mother's love, would he say the same thing? If he was somehow offered that, would he really pick this? She discarded the question in revulsion at the idea of playing favorites in that way. It was no different than if someone asked if she would give up Ichigo to see Kaien live again. They were who they were, the past was what it was, and he would say the same. But even so . . . "Are you sure you really want for us to keep going too?" she asked much more quietly.

The gall that had ruled his face fell away and what replaced it looked more pained than anything. It took him a moment to recompose himself and he looked at her with redoubled resolve but no anger as he stated "Rukia . . . I don't ever wanna have to hear you ask something like that again."

Her eyes widened at the callback to when she'd lectured him in Hueco Mundo and she suddenly looked quite guilty at having asked it, glancing away from him. After a moment she continued on despite that: "Yoruichi told me that you turned down Inoue asking you out back in April." Once more her voice carried no subtext.

"I did," Ichigo replied honestly, not entirely sure what that had to do with things between them but realizing she was airing various concerns to him in her own way.

"Why?" Rukia responded.

He exhaled before saying "I like her, but not like that. I told her how much I appreciated her, and that I loved her like a sister, but that I couldn't change that. She took it a lot better than I thought she would. I didn't say it then, but I felt at that time that I just . . . wasn't interested in that kind of thing." That seeing Rukia again had turned his position upside down inside a week made it plain what a coping mechanism that had been.

She knew it too, and she didn't address it directly. "Yoruichi also told me you didn't go to school on the first day after waking up. She said Tatsuki went to find you and she's never told anyone what she saw," she replied.

His eyes went a bit wide at both that Yoruichi knew so much and that Rukia knew it too. He opened his mouth as their talk the week prior came back to him, before closing it, considering, and then saying "It felt like . . . everything in my world had fallen apart again." He left it unsaid what the previous time had been. She knew well enough.

"On that same day, I . . . went off into the wilderness of Rukongai at night. It was nii-sama who found me out there," Rukia volunteered. She looked back to him with considered sympathy as she said "That song we heard earlier today at the festival, 'Don't Speak', best conveys how I felt, which was why . . . it was no different for you and that's why you moved for us to leave, isn't it?"

"... Yeah," Ichigo replied, processing fully why they'd both been so melancholic when they'd admitted they'd missed one another even after they'd admitted they also liked one another. A long silence stretched out between them, the conclusion not being drawn verbally even though all these things together sketched out the whole truth before them. "I was trying to figure out how to find my way back to seeing you again without doing anything I knew you'd get angry at me for," he stated at
"I was too," she replied, meeting the look. She didn't elaborate on the difference between seeing and interacting with him as it was pedantic and beyond the point. He knew what she meant.

They'd made it clear—and recently very clear—that they liked one another. It went unsaid but neither could run away any longer from the fact that they'd liked one another for quite awhile beforehand too. Both became quiet as they tried to figure out when exactly it'd happened, if indeed it had been any one moment at all. They found themselves thinking back to the looks in each others' eyes on that very first night when they had told one another their names and their hands had met on Sode no Shirayuki. Had it started even then? In a way, that night remained the most intimate one they'd ever had, bar none.

The zanpakutō in question offered her no answers. Sode no Shirayuki had been oddly silent about everything involving Ichigo, as if she not only had no opinion but almost no awareness of what was going on regarding him. That remained very unusual.

After some time contemplating, he forced himself back to the present, asking "What did Byakuya say to you today?" to redirect their talk. She hadn't volunteered anything about it and her voiced memory had reminded him of it again.

Despite the tenor of the conversation she seemed to smile faintly on reflex. After a short interval she took on a look that was at once both bashful and coquettish before saying "It was a private conversation."

"Don't say that after relating everything you've heard from Yoruichi!" Ichigo replied with a bit of heat, scowling at her sudden evasiveness.

Rukia crossed her arms at this, saying "It was advice and knowledge meant for me and me alone, and that's all you need to know," rather primly. She let him glower for a moment before adding "The gist of it was to not worry about what others might think," without further comment or elaboration.

He blinked, it taking him a moment to parse what Byakuya of all people might mean by that. He was telling her she shouldn't worry as to how she acts with me? It must have shown on his face because she was giving him a shadow of that strange smile again suddenly. He frowned in response before looking away for awhile, stewing in all of these thoughts as his mind returned to how life would continue after this vacation ended. "Rukia, we really do need to talk about what we'll do afterwards . . ." he tried to continue.

She watched as he resumed brooding and sighed. She hated seeing him like that when they talked about these things and she made a snap decision. Without warning she leaned forward and crawled onto his bed, rapidly pinning his wrists with her hands and sitting on his stomach to keep him from moving easily as she peered down at him.

He was more than a little stunned by her speed and decisiveness in moving and didn't quite react until she was already holding him down. "H—Hey, come on, what're you doing?" he demanded, fighting against her grasp. He was reminded yet again how surprisingly strong she was for her size.

"Ichigo, are you ashamed to be seen with me?" Rukia asked coolly.

"Of course not!" Ichigo replied, looking up at her indignantly.

"Are you embarrassed to be in close proximity to me?" she continued, squeezing at his wrists.

"No!" he stated. Although it was sometimes awkward because he didn't know what to do, he would last, looking at her levelly.
never call it embarrassing.

"Do you find it humiliating to talk to me frankly and honestly?"

"No," he repeated, his frustration starting to lose its momentum.

"Does the idea of being affectionate with me make you distressed?"

That time he hesitated for a split second. It wasn't that he didn't like it. It wasn't that at all. "I just want
to do things right. I don't want us to lose either what we have, or had . . ." he said quietly.

Her expression became quite delicate at that. "Are you afraid of me?" she whispered.

He said nothing, lost in those ultramarine eyes of hers.

"It's okay if you are because I'm afraid of you too. Well, that's not quite right—it's more like I'm
afraid for you than of you. I know that's what you feel too because it's natural," Rukia continued.
She reflected on something that had been on her mind again since the night before, saying "You're the one who told me it was okay to be scared if we had each other."

"I know," Ichigo managed, adding "You're the one who told me there was no model for us . . . so I want to make sure we have what we want!"

They stared at one another for quite some time. After a long interval, as if relating indisputable facts,
she stated quietly but firmly "I'll still be your girlfriend. Whether anybody else knows beyond those
who already do or not, whether we touch or act familiar in public or private or not, whether we sleep
beside one another at all or not, whether we decide to declare the next date night our real first one or
not, no matter what else that won't change." She wouldn't surrender that. Her demeanor became
confident and self-assured as she spoke but her eyes seemed to convey a smile at him.

Ichigo tried to remain stoic in the face of it but finally he just let out a breath and smiled up at her.
"I'll still be your boyfriend," he said. They really were stuck together.

"Don't say it so sheepishly!" she admonished.

"If I was more assertive you'd complain about how I was taking it for granted!" he accused.

"I—I would not, you fool!" she said with a huff, scowling herself.

"So are you planning to just hold me captive all night or what?" he deadpanned.

She twitched an eyebrow and let go of his wrists in frustration at how irascible he was only to
suddenly find her hands caught in his. She blinked at the role reversal, his grip strong and sure. She
was about to say something when she was stopped cold by the look on his face. He looked very
certain of things.

"Kuchiki Rukia, nothing makes me prouder than being seen with you. So I won't embarrass you but
I don't mind if the world knows what you are to me. No matter what I'll give you respect even as I
give you attention, because you're a lady and not a damsel. I'll misstep, and I'll mess up, but I'll do
my best to treat you right," Ichigo said firmly.

Rukia found herself fully captivated as she stared into his chocolate eyes. She let the back of her
fingers brush against his palms precisely to garner his attention.

He loosened his hold on her hands at that.
She moved them, sinking her fingers down between his as they regarded one another and lightly squeezing to indicate her approval, watching him for awhile in appreciation before saying "We never decided on whether we want to stay after Friday or not."

He'd been thinking about it. "Wouldn't it be best for us to use the last week to get things in order rather than trying to do it all on the last weekend?" he asked. He honestly wanted to stay as long as possible but it wasn't the smart or mature thing to do.

"What do you mean?" Rukia asked.

"You never had an opportunity to sort things out in Soul Society before being dispatched here," Ichigo said. He knew how seriously she took her work.

"Ichigo, being assigned to watch over you means I have to do just that . . ." she replied. She didn't like the idea of leaving him completely alone, even for a little while, and it also ran counter to her mission parameters.

"Come on, I literally live with one former taichō and two more seem to have turned my friends into a spy ring. You can remand me to their custody or something for a few days, can't you? Just ask Ukitake-san if you can or not," he responded, trying to sound convincing.

"Are you trying to get rid of me after saying all that?" she chided, looking at him with a suspicious expression.

"It would help us decompress," he said, locking eyes with her and squeezing back at her hands.

Rukia blinked and started to say something but just let out a breath instead. He was right that it was better for them to ease into their new situation. It would give them time to clear their heads, acclimate to their new accommodations, and get their affairs in order. Acting skills or not, she would need to spend time reorienting to pretending to be a high school student and to familiarize herself with what Urahara was actually doing too. "Fine, I'll ask, but tomorrow we have to talk to your family about at least some of what's going on," she said firmly.

Ichigo cringed a bit at that but let it go, saying only "Alright."

They were left to consider one another, their attention gradually shifting down to where their hands interlocked. She started to try and slide her fingers out from his in deference to the points of their conversation only to find him resisting. She let the corners of her mouth rise just a little at that even though it made her feel a bit bad. For all that he wanted to be responsible and deliberate, he was definitely still Ichigo. She leaned forward while he was distracted and lightly kissed his forehead just below his hairline.

He blinked and looked up at her in surprise, taken a bit aback at the gesture.

It gave her the opportunity she needed and she extricated her hands, brushing his hair back into place with one as she turned. "Get some sleep," she instructed modestly. She pushed herself back onto her own bed and reached for the light.

"Hey, Shinigami," Ichigo suddenly said rather arrogantly.

Rukia blinked again, this time at the abrupt change in his tone and word choice. She turned her head to him in confusion, finding him looking at her with a small smile and an oddly sentimental appearance that was completely at odds with his words. It made her stop.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow," he continued.
After a few seconds her expression came to mirror his. "That's not my name, brat."

"Yeah?" he asked, his smile growing.

She smirked and turned off the light, getting under her own covers.

Chapter End Notes

An interesting aside: in Episode 1 of the anime, Ichigo puts his hands on the blade of Sode no Shirayuki's sealed state and his hands never come near Rukia's; in Chapter 1 of the manga, he grips it by the guard and his fingers very clearly do contact hers.
Never Letting Fate Decide

Monday, August 19, 2002

Ichigo woke up to the rhythm of rain against the window. He sat up slowly and looked outside, finding the world cast in grey and gleaming electric lights. It was sometime after sunrise but still early. A look over at Rukia revealed she was curled up and fast asleep, breathing silently. He found himself smiling at the sight of her and exhaled, going to get dressed. It was too late to go back to bed and too early to wake her.

His mind wandered as he showered, turning to the previous night. He still couldn't get rid of the feeling that he was doing things wrong, but the sensation was different somehow. It gnawed at him like a kind of corrosion. Eventually he sat down under the falling water to try and meditate on it, something about the noise and the feeling helping him think more clearly than the soaking tub did.

He considered it for a long time before he spontaneously recalled Rukia singing "Love Is A Battlefield." He somehow knew it was the title and not the song itself that was the key to the puzzle. He took that for granted and considered the shape of the key: it was a sword, and its blade was made of words.

There was Sun Tzu: If you know the enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles. If you know yourself, but not the enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer defeat. If you know neither the enemy, nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle . . . Supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemies' resistance without having to fight.

There was Bruce Lee: There are no limits. There are plateaus, but you must not stay there, you must go beyond them. If it kills you, it kills you. A man must constantly exceed his level . . . When you're talking about fighting, as it is, with no rules, well then, baby you'd better train every part of your body! . . . All types of knowledge ultimately mean self knowledge.

There was Musashi: When fighting with enemies, if you get to feeling snarled up and are making no forward progress, you toss your mood away and think in your heart that you are starting everything anew . . . The main thing is to see that adversaries feel defeated from the bottom of their hearts. You can knock the heart out of people with weapons or with your body or with your mind. It is not to be understood in just one way . . . Crushing requires a crushing mood, as when you view an opponent as weak and become strong yourself, thus overwhelming your adversary.

There was Rukia herself, yet again: If you're afraid of losing, just get stronger. If you're afraid of not being able to protect your friends, swear to get stronger until you can protect them. If you're afraid of the Hollow inside you . . . just get stronger until you can crush him. If you don't want to listen to others, then hold your chin up and yell those words to yourself! That's the kind of man you have been . . . in my heart, Ichigo!

There were all those and many others besides. He mentally swung the sword around, checking its weight and balance, familiarizing himself with it. It was new and different, not like Zangetsu or even the one which had been impaled into his emotions for months on end. Although it had an edge and was made for fighting, it was a sword for living, not for killing. The enemy it was designed to eliminate was not outside but within himself: his own doubts. He hadn't really been thinking about living for awhile, just about surviving.
Did Rukia have one like it, or did Sode no Shirayuki do that job? Would he need it if he still had access to Zangetsu? He cleaved such thoughts away and turned to the bigger conundrum: what could something like a sword do against something like rust other than to cut away the corroded parts? The response came in Rukia's voice and had an annoyed tone although he knew it originated in his own head: *You're thinking about it too literally, Ichigo.*

*Thanks, mental midget,* he replied sarcastically, not afraid of reprisal from his own idea of her. *Great, now you're talking to an imaginary version of your girlfriend in the shower. Real step up from having an inner world, huh, hero of Soul Society? Shut up and focus!*

He saw it then. If his despair during the war had been fear of the Hollow within him, and his despair after the war had been the loss of Rukia and the strength she'd given him to protect, then his latest despair was in how to handle her. He'd grappled with it time and again but it felt like he never got it quite right. He hadn't gotten it right since he'd been aware of starting to really worry about it. It was Renji's voice that assailed him then: *The more you're afraid of hurting her the more you will!*

*I know that,* he thought.

The response was acerbic: *Then why do you keep doing it?*

He took a step backward in the conversation rather than taking a step forward: he hadn't gotten it right since he'd started to worry about it.

The reaction remained Renji's: *I told you to just be yourself.*

*Shut up,* he reiterated, putting it out of mind. Was his problem that he was thinking about it too hard? Maybe it was even simpler than that. Was his problem that he was thinking about it at all? Had he been thinking about everything too much ever since that day, and lost sight of who he was? In almost every activity, from martial arts to baseball to playing guitar, the goal was to train until the task became second nature and expression could simply flow without conscious impediment or self-awareness. It seemed Bruce Lee's *be like water* had more meanings than one. Beyond that, it wasn't that he was bad at thinking—it just wasn't really how he usually did things.

Was the same true for relationships? Had he been trying to think his way through interacting with Rukia rather than simply doing it? He thought back to their first few days together after being reunited. It certainly seemed that he'd really started sometime after then, perhaps when he'd noticed what he'd later learned were her efforts to deal with grief over Kaien. He'd repeatedly had his own heart knocked out in various ways and to rebuild it he had to relearn himself every time. If he took that for granted, what would things look like if he didn't try and finesse them?

His thoughts took Rukia's voice again: *They'd look pretty much like before, you fool! Didn't you figure out we liked each other long before we ever said anything?!*

*Fine, fine,* he waved it away. He tried to think of a time when he'd been supremely confident to put himself in the mindset of what that Ichigo would've said last night. Then he reflected on how it differed from what he'd actually said.

---

Rukia swatted at her soul pager before managing to turn the alarm off and reluctantly shifted in bed, blinking her eyes open to look toward where Ichigo should be. His bed was empty. She then heard something that sounded a lot like quiet chewing and zeroed in on it to find him sitting on the reclining chair that faced the window. He was fully dressed and faced away from her, eating what seemed to be a sandwich and looking out onto the rainy city.
"I got something for you too, if you're hungry," he said after a moment, seeming to somehow gauge she was awake and looking at him without directly observing her.

She blinked at the timbre of his voice, finding it oddly nostalgic, before looking to her dresser, finding there was indeed a plate with a club sandwich and a small mixed leaf salad on it. It wasn't what she thought of when she thought of breakfast, but it wasn't objectionable either. She looked to him again in confusion before sitting up fully. After a moment she slid her legs off the bed and stood, taking the plate and going to the other chair. She hazarded a glance at him and found he really did seem to be studying the city as he ate. There was some new brightness in his eyes she could see even at an incidental angle. What . . . happened? She looked away and started to quietly eat, trusting he would reveal something to her in his own time.

"I said I'd mess up, but I guess I started at it early," he said with some humor as he finished up his steak sandwich, carefully dusting his hands off above the plate and then wiping them off with a napkin.

Rukia glanced at him again as she chewed on a bite of her sandwich. His moderate mirth seemed genuine, and neither it nor his tone matched his words at all. It was worrying. It was then that he turned and smiled at her and she saw fully what was illuminating his chocolate eyes. It was a clarity of purpose she hadn't seen in him in a long time. If his previous powerful looks during this vacation had often burned, this one glowed. She wound up staring at him.

"I said a lot of stupid things last night, so here's how this is really gonna happen. No big complicated set of rules, 'no promises, no demands.' I'll do things when I feel like it, whether that's holding your hand, or kissing you, or sleeping beside you, or whatever we've done up to now. If you don't like whatever I do, or don't do, you'll do something to let me know and then you'll do like always and correct it. The reverse also holds. We'll probably argue and fight, but we always have, right?" Ichigo said, looking at her as squarely as he could even as he kept a small smile.

She had to remember to swallow the food in her mouth before she managed to get out "Ichigo . . ."

He lifted a finger and lectured "I stand by the getting-our-affairs-in-order thing though, so you still have to talk to Ukitake-san. And yes, we'll still tell my family."

She set the plate aside to focus fully on him, it still a bit too early for her to immediately come up with a cogent response.

"Things are different and so that's how it is. We just have to work through them as they happen. I'm not great at or familiar with this kind of stuff, so it could be you don't always want to talk to me or even deal with me, or maybe I can't do anything but listen, and that's okay. You should know by now that a lot of people care about you just as much as they do me and you can turn to them too," he continued.

Rukia felt her eyes start to widen before she forced a composed look onto her face and narrowed them, getting up and moving over onto the reclining chair to sit beside him. She glanced down at one of his hands and took it in one of her own, squeezing at it, not trusting herself to speak just yet.

Ichigo squeezed back without any hesitation, looking sideways to her and watching carefully. Act on instinct had become something of a mantra that repeated in his head.

"And that's . . . what we're going to tell your family?" she asked at last, looking to him with questions in her eyes and more than a little surprise at how brazenly he was accepting all of it.

Without a pause he said: "Dad already knows everything, Karin knows about Shinigami and some of
what we did before, and both she and Yuzu have probably been told what happened by this conspiracy club everyone put together. We'll address that if we need to. As for us, we tell them we realized we liked each other and we're dating, because we are. I figure we've had . . . seven or more dates now. You're here to watch me and your brother wants you living somewhere where you have space to yourself too, so that's why we'll have a house. They'll know what that means in their own ways. They can come over anytime and we'll meet with them regularly too. I learned from Yuzu so I can handle chores and all that while you handle patrols and spiritual stuff. We work as a team. We're boyfriend and girlfriend."

"And what about everyone else?" she asked. Her eyes seemed to soften as her expression became rather knowing. She could tell what he was going to say and was already proud—and happy.

He smirked a little. "I just said we're boyfriend and girlfriend. Everyone who knows about Soul Society will probably just act really smug about the whole thing. We'll tell anybody that doesn't that your brother set you up to stay for quite a long time while he managed family affairs. He asked me to be your roommate so you weren't alone and one thing led to another."

Rukia felt a smile form on her lips even as she did her best to keep herself under control. "So you're really not ashamed of being with me, strawberry?"

Ichigo reached his other hand out to one of her cheeks, gently turning her head as he rotated his own. He leaned forward, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead to hers. He didn't kiss her only because they'd just eaten. "Never," he said as he lightly stroked at her.

She closed her eyes, letting go of his hand and gripping at his nearest knee. She turned him toward her, getting his cooperation, and likewise moved, leaning forward against him and putting her arms tightly around his waist.

He embraced her with both arms and brushed his forehead against hers. He could feel her heart beating hard and could guess at the reasons. He wanted to apologize but instead he just pulled her closer, knowing that was the proper way to do it. They held each other noiselessly against the continued tapping of the rain for awhile before he whispered "You're getting soft, Kuchiki-fukutaichō, normally you'd have just beaten me up and told me what was what."

"Shut up, fool, you're ruining the moment," she whispered back, her fingers digging into his shirt as she pressed her forehead more firmly to his.

Ichigo hugged her a little more tightly and held it for awhile before saying "You should finish eating and get dressed; we still have to do it." He didn't actually move to let her go.

It was many long seconds before Rukia began to move, slowly pulling back and being released in tandem as she went. She wound up unable to look away from him from the moment she opened her eyes and forced a coy look onto her face, saying "Brush your teeth again while I finish eating."

"Eh?" Ichigo asked.

"Just do it," she commanded without elaboration.

He lifted an eyebrow but went to do as he was told. By the time he returned she was done and swapped places with him without a word.

It was later when they were assembled at the door that Rukia pulled Ichigo down by the collar while standing up on her toes and kissed him, pushing him back against the door and holding it for a long time.
There was no plan, so they went down to the lobby to meet up with Isshin, Yuzu, and Karin. They escorted them back up to their suite to store their bags for the day. After determining they hadn't had breakfast, and having a vague idea of what to do considering the weather, they collected their umbrellas and windbreakers. Ichigo led everyone to brave the rain on the way to Roppongi Station and they got on a train to Shinjuku.

As they went, Rukia typed out a message to Ukitake regarding her intent to return for a few days next week to conclude her previous engagements with the Division in the knowledge Ichigo would be secure in the hands of his friends and family. There were several things she had to wrap up in terms of outstanding training commitments, picking up possessions, and personal farewells. She kept it brief and to the point and sent it.

It wasn't their first time at Shinjuku Station, but with both the weather and the hour it was rather packed. Layered with a seemingly endless number of stores and restaurants it was as much a mall as it was a transit hub. Keeping together, they made their way toward the periphery, finding a relatively quiet little café that served breakfast and getting a booth together. Ichigo and Rukia took one side while Isshin, Karin, and Yuzu took the other. They ordered, with the couple only getting drinks. Both opted for flavored coffees.

"This place is so busy," Yuzu said in wonder, looking out to the bustle of the station beyond.

"This is actually fairly close to where we met up," Rukia replied with a small smile.

"Really?" Karin asked, intrigued that she'd found her brother somewhere like there.

"It was like a kilometer west of here," Ichigo said, "though this is one of the first few places we wound up going the first day. It seemed appropriate to . . . well, we have some announcements to make."

Isshin immediately opened his mouth only to let out a small cry as the heel of Karin's nearer foot slammed down on top of his own.

She in turn joined Yuzu in staring at the two expectantly.

Rukia demurred and elected to let him lead off since it was his family, looking sideways to him. It was then that she felt one of his hands on hers, interlocking fingers securely. Her eyes widened fractionally as his eyes shifted and she received the briefest of glances of confidence.

"We've been dating for a few weeks now," Ichigo said, his tone light but proud.

"That's right," Rukia affirmed, looking back to the twins.

Karin lazily smiled, Yuzu looked like she might cry in joy, and Isshin seemed to appraise the news with something more than just happiness.

"I'm sure you both know by now what's been going on this whole time with the Shinigami," Ichigo continued, looking to his sisters after a glance at his dad.

They both nodded without interrupting him. Karin felt they hadn't been given the complete story to keep them from worrying too much, but they'd heard the outlines of what had happened in Soul Society and Hueco Mundo, mostly from their father, but also from Urahara, Yoruichi, and Ichigo's friends. They knew enough to understand what had gone on and what the situation was. She'd been kind of upset, but reflecting on how Rukia had conducted herself with them and how Ichigo was had
let her move on many months ago. Yuzu had just seemed relieved to learn what had been happening.

Ichigo exchanged a look with Rukia, deciding she should explain her end of the story. Picking up on what he was doing, she said "Soul Society sees getting Ichigo his powers back as a priority. After we decided that we wanted to be together, I put in a request to watch over him until that happened. My brother has a lot of influence and decided that if I was to stay here it would be in what he felt were appropriate accommodations. Given everything, that means he's looking for a house where Ichigo and I will be living together."

The twins' expressions changed a bit at this, the news becoming a bit bittersweet.

"We don't know where the house will be yet," Ichigo said to reassure them, "It could very well be in the Minamikawase neighborhood, and at any rate it'll be in Karakura proper so it won't be very far. You can come over anytime. We promise we'll be over for dinner and to hang out often."

"We promise," Rukia repeated, smiling sincerely and immediately adding "Nii-sama is very considerate about these kinds of things." She was a little afraid they'd think she was taking him away from them.

Isshin was clearly contemplating—no, reevaluating, he seemed to already know some of this—the other dimensions of what must be going on. Karin and Yuzu took their time processing it before the latter said "Your brother sounds like he cares about you a lot."

"He does," Rukia said, meeting the sweet girl's look.

"That must be a real pain sometimes," Karin replied, looking meaningfully at Ichigo.

Rukia glanced to her and smiled more broadly, "It can be."

Ichigo glanced away at that, deciding to say nothing.

"As long as we're invited and you come over often then it's fine, onii-chan, nē-san," Yuzu said, smiling softly.

"Yeah, and a boyfriend and girlfriend need space and privacy so it's probably better you have a place to yourselves anyway," Karin said nonchalantly.

"Karin-chan!" Yuzu said, shooting her sister a small glare at her insinuations. She could be so indelicate.

Rukia turned the slightest bit pink and gripped at Ichigo's hand.

"It's true," Karin said as if there was nothing more obvious in the world. She'd heard their songs for one another and wasn't naïve like her sister.

"You have my consent," Isshin said with sudden gravity. He fixed Ichigo with a serious gaze that communicated the remark was about a lot more than just living on his own, and that they'd talk about it later. His son nodded subtly. His eyes moved to Rukia and he gave her a smile that wasn't just polite but surprisingly warm. *It's hardly a conventional match-up, but you've always been there for him and I'm not one to talk, so . . .* "I'll also see if I can't assist in helping your brother find a place," he said, giving his smile a reassuring bent to show he wasn't going to cause trouble.

Ichigo refused to even consider the idea of his father interacting with Byakuya and everything that could possibly go wrong with that, whether they had once been peers as taichō or not.
Rukia was left in a similar if somewhat more optimistic frame of mind. Maybe they would engage in the subject from common ground? Or would they be haggling over the politics? She couldn't imagine her brother indulging Ichigo's father's eccentricities. At any rather, neither she nor Ichigo were in a position to stop him . . .

The sisters glanced to their dad. There'd been no way he would've objected, nor would they have let him anyway. "Rukia-nē's brother must be really nice to be buying her and onii-chan a house," Yuzu said, clearly trying to imagine what Byakuya was like.

"Can we meet him too?" Karin asked.

"Wouldn't he also be like our brother if Rukia-nē is like our sister?" Yuzu mused.

Ichigo and Rukia both started to say something but were cut short by Isshin saying "Of course, the more the merrier!" to both the twins' questions even as he gave the couple a sly tracking gaze that communicated they had no say in the matter; this was simply the nature of the game they were playing. When—he discounted out of hand whether it was an 'if' or not—things eventually continued on, Yuzu would be more correct than she might know.

The couple shared a glance at this as their hands clamped tighter yet again. Rukia gave a small sympathetic smile in reassurance. Based on the last exchange she'd had with Byakuya it would probably be fine. He might appreciate Ichigo's sisters too.

"Are you really going to be okay living on your own?" Yuzu asked, looking at both of them. There was a note of worry in her voice.

"I know how to take care of things," Ichigo said confidently as he met her gaze, "I learned from the best. Though it might not hurt for you to teach Rukia some things too, and you can always let us know if we're not doing enough."

Yuzu beamed at that and nodded.

"How long do you think it'll be until Urahara does whatever he's doing?" Karin asked. She knew the shopkeeper was involved with returning Ichigo's Shinigami powers but how wasn't a subject that'd been brought up around them.

"You probably know more than we do," Rukia admitted. "That's going to be one of the first things I talk to him about."

"So how many dates have you been on?" Isshin asked only a little smugly, deciding to get in on the question and answer session.

"Three nights out—one of which you ambushed us on I might add—and depending on what you count somewhere between four and six others," Ichigo said matter-of-factly, for once ignoring his impulse to beat his old man up. He revealed it more out of pride than a sincere desire to answer the question.

Rukia smiled a bit despite herself.

His sisters were smiling at both of them again and were about to ask more questions when suddenly their food arrived. They started to eat, spending their time thinking up other questions and concerns. They had all day.

Ichigo and Rukia quietly sipped at their cups of coffee, not releasing one another. There was still a lot farther to go before the day was over.
As Ichigo's family ate they asked questions about where he and Rukia had gone on their dates. The couple gave some details about what might be considered as such without the heavy edits they had at Friday night's karaoke session.

Karin and Yuzu were both amazed that Rukia could beat Ichigo at video games.

Isshin seemed to find the story about Haneda Airport the most amusing, but decided not to tease them about where they might want to go someday just yet. He'd start leaving travel brochures around them sometime in the future. They finished, paid, and were sipping at their various drinks when Isshin asked "So what are your plans for the last few days?"

"Rukia was able to schedule us on a tour of the Imperial Palace through the Imperial Household Agency the week before last, so that'll take up most of tomorrow," Ichigo said. He didn't know a lot about such things, but it seemed to have been approved remarkably fast, even if Tokyo was also largely on summer vacation. He had a feeling it had something to do with Soul Society's influence and her noble status.

"We'd tentatively planned for one last night out on Wednesday," Rukia said in turn. The details hadn't yet been decided on but they still had their fourth outfits they hadn't revealed to one another.

"Thursday is the Tamagawa fireworks festival, so we'll be going to see that in the evening and investigating around there and Yokohama during the day," Ichigo continued. It was actually technically three competing fireworks festivals all concentrated in the same area, and the total show would sort of approximate the Tokyo Bay show in scope.

"And Friday will be our final day so we'll probably just have breakfast and then have to pack," Rukia concluded.

"So a little over four days from now and you'll be in a new house, eh?" Isshin mused.

"We should get them a house-warming present," Karin suggested.

"It's not really a surprise if we're here to see you buy it, you know," Ichigo said.

"Who says we'll let you see what we're getting?" she countered, frowning a little.

He exhaled and didn't contest the point, looking to Rukia for a second. "Well, if you're serious, we can look around here or head to Takashimaya Times Square." The department store in question was immediately accessible from the south exit of the station. It had a massive footprint and was 15-stories tall when including its two basement levels, with the top three floors given over to restaurants and another food court in the basement. It was entirely possible they could spend most of the rest of the day there which was just as well because it was projected to rain all day.

"Is that the building we passed that's bigger than Karakura's shopping district?" Yuzu asked in disbelief.

"Yep," Ichigo said, smiling.

Rukia started to slide out of the booth, pulling him with her and deciding neither to hide the fact
they’d been holding hands nor letting him go. "Come on then, let's get to it," she said lightly but firmly.

Ichigo didn’t resist and went along.

The pair was followed by his family, all smiles.

"You know you're going to die, right? Do you have any last requests?" Renji asked.

"You're still alive despite having sent the thing, aren't you?" Hisagi replied.

"I wasn't planning to show it to every woman in the Seireitei," Renji countered. He’d been told how it'd come across Hisagi's desk, understood it wasn't his fault, and knew there weren't really better options short of fighting Yachiru and thereby Kenpachi, but that didn't make him much more enthused about the whole affair. He wondered if Byakuya would go for fighting Kenpachi or approve of Rukia being so highlighted and inevitably praised and found he couldn't decide which it'd be.

"Look, are you going to do the interview or not?" the editor-in-chief asked.

"Show me what you've got first and then I'll think about it," the crimson-haired Shinigami groused. Hisagi rolled his eyes and pulled out a folder, producing the rough layouts of the bulk of the special issue. As the point was in large part to advertise and compliment screenings of the footage—the Shinigami Women's Association was entirely handling that aspect—they’d set up a lot of the content like a program guide, with the information organized in the same order as the performers had appeared on stage. For each singer there was a profile that covered biographical data, the lyrics for their songs in English, katakana, and kanji, as well as some lyrical analysis as to what the songs were about and keys to explain modern concepts and phrases that wouldn't necessarily be entirely familiar to Shinigami.

The biographical information for the humans was heavily updated from the previous years' mid-summer issue, for Urahara, Yoruichi, and Isshin was new material on their previous careers with some token information as to their more recent activities, and for Yuzu and Karin was largely blank other than their relations to Ichigo and Isshin and some facts about them. The last two were listed together to save space. Rukia and Renji’s profiles were rather extensive. The lyrical sections were already functional. "We're still consulting with the 12th Division about images and some other things for the graphics and details," he added.

"What else will be in it that isn't here?" Renji asked.

"We still need an introduction, a historical overview, some opinion and analysis pieces, and hopefully a lead-in interview with someone who was involved—you—for context. I promised Ukitake-taichō that this would be tasteful and focus on the camaraderie of the event; that it would serve as an example of rallying together to support one another, even if there are clearly . . . other angles. I figure we . . . owe Kuchiki and Kurosaki too. I've tried to come up with interview questions that would—delicately—address the background in the context of last year's war and why this happened," Hisagi explained. It wasn't going to be an absolutely massive issue, but he wanted it to be robust and comprehensive for what it was. He was also damn sure going to win Ukitake's approval for it.

"If I do the interview I want full control over what goes on the page and what doesn't," Renji said flatly. Framing how Ichigo and Rukia had arrived at this point would have to be handled rather quite
delicately indeed to remain tasteful. He felt it could be done but it wouldn't be easy.

"It's your time," Hisagi replied. He was about to suggest they get started when suddenly the soul pager he was carrying started to go off. He fished it out of his shihakushō, discovering it was a message from Ukitake. After a moment his eyes went a bit wide. "You've got to be kidding me," he muttered.

"What?" Renji asked.

"Apparently if we're going to do this it has to be done and ready to print by Saturday morning at the latest. Kuchiki will be coming back here on Sunday for several days to get her affairs in order for her deployment," the editor-in-chief said unhappily, staring at the message. The intent was clearly to force the situation before she could do anything about it while it was still in the planning stages. Did Ukitake want this to be a kind of surprise for her? It was possible if everyone labored diligently but .

The crimson-haired Shinigami laughed harshly at that. "Well, now that your execution date has been scheduled I guess you're gonna have to work even harder just to make it there," he said with a grin.

Hisagi glared at him sourly and produced a notepad and stylus, ready to start transcribing questions and answers.

Renji exhaled and started to think back again on what he knew of the situation from the very beginning, bringing that knowledge into alignment with the supposed purpose of this exercise.

The quintet stayed at Takashimaya Times Square through lunch and beyond into the late afternoon, separated only when Yuzu and Karin shooed the couple off after tracking down what they regarded as the perfect gift. Isshin spent the rest of the day carrying it around carefully bundled up in a bag. After exploring the store to their satisfaction they once more took up their umbrellas and navigated the streets to others, eventually winding up at the Isetan department store. Isshin had decided he would get them his own housewarming gift, letting the earlier one be Karin and Yuzu’s. After he finally found something appropriate they turned to leisure.

Recalling the stories Rukia and Ichigo had told them earlier, they wound up at the Shinjuku Copa Bowl bowling alley, engaging in what Isshin immediately billed as a family tournament to determine the future chairmanship of Kurosaki family activities. The source of his confidence was soon made clear as over four rounds he completely wrecked everyone else, including Ichigo—he’d had a lot of practice playing with Masaki. Rukia came out ahead of Yuzu and Karin—the latter only just—but remained a distant third.

In his 'benevolence' Isshin led everyone back toward Shinjuku Station, eventually settling on one of the many restaurants within the Lumine department store complex for dinner. They ate and needled one another for an hour before going back to Roppongi to collect their things, the couple helping them get their luggage back to the station given the rain. They eventually wound up in the ticketing area together, Karin and Yuzu hugging both Ichigo and Rukia.

"Hey, it's only four more days," Ichigo said gently, hugging Yuzu back.

"I know," she replied quietly.

"I'll make sure we make your brother feel welcome in Karakura," Karin assured Rukia.

"I have every confidence," she replied with a small smile and a touch to the shoulder.
"Oi, Ichigo, don't piss off the Emperor or something tomorrow," Isshin warned, mostly to cut the sentimentality short as they were running out of time.

Ichigo glared back while Rukia laughed at the very idea, and Karin and Yuzu reluctantly left the pair to stand with their father. They said their farewells and departed from one another. Rukia wordlessly took hold of Ichigo's nearest hand as they navigated out of the station.

She stopped him in the living room and leaned against him for a moment. "Your family is a lot of fun."

He lightly supported her, replying "They like having you here."

She looked up to him with reddened cheeks and mildly widened eyes to find he was smiling a little down at her. Something about what he'd said had suddenly connected Yoruichi's remarks about some of the calculations Byakuya was making with the behavior of Isshin and the twins. They've all been acting like I've been part of the family for a long time now, but today especially . . . they're already acting like we're . . . !

"What?" he asked mildly. It was true, they hadn't gotten along so well or had a day out so unreserved in a long time.

Rukia shook her head, looking down.

"Come on, you can talk to me," Ichigo entreated.

She shook her head more forcefully and pressed her forehead to above his heart.

"Rukia . . ." he said quietly, before exhaling and sliding his fingers into her hair, holding her. She was so strong and loud most of the time that when she became embarrassed and quiet he was at a loss as to what to do. He focused on just doing his best to comfort her through touch.

She abruptly turned and pulled away, clearing her throat and saying decisively "You should shower first. We have to be up early. Ichigo . . . do you want to make tomorrow special?"

He blinked at her changing the subject and the question in confusion before asking "How?"

"Want to wear our kimono to the Imperial Palace?" she replied. All their parts had arrived the week before and had been in their boxes since. They hadn't even opened them, certain as to their fit.

He stared at her for a moment before smiling at what she was doing. The two kimono were technically their fifth set of high-end outfits. "If we're going to do that, we may as well have dinner at a kaiseki restaurant too," he offered. Kaiseki were multi-course traditional Japanese meals of high caliber and could be tremendously expensive; they were often structured around showcasing the chef's favorite ingredients or skills. Traditional dress was often mandatory at high-class establishments.

"Ichigo, I think you're becoming spoiled," she criticized. He couldn't see her face but knew she was smiling.

"I figure Byakuya will deal any concerns about our spending and would approve of a Kuchiki receiving only the best," he replied.

"Hmph! I get to choose where we go," she declared, crossing her arms. She knew what to look for far better than he did. Their options would be constrained due to the most outstanding restaurants
surely having long reservation lists but she felt they could still manage to get into somewhere quite nice given the season and the day.

"Okay, but then I get to plan Wednesday night," Ichigo said, having already come up with several ideas. If she was going to give him a night focused around the traditional and the past, he would give her a night focused around the modern and the present.

"Fine," she said with a theatrical chill, before going to the door and putting on her shoes again. "I need to talk to the concierge," she explained, heading out.

He watched her leave and smiled before going to shower.

By the time he was out she'd returned, apparently quite satisfied with wherever she had managed to secure them access to. He asked to see her soul pager while she cleaned up, remembering her past annoyance at him merely taking it. After only a bit of cajoling he got her to hand it over, using it and some of the suite's literature to finalize his own plans while she was occupied.

Ichigo was on his bed continuing to use the device when Rukia came out of the bathroom. It was sort of ridiculous how useful it was even compared to a cell phone. He found himself wondering how Soul Society had collected a lot of the information it had access to as they didn't seem like things the normally stuffy Shinigami would care about. He assumed it had something to do with the 12th Division. He was roused from studying it by the sound of the door and turned.

Rukia was wearing her first set of pajamas yet again and after turning off the light made her way to her bed in a casual way, sitting on it and considering Ichigo's screen-lit face in the darkness. She continued forward after a few seconds, making her way onto his bed and turning off the device, pulling it away from him and setting it aside.

He didn't object, watching her and placing his newly freed hand on one of her sides. He caressed there to signal to her that it was more than alright.

She lay down alongside him and pulled the covers up before turning under them to fully face him, pulling at him to do the same with one arm, the other braced in front of her with her hand sliding under the pillow.

Turning as well, he pulled her to him with one arm and brought the other forward to meet hers, finding her hand and locking their fingers together as he pressed his forehead to hers once again. The only sound was that of their breathing. Her breath smelled of mint and mingled with the scent of her soap and shampoo in interesting ways, somehow all of it captivating his attention.

She held the position for a long moment before her cheeks started to burn at her earlier thoughts again. She lowered her head and pressed his chin up with her hair, burying her face against his neck. She could feel her own pulse hammer from all their many points of contact and felt his beat strongly in reply.

Ichigo brushed at her back reassuringly and tilted his face down into her hair. "Is it so humiliating to be appreciated?" he asked quietly, voice muffled.

"It's not that, you fool," Rukia managed to get out against his skin. The only heat in it was warmth, and she clung to him more securely.

"Tell me?" he asked. He felt her fidget at him with her hands and body as if in debate.
"What exactly did Renji tell you about nii-sama's intentions?" she asked after a long interval.

That time it was he who hesitated. "He told me that Byakuya had kept suitors away from you and that there was only one reason he'd let me live with you," he said at last.

"That's more or less what Yoruichi said too," she replied.

"What did Byakuya actually say?" he asked. She tensed at that and he continued rubbing her back in response, giving her time and not pressing her on it. Her cheeks became hotter against him as she continued to fret. It was one thing to have heard the words, to reveal them was quite another.

It was a long time before Rukia repeated what Byakuya had said verbatim.

Ichigo felt his eyes widen a bit as she related it and went a bit red himself at the end, abruptly gripping at her in turn.

"Do you see now, Ichigo . . . ? It's not just nii-sama, today even the jokes your family has long made about me being your father's third daughter were different . . . they were acting like we were already . . .!" Rukia whispered, her voice growing slightly hoarse at the end.

Something in him unlocked at that, sensing a kind of danger. He was suddenly acutely aware that how he acted was of grave importance. He dispensed with all his thoughts; it would do him no good to think about it. He had to feel things out and react naturally if he was to get them through it. "I'm going to move with you, don't be alarmed," he said quietly. He didn't want to scare her by just doing it without saying anything at a moment like this.

"Eh?" she asked, shaken from her thoughts and not immediately understanding. As he started to move she caught up and cooperated after a second's hesitation.

He used his grip on her to push them backward on the bed so that he was near an edge and she was near the center before rotating with her so she was on her back and he was on top. He brought his hand free from hers and lifted up a bit, shifting down so that given their differences in height his lower torso was well below hers and most of his weight was off her, her legs at his sides and his face at her neck and clavicles. He slid his arms under hers and around her, using his hands to pull the pillows down.

Rukia lifted her head to let the maneuvering end and brought it down to rest on the pillows, finding Ichigo draped against her. His hair poked up against her chin, mouth and nose. Something about it smelled so comforting. Was it just his shampoo? She stared down at him, her blush not deserting her, before sliding her arms around his back. She brought one hand up into his hair and pulled him tight, understanding. If the night before last she'd been too small a blanket and he not the greatest bed, then . . .

He gave one of her delicate collarbones a light kiss and said "You're tired." It was normally used when leaving an office or sometimes as cheers when drinking but it seemed like the most appropriate way to acknowledge everything both said and unsaid without making light of it, or advancing, or retreating. He would keep her in the present with him.

"Ichigo . . ." she replied quietly. Her fingers clenched at his shirt and hair.

"You should trust in what Byakuya told you and not worry what anyone thinks, good or bad," he said.

She released her grip on him slowly at that, starting to rub his back and neck in response. "You're tired too," she replied, coming to realize what he was doing; he was shielding her physically,
psychically, and emotionally.

Ichigo murmured something in assent, sinking against her at her touch. On top of everything else it had actually been a really long day for him.

Rukia continued on quietly comforting him, feeling his pulse and breathing slow to a resting rate in time. Finally he just lay inert against her, silently radiating heat. She soaked in it and closed her eyes, becoming still herself and relaxing, gravity doing the work of keeping him against her as she slipped away. *It's fine like this . . . for now anyway . . .*
Tuesday, August 20, 2002

Rukia's eyes fluttered open as a blade of sunlight slowly tracked across her face. She murmured and squinted at it, turning her head to escape it and becoming aware of Ichigo's heft and warmth against her. They hadn't moved a centimeter. She kept the hand on the back of his head in his hair and searched for her soul pager with the other, checking the time. It was a half hour before they were supposed to be up. She sighed and put her arm back around him, enjoying having him against her and idly stroking at him.

He was deep asleep and didn't stir at all.

She glanced toward the windows, discerning from the light it'd at least stopped raining and the typhoon had likely fully passed, before looking back down to his sleeping form. Giving his hair a final brush, she closed her eyes and relaxed against him again as best she was able. It was surprisingly easy; his presence could be as calming as it was preoccupying. She mentally transitioned to her inner world.

As usual she found herself in her shihakushō within a snow-covered mountain valley, standing on a stone pathway that passed under bright red torii gates with curved lintels occasionally interspersed with lamps. To one side a stream babbled unfrozen despite its surroundings and a light snow seemed to fall from no source and never accumulated. This time the sky and snow alike were lit brilliantly by the light of a full moon, there only a few wispy clouds on the horizon. It stood in marked contrast to the weather she'd known there during her time alone in Soul Society. She could guess why. She made her way along the path, knowing where to go.

It wasn't long before she found Sode no Shirayuki on a bench considering a still pond. On the other shore a temple-like structure was lit in lanterns and reflected in the water. Rukia sat down beside her zanpakutō's spirit, ignoring the snow; it never behaved like it was there unless one wanted it to.

Quiet stretched out between them before Rukia said "You've been very quiet lately."

"There has been no need of my counsel, Rukia-dono," Shirayuki replied imperturbably.

"You must surely have some opinion about all this," the petite Shinigami ventured, looking at the reflection of the moon in the water. The fact it was serene rather than blizzard-like was, by itself, surely something to remark upon.

"Of course, but would it do good to voice it?" the zanpakutō spirit replied.

"I want to know what you think," Rukia said directly, putting an edge of annoyance in it.

Shirayuki gave the smallest of smiles at the behavior she had become more used to seeing from her wielder. "Rukia-dono, it would be unconscionable if my thoughts were to alter your own."

Rukia adopted a put-out expression and glared at the white-haired woman. "I'm ordering you to tell me," she muttered.
The zanpakutō spirit closed her eyes and after awhile said "I believe Byakuya-sama was most correct in all things, especially that it won't be easy. Kurosaki Ichigo will break your heart, even though he'll mend it. He'll make you soft and ductile, even though you have become too hard and brittle. You'll know pain, even though you'll know joy." She didn't elaborate, not certain enough to confirm her suspicions. It was fine when they were in a domestic setting like they were then, but they were soon to return once more to a battlefield.

The raven-haired Shinigami stared at her quietly before looking away. "Isn't that still better than . . . feeling nothing?"

"That is for you to decide, Rukia-dono," Shirayuki replied. She was quiet for awhile before adding "I am happy that you are happy." It was neither her place nor her specialty to judge whether Rukia opening herself to Ichigo was a good idea because what was good was subjective. Byakuya was correct that Rukia grew in response to Ichigo. What she would grow into was a different matter. He'd taken her resolve from her, but he'd also given her a new one. Whether it would be stronger remained to be seen.

She'd long foreseen this. She'd just as long pondered at what she'd seen when piercing the boy and since then. While they still avoided addressing the true depth of their feelings to one another both of them would remain deeply conflicted. It complicated her relation with her wielder. Shirayuki felt Rukia's drive to seek and maintain control was not merely a personality trait but a survival mechanism related to something much more innate. If it was as she thought, Ichigo freeing her emotions and inhibitions would make continuing to strive for bankai . . . interesting.

Rukia looked to her again before her eyes searched the pond for something.

"Rukia-dono," Shirayuki began after awhile, before letting out a small breath. Her wielder deserved her best guess: "I am no expert on such things, but are not the Visored and the Arrancar proof that Shinigami and Hollows, despite being opposites, exist along a gradient?"

The Shinigami looked to her questioningly at what that had to do with anything, discerning only that it involved Ichigo. "Why?"

"Has he ever described Zangetsu and his Hollow to you?" she replied.

Rukia related brief physical descriptions of both.

"Have the Visored ever articulated having more than one spirit?" she asked.

Her wielder just sort of stared at her at that, not ever having heard anything on the subject.

"Is it not strange . . . that the Hollow has always resembled a Shinigami, as if they had already merged, and yet Zangetsu seems totally unaffected?" she continued. She stopped there, not confident enough to pursue her thoughts to their logical conclusion: she couldn't shake the feeling that what had been called Zangetsu this entire time was actually something else. If that was the case then . . .

"I'll talk to Urahara about it," Rukia said quietly. She would also confront Shinji about it while she was in Soul Society too, since the shopkeeper was notoriously selective in what he did and didn't reveal . . . and maybe Isshin as well.

Another long gulf of silence stretched between them before Shirayuki broke it by laughing softly.

"What?" the petite Shinigami asked.

"You recently wondered about your very first night together . . . it was indeed very unusual,"
the zanpakutō spirit said. She had little say in noticing the matter or not, integral as she had been to it.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rukia asked with sudden agitation. It was bad enough how everyone else was behaving but if her own zanpakutō got in on the act too . . .

Shirayuki smiled at her sincerely and pointed at the reflection of the moon in the pond. "Surely you have noticed."

Her wielder stopped and followed the gesture, having been unable to stop noticing.

"Somewhere over the horizon there must be a very bright sun shining," Shirayuki mused idly, knowing full well what it was and where, and knowing Rukia knew too.

Rukia was about to say something when she was abruptly pulled away by a distant call of "Pyon, pyon!"

She irritably turned off her soul pager as she found herself back in the real world, feeling Ichigo adjusting against her a bit. Her expression softened as she looked down at him again and she couldn't stop herself from brushing her fingers through his hair once more. She took her time and coaxed him into waking up through touch and calls, rewarded for her efforts by the sight of sleepy chocolate eyes looking up at her many minutes later. Her smile broadened as she said "Good morning, blanket."

"You're awfully chipper, pillow," he muttered, returning his head to rest against her sourly. He'd been having a pleasant dream he couldn't recall and she was rather too small to call a bed. He shifted as one of her hands slid down his neck and started to gently scratch.

"Don't be so cranky," she chided.

He said nothing but continued to behave as if he was grousing, appreciating the sensation and the change in her mood. How long had she been awake?

Rukia humored him for awhile longer before patting his back, saying "We have to get up. It'll take awhile to get dressed. I bet you've never worn a kimono before."

"It can't be that much different than a yukata or the shihakushō," Ichigo replied. She wasn't wrong; he'd worn a suit for shichi-go-san as a child.

"You weren't very good to begin with at the first and you wound up pre-dressed in the second," she insisted, quite sure if souls appeared naked that Ichigo would've taken a half hour to get anywhere. "Come on, up," she commanded.

With great reluctance he pulled away and sat up.

Rukia's kimono was a study in contrasts. At the time she'd ordered it she'd eschewed having the long furisode-style sleeves that might be expected for someone of her apparent age both in difference to her actual age and because she wasn't interested in flaunting her marriage eligibility. She refused to think about the latter given the past few days. The design was silk and colored red overall, with an intricate floral print that intensified as it went down the length of the garment, transitioning through pinks, fuchsias, purples, and blues as it went. There was an iridescent quality to the final colors, and it was also shot through with subtle whites, greens, and gold. Her obi and obijime around her waist drew out and highlighted these colors to contrast, and she'd done them up in a conservative and traditional fashion. The kimono was emblazoned with a single kamon of the Kuchiki clan's crest at the nape of the neck. The overall effect was that of a hōmongi type kimono that straddled the line
between formal and informal as well as youthful and mature, giving her quite a lot of flexibility as to when and where it could be worn. She wore white *tabi* and *zori*, had floral *kanzashi* hair ornaments that matched the patterns, and had on a touch of makeup.

Ichigo’d had something of an easier time, having gone for a regular formal matte black silk design. He wore a black *haori*, no *hakama*, and had no *kamon*. At the time of ordering it he’d been unaware of any Kurosaki family crest and was still unsure of whether he was actually related to the Shiba, let alone what their crest was or whether he had an interest in adopting it. His concession to individuality was in the *obi*, which while white overall had interesting black crescent wave patterns in it outlined in blue and red, evocative of Getsuga Tenshō. Owing to the odd combination of factors, it likewise walked a line between casual and formal, although it erred more on the casual side for the lack of *kamon*. It was the most he’d looked like a Shinigami since the prior year. Like Rukia he wore white *tabi* and *zori*.

They regarded each other not for the first time, having had to help one another on occasion to get fully dressed in the outer layers, but taking a moment to appreciate the full effect of their ensembles. Rukia smiled at how much he seemed to channel the way he used to wear a *shihakushō* even if the outfit was really quite different.

Ichigo was captivated by how she was able to pull off the contrasting elements of her outfit and glanced aside when it became a bit much to continue to handle, saying "You look good."

"You do too," she replied, adding "Let's go."

If they’d occasionally drawn glances before in restaurants and subways for their appearances and behavior, this time they drew open if discrete stares. Although it was clear they were on their way to some event or another, seeing people attired so on a Tuesday morning was highly unusual. Rukia bore it with grace, apparently having taken Ichigo’s endorsement of Byakuya’s position to heart. Ichigo did his best to pretend he was indifferent even though he felt the looks were mostly directed in wonder at Rukia and it filled him with pride more than any jealousy. The pattern repeated itself all the way to Tokyo Station and along the walk into the heart of Chiyoda. They stopped to pick up a *bentō* brunch as they went.

Their tour was in the early afternoon and so they spent the morning in the Kōkyo-gaien, East Garden, and Kitanomaru Park zones of the palace complex. The first and third were open parks, while the second was usually only closed on Mondays, Fridays, and public holidays. They continued to draw tacit attention as they went for how picturesque they looked and were quite sure they were the subject of more than a few photos. It was as they were eating brunch that they were directly approached by a woman who seemed very much like either a professional photographer or serious hobbyist who asked if she could take pictures of them.

Ichigo was about to decline when Rukia cut him off, saying "If you would be so kind as to send us copies of the final prints and film, I don't see why not," with a small smile. They hadn't taken any photographs to commemorate their time in the city and although that was usual for a Shinigami, she knew it was highly unusual for a human. Having a few would be nice.

After a moment's thought the woman agreed, and Ichigo relayed his family's home address to her, which she took down before asking them to just continue as they had been. She retreated to a moderate distance to give them space, apparently having a lens capable of compensating.

It was a bit difficult at first knowing they were being observed but they eventually went back to chatting about music. Rukia was insistent that Ichigo tell her more about modern genres, bands, and songs, and that he educate her further upon their return to Karakura. They never heard the camera
shutter and it was awhile after they'd finished eating and were deep into discussion of the history of rock and roll that the woman returned, apologizing for the interruption, thanking them for their time and again promising to send them copies.

Rukia was gracious and Ichigo was silent but pleased by her apparent newfound interest in permanent reminders of their activities.

After awhile longer chatting and observing the park grounds they made their way to the appointed starting point for the tour, meeting up with around 300 other tourists. Most of them were Japanese and were normally attired. They were all attended to by two imperial guards with megaphones and chaperoned to the visitor center in the East Garden where they were given an hour-long briefing on conduct, safety, and the history of the palace itself.

The actual tour involved the tourists being split into lines of four to form a long column. Most of them had arrived by bus and were on package tours. Those who had arranged for tours independently, like Rukia and Ichigo, were allowed more leeway at the rear of the column, and so they wound up at the very back side by side, glad to not be the recipients of attention for once in the day.

"You didn't suggest we dress like this because we're gonna actually be invited in for tea or something, did you?" Ichigo whispered to her during one of the lulls. He wondered if his dad's warning had been more than just something flippant.

"Don't be ridiculous," Rukia lightly replied, leaving everything about the potential relations between Soul Society and the Living World unsaid.

He glanced to her and decided to take her at her word.

The hour-long tour passed without incident. Once more outside, they ambled back north to Kitanomaru Park to kill time. They briefly explored the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and the Science Museum, before walking around the Nippon Budokan and finally crossing the moat at the Tayasu gate. A short walk to nearby Kudanshita Station got them to the subway, and one stop later they were in the eastern fringes of Shinjuku again at Iidabashi Station, walking to their final destination: the kaiseki restaurant Ishikawa.

They were greeted by a small but enthusiastic staff which seemed appreciative of their dress, being similarly attired. Their recent reservation was swiftly confirmed. As there was as of yet little in the way of competition for seating, they were given a choice of a private dining room or a place at the counter. They looked at each other and after a moment decided on the counter. Rukia felt sociable. They were escorted to a bar made of cypress wood that seated seven. The room was wood-paneled in a minimalist style with warm yellow lighting that made it feel cozy and they were the only diners. They were presented with two options: set-piece meals that were ¥15,000 per person or ¥19,000 per person. Ichigo felt his throat catch at the prices despite their experiences to date but Rukia confidently picked the latter for both of them.

They were chatted up and doted upon by the staff and chefs, including the head chef, as they waited for their meal. It was completely at odds with their previous dinners and strangely disarming. They found themselves caught up in it as if they were among acquaintances.

"I don't imagine you're in Tokyo for business?" they were asked by a chef.

"It's the last few days of our vacation," Ichigo offered.
"We just came from having toured the Imperial Palace," Rukia added.

"Oh my, in such attire too, I'm sure it was appreciated," one of the waitresses stated with a smile. "We don't often get visitors quite so traditionally dressed."

Rukia smiled and Ichigo looked a little abashed.

"So, where has this lovely young couple before us come from?" the head chef asked, appearing from the kitchen.

We're on summer break from our second year at the University of Tokyo," Rukia lied, before adding "but we're from Karakura originally." She didn't deflect the assumption of their status. Both his statement and the latter half of hers were true enough. How they could afford all this as university students was something she knew wouldn't be asked out of politeness.

"I'm afraid I don't quite know where that is," the head chef admitted after a moment.

"It's a town in southern Western Tokyo near Naruki and Tama," Ichigo explained, playing along with the lie. The fact they were partaking of the sake menu along with water and tea made the truth a bit inconvenient at this point.

"Oh, I see, so you're just taking in the city?" the head chef pontificated with a smile.

"Yeah, something like that," the teenager admitted.

"I couldn't let him stay by himself or he'd just eat ramen every day and end up in arcades," Rukia chided, smiling as she looked at Ichigo meaningfully.

Despite himself he smiled back.

"How fortunate," the head chef said politely in understanding and good humor, before the first dish was called out as ready and shortly served to them. The food was astonishingly good and the conversation and drinks made it all the better, and the two wound up continuing to chat with the staff about what they'd done so far with ease as they ate.

Ichigo was coaxed out of his reservations by Rukia's social grace. It was a side of her he hadn't seen much before and it gave him confidence. She'd always been reserved but he knew she must have received instruction in such matters . . . was it his presence that let her run free with it? He realized it was the first time they had interacted with strangers in an extended fashion as if they really were a couple and found he enjoyed it. It felt right. He was soon right alongside her in the conversation as they navigated the multiple courses and different kinds of sake, guided by the head chef.

When they finished dessert an hour and a half later they were full, content, and suffused with pleasant warmth from the alcohol they'd had. Their payment was readily processed and even though other customers were starting to filter in, many of the available staff saw them out with extended goodbyes. Ichigo and Rukia indulged in it and promised to come back sometime. It was as they were making their way out of sight that he found her hand, escorting her for the long ride back around half the Oedo Line.

Rukia let out a contented sigh as she sat down on her bed, still feeling the effects of dinner. She looked over at Ichigo, who was flopped back next to her, apparently having waited for her while she showered. She smirked slightly and poked at his t-shirt clad chest with a finger. "Still learning how to handle your drink, strawberry?" she teased.
"No," he replied confidently, grasping her wrist and pulling her back lightly so she toppled next to him.

She let her smirk become a smile and tilted her head so a cheek contacted one of his shoulders, just enjoying the proximity. After a minute she said "Mmm, hey, Ichigo?"

"What?" he replied.

"Can I have another foot massage?" she asked quietly, adding "We've walked a lot today."

He glanced over at her without turning his head, finding she was looking up at him. "I would've thought you preferred to leave that to the professionals by now," he said dismissively.

"That's different," she said factually, giving him a look that communicated it was about a lot more than that. She liked the way he did it because it wasn't so studied, was more intimate, and it was him doing it.

"Just your feet?" Ichigo asked.

Rukia nodded even as she didn't break eye contact. He might've been a little more adventurous the first time and she a bit greedy in asking for more, but it was fine to keep it limited.

He sat up languidly, saying "Turn over and scoot up then," as if it was a burden, even though she could tell he was going along with it because he liked the idea.

She did as he asked and rolled onto her stomach, rotating so she was along the length of the bed with her head on a pillow.

He sat at the other end of the bed and took both her feet in hand, working with them as he had the last time. He'd trimmed his nails recently and so she wasn't nearly as vocal as she'd been previously, getting comfortable as he relaxed her. He paid extra attention to soothing her without tickling as he wound the massage down and by the time he let go she was breathing softly. He found he couldn't be sure if she was still awake or not and whispered "Hey?"

"Mmm?" Rukia murmured, clearly only halfway conscious.

Ichigo's expression became a bit soft and he rubbed at her back through her pajama top, reiterating "You're tired," as he had the previous night. She looked too comfortable for him to move her in good conscience.

She settled down even as she let out a mild protest, on some level knowing what he intended but finding the struggle to do anything about it too arduous.

He continued to calm her until and for a time after he felt her fully relax under his touch before tucking her in securely and turning off the light. He brushed at her hair idly for a second and carefully moved to his own bed. It was technically still quite early, but he was suddenly overwhelmed by the sensation of being tired just like she seemed to have been. It was just as well as they'd be out much later the next night.

Chapter End Notes

Ishikawa seems to have opened in 2003, but I made allowances for the hotel and
describing a city as it existed 13 years ago now is a bit hard, so.

Karakura is shown in Chapter 37 as being at about the position of Tama in Western Tokyo. This means it's about 29km (18mi) from the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. Presumably Naruki is Tama and Kagamino is in the Setagaya ward; I'm going to assume in this universe Naruki and Tama are separate but about equally well known. It's about a 40–50 minute ride from Tama to Shinjuku and 60 to 70 minutes from Tama to Roppongi; adding in walking times from Karakura would probably translate to about an 80–90 minute trip from there to the hotel, which is sufficient to constitute some distance between the two locations.
It played out like usual. The lines were exchanged as they always had been. Rukia tried to ignore the memory that resolved in front of her, reciting a litany to herself: *I did what I had to do. This is just a dream...* She still felt intensely guilty upon seeing it again, but she had to stand strong in the face of it. She couldn't let it rule her. She couldn't let the past rule her. Even so, she hoped against hope that Ichigo would once more come to her rescue. Right when the thing-that-had-been-Kaien was about to leap at her it was smashed down by a bolt of black *reiatsu* outlined in red and she swore that deep within it she saw the outline of Zangetsu at the end of a long strip of cloth . . .

In the aftermath of the resulting explosion she saw someone whose shape looked exactly like Ichigo's, but whose colors were all wrong. His *shihakushō* was inverted and his skin and hair were pure white. He turned to her, golden irises glowing from black sclera, and smirked wickedly as he withdrew the blade from his defeated foe in a spray of red.

"You . . .!" Rukia said in disbelief, her eyes going wide as she was again in control of her voice.

"Yo!" the Hollow replied with evil humor.

"How . . . how is this possible!?!" she demanded. If this thing was there, and the last time this nightmare had changed had been because of Ichigo's physical intervention in the real world, what was happening to him? What was happening out there? She couldn't afford to be asleep!

"How the fuck would I know?! You said it yourself: it's a dream! Anything is possible!" the Hollow shouted with a harsh laugh in answer to both her question and her thoughts alike.

She froze for a split-second at that and he was abruptly in front of her as if he'd used flash steps before she drew Sode no Shirayuki and brought it to a ready position against him.

The Hollow waved a finger, giving a sinister remonstration: "That's no way to thank somebody who just saved you."

"You didn't save me——" Rukia shouted.

"The hell I didn't," he grated, before smirking again and saying "Must be some irony, huh, a Shinigami-Hollow hybrid killed by his Shinigami-Hollow hybrid cousin? I guess it's only natural newer models replace older ones! Seems you're always falling in love with men threatening to turn into monsters, midget!"

She adjusted her *zanpakutō* to a final cutting position. "What's happened to Ichigo?" she demanded. Her tone was as cold as a grave.

The Hollow grabbed the blade in another gush of crimson with his own sword-hand, bracing it against the hilt of his inverted Zangetsu, before grabbing her by the collar with the other, making it impossible for her to easily move. "I just told you I have no idea!" He smiled cruelly and added "Don't worry, I'm not gonna hurt ya. You're special. I don't bite! Not that kinda way anyhow! Doesn't stop you from thinking about treating me just like poor Kaien back there though does it?"

Rukia glared at him with a look that could kill. If this was just her own idea of what Ichigo's Hollow was like, then . . .
"Scary," the Hollow said snidely. "Yeah, yeah, you get it now, don't ya?" He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "This ain't about Ichigo or Kaien, 'ojō-san', not the way you think it is anyway!" he declared.

"Shut up," she hissed, frost all-but-forming from the chill behind the words.

"Or else what, midget? Really think you can stick a sword in the spitting image of your boyfriend? Hah! Wouldn't be the first time, would it!? Not by a long shot! Only if you can get it loose though!' the Hollow cackled, lifting her by the collar of her shihakushō as if she weighed nothing more than a sack of potatoes.

"Hadō number 4: Byakurai," she called, even as she brought her free hand's index finger to right above where his heart should be.

He flung her back with his left hand even as he continued to grip Sode no Shirayuki such that she twisted, her shot careening off into the sky in a brilliant arc of blue.

She swung herself around, using his grip on the sword to twist her wrist, kicking hard off his shoulder. Since she couldn't rotate her zanpakutō, she rotated herself about it instead, declaring "Dance, Sode no Shirayuki!" The sudden blast of cold air forced the Hollow to release the blade and she landed on her feet some meters back from him, bringing it ready again.

The Hollow seemed to consider his hand before it regenerated as if nothing had happened. He was again smirking at her with narrowed eyes. He laughed and accused "I guess you're serious! Good, you should be! This is your fault anyway, you know!? He unlocked me to save you! He built me up and leaned on my powers to protect you! You've even held me up as an example for him to strive to be like! You wouldn't have had all these problems if he was more like me, would you!?"

"Shut up," Rukia reiterated. That time there was iron rather than ice in her words. She wouldn't be lectured to by some embodiment of her own guilt, no matter whose face it wore. She'd promised Ichigo that it was on him to forgive her, not on her to punish herself, and he'd forgiven her for all that so many times already . . .

"No, hey, it's fine, you'll reintroduce us soon enough, and then I can just take his place. Isn't that what you really want? Don't you want a strong, capable King? We'll have plenty of time to get acquainted then, you and me," the Hollow taunted in a mockery of reconciliation, grinning.

"Ichigo will have no trouble defeating something like you," she said confidently. Even if this was just her own nightmare version of what Ichigo truly confronted—a pale shadow of fear—she trusted in him. He would never make her confront a situation like what had happened with Kaien. She would help him become strong again to ensure that! He was . . . her pride!

The monstrosity's grin widened. "Maybe so . . . ! But you've got a more pressing problem right now, don't you? What can someone like you do against someone like me anyway, midget!?" He lifted Zangetsu up against her for theater and emphasis as if he could fire a Getsuga Tenshō at any moment.

"You've acknowledged this is a dream and you're only a figment of my imagination," Rukia replied coolly, narrowing her eyes. "Here, I am supreme."

"That's never helped you before," he said with a snicker.

"There's a first time for everything. As you said: anything is possible!" she stated, before fixing him again with a look of pure killing intent and calling "Bankai!—"
Rukia snapped awake and jerked her head up from her pillow, looking around. The room was dark. Discerning where she was, her eyes immediately darted to where Ichigo should be. She could only faintly see him on his bed, mostly by the motion of his covers slowly rising and falling. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully. She stared at him for a long while, unable to believe he was fine, before she suddenly shivered and realized she was soaked in a cold sweat. She got up and retrieved a new pair of pajamas and underwear, going to shower.

She only took as long as was necessary to wash off and warm up before drying herself and getting dressed, turning off the light before opening the door and going over to his bed to double check on him. He hadn't even shifted in the time she'd been gone. She moved away and discerned her bed would need the sheets changed before confirming it was indeed still extremely early. She'd been asleep for hours but suddenly felt drained. She looked to him with mild guilt before returning to the side of his bed. He was facing toward her bed, away from her. She knew he wouldn't mind, but . . .

She clenched a fist in resolve and pulled back a corner of his covers, slipping under them and turning, pressing to his back and bringing her face against his hair as she got her arms around him. His warmth and scent were reassuring even if the position was new and unusual. She briefly considered the fact that Shirayuki was once more silent but the thought was soon lost. It didn't take her long at all to fall back asleep against him.

Ichigo woke up naturally sometime in the late morning, neither an alarm of Rukia nor the woman herself calling out to him. He saw that her bed was empty and felt a familiar warmth and weight against his back. Narrowing his eyes in confusion as to why she hadn't just transferred across the gap if she'd woken up, he found her arm around his side and lifted it slightly, slowly turning to face her.

She stirred at his movements but didn't immediately wake, and as he lowered her arm back onto him and put his own arms around her she stopped just as quickly as she'd started.

He pushed his face down into her hair and idled with her, both thinking and not. It wasn't important they be anywhere and she deserved her rest. It was significantly later when she started to wake, small motions and changes in her heartbeat and breathing tipping him off. He pulled his head back and watched, waiting with a small smile.

When Rukia's head tilted back and her ultramarine eyes found him, he saw concern and embarrassment in them.

Ichigo blinked at that and said "Hey . . . what's wrong?"

Her eyes widened at how easily he saw through her and she just lowered her head again, hiding her face.

"Oi, Rukia, come on, it's okay, talk to me," he said lightly.

"I had another nightmare," she said quietly. He seemed to freeze at that for a second and abruptly pulled her closer. She could practically feel the guilt radiate off of him and gripped at him reassuringly. "You couldn't have known. And it was different . . . if anything I was worried about you" she said.

Ichigo stared down at her, not understanding what she meant.

Rukia let out a long breath and tried to think of how to explain it briefly without alarming him, at last saying "It started like normal and I found myself hoping you would notice again . . . and then I dreamed that your Hollow showed up instead and eventually we fought. It was probably just a
mixture of things that have been on my mind more than anything like the real one . . . but since the last time it was your touch that changed the nightmare, I was worried about what might be happening."

He was pained by the thought. She was suddenly looking up at him with a determined gaze, and he was taken aback by its intensity.

She held his gaze for long seconds before closing her eyes, pushing up a bit and pressing her forehead to his, bringing up a hand to cup one of his cheeks. "I know you're strong, Ichigo," she said with certainty, "It was just a nightmare."

He continued to stare at her for a second before closing his eyes, just holding her.

"I tried to use bankai in the dream and woke up drenched in a cold sweat," she whispered after a long time.

"I thought you didn't know it yet," Ichigo replied.

"I don't," Rukia said, adding "The Hollow had said it was a dream and anything was possible, so I thought . . . well, it got me out of the dream at any rate. I'm going to have to start training at it again soon."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked. His experience learning bankai probably wasn't of any use to her since he'd used Urahara's method and he understood it was traditionally something that was personal to every Shinigami.

"Just being here is enough," she said, brushing her forehead against his.

A gear in his mind turned: he shouldn't be selfish. She needed his support and in this case that meant acknowledging he couldn't do anything and letting her handle things in her own way. "If you want to get started with that immediately instead of waiting, you know I understand and it's alright," he whispered.

"Ichigo . . ." she replied lightly, not immediately sure how to respond.

"I honestly didn't have a lot planned until this evening," he admitted, "I can hit the gym or watch some movies or something. You can do that jinzen thing here or wherever you feel comfortable, if you're not already at the materialization stage. I know you're strong too, Rukia. Don't worry about spending some time on your own."

Her hand slowly stroked his cheek at that, even as she confirmed by asking "Are you sure?"

He nodded lightly against her, the tip of his nose brushing hers.

Rukia moved her head back and regarded him for a long moment. She knew he was trying to help even if it meant he had to let her go for awhile. She caressed his cheek with approval before gently pulling out of his grasp and sitting up.

Ichigo sat up beside her, weighing what he wanted to do. "I guess I'll start with the gym. Chappy can stay here and watch TV," he offered. He knew the artificial soul could sense Rukia's reiatsu and would be in a better position to warn him or summon help than he would if it was necessary for some reason.

"Right," she said.
He clasped her on the shoulder before getting up and going to shower. By the time he was back out Chappy was on the couch and seemed entranced by the Japanese edition of Cartoon Network. There was an empty bowl on the table in front of her and a sandwich for him—Rukia'd apparently eaten before leaving things to the artificial soul. "So where did she wind up going?" he asked after finishing the sandwich.

"Rukia-sama said she would be on the tower behind this building, pyon," Chappy replied.

He let out a breath and smiled just the slightest bit. Of course she was. She was always strangely fascinated by high places. Still finding Chappy's presence oddly discomforting, Ichigo went to wash his hands, called for the dishes to be taken away, and grabbed some of his things in what had become a makeshift workout bag before saying 'I'll be in the gym if anything happens.' He was sure Rukia had already given her further instructions.

She just nodded, and so he left.

Upon his return in the mid-evening he found Chappy much as she had been. He ignored her for the time being and went to get a new pair of boxers and an undershirt, hitting the shower again. He'd only toweled off before leaving the gym. He'd mostly kept to cardio exercises and had avoided straining himself too much so he'd still be in good condition for the evening.

He was out and getting his fourth outfit unpacked and laid out when the gigai entered the bedroom, once more very clearly in Rukia's possession. She headed to the bathroom for a minute and he heard her using the sink before she came back out.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

She was storing the soul pill and began to collect her own clothes as she replied "It's hard to say."

Her tone was neutral, and he knew that meant that it was probably rather quite complicated. He didn't press the point, noting she was endeavoring not to look his way. He wasn't sure if she really didn't want to talk about it, wanted to try and keep from having his outfit spoiled, didn't want to blatantly watch him dress, or some combination of the three.

"Ichigo . . ." she said quietly before entering the bathroom.

"Don't worry about it," he replied with a bit of good humor.

She gave him a glance over her shoulder out of the corner of her eyes.

He could tell there was a smile on her face.

Rukia's dress came up to a collar slightly higher than the base of her neck and had fairly long sleeves that went to the middle of her forearms, but its fitted skirt only went down to her mid-thighs. Everything above her bust wasn't opaque but rather a dense lace pattern which was briefly repeated at the hem of the skirt. It was entirely designed to draw attention to her legs. She wore her usual accessories and once more had on a fair amount of makeup around her eyes, which gleamed mischievously. She also had on a subtle pink shade of lipstick.

Ichigo had on a plain charcoal grey suit, black dress shirt, a thinner-than-usual matching grey tie, and a pocket square that was the precise same shade of orange as his hair. He'd undone several buttons on the cuffs again for an irreverent look and appeared to have chosen the tie as much for the fact that it was optional to the look as for the fact it matched. He likewise had his usual accessories on.
She found she really liked how the dark dress shirt looked on him. Something about the ensemble struck a note that was a lot more fun. "So what's your big set of plans, Ichigo?" she asked.

He had to try really hard to keep from looking down at her legs and didn't wholly succeed but it was made easier by how enchanting her eyes looked. "Well, first we eat," he said simply, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. He placed a call for housekeeping to visit while they were out and they left.

They ate at Keyakizaka in the hotel, which was a *teppanyaki* style restaurant. Both got multi-course dinner sets that took them through clam, snapper, beef tenderloin and sirloin, rice, miso soup, and finally for dessert some ice cream. Both had tea, and Ichigo surreptitiously made sure to have a lot of water. They mostly discussed what to do in Yokohama the next day, Ichigo choosing not to press Rukia on things yet and she likewise not quite willing to discuss them. The meal was rather robust and after having their fill they paid and departed, he escorting her to the subway. Once more they turned heads, for completely different reasons than before. She made very sure to keep her legs crossed for the entire ride.

Rukia was finally distracted from Ichigo by the scene that sprawled out beside them, Tokyo's cyan-lit expanse going off as far as one could see, punctuated by red aircraft warning lights and a more green-orange glow on the horizon. Shinjuku's towers loomed below them. They were on the 52nd floor of the Shinjuku Park Tower in the Park Hyatt Tokyo's New York Bar. They more than met the dress code and Ichigo had not-so-casually let slip they were staying at its new sister hotel, and that appeared to have greased whatever wheels were necessary to get them a window-side seat. There was a platter of cheeses and fruits between them and they were sipping at cocktails. "I thought you said it was dangerous to tempt fate when it came to drinking," Rukia chided quietly after a few moments considering the view. She wondered if she'd misjudged the hotel when she'd made her selection.

"I kept noticing that nobody ever asks to see our IDs," Ichigo replied just as quietly, "so I figured it was worth the risk." He'd also calculated that given their state of dress and where they were staying no one at the bar, at least, would ask questions. He wouldn't admit she'd been right on their first night out, but she had been.

She just smiled at him and enjoyed her drink. Cocktails could be a lot more appealing than sake and she found herself annoyed that they weren't a thing in Soul Society. She idly wondered whether somewhere out in Rukongai there were souls of people who in life had been bartenders and distillers.

He just enjoyed her company as they worked through their first two drinks, continuing to hydrate and sample the snacks they had. When he started to genuinely feel the effects he asked "So, how was the view up on that tower?"

"It'll be really nice when it opens," she replied as she once more looked out upon Tokyo. It'd been very slightly taller than where they were then. "I always prefer the way it looks at night though."

"I do too," he confided. He paused, not sure if he actually needed to ask for her to say anything.

"A *zanpakutō* spirit will evaluate and often even fight their wielder to determine whether they're worthy of knowing *bankai*, but doesn't actually know what it is until the wielder does," Rukia said quietly, "Both will only ever find out at the same time." She looked to Ichigo to find an odd look on his face, as if he'd suddenly just remembered something. Not sure what to make of it, she smiled a little and continued on "A *bankai* can also only be partially revealed by the *zanpakutō* spirit if they don't fully acknowledge their wielder, making it weaker, and likewise can continue to evolve after
being revealed."

Ichigo stared at her as something in the back of his mind burned, but he couldn't identify quite what it was at the moment. Finally he just settled on "Like how Byakuya's Senbonzakura Kageyoshi has several different forms?"

Rukia nodded and continued on "The final stage of learning bankai is materializing one's zanpakutō spirit and then subjugating it to one's will. What that actually means in practice depends on the spirit."

"Yeah, I did that using Urahara's technique, but also saw Renji doing it the traditional way," Ichigo said. He stopped and wondered for a moment. She'd never described what Sode no Shirayuki was like to him. His thoughts turned to memories of the sword in its shikai state and her attacks with it. Both were elegant and refined, and he could only think the zanpakutō spirit must act likewise. If that was so then . . . "I imagine Sode no Shirayuki probably doesn't respond well to brute force," he mused.

She gave him a small smile at his understanding. "Yes. I was able to materialize her before coming here and still can, but . . ." she trailed off. For once Shirayuki's voice did gently add: *My, my, he can be quite perceptive when he wants to be.* Rukia mentally shushed it.

"So do you have to beat her at a singing competition or ikebana or shōgi or something?" he asked.

Rukia kicked him under the table, albeit only lightly, put out by how quickly he'd veered away from taking the topic seriously. "It doesn't work like that!

Ichigo ignored it and sipped at his drink, slowly finishing it, before calling over a waiter and asking for a third and final one.

She abruptly caught up and asked for her own third, and shortly they were left with them, regarding one another.

"Anyway, whatever it is you have to do to prove yourself worthy to her probably involves confidence, right?" he said rather than asked, feeling for sure the answer was yes.

"That's quite likely," she conceded.

"Then it's just as well we're doing what we're doing next," he replied.

"And what's that?" she asked, looking at him suspiciously.

"We're going to dance at a nightclub," he stated, looking back with a serious expression.

She stared back at him in mild shock, never having known him to be one for dance. "Ichigo . . . I only know traditional dances," she said after awhile.

"You sang a song in English from memory and like two minutes studying the lyrics, don't give me that," he replied dismissively. He remembered the dance she'd done during her first song to him and her ability to play DDR in Akihabara as well. He was sure she would prove just as adaptable at the physical as the vocal. It wasn't that he was great at dancing but . . . "It'll be fun, promise," he added, smiling.

After a moment she smiled back.
Wednesday, August 21, 2002

Ichigo's assumptions about their ability to get into nightclubs hinged largely upon their experiences to date, their clothing, the day of the week and time of year, and upon the particular ones he'd chosen. His picks were Velfarre in Roppongi and Air and Womb in Shibuya. Their capacities were, respectively, 1500, 500, and 1000, and they had broadly similar taste in music, revolving around house, techno, trance, and their various subgenres and localized varieties. He figured it'd be an all new experience for both of them.

He'd decided to start with Velfarre since it was right next to Roppongi Station and they wouldn't have to worry trying to catch the last train. Roppongi was also still regarded as wilder than a lot of other wards and he figured it'd help them get in. Pulling Rukia close before they got to the doors and adopting his best put-out expression to convey disdain at the notion of being carded, he found they were asked for the cover fee and waved inside without any further checks. He waited until they were safely away before blowing out a breath. He was shocked it'd worked even though it was scarcely the first time.

Rukia glanced at him and smiled a little. She was of the opinion they'd transgressed against the Living World's laws only mildly, weren't hurting anybody, and if anyone deserved the leeway to do so it was Ichigo. That he was developing his own confidence in doing it as well as treating her made it more than okay, even if she could tell it wore on him. She could scarcely criticize him for it after having encouraged it. She asked "So what kind of music is it they play here?" even as she could feel more than hear an oddly fast beat.

"It's electronic stuff; sometimes it's a bit fast, sometimes it's a bit slow," he replied, leading her through a hallway.

"Electronics . . . ?" she asked, not understanding what appliances had to do with music.

"You'll figure it out," he promised. The music changed right before they entered the main room, the opening riffs of Paul Oakenfold's "Ready Steady Go" strumming out. The dance floor was less crowded than he'd imagined it might be although it was still quite populated. They'd have plenty of room if they wanted it. Lights of all colors strobed and pivoted, occasionally glinting off an enormous disco ball hanging from the ceiling, above which lasers coursed and stuttered back and forth.

Rukia stared at the cavernous room in disbelief, the net effect of it being a complete assault upon the senses that made her instinctively move closer to Ichigo. The music was loud and like nothing she'd ever heard before, and the lighting was just as chaotic and unfamiliar. There was even a smell and taste to the space, although those were hard to place. An intense energy seemed to flow all around them from the people dancing. This is . . . incredible. It reminded her of what she'd observed at the Shibuya scramble and at Summer Sonic yet was different again as well.

Ichigo kept his arm around hers and led her along a side of the wall toward one of the bars, getting them seats since he was sure she'd need time to process and absorb what they were listening to. He paid more attention to her as they sat than anything else, wanting to see what she made of it all. After awhile he loosened his tie and undid the top few buttons of his dress shirt. Dancing with it on tightly
would never end well.

She took her time, listening to and watching several songs to really get a feel for the mood and the aesthetic, determining it was indeed all about energy. Finally she looked at him and smirked a little, saying "This isn't what I expected, Ichigo."

"It's not really my thing, but I figure we could save the tango and waltz for some other time," he replied, guessing he would make less of a fool out of himself at freeform dance than something rigorously structured.

"You can tell me what those are supposed to be later," she stated, her tone implying she'd hold him to it, before taking him by the hand and leading him out onto the dance floor confidently.

He followed and matched her pace, letting her lead him to wherever she felt comfortable. They got somewhat into the dance floor before she stopped him and they began to dance together, a little slowly at first.

Rukia kept close to him and tried to guide him in a way, knowing Ichigo had energy in abundance even if he sometimes lacked for grace; she didn't want to just dance, or dance next to him—she wanted to dance with him. It took a bit of coaxing to get him to loosen up but by the second song they were already lost in the music with one another.

Neither remotely kept track of the number of songs they danced to. Velfarre's DJ for the night had apparently decided to embark upon something that was a cross between a world tour and a state of the art and they grooved through the work of artists as diverse as Daft Punk, Tiësto, David Guetta, Juno Reactor, Benny Benassi, Underworld, The Chemical Brothers, The Crystal Method, Fatboy Slim, Vitalic, Mr. Oizo, Ferry Corsten, Shinichi Osawa, and Röyksopp, among many others.

As they continued on they gradually made their way to the center of the dance floor, subconsciously moving toward a focal point of the powerful sound system. Although they didn't stop anyone in their tracks, they cleared out a small space around themselves, everyone else instinctually recognizing that the power of the two of them was something special. As the night went on the dance floor continued to fill and they became the eye of a hurricane.

Thursday, August 22, 2002

Dancing in most bars, pubs, nightclubs, and other places of commercial business was technically illegal after midnight, but nobody ever paid much attention to that particular law because it was never enforced. Rukia and Ichigo began to slowly orbit out of the crowd toward the outskirts once they started losing steam. As they finally spent their last, came back to their surroundings, and again headed for the bar, Ichigo checked his watch and was shocked to see it was 1:14 AM. Where'd all the time gone?

She was ordering drinks for them—both having long since burned off what they'd had what seemed like a short time ago—and noticed the stupefied look he had on his tired face. "What?"

He glanced to her and just showed her the time.

Her eyes went wide and her mouth fell a bit ajar. We were out there for four hours? A sudden throbbing in her feet convinced her it was believable. She stared at his watch for awhile before saying "We should have our drinks and leave."

He nodded and they drank a bit quicker than they normally would before making the short walk
back to their hotel. Every step seemed like a tiny agony that the drinks did little to dull.

Rukia turned Ichigo once they were on the elevator and leaned rather heavily against him, not wanting to stand anymore but having had too much pride to do anything about it in public.

He supported her without objection, intuiting the problem even though he wasn't in a much better state owing to his dress shoes. They had perhaps gone a bit overboard considering their footwear. "Need me to carry you?" he asked quietly and without judgment. He secretly hoped she'd say no, but had to offer and was prepared if she said yes.

She shook her head, making her way under her own power once they got to their floor. They were barely inside the suite when both sat down on the floor side by side and very gingerly pried their shoes off, each wincing a bit. Neither was bleeding or anything like that but after letting out a great sigh of relief, she began to work a healing kidō on herself, not wanting to deal with blisters. "Take off your socks," she commanded as she started to finish.

He did as he was told and turned so he was parallel to her but facing the opposite way. This gave her easy access to his feet and gave him the same to hers. As she started to work on him he began to gently massage her, taking great care not to look too far up along her legs.

Despite letting out a small noise at this she didn't protest and continued, able to maintain the necessary concentration regardless of the sensation. When she was sure it was enough, she took his feet in hand, starting to likewise massage him, doing what she'd felt him do three times.

Ichigo clenched his jaw at the feeling. Ever practical, her nails were really short for a woman but still longer than his.

"Does it hurt?" Rukia asked with a note of concern upon seeing his reaction.

"No, I'm fine," he replied. He wanted to continue on massaging her legs until he was sure she was at ease and her skirt made it remarkably easy, but also made it remarkably dangerous. In addition it was late, and they still had to shower and be up early. Getting too comfortable on the floor was a bad plan. "We . . . really should clean up and turn in," he said with reluctance. Her fingers dug into him just a little harder, drawing his attention.

"Forget the fireworks, Ichigo," she instructed, although her tone was gentle, "We'll be able to find somewhere to observe them and can still go to Yokohama . . . but I would prefer to spend this time with you rather than running off to sight-see." She was staring at him with an expression that made it clear this was far more important to her and she wouldn't take no for an answer.

He looked away both for lack of anything to say and because he didn't want to look down.

"I had a lot of fun," Rukia offered after a second, smiling at him to try and get him to look at her again.

Ichigo turned to her once more and could only smile reflexively. "I did too."

"You dance pretty well," she stated, adding quietly "Better than you sing."

He glanced away for a second before replying "I was just trying to follow your lead." It seemed he usually was.

"Is that so?" she asked coyly.
He nodded seriously, massaging the arches of her feet a little more firmly before she got any ideas about teasing him.

She leaned back against the door at that. "My calves are sore too . . ."

"Rukia . . ." he began. He wasn't opposed to following her lead once more, but it should be in more comfortable circumstances.

She interpreted it rather differently and let go of his feet, pushing herself forward with one hand and grasping his tie with the other, pulling on it so he bent toward her. Their faces weren't that far apart and she fixed him with a stare. "Ichigo, when I bought this dress it was because I liked how it looked and because my legs are the one thing I can really show off . . . but tonight I wore it for you, not for me," she whispered with some irritation at having to spell it out. She'd caught him looking all night and just as many times trying not to look and she didn't like the latter at all. He'd already seen a lot more than a bit of thigh and so it was fine if he looked at them . . . and touched them. She grimaced slightly as she heard Shirayuki giggling.

He stared back for a second before his expression locked down into one of those scowls he so typically wore. "That's not what I . . . anyway, that's not true," he said dismissively.

Rukia blinked at that, completely lost for words at what he might mean.

Ichigo closed his eyes and tilted his head to one side as if in exasperation as he said "All four of your dresses have been rather tight across your rear. You might be lithe but to say you only have one thing to show off just isn't—"

She became red at the way in which he so casually one-upped her and shook him by the tie as she started to punch him hard in one arm. "You idiot! Don't say that sort of thing with that kind of face to humiliate me!"

He abruptly let go of her feet and caught her fist in one hand on the second punch and grasped her opposite shoulder with the other, leaning forward further so their noses were almost touching as he glared at her. "You can hardly expect me to massage you if you cripple my arm and that's no way to react to being told you have a nice ass!" he almost shouted.

She turned an even brighter shade of red as her grip on his tie intensified and she struggled to free her fist. "Don't—don't say it so crudely!" she admonished.

"How am I supposed to say it then?" he demanded.

It was her turn to glare before she turned her head slightly and closed her eyes, using the tie to pull him forward so his lips pressed up against hers.

Ichigo didn't hesitate and kissed her rather firmly, releasing her fist enough to thread his fingers down between hers and slowly pushing her back against the door again.

Rukia reciprocated and squeezed at his hand, releasing his tie and tangling her fingers in his hair. They held it for a time before he broke it off, pushing one of his cheeks past hers so his mouth was by her ear. He tried again: "Rukia, you've got a cute butt." He felt her heat up again but that time she said nothing. He lightly rubbed his cheek against hers and stroked his fingers against the back of her hand, knowing that had her approval. She stayed quiet for awhile. He wasn't prepared for the foot that was suddenly against his abdomen and was sent sprawling backwards onto the floor by it.

"I was going to invite you to share the soaking tub with me again but then you engaged in this
nonsense and ruined the moment, so you can wait your turn, jerk," she declared haughtily, rising and striding past him.

In what he was sure was a calculated move to add insult to injury on her part, his new angle gave him a view of more than a little of her thighs, and to look away then was surely to stoke her ire. He just glowered at her until she firmly shut the bathroom door behind her.

Ichigo exited the bathroom to find her in bed with all the lights off, looking at the ceiling. He imagined she was trying to ignore him.

Rukia was shaken from her inner dialogue by his abrupt reappearance. *It's not unfair*, she added conclusively. Shirayuki said nothing in response.

He moved over to her bed and sat down on it, considering her sourly before leaning over and crawling forward.

"Who invited you over here anyway, strawberry?" she asked, newly irked at his sheer presumptuousness. She started to sit up to try and push him away only to find her wrists abruptly caught in his hands and pinned behind her head. "H—hey, what are you doing?" she demanded, her eyes going a bit wide at how securely he held her.

He proclaimed "Shut up, midget," before settling against her as he had the night before last, serving as her blanket once more and adding "You're under my care so stop babbling!" He released her wrists and got his arms securely around her such that she couldn't dislodge him. After the previous morning he wasn't going to leave her alone no matter how angry she might be at him.

She openly stared at his attitude, so reminiscent of how it'd been during the invasion of Soul Society, and at the insult he'd used. She'd never heard it from him before . . . but had heard it from the Hollow in her dream. She didn't resist as he settled against her and only very slowly brought her arms down to lightly rest her hands on his shoulders. "You're above the covers, you fool," she said quietly after a time.

"It's not unpleasant anyway," Ichigo replied. He wouldn't be tricked into letting her escape. After everything the extra layer of padding between them was probably appropriate too. He could tell she was going to keep on about it and cut her off by saying "I didn't and don't have a problem with massaging your legs. I just didn't want to do it over there."

Rukia looked away at that, realizing she'd at least partially misread his intentions and that was why he'd escalated. It still didn't explain the other part though. "Why have you been trying not to look at me all night?" she softly pressed. She blinked and looked down at him as she felt his cheeks warm against her neck.

"Because there's such a thing as too much of a good thing," he muttered. He *would* have had a problem with bathing with her again, that night anyway.

"Ichigo . . ." she replied, starting to understand and turning a bit pink. They'd already confessed their mutual attraction and so from a certain perspective to try and draw his focus was really to do nothing but to tease. *I told you that you already had his attention, Rukia-dono*, Shirayuki added smoothly. She wasn't smug, but the absence of any such quality just made Rukia all the more certain it was there.

"Go to sleep," he said, his tone rendering it halfway between a command and a request.

She slid her hands along his shoulders to his neck and the back of his head, pulling him close. " . . .
I'm sorry," she whispered down to him. It wasn't the right set of words, but it was the closest thing she had at the moment.

His arms tightened a fraction in acknowledgement both that it was the wrong thing to say and that he didn't really mind. He mildly added "Don't apologize, stupid," before placing a kiss on her neck. It was infinitely preferable to him that she was happy and self-confident, even if she sometimes threw it in his face and he threw it back, than that she was ashamed of herself or what she wanted.

Rukia stared down at him before looking aside, placing her hands on the bed and pushing herself up despite his weight, saying "Let go," without heat as she did so.

"I told you that—" Ichigo began in confusion and agitation.

"I'm not mad and I'm not kicking you out, but I need you to let go so we can move," she stated calmly.

With some trepidation he did so, sitting up and letting her do the same while staring at her curiously in the darkness, not that there was much of anything to see.

The first thing she did was to push the covers back and encourage him to lift up his legs by turns so he wasn't sitting on them and they rested behind him. The second was to grasp his shoulders and lean him forward so her forehead was against his. "You know I trust you, Ichigo," she whispered, her breath warm on his lips.

"Yeah," he affirmed quietly, even though it wasn't a question.

"And I know you trust me," she continued.

He nodded very slightly at that, moving her head with his.

"My calves and thighs are still sore and I want you to massage them. I know it's difficult to do that when I have pajamas on so I'm going to make it easier for you," she said directly. She left everything else—what this was, what this wasn't, that he didn't have to worry about looking because neither of them could see much of anything, where he should stop his hands, and so on—unsaid precisely because they trusted each other. Finding no objection from him, she leaned back onto the bed again.

Ichigo turned a bit red as he heard a quiet rustling that indicated she was taking off her pajama pants but just waited quietly. After a moment her hands found his wrists and she wordlessly guided them to her ankles. He focused on her feet for awhile to follow up first, then moved his hands up the back of her legs and began to knead her muscles, taking his time and doing it properly to work out all her tension. He spent a long time on her calves before starting on her thighs, by then exclusively focused on relieving her aches. He kept away from her inner thighs as those muscles wouldn't have been used much and halted elsewhere only where his fingers ran up against a finely-looped cotton fringe.

Rukia stifled herself with her hands to keep from distracting him as he massaged, letting him turn and maneuver her freely no matter how awkward a position it might put her in. Her cheeks burned occasionally but the relief more that compensated for it and she didn't find anything he did questionable. It was some unknown time later when he started to soothe her tender muscles and she finally trusted herself not to make noise that she withdrew her hands, focusing on breathing quietly. It was very, very different from a professional massage. He was finishing with relieving her calves when she pushed herself up again, saying "Ichigo, let me massage you too."

"I'm fine," he replied quietly.

"You must be sore, no matter how much you've been working out," she insisted.
He stared at where her voice was coming from, before letting out a breath and turning around, laying down with his face at the foot of the bed.

She found his ankles and started to again do as he had done, checking on his feet before working with his calves. She felt him ease at her touch and took her time locating all the knots in his muscles, it taking quite a lot of work for her to get at all of them. She'd become sufficiently intent on it that once she was satisfied she continued on to his thighs without a second thought, not hesitating to bring her hands up his long boxers to get at them. She kept to similar zones as he had, taking her time and repeating what he'd taught her.

It was his turn to bury his face in his arms at the sensation, though his jaw did most of the work of keeping him quiet. When she at last let go he pushed himself up slowly, turning toward her again. Her hands found his shoulders, his grasped her biceps, and they again leaned against one other.

She changed her grip and started to move backwards with him, bringing his head down so they were positioned like they had been before.

"What about your pants?" he whispered.

"Don't worry so much," she whispered back, sliding her arms around him and letting him settle against her like a blanket again. *It's fine with you—only with you . . .*

He didn't object and pulled the covers up over them before bringing his arms along their sides, resting his hands against her there.

She shifted a little at that, whispering "Promise me we'll use the tub again before we leave," as she stroked at the back of his neck.

"Promise," he replied, discerning she wanted them to try it again less aggressively than they had the first time. "Go to sleep," he said again, already sinking against her despite everything.

That time she accepted his request.

Chapter End Notes

The music ascribed here to Velfarre seems to be something you'd have been more likely to hear at Womb, but eh. Velfarre closed in 2007. As an interesting aside: Japan's ban on dancing at public venues after midnight began in 1948 and was repealed in 2015 after a multi-year "War on Dance" beginning after 2010.
**Thursday, August 22, 2002**

They woke up after noon, Rukia having set an alarm to keep their schedules at least sort of on track despite her stance earlier that morning. With reluctance they pulled apart, Ichigo letting her stay under the covers in chivalrous deference to her modesty and going to get dressed first.

Not too much later they were clad in their *yukata* and made their way toward the subway yet again. Both noticed that they didn't have any problems getting around despite the state they'd returned in the night before; they were each privately pleased their efforts to help one another had worked, although neither shared their thoughts. They took the Hibiya Line to its end, getting on a proper train and riding the Tokyu-Toyoko Line all the way to Yokohama Station before taking a short hop to Minatomirai Station via Yokohama's own subway; it took under an hour all told.

Minato Mirai was Yokohama's 'futuristic' seaside development and their first stop was its massive 73-story Landmark Tower, the tallest building—but not structure—in Japan. As they were both starving they ducked into one of its restaurants for lunch before spending quite a lot of time just taking in the view from the Sky Garden on the 69th floor.

Due to the time they stuck to Minato Mirai proper. They toured the massive multi-level Landmark Plaza mall which adjoined the tower; with its columns, stone work, odd ceiling features, and lighting it resembled nothing quite so much as a commercial temple. They investigated the museum ship *Nippon Maru* and Ichigo pointed out some of its modern contemporaries in the harbor, including a few cruise ships, the size of which left Rukia as stunned as commercial airliners had. They also toured the Red Brick Warehouses, former cargo storage depots that had been converted into shopping centers, World Porters, another shopping and entertainment complex, and Cosmo World, a small theme park complete with a roller coaster and Ferris wheel.

As the sun approached its rendezvous with the horizon they returned to Landmark Tower for a robust dinner before retracing their route, getting off at Tamagawa Station about two-thirds of the way back to the Roppongi. They'd found that although it was quite populated, there was still a fair amount of space in the riverside parkland; most of the premium seating was about a kilometer upriver relative to them. They wandered north for awhile before finding a place they felt would have a good view. Not having a sheet, they just sat together on the grass, surrounded by a few other people but having a comfortable amount of space for themselves.

Ichigo took Rukia's nearer hand in his as they waited and in response she scooted a bit closer and leaned against him a little.

Technically there were three separate fireworks festivals going on: Tokyo and Kawasaki were having dueling displays to try and outshine one another, and several more kilometers upriver the city of Chōfu in Western Tokyo was having its own display. They were poorly positioned to see the latter, but did catch a bit of it before the rivals started up. The competitive nature meant that although fewer fireworks were launched than the Tokyo Bay show they'd seen, they came up in far greater numbers at once, as if the two cities were waging a war at their border.

Rukia squeezed at Ichigo's hand as they watched and couldn't do anything but smile. Somehow fireworks displays always lifted her spirits immensely.
The show was much shorter, only taking about three-quarters of an hour, and when at last it was over they rose together and made their way back along the Tama River rather than idling, hoping to beat whatever traffic might be going the same way.

Upon returning to the hotel, they sorted out all their dirty laundry for a final wash to take advantage of the hotel's services while they could, leaving aside clothes for the next day and fresh sleeping wear before going to shower separately, adding their yukata and nagajuban for cleaning. They elected to get their eight special outfits and their kimono cleaned as well while they could still rely on professional services. After calling for it all to be picked up and returned in the morning they started to pack everything that was already clean in the luggage they'd acquired at the start of the vacation, chatting about various things including music and festivals in Karakura while they worked.

Once they'd done all they could before getting their other items back they retired to bed at a reasonable hour, still rather frayed from their off-balance schedules and the energy they'd expended. They had to be up early again, so it was just as well. Rukia passed out not long after curling up against Ichigo and he didn't stay awake much longer. They needed a vacation from their vacation.

Friday, August 23, 2002

Although they got well more than eight hours of sleep it didn't seem to make them much more rested. Rukia pulled Ichigo up and guided him along to the bathroom with her despite it as he'd promised. He went along grumpily.

Sometime later he was sitting behind her in the soaking tub, lightly massaging her neck as they both enjoyed the hot water; it was just the thing to work away tension. Each had been too tired to be excessively modest, provocative, or even terribly interested in the other in the shower, and they'd helped wash each other's backs again and otherwise ignored one another. The tub seemed to bring some life back to them, but they kept things simple and aboveboard after having idled next to one another for a long time.

"So tell me more about electronic dance music," she requested, settling under his touch. She'd become just as fascinated by it after clubbing as she had been by rock and its various children after the Summer Sonic festival.

It was problematic because he was scarcely a music historian and knew less about EDM than he did about rock. "I think it all started in a couple different ways. Electronic instruments started appearing in rock and pop music throughout the 60s to 80s. The song you sang for karaoke uses synthesizers heavily and is probably considered synthpop or new wave. That combined with disco, which itself came out of pop, funk, and soul, and from that things like house, techno, and trance emerged," he said haltingly.

"I don't know what any of that means so you'll just have to give me examples at some stage," she said seriously.

He exhaled and said nothing, foreseeing they'd be spending a lot of time in record stores in the future. Still, it was good that she was developing an interest in things beyond just the traditional arts and he was glad for her. Maybe she could learn some more about what she wanted to know about music history from Chad.

"So what are the tango and waltz?" she asked, recalling what he'd said at the club.
"They're formal dancing styles that are like 100 and 250 years old. I don't know either—or any formal dances before you get any ideas—but they're both pretty famous and I was just using them as examples," he said airily.

"You were just making your dancing up as you went along, hmm?" Rukia asked.

"I told you I was following your lead," Ichigo replied.

She brought her legs up in front of her and leaned forward on them a bit. They were silent for awhile. "Will you really be okay while I'm gone?" she asked after some time had passed.

"I'll manage somehow," he said, not teasing or being sarcastic.

She sat up fully again and slowly turned to face him, prompting him to withdraw his hands. They regarded one another in the water quietly. "I imagine Saturday will be busy with family and friends, and I won't be back until late Thursday, but promise me we won't do anything next Friday." She wanted to spend another full day in his presence with nowhere to be and nothing they had to do before school started.

"Promise," Ichigo said, nodding at her.

Rukia nodded back and locked eyes with him as she shifted under the water. "We'll get up together, okay?" It wouldn't do them any good to suddenly be embarrassed after having really woken up and relaxed.

He nodded again and didn't break eye-contact, likewise preparing to get out with her.

They politely ignored one another thereafter and got dressed separately, winding up back together brushing their teeth at the same time; it was a bit odd but not off-putting. They scarcely finished before their clothes were dropped off, and they set about packing them up. Ichigo happened to notice Rukia was still hanging onto the empty box of sweets he'd gotten her and still didn't know what to make of it.

Rukia transferred the flowers onto the living room table and left them for the hotel staff to do whatever they saw fit; they were still healthy looking—she'd been using a little kidō on them daily—but she couldn't take them with her and at any rate the message had expired even if the flowers themselves hadn't.

They finished getting everything ready with time to spare and took one last opportunity to eat at the hotel, going down to The French Kitchen for breakfast. Rukia got the Japanese breakfast of steamed rice, grilled fish, miso soup, pickled vegetables, sliced fruit, and apple juice. Ichigo got the French Kitchen breakfast with three mixed baked items, ham and Camembert cheese, a bell pepper omelet, roasted potatoes, bacon, sausage, sliced fruit, coffee, and orange juice. As usual, they stole liberally from one another, chatting about things like what she'd be doing in Soul Society.

Hunger sated, they returned to their suite for the last time. They gave it a long look over before collecting their bags and cases and leaving to check out. Neither really had to say anything. They both knew they'd miss the room and the hotel. The Grand Hyatt Tokyo had been good to them and for them and it would always be special to them in its own way. The same was true of Tokyo as a whole, even if they'd seen only the smallest fraction of it. On the elevator ride down Rukia sent Byakuya a message via her soul pager to let him know when they'd be arriving in Naruki, sure he'd want to meet them on arrival.
Rather than trying to manage their luggage on the subway, they took the hotel up on its services for the final time. They scheduled a taxi to Shinjuku Station and let themselves be helped to porter service before they took the Keio Line southwest toward Western Tokyo. They stored their bags and suitcases as best they were able and settled in for a trip that would take about 40 minutes with a transfer to the Keio-Sagamihara Line.

Neither was prepared for who greeted them. After collecting their possessions and getting off the train and onto the platform, they were immediately confronted by a full ensemble of friends and family.

Byakuya stood with seeming disinterest, once again impeccably dressed in attire that was far too formal, and attended by someone neither of the pair had ever seen before who was dressed like a chauffeur. Immediately beside him were Yuzu and Karin who were in turn flanked by Isshin. The entire Urahara Shop crew was assembled next to him, including Yoruichi. Beside her were Ishida, Chad, Inoue, Tatsuki, Keigo, and Mizuiro. Off to one side was Zennosuke although Ichigo wasn’t able to tell. Upon sighting the couple, different expressions of delight and happiness lit up down the line before everyone—even Byakuya and his hired help—gave small bows of the head and shoulders and called "Welcome home!" to varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Rukia and Ichigo both froze at the sight and forgot to clear away from the door of the train in case anyone else was departing. Fortunately no one was.

"Everyone . . ." Ichigo muttered in disbelief

Byakuya gestured for the chauffeur to attend to them and he did so with polished efficiency, relieving them of their luggage—bulkiest first—and assembling it into a neat pile, before starting to haul it away in stages while they sorted out their reunion.

"Nii-sama, did you invite everyone?" Rukia asked in surprise. She was stunned that even Zennosuke was there, although that made sense as he was technically her subordinate—he was paying respects to his newly arrived superior.

She was answered by what could’ve been called a very small smile and then it was like the floodgates were open, everyone crowding around them and hugging them, greeting them, or asking what had been going on. The three teenagers who hadn’t gone to Tokyo were particularly excitable and curious. It was all a bit much to deal with so suddenly and the couple was swamped.

Byakuya let it play out until all the luggage had been taken away and the chauffeur was returning. He dismissed Zennosuke, apparently having already discussed something with him, and said "I believe we should make Rukia and Ichigo feel at ease. They’ve had a long trip," in a way that cut through the noise of the crowd around them and communicated a message everyone else already understood.

Ichigo was caught off-guard by the use of his given name and Rukia was only somewhat less surprised, but before either could say anything they were being practically dragged off, although everyone was careful to keep them together during the process. The chauffeur understood and immediately turned back the way he’d come from. Byakuya followed along.

They were eventually led to a limo that could seat all of them and were once more shocked at the attention being given to them. They were directed to the choicest seats, Byakuya apparently opting to sit up front, and were afforded a bit more space and time as the ride to Karakura began.
It wasn't immediately clear where they were at first, although Ichigo discerned it seemed to be south of his family's clinic in Minamikawase. Things looked quite familiar even if he rarely had a reason to go that direction. They were stopped outside of a rather traditional looking but somewhat large two-story house that clearly had a comparatively spacious garden.

"We were able to find something close to home," Yuzu said cheerily as she saw the two peering up at it.

Karin lightly shushed her, not wanting the surprise ruined. Everyone piled out and the couple was plucked out to be escorted inside by their welcoming party. They were joined by Renji, who'd clearly been tasked with patrolling Karakura while everyone had briefly left for Naruki, and oddly enough, Chizuru and Michiru, who seemed to be there mostly because a lot of people they knew were.

The layout of the house wasn't immediately apparent upon entry, but it seemed to be quite standard, with the ubiquitous *genkan* entrance area leading into a rather open, permanent living room with all the modern amenities. There was an adjoining dining room and kitchen complete with breakfast bar and they'd all clearly been styled to fit together. The aesthetic was a tasteful if restrained fusion of the modern and traditional, featuring heavy use of various woods and bamboo combined with rich inset ceiling lamps and large windows to let in natural light. Several appliances in the kitchen gleamed in stainless steel. Beyond were various traditional multipurpose rooms that used *tatami* mats and had been set up in temporary ways just to demonstrate what might be done with them, *shōji* doors opened up to show them off. The garden in the back and along one side was likewise quite traditional and featured a covered *rōka* walkway as well as both a patio and a deck area.

Everyone else discretely moved to the living room to socialize and wait. As they filed in, Byakuya was the last 'guest' to enter and gestured for Rukia and Ichigo to follow him as he gave them a tour. Everyone's deference was explained by the fact it was still *his* house—even if he had listened to some but by no means all of the Kurosaki family's suggestions as to how to upgrade and furnish it—which he was soon to turn over to them.

It soon became clear that on the first floor there were also: a unit bathroom near the entrance that had the all the usual amenities in a compact if functional space; a utility room with modern appliances and space for linens and cleaning implements, all of which were in place; an offset and discrete staircase to the second floor; many, many closets; a room that had been permanently set up as a combination office, studio, and library for studying; and a somewhat compact permanent guest bedroom with a small but full bathroom that was traditionally divided up into three separate areas for the toilet, sink, and shower. Byakuya likewise demonstrated that the kitchen was fully stocked with wares and basic items, although perishables had been mostly eschewed.

The second floor opened onto a modest lounging area that was rather less formal than downstairs and held a table, small stands, and comfortable looking chairs. On either side were their bedrooms.

Ichigo's bedroom was quite spacious, with all his personal effects having been moved in and installed in a way reminiscent of how he'd had them in his family home. The furniture was less functional and more mature and he'd been given a twin-sized bed to replace his single, but the style remained recognizably something he could call his own. Once more it featured both ample natural and artificial lighting. He had his own bathroom that was quite generously sized, and he was privately pleased it featured another rainfall shower. His wardrobe was unaltered except for the inclusion of several tailored and conservatively styled suits and even a tuxedo along with many accessories for them. It was unclear exactly how they'd been fitted, but they were all extremely expensive and put what he'd picked out for himself in Tokyo to shame. He'd also been given two *kimono*, one casual and the other perfectly formal and bearing what he assumed to be five *kamon* of the Shiba clan—he'd never
seen it before but it was hexagonal like the Kuchiki one.

Rukia’s bedroom was enormous and constituted what would traditionally be called the master bedroom, including a large walk-in closet. She found the few personal effects she'd wanted to retrieve from her apartment in Soul Society were already present and apparently visible to Ichigo too. She had a huge king-sized bed and plenty of space beyond it replete with dressers, an armoire, and nightstands. The furniture was elegantly feminine but also cute and she noticed many of the prints on the fabrics were rabbit-themed, although usually abstractly so. The master bathroom had a separate room for the toilet but was otherwise an open-plan design divided up by space and lighting into a large sink and counter area, a very large shower, and an enormous raised soaking tub. While Ichigo's bathroom was styled quite nicely, Rukia's was positively stately, with heavy use of stone tiles and traditional elements to create a serene, relaxing space. Her wardrobe was half empty, not having been filled out with intimates and more casual clothing, but in terms of outfits she’d been given several student uniforms and dresses that ran the gamut from cute and simple to ultra-refined. She was sure she saw Yuzu and Karin's hand in the simpler ones. She’d also been given an expensive and tasteful selection of jewelry and accessories, and had two *kimono* that likewise occupied either end of the spectrum.

They were left thunderstruck at how much wealth had been expended on them even if the home wasn't palatial in size, coming to realize that as much as they’d spent on vacation it was only a fraction of what'd been paid at their new residence. The message was very clear: this wasn't merely a gift but an investment, and not even necessarily just in them—they would be expected to host Soul Society’s engagements in Karakura downstairs. There was also very much the implication made by their rooms and the living spaces of the house: they could have space to themselves, and likewise could choose to socialize or relax wherever they might, but if they were to be intimate Ichigo would be going to Rukia rather than the other way around, and she would have the upper hand in determining how that would go. Making her happy was clearly the overriding priority behind all of it.

"Nii-sama . . ." Rukia said, not really knowing what to say at his generosity.

Despite his disdain for formality and authority alike, Ichigo was forced to acknowledge the crushing weight of the luxury that was being lavished on them. He bowed at what was, especially for him and who he was bowing to, a comparatively severe angle and said "Thank you very much!" with contrition.

She looked to him, more than a bit startled at seeing the gesture again.

Byakuya seemed to consider it for a moment before he began to walk past the two of them, saying "A songbird does not care whether it lives in a nest made of gold strands or straw." He stopped at the doorway.

Despite how obtuse the remark was on its surface its meaning was extremely clear to both of them and their eyes went wide at it: all of this and yet he viewed it as nothing in comparison to what Ichigo had achieved.

"I believe we are being rude to everyone else in making them wait to present their own gifts," he added, departing and heading back downstairs.

Ichigo and Rukia shared a quick look and followed.

By the time they were downstairs a cake, a spread of lunch, and refreshments had been laid out in the dining room and on the breakfast bar. Everyone else was waiting in the living room with smiles and
their housewarming presents variously concealed. A tablecloth had been thrown over the coffee table to keep from scuffing it as everyone presented what they’d bought on it.

Karin and Yuzu had gotten them an analog clock whose face was a rather simple geometric representation of a blazing sun and a crescent moon, overlaid side by side. Something about it had just reminded them of the pair from the moment they saw it and it wasn't overwrought or too expensive.

Isshin had gotten them a very nice wooden cutting board and had it professionally customized with the mon of both the Kuchiki and Shiba clans. They were arranged parallel about the center and were side-by-side on the horizontal axis, as if they could be tiled. Neither emblem had dominance, and they almost but didn't quite touch. He'd liked the symbolism of his daughters’ gift but had decided to be a bit more explicit in his own message.

The Urahara Shop and Renji had gotten them an all-purpose cocktail set, a popular Japanese-language bartender's guidebook that included lots of recipes, and a small bouquet basket of various quality-but-not-too-pricey liquors and ingredients to get them started. The three teens that had been to Tokyo studiously pretended not to notice; the five teens that hadn't stared at it incredulously. The gift-givers, particularly Renji and Yoruichi, completely ignored the latter group's responses.

Chad, Inoue, and Ishida had pooled money together to get them a rather nice karaoke microphone that had a few advanced features built in and could be plugged into almost any sound system, including the one that was hooked into the living room's TV.

Tatsuki, Keigo, and Mizuiro—apparently with financial input from Chizuru and Michiru, probably provided after cajoling by the former—had gotten a rather nice set of matching activewear for the couple in gender-neutral colors, along with some reasonably priced but dependable trainer shoes. Tatsuki had her own estimate of their sizes but had consulted with Yuzu for more accurate figures, especially for Rukia since the Shinigami had previously been stealing her clothes. She knew Ichigo usually exercised in the evenings and figured Rukia would probably eventually join him.

Ichigo and Rukia were once again left astonished at everyone's thoughtfulness and found they didn't know what to say. Their expressions conveyed more than enough for everyone to understand.

They were saved by Isshin declaring "I don't know about anyone else, but I'm starving. Let's eat!"

Chapter End Notes

And so we say "Genki de!" to Tokyo and 'Season 1'.

All Ends With Beginnings

Friday, August 23, 2002

Over lunch Rukia and Ichigo were split up in engaging with family and friends.

Rukia was mostly preoccupied by Karin, Yuzu, Inoue, and Yoruichi—continuing on as her core support group—about the imperative of completing her wardrobe.

Karin and Yuzu really did regard her as an adoptive sister in addition to their brother's girlfriend. That feeling had only intensified when Byakuya hadn't rebuffed—nor admittedly acknowledged—their efforts to extend adoptive familial status to him too when the Kurosaki family had inserted itself into his real-estate adventure.

Inoue still held her as a dear friend and counterpart in supporting Ichigo, and felt sincerely indebted to her for the change she had worked in him. She was glad for them and happy that they were happy, and would do whatever she could to keep things that way.

Yoruichi was heartened to have a woman around who was somewhat nearer her own age and understood at least some of the worldview and experiences she'd had. She'd been stuck almost exclusively with men as associates since her exile to the Living World, especially since the female Visored kept to themselves and were prickly. Rukia was a lot more fun than she let on also seemed like she might make a good drinking buddy.

Meanwhile Ichigo was assailed by Tatsuki, Keigo, Mizuiro, Chizuru, and to a much lesser degree Michiru as to what exactly happened and how he'd met Rukia again, as most of them had only recently returned from their own vacations and only some of them had been partially filled in as to what was going on.

Tatsuki, Keigo, and Mizuiro had all been indisposed during the events in Tokyo, and the first they'd heard about the recent developments had been by phone from Yoruichi on Monday. They'd returned over the course of the week and had only been privy to the Flash Goddess showing them the karaoke recording earlier in the day. All of them were staggered by the change in Ichigo's disposition and genuinely curious as to what had happened.

Chizuru hadn't been part of the club as she didn't know Ichigo or Rukia well, but she'd been told by the three who were what had gone on last year and since so many of her friends were involved and they'd been honest with her she'd decided to help out.

Michiru knew significantly less about what was going on and was largely lost, but had been convinced to help mostly because Inoue and Tatsuki so clearly believed in the cause.

A third group—consisting of the rest of the Urahara Shop, Isshin, Byakuya, Renji, Ishida, and Chad—mostly kept quiet and watched or engaged among themselves.

Isshin'd had a brief but serious chat with Byakuya about what this was all about upon his return to Karakura and found they were on the same page—for the moment anyway. In not so many words the brother had articulated he wanted his sister to be happy, and the father wanted the same for his son. That understanding was sufficient for the foreseeable future, although other considerations would have to be addressed later. It seemed rather obvious Ichigo had learned about the Shiba clan, so he'd opened up about to his daughters and let them know he'd taken Masaki's familial name. They'd seemed disinterested until he mentioned cousins. He'd let them engage with Byakuya in a
familiar way because he thought it was harmless, funny, and they seemed to enjoy it.

Byakuya had understood and tolerated Isshin's interference out of an understanding—if not quite a respect—for their similar positions on several matters. It'd been clear from Monday onward that he was in command of the final stages of this enterprise and all parties had deferred to him sufficiently on that point to satisfy him. Once they'd selected the house he'd spared no expense in bringing in an army of contractors to bring it up to his standards; the last of them had only left earlier that day. Between directing them and shopping for all manner of items it'd been a rather busy and unusual week. He'd found the behavior of Karin and Yuzu toward him vaguely amusing, if overly familiar, but given their clear and earnest concern for Rukia as much as Ichigo in their suggestions he'd chosen to say nothing about it.

Renji'd already told Byakuya about the situation that was developing in Soul Society earlier in the day upon being summoned, and his taichō seemed indifferent once he'd revealed he and Ukitake had been heavily involved in trying to make events constructive. It seemed that Rukia receiving due praise in an appropriate manner was more than satisfactory to him. Renji had been left with the impression there were other calculations being made too but he wasn't privy to them. He felt his part in everything beyond just continuing as Rukia and Ichigo's friend was basically done.

Ishida, despite being surrounded by so many Shinigami, found it all rather entertaining.

Chad was just happy for the couple.

Urahara was internally treating it as another mental holiday from his real work; externally he was quite satisfied with free food.

Tessai, Jinta, and Ururu were there because the boss was and a good excuse to get off work should never be turned down. Likewise, the food was free, and having been observers to the whole thing almost its beginning, it was interesting to watch it continue to play out.

"If you're going to keep demanding answers to things then you can do it while helping me get these bags upstairs," Ichigo said loudly, standing and going to retrieving the luggage to haul it up the lounge area. He was joined by Keigo and Mizuiro, who were more than happy to do physical labor if it meant they could continue pestering him, while Tatsuki exhaled dismissively and went over to join Inoue with Rukia's group. She was followed by Chizuru and Michiru.

Ichigo was able to get the luggage upstairs in short order with Mizuiro and Keigo's assistance. After threatening them both with egregious physical violence—damn if he'd let them even see into Rukia's room—and getting them to sit down in the lounging chairs he sorted the bags into the appropriate rooms, knowing what was whose, and led them back downstairs.

"Tell me again how I'm a playboy for only pursuing older women, Kurosaki," Mizuiro continued to needle, not above getting a few hits in after having endured over a year of such commentary. He didn't know exactly how old Rukia was but it had become clear over the past several months she wasn't actually their age.

"And what's with someone like you winning the hand of such a beautiful maiden anyway?!" Keigo demanded. If there was a contract that delineated their friendship it would have specified being annoying was his job.

"Just because I'm farther down the stairwell than you doesn't mean you can't have an accident," Ichigo growled ominously to both.

They were all stopped by how animated the group of girls had become in trying to convince Rukia to
Ichigo was perplexed by it, while Keigo and Mizuiro seemed to regard the sight with fear.

"I couldn't possibly—" Rukia was protesting with a defensive smile.

"It's an important part of moving into a new place," Inoue said sweetly.

Yoruichi leaned down and whispered something to Rukia. Ichigo noticed she turned pink and her eyes widened at whatever the Flash Goddess was saying.

"Yeah! Besides, you can tell us what really happened," Tatsuki offered, putting a friendly hand on the petite Shinigami's shoulder. For a split second she glanced at Ichigo and glared, not having believed most of his version of events for a second, before giving a winning smile to his girlfriend. They'd never been very close during the times she'd been around before, but Inoue liked her and anybody who could tame Ichigo and get him to open up was surely worth her time.

Rukia looked to Ichigo not for approval but out of concern for him.

Ichigo let the corners of his mouth twitch up a little to indicate he'd be fine if she went off to do something.

Byakuya noticed what was occurring; he had one last item of business to attend to with the pair since the event appeared to be winding down and with both he and Renji there paperwork was no doubt piling up back at the 6th Division. He rose and walked out to the garden, giving both Ichigo and Rukia brief glances to indicate that they should follow.

With a moment's hesitation they both did, leaving their friends behind.

Keigo and Mizuiro shared a look before going over to Ishida and Chad to bother them in turn about various things. Most of the ladies began to discuss where they should go in Karakura and potentially Naruki to shop for things Rukia still needed.

Byakuya waited out in the garden for the couple to assemble in front of him. Once they did he reached into his suit jacket and produced an envelope, opening it and removing two keys and two cards. The keys were identical and were clearly for the house. The cards were personalized JCB credit and debit cards with their names on them and bore the Mizuho Bank logo just like the one Rukia had that accessed the Shinigami special mission finance account. After handing them out, he kept his hand extended out to Rukia.

She understood and produced that older card, handing it over.

"These utilize the Kuchiki clan's private account. For your purposes they are unlimited, however I trust that you will show some restraint in using them in the understanding that conspicuous spending is precisely that," Byakuya said to both of them dryly.

Each nodded, understanding.

The clan head then looked to the teenager and said "Understand this too is a gift and that I am not buying you off or putting you into my debt . . . Ichigo."

"You know, if you keep calling me that I'm going to just start calling you Byakuya again," Ichigo replied with a small smirk. His delivery was only faintly arrogant—he wouldn't push his luck too hard.
Byakuya's eyes narrowed fractionally. "All of the utilities and other expenses associated with this property are set to be automatically withdrawn from the same account as those cards." They would never miss a bill. He handed the rest of the envelope over to Rukia, adding "These are the documents confirming ownership. Since it would appear that you now have plans for the day and I have stayed quite long already I will be taking my leave with Renji."

Rukia looked up at him before looking down again as if in thought. After a moment she crossed the distance between them and hugged him around the waist.

Ichigo was scarcely less surprised than Byakuya by that.

She didn't let go, and after looking down at her with unusually widened eyes for a moment, the head of the Kuchiki clan slowly brought his hands to her shoulders, gripping there lightly.

This seemed to be enough and after a few seconds Rukia withdrew, smiling up at her brother warmly as she stepped back beside Ichigo.

The three stood in silence for some seconds before Ichigo bowed his head slightly in a rather more knowing and familiar way than earlier to communicate some respect.

Byakuya's only acknowledgement seemed to be jutting his jaw forward slightly before he turned and headed back inside.

Yoruichi, Isshin, Renji, Yuzu, and Karin all had the good sense to get away from the windows before their observation of events might have been noticed.

Renji slapped Ichigo on the shoulder somewhat harder than was normally friendly and said "Later," before pointing at Rukia and continuing "And I'll see you in like, two days, so whatever," dismissively to tease. It was sufficient to get them both to glare at him while he got his shoes on and left with a smirk, following after Byakuya.

They were followed by the rest of the Urahara Shop crew. "Kurosaki-san, Kuchiki-san, do your best," Urahara offered, tipping his hat as he left.

Tessai nodded at them both sagely.

Jinta said "Thanks for the food, I guess," with disinterest.

Ururu bowed deeply to both and said "Thank you," meekly before sprinting to catch up with everyone else.

Rukia scarcely had time to react before Yoruichi was grabbing her by the wrist and stepping into her own shoes, forcing Rukia to do the same. "Come on, we've got a lot of places to go," she entreated, practically carting the raven-haired woman off.

Ichigo received a smile from Inoue and weird looks from his sisters and Tatsuki as they quickly filed by in turn, getting more traditional thanks and farewells from Chizuru and Michiru. Like that they were all gone. He realized then the looks had all been different varieties of reassurance. He shut the door, trying to figure out what they'd meant.

"You should know better than to stand that close when they're on the prowl, Ichigo! You're lucky to be alive!" Keigo called as if seriously worried for his well-being. Mizuiro had a look that indicated he didn't quite endorse the position but at least understood it. Ishida and Isshin just looked smug in their own ways. Chad looked cryptic. All of them were having more of the food, clearly intent on
ensuring nothing was left.

"Why is it I'm left with you jerks!?!" Ichigo demanded sourly.

"That's no way to talk to the people you used as scapegoats for your deceptive vacation plan!" Keigo protested, likewise willing to use the abuse they endured as ammo.

Ichigo grimaced mildly at that and went over to join them in eating and conversation.

The young men began to drift out as the day wore on. Chad had work, and Keigo and Mizuiro got as much mild revenge upon and information from Ichigo as they felt they would in one day and decided to become scarce before they actually irritated him. That left Isshin and Ishida, and the latter had the sense to tell there was some unfinished business between the father and son so he left as well.

Ichigo found himself looking at his dad across the table, both of them regarding the other in silence. Finally he said: "So that's the Shiba mon on the cutting board and kimono, right?"

"Yeah," Isshin replied. He took a moment before asking "Did she tell you?" He didn't refer to the mon when asking the question.

"No, I guessed it while trying to piece together who Kaien was," he said honestly, "She just confirmed it later when we talked about that. Leaving the haori on your shihakushō was a pretty big clue." His dad seemed to ponder this and looked mildly impressed that he'd managed to put everything together.

He was really wondering at how much he should say right then, and what approach to take. Ryūken was right that I haven't been the greatest father . . . "So you know why Byakuya is doing all this, right?" he asked, deciding to stall.

"The real reason he's doing it is he wants Rukia to be happy, but it doesn't hurt that I'm a strong descendant of the Shiba and there's no Shiba clan to worry about anymore," the son replied. He had the feeling Renji and Yoruichi had reported back to him and Urahara, so why they were even discussing this was a mystery. "You knew that I knew that already."

Isshin sighed and scratched at his chin. "This isn't really the greatest time to tell you everything," he muttered.

"So don't," Ichigo replied. He stood by what he'd said in fake Karakura that day even if he'd borrowed Rukia's words.

"I don't think that's fair either," his father replied with a lame smile, making it clear that it was an actual problem. "Now it's not just about you, but Rukia-chan too, so . . ." he trailed off.

The son looked away at that, discerning what he was implying. "Tell me whatever you can and I'll just deal with it until I can really do something about it," he said quietly.

"No," Isshin replied flatly.

"You just said—" Ichigo began heatedly, looking to him. He was stopped by the expression on his father's face; he looked deadly serious.

"I know you want to protect her, but it's not something you should have to shoulder on your own, or can right now, and she needs to know too. I'll tell you what I can, but only when she can hear it from me too," the former taichō stated. Rukia deserved to know because she'd already dealt with a lot of the effects of it in the past, and it would affect her in the future. He didn't doubt she would accept it
and it wouldn't change her opinion of Ichigo. As for the rest . . . they couldn't do anything about that as they were anyway.

The son glowered for a second, but cast his mind back to that morning, and the previous, and on and on. He trusted Rukia with his body and his mind, and one of the very first things he'd ever done with her was trust her with his life and his soul. In the end he just nodded resolutely and looked away.

A heavy silence lingered between them. Isshin could see his son's emotions written all over his face. After a time he asked ”Have you told her how you feel yet?” There was a beat before he added "How you really feel?"

Ichigo narrowed his eyes. He trusted Rukia with his heart too but hadn't said it. Not that way, anyway . . .

"Nothing about this is normal. You know she knows. You know she feels the same. You shouldn't be scared of using a word. She's leaving soon for a few days, right? It was your idea? I can tell it wasn't hers. Don't wait: tell her before then. If I'll eat you up otherwise and you'll make your sisters worry," the father advised. It was the best he could offer. The boy would probably be lovesick either way, but at least that way he'd have done something about it.

"Is it right to tell someone something like that before they leave?" Ichigo asked, looking to him.

"If you never want to have any regrets, it's the only time," Isshin said quietly, meeting his gaze levelly. His meaning was clear, even if there were many ways to interpret the words.

They stared at each other for awhile before Ichigo looked away again.

Isshin let out a breath and got up, going to the coffee table and retrieving the bouquet of liquor. The atmosphere was suddenly oppressive. "How about a drink?" he offered. His son was looking at him incredulously. "Just one, and don't look at me like that! It's not like I got your started or this is your first!"

The campaign to complete Rukia's wardrobe was wide-ranging and not without casualties. Although they had fun, Michiru and Chizuru dropped out after the group had scoured Karakura and were moving on to Naruki in the late afternoon. Yuzu, worried about making dinner for the couple, also departed not too long after, taking Karin with her. As they were a bit far away by then Tatsuki chose to accompany them back to at least the edge of Karakura, although she promised she'd return. Karin protested being chaperoned, but not too much as she thought Tatsuki was actually pretty cool.

Rukia was left with just Inoue and Yoruichi, who were helping her carry bags of the many items they'd already picked up. She'd gotten a good selection of underwear—Chizuru had largely kept her opinions to herself for once—some shorts and jeans, and quite a number of t-shirts and other casual wear. She'd also picked up a few winter items since they were still on summer sale, and various toiletries like soap, shampoo, and conditioner.

"Now we can get the really serious stuff!" Yoruichi declared. Naruki would have a better selection than Karakura had anyway.

"Eh, Yoruichi-san?" Inoue asked with confusion, not sure what else there really was to get.

Yoruichi shifted all the bags to one hand and held up a finger for each absolutely critical class of item, declaring: "Makeup, perfume, shoes, hosiery, and real lingerie." It was clear Rukia had enough to function, and Byakuya had apparently done well by her for dresses and jewelry, but it wouldn't do just to be functional. It wasn't about Ichigo—he was already smitten with her and there was little
need to impress or tease him—it was about making Rukia feel powerful and confident in herself.

Inoue blushed a bit at the idea of helping Rukia pick out the last of the five kinds of items, but quickly directed her thoughts away from anything she shouldn't be thinking about regarding the couple, instead smiling and nodding confidently. She understood.

"Do we . . . really have to?" Rukia asked. She was a bit embarrassed at the whole thing.

The former head of the Shihōin clan peered at her with vague disapproval. "Rukia, you're pretty. Ichigo knows it already. This isn't about him. It's about you. You have to know it too," she said with certainty.

The petite Shinigami stared at her at that.

"You are really pretty, Kuchiki-san," Inoue added, "but Yoruichi-san is right. It's one thing to be something, and it's another to know you're something."

"I—I know I'm pretty!" Rukia said with a huff, looking away in annoyance. Her mind drifted back to the previous morning and Ichigo's comments about her dresses. He really did know it better than she seemed to. Shirayuki said nothing but she felt a small smile of encouragement to go along with it. She sighed and with some exasperation said "Alright, fine."

Yoruichi gave a sly smile and lead them on. Tatsuki caught back up about a half hour later.

By the time Rukia returned with the two teenagers and the woman it was dusk. They were all carrying several bags, having acquired a few more in Naruki. Tatsuki had understood the objective immediately upon rejoining them and had served as the voice of aggressiveness and practicality to compliment Yoruichi's sensuality and Inoue's demureness.

Karin was the one to greet them, and helped them take everything up to Rukia's room before they returned downstairs.

From the kitchen Yuzu insisted they all stay for dinner, and Isshin joined in, calling it a gathering of close family friends.

Yoruichi and Tatsuki agreed quite quickly and persuaded Inoue to stay despite her objections.

Ichigo and Rukia didn't protest. There was a tension between them again, but it wasn't dire and everyone who noticed felt sure they'd work it out later. Both the adults and teens decided to not prolong dinner too much to give them time to themselves.

Rukia was adamant that Ichigo couldn't be in her room while she unpacked and got her new purchases put away; she'd let him know when he might be allowed back inside.

He got his own bags unpacked relatively quickly and decided to keep busy by putting the luggage away downstairs. He knocked on Rukia's door and asked if she'd set the bags and cases she had outside while he showered before retreating, in no mood to test her. Upon returning—his new shower was just as good as the hotel's had been—he found she'd cooperated and took her bags downstairs, storing them in one of the closets with his own. He and his dad had already squared away most of the housewarming presents to suitable locations and mounted the clock in the living room, so the only things left were their workout clothes. He left Rukia's set by her door and put his own away before flopping onto his new bed.
He briefly let his mind wander over how to tell her how he felt before realizing if anything should be done naturally, it should be that. A yawn suddenly overtook him and he realized how tired he was. He would do it tomorrow. He would definitely tell her tomorrow . . .

It took Rukia a lot longer than she expected to get everything put away. When she finished and ran all the trash from packaging downstairs to the garbage she realized Ichigo wasn't there. After giving the lower floor a final look she turned off the lights and went up to his room to check on him.

She found him asleep on top of his covers, looking peaceful, and watched him for awhile in deliberation. Finally she went to retrieve a throw-blanket off her bed and came back, carefully putting it over him before going to shower. When she returned she gingerly got onto the bed with him, under the blanket, and into his arms. She absolutely refused to leave him alone on the first two nights, and if that meant being in his bed rather than having him in hers then that was fine.
To Let Our Hearts Ignite

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, August 24, 2002

To Renji's eyes Hisagi looked halfway dead. The 9th Division co-fukutaichō was slumped in one of the chairs in front of Ukitake's desk. Byakuya stood beside Ukitake, passively considering the production sample of the Seireitei Communication's special issue. Renji himself was off to one side of his own taichō. They'd been invited to examine it by Ukitake and Byakuya had accepted on both their behalves. Renji had already basically seen it but played along anyway.

It was thinner than usual and the price was more reasonable than the prior year's summer special. The cover was an image of Rukia singing, with insets of everyone else. The first page listed showings of the footage—the Shinigami Women's Association had outfitted the 4th Division's rarely used training grounds for the event—starting later on Sunday and continuing for a week thereafter in the evenings. The interior had been greatly embellished upon since Renji had last seen it with graphics but it was the same in terms of content.

There was an introduction written by Hisagi himself which expounded upon why he felt the event was newsworthy. There was a historical overview of why it was relevant that briefly recounted the roles of the people involved in a single space, covering the invasion of Soul Society, the war, and the recent search mission to find Ichigo. There was a separate historical overview that briefly discussed music in the Living World. There were a spread of opinion pieces including ones from Rose, Unohana, and Matsumoto that focused on things such as the need for artistic expression, the importance of sharing experiences to maintain one's psychological well-being, and on the power of communication and friendship. There followed Hisagi's interview with Renji and the biographical and program guide sections. A few pertinent past articles that had been run in the magazine before were reprinted in the back.

It was focused and never once mentioned the relationship between Ichigo and Rukia directly. In Renji's estimation it was unlikely to result in any of their imminent demises, his mockery of Hisagi earlier in the week notwithstanding. He felt it was slick, polished, and pretty good considering the time frame in which it'd been produced.

Ukitake took his time reading through the articles and studying the various pictures that had been used. Byakuya seemed to do likewise and neither betrayed any hint of what they might be thinking. The room was quiet enough to hear a pin drop as they went, although there was no great atmosphere to be noted except one of imminent judgment. Byakuya lost interest at the start of the biographical and lyrical section while Ukitake lost interest afterwards, only glancing at the reprints in passing. The latter closed the magazine and laid it flat, considering the cover for awhile. "I'm sure the Shinigami Women's Association has a backup plan if this doesn't go forward?"

"I wouldn't know," Hisagi replied. It was truthful and he was too tired to lie at any rate.

Ukitake glanced to Byakuya, who met the look without a reaction; it seemed rather clear he had no objections, so it was his decision. He took in a breath and slid the magazine back across the desk to Hisagi. "Alright," he said, exhaling. There would be gossip but it would come from the footage, not the magazine, and if Byakuya wasn't objecting then he hardly could either.

The editor-in-chief stood, bowed, and took it before leaving.
Byakuya spent a moment in contemplation and departed.
Renji followed.

Ukitake was left alone with his thoughts.

Ichigo woke up slowly just before noon, aware of Rukia's presence long before he was cognizant of anything else. He'd turned onto one side. She had her head pressed against his chest and her arms around him a bit awkwardly due to how she'd joined him after he'd fallen asleep. She was breathing softly. When he opened his eyes to look down at her he could feel his own pulse start to speed up as he recalled his thoughts before he'd fallen asleep. He slowly shifted his grasp on her and gently pulled her closer.

He spent what seemed like a small eternity just holding her, lost in the past. He'd given some thought as to how it'd all happened. It was true that their first night together had been dramatic and had established a deep bond of trust between them, but it'd taken time for them to really realize it. It was when she was taken to Soul Society that he'd really begun to fully appreciate her because he felt he could've lost her. She wasn't like anybody else—he'd known that for over a year and increasingly so as time had passed, except when he'd had to put her out of mind to try and preserve himself. What he felt for her wasn't what he felt for anybody else. How he was with her was the same. He'd fight anyone for his friends, but for her, he'd . . .

He'd been able to tell Inoue he loved her like a sister without any great impediment. Why was it so hard to tell Rukia that he just plain . . . it was hard to even form the words in his mind! Was that why she'd been so embarrassed by how everyone was treating them? Was it just like that for her too? How could everyone, even his dad, see it so easily when they had a hard time even saying such things to one another? He threw the questions away, knowing he wouldn't get answers. He was trying to meditate on it rather than think about it when he heard her.

"If you pull me any closer I'm going to bruise, Ichigo," she said quietly.

He abruptly eased his grip, not realizing he'd been holding her so tightly or that he'd woken her by doing it. "S—Sorry," he managed to get out. Rukia moved and suddenly her face was in view, ultramarine eyes seeming to sparkle at him as a coy smile played on her lips.

"I'm not a stuffed animal you know," she taunted, only to stop as she saw what was in his gaze. His eyes had a quality that seemed to be a mixture of the intense burning look and the highly focused glow she'd seen in him lately. She'd never seen both at once. They widened the moment he saw her and she could feel his heart start to race. It gave her pause and made her concerned. "Ichigo?"

"Hey," he replied, smiling a bit awkwardly. It was too quick.

"Are you okay?" she asked, narrowing her eyes a bit in suspicion. He was definitely behaving unusually, even for lately.

"Yeah," he continued.

"What's wrong?" she demanded quietly.

"Nothing's wrong," he said, looking away.

Rukia lifted an eyebrow slightly before peering at him with half-lidded eyes. She slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position, pulling at him to get him to do the same. When he did she grasped him by his upper arms and commanded "Talk. Did you have a nightmare or something?" She hadn't
yet seen him troubled by them like she was, but given all he'd endured it wouldn't be surprising.

Ichigo looked back to her with that odd mixture of expressions, very clearly weighing whether to do something.

It was like she was under an intense light when he looked at her like that, although it wasn't harsh. She knew instinctively then that it was about her. Once that connection was made everything else hit her all at once.

"I have to tell you something," he said seriously, not looking away.

She could feel her own eyes widening and shut them, leaning forward suddenly to bring her forehead to his. "No, you don't," she whispered. He didn't have to push himself like that for her. She knew. He knew she knew. It wasn't important to have to say it if they both knew . . .

"Yes, I do, Rukia . . ." he whispered back.

"Ichigo . . .!" she protested quietly.

"I can't let you leave without telling you," he replied.

"It was your idea I do that and you know I'll be back, fool, tell me then!" she said a little harshly, gripping at him. It wasn't fair to tell someone something like that when they were going to be leaving!

"I know it's not fair," he said as if he could read her thoughts, "but we both know it and we're both going to be thinking about it the whole time either way! Isn't it better to have done something?"

She suddenly remembered when she'd asked him if he liked her. Hadn't she used the same argument to convince herself then? Wasn't this supposed to be about giving them space to sort themselves out? But then didn't this also hijack that? Or if they both knew was it just giving them a head start? He pulled his head back and she hesitantly opened her eyes to look at him again.

Ichigo gave her a look that was solemn but neither sad nor severe before closing his eyes again, and she watched as his countenance and body language changed. It was like he was lowering every single defense he had against the world one by one, leaving himself totally exposed. He looked relaxed and even his face was perfectly pacific, as if he was asleep. It seemed to take both an age and no time at all. When at last he opened his eyes it was the softest and most vulnerable she'd ever seen in him. He said nothing and watched her, waiting.

Rukia stared openly. She had to fight hard not to hug him—his look compelled her to move to protect him. Why is he doing it like this! She'd imagined he would eventually do something cheesy or thoughtless, like spring it on her during a fight or pin her down and declare it like it was an inescapable fact of the world that she would have to just accept. She'd reconciled herself to that. To do it like this was . . . was . . .

She suddenly realized that he wasn't moving in the slightest and something behind him had changed. Her gaze slid over to the discrepancy and focused to find Shirayuki and her eyes widened immensely. Her zanpakutō's spirit was considering her coolly. She found she couldn't say anything—it was like her body just wouldn't respond.

Shirayuki slowly walked up to the bed, standing behind Ichigo. "Do you want to protect him or accept him?"

Rukia's pupils contracted at the choice.
"You instinctively want to protect him. That is why he is leaving himself totally open to you. He wants to show you that you don't have to protect him from yourself. He wants to show you that he trusts you with anything and everything. He is defenseless to you, because he wants you to be defenseless to him. So now you have to choose whether to protect him or accept him... and in so doing, whether to protect or accept yourself," she continued. Her tone was cold.

Rukia just stared. It was the first time she could ever remember Shirayuki not readily invoking her name and being so distant and frigid.

"I am here to protect you, so in many ways this is precisely antithetical to my purpose and existence. But at the same time, neither you nor I can protect anything if you remain divided against yourself. Choose!" the zanpakutō spirit commanded.

"I love him," the petite Shinigami whispered after some time, just barely loud enough to be heard even if her lips had been by one's ear.

"I cannot hear you," Shirayuki replied.

"It's not enough to either just protect or accept him! I love him!" Rukia shouted with a sudden intensity in her eyes.

The zanpakutō spirit continued to stare at her indifferently before giving the thinnest of smiles and quietly saying "Then let me go for a time and tell him, Rukia-dono."

Rukia's eyes snapped back to Ichigo and suddenly things were in motion again. Shirayuki was gone.

From his perspective her pupils seemed to have just abruptly contracted and then dilated again and he watched her eyes soften immensely before she closed them, becoming still and relaxed. When at last she opened them again it was like he was staring into the sky at twilight and he could barely stop from completely losing himself in the face of it. They stared at one another for a long time before he extended a hand to one of her cheeks.

She brought a hand of her own up onto the back of his, before reaching out the other and touching him likewise.

Ichigo held it to his face like she was doing and brushed his cheek against it. "Rukia... I love you. I've loved you for a long time now—"

Rukia leaned forward slowly, once more bringing their foreheads together and cutting him off. "I love you, Ichigo," she said quietly, rubbing her cheek against his hand before turning her head, kissing him.

He took his hand off hers, bringing it around her back and up into her hair, kissing her tenderly and pulling her to him.

She brought her other hand onto his other cheek, holding the kiss without intensifying it for as long as she possibly could before she tilted her head away and sank down against him, moving her hands onto his shoulders. She was once more with him as she had been at Tokyo Tower—that felt the most right. Her heart was racing.

He held her head securely over his heart, feeling her hot breath through his shirt, and pulled his other hand away from her cheek, sliding it around her waist. He hugged her tightly and brought his face down into her hair. His pulse was hammering.

Rukia let everything but her grip go limp at the feeling of his breath in her hair, entirely leaning
against him.

Ichigo leaned toward her to keep them upright.

They stayed like that for what felt like hours, keeping their hearts open to one another while saying and doing nothing. Each basked in the other's strength and vulnerability, starting to learn to trust each other as they had with their lives, memories, minds, bodies, and souls.

Much later Rukia's fingers dug into his shoulders slightly as she whispered "Ichigo, I'm hungry."

Ichigo's immediate thought was that it was cute. His natural reaction was to lightly mock her for ruining the moment as she sometimes did to him, though he knew it had already gone on as long as it needed to. Before he could do so his stomach growled in sympathy. Silence passed between them before she started to laugh at him; it was a wonderful sound that abruptly stopped when hers did the same. He sighed and withdrew his arm from her waist, sliding a hand under her thighs and picking her up by cradling her against him before getting off the bed.

"I can walk, you know!" she protested as she got her legs around his torso.

"So do you wanna walk or not?" he asked dryly.

"Hmph! You can carry me now, jerk! Otherwise I'll take this as you just trying to touch my butt!" she threatened.

"Bitch," he muttered, although there was no insult in the way it was delivered.

"Brat," she shot back affectionately.

Ichigo shifted her up a bit so that her chin was on his shoulder and one of her cheeks was to his before moving his hand so it did actually rest just below her rear, although he didn't do anything else. "Ingrate," he said quietly.

"Fool," Rukia said in a hushed tone, her cheeks turning a little red as she tightened her arms securely around his neck.

"Let's see if Yuzu left anything pre-made for us. If not I'll make something for you, midget," he whispered with mock irritation.

"Fine, strawberry," she hissed back theatrically.

He carried her downstairs to the kitchen, removing the hand he still had in her hair to open the fridge and the freezer. Yuzu hadn't left them anything. He closed both and turned, leaning back against the fridge to make it easier to support Rukia. She was relatively light and securely to him, but if he didn't have to carry her fully he saw no need to do so—it'd let him keep doing it longer. "So what do you want to eat, Kuchiki-dono?"

She pondered it for awhile before the doorbell rang, interrupting her thoughts.

"Who could that be?" Ichigo wondered, pushing off the fridge and heading toward the entryway.

"I—Idiot, don't answer the door while carrying me like this!" Rukia admonished. She discerned he was going to do it anyway and freed herself from around him, landing on her feet. The motion brought Ichigo's hand onto her butt and she blushed before slapping his arm away and kicking him in the shin, retreating to the kitchen in a huff to look over what they had.
Although he was a bit red himself, he was about to criticize her token abuse when the doorbell rang again. "Yeah, yeah, working on it," he called, deciding to leave her be and going to answer it. When he at last got it open he found Yuzu and Karin. They were both carrying a few sealed plastic containers; it was clear the former had anticipated their current dilemma and was bringing them food. "Hey! Sorry, I didn't know you were coming over," he said, stepping aside to let them in.

The sisters shared a brief glance at their brother's disposition before Yuzu said "I thought you and Rukia-nee would get hungry and knew you hadn't gone shopping yet, so I brought some lunch and dinner, onii-chan!" while walking in and taking off her shoes.

Karin did the same, and asked "Did you just wake up?" as she followed her sister into the kitchen.

Ichigo shut the door, calling after her "I just haven't gotten dressed."

Karin's "Wonder why," was directed as much at Rukia in the kitchen as it was at him.

Yuzu shot her sister a glance before smiling at Rukia. "Nē-san, can we stay for lunch?"

"Of course you can," Rukia said with a smile, hoping her cheeks weren't still red. From the look Karin was giving her she thought they might be.

Ichigo exhaled happily as he sat back. Yuzu had brought them a selection of various fish and vegetables she'd fried up as tempura before coming over, as well as a large helping of the beef stew portion of Hayashi rice for dinner.

Rukia finished munching on one of the last pieces of tempura and asked "Yuzu-chan, you haven't been in the kitchen all morning doing this for us, have you?"

"It's not a big deal," Yuzu replied demurely with a smile. She didn't think of it in such a way, but making them feel at home was her role and how she could best help them.

"So, you guys are going shopping for food, right?" Karin asked with her eyes a bit narrowed, making it clear it was something more than a suggestion.

The couple shared a glance before Ichigo replied "We'll do that when Rukia comes back, it's no good to just leave things in the fridge for most of the week."

"Then what will you eat, onii-chan?" Yuzu asked with concern.

"I'll just stay over and have meals with you guys and sleep on the couch or something. It's fine, don't worry about it," Ichigo said dismissively.

That he was so casually choosing to impose on them when he had a new house to himself wasn't something either of his sisters or Rukia remarked on. All three understood that he would accept a severe if temporary downgrade in accommodations to not be in the house alone and around family instead, and approved of the choice. They all smiled a little and chose to say no more on the subject.

"So what are your plans for the rest of the day?" Karin asked, changing the topic. It was by then mid-afternoon.

"We didn't really have any," Rukia replied. She was fine with that.

The dark-haired sister glanced between her brother and his girlfriend in evaluation before standing, pulling Yuzu up with her and starting to head for the door as she declared "Bring the containers back
with you tomorrow, Ichi-nii. There's a lot of cleanup to be done because of you!" She knew
something was going on, if not what, and discerned they needed the place to themselves. They'd
have plenty of time with Ichigo over the next few days.
Yuzu protested at how abrupt their departure was as she was dragged off, but Karin wouldn't be
persuaded. They were soon both out the door, it locking itself behind them.
Ichigo and Rukia were left looking at one another with mild surprise before he smiled and started
collecting all the dishes, going to clean them off along with the containers the tempura had been in. It
was as he was finishing up at the sink that he felt her arms around his waist.
"We were in the middle of something," she said quietly.
He finished drying off his hands and slowly turned to face her, leaning back against the counter as he
brought his arms around her shoulders. "Want me to carry you back up?"
All she said was "Hmph," even as she stood on her tiptoes to make it easier for him to lift her.
They curled up with one another in the middle of her bed. Ichigo felt he had to get something else
out of the way first. "During the war, dad tried to tell me a few things and I told him to tell them to
me later when he felt it was right." He didn't feel the need to tell Rukia he'd used her words when
he'd done it. "We talked about it again yesterday and he said he would tell me what he could, but
only when you could hear it too."
She looked up at him in mild confusion, letting her expression ask why for her.
"He told me 'Now it's not just about you, but Rukia-chan too', so he feels you have a right to know,"
Ichigo explained.
Rukia stared for a moment before looking down. She quietly wondered if it had to do with the
Hollow. She put it out of mind, although she felt more respect for Isshin. The matter could wait a few
more days.
They held each other silently for awhile, gradually growing comfortable and opening themselves up
to one another again, occasionally starting to confess small things to one another, sometimes about
the other, sometimes about themselves. They alternated it with idling together and even briefly
napped, just sharing space and time. Rukia absolved Ichigo of his promise to give the next Friday
over to her, as it was what she'd wanted then and more. He resolved he'd take her out instead. They
kept close for the entire afternoon and evening before going to fix the dinner Yuzu had brought
them.
After dinner they gravitated to the living room to explore the electronics that had been left for their
entertainment. Surveying the titles and consoles, Ichigo challenged Rukia to a round of Gran
Turismo 3: A-Spec, figuring if there was one thing she would struggle with it would be a game with
realistic driving physics.
It took her longer than normal to get used to it as she knew nothing about driving or racing, but after
warming up it became a rather hard-fought competition. He barely came out ahead and she
challenged him to a rematch. They started to work through the library, occasionally fighting with one
another on the couch at the results only to draw close again and resume the struggle in a new game.
It was after a particularly vicious battle in Armored Core 2 that he carefully set the controller down
and started to tickle her, having had a long time to learn her weak points.


She let out a squeal of surprise and laughed, trying to hit him with the controller as she called "Fool, don't tickle me just because you're a sore loser!" He managed to disarm her before she did any real damage to him or the controller and so she fought back by tickling him instead.

They laughed and grappled with one another for quite awhile before he managed to pin her down with her hands to her sides, held there by his legs. He had his hands on her shoulders and was leaning over her.

She glared at him with a pouting expression, before looking to one side. "You're a dirty cheater, Ichigo," she accused.

"You knew that already," he said, putting more weight on her as she continued to try and free herself.

Her eyes slid back over to meet his, half-lidded. "So you've caught me, hero of Soul Society, what now?" Rukia said in mock anger.

"You're noisy," Ichigo replied, leaning down and kissing her.

She joined in wholeheartedly, her hands gripping at the back of his thighs before sliding up to his rear to embarrass him for what he'd done earlier. He shifted and she felt him blush. He made the kiss passionate in retaliation. After a long moment he ended it, kissing his way down her neck and pressing his face there as he released her arms and slid his lower body down off her, breaking her grip. She let out a breath, putting her arms around him. Part of her didn't want him to stop, or to stop herself, but she knew they should and understood. They stayed together for some time again, his hands lightly massaging her sides and hers doing the same to his neck.

"We should get ready for bed; you should be rested for tomorrow," he said after awhile, pushing himself up away from her.

She sat up beside him and flicked one of his ears, saying "Shower on your own, fool," before getting up and padding upstairs.

He watched her go with a small smile, turning everything off and dealing with the dishes before going to do just that.

Rukia found him in the lounging area with her throw blanket neatly folded up and made her way to him, extending a hand in invitation.

Ichigo took it and let her lead him to her bed. They settled in together, but only loosely so, both having wordlessly decided to try and make their separation from one another gradual rather than abrupt. It took them awhile to fall asleep but when they did they fell into a deep and dreamless state with one another.

---

Chapter End Notes

Shirayuki is doing something similar to what happened when Ichigo fought Kenpachi; it was later stated this was a Quincy ability in Chapter 542, but I'm deciding that it wasn't since there's no particular reason to accept that. (What the Quincy do in the Thousand-Year Blood War arc seems very different.)
Sunday, August 25, 2002

Rukia woke up to the smell of something enticing, shifting a bit before blinking her eyes open to find the bed empty. She sat up with a yawn, deducing Ichigo was making something for her, and smiled to herself before getting up to check on him.

She made her way to the kitchen, peeking inside as stealthily as she could. He appeared to be making tamagoyaki and some sort of onigiri. She watched curiously, having never seen him cook before. He looked unusually patient and calm as he worked, moving meticulously and carefully. It was a side of him she'd never seen.

It was after a minute that he said "If you're going to watch me, you may as well have a seat at the breakfast bar," without looking up from what he was doing.

Her brow furrowed but she followed the suggestion as she chided "If you knew I was here you could've told me to do that from the start."

"I didn't want you thinking I thought lowly of your sneaking skills," he replied tautly. He had by then moved on to plating as the eggs were finishing.

She continued watching silently and soon a plate was in front of her with the tamagoyaki and onigiri, as well as a cup of hot tea and a glass of water.

After attending to her, he laid out a plate for himself and washed his hands before sitting down beside her. They both started in.

Rukia quickly realized that he'd used a cucumber tsukemono in the onigiri, and glanced over at him. He'd made the dish with her three favorite ingredients, and that couldn't just be a coincidence. Ichigo seemed to be busy with eating and so she looked back to her plate, continuing without comment. It was simple and rather traditional, but actually quite good beyond that. They ate in comfortable silence.

It was as she was finishing with her tea that he asked her "So, how was that?"

"It needed more salt," she said nonchalantly, not willing to immediately reveal her true feelings about it.

He lightly slapped at her nearer arm with the back of one of his hands in dismissal before making his way back around into the kitchen, starting to clean everything up.

She let him take her plate and then her cup and glass, waiting until he was fully distracted by the dishes before getting up and joining him. She hugged him rather more firmly than she had the prior day and whispered "That was really nice," holding it for awhile before letting him be and going upstairs to shower and dress.

Ichigo continued cleaning the dishes with a little smile.

She packed a small bag with a change of clothes for her return, as well as the clothes and other items she had gotten from the Urahara Shop before heading out to Tokyo almost a month prior, intending to return them. She kept the ID, although she left it among her things, intending to get a new one.
with an appropriate age for her cover and using the older one for nights out. Satisfied that she had everything and her note to Yoruichi was plainly visible atop it all, she met Ichigo in the lounge area, finding he wasn't carrying anything. "Don't you need clothes while over at your family's house?" she asked with suspicion.

"I can just come over here to shower and get new clothes at night before changing to sleeping clothes there, it's like a three minute walk," he said without any great concern. It wasn't an inconvenience and the bathroom there would feel tiny after he'd gotten used to his new one.

She chose not to press the point and turned, leading him downstairs without a word.

He followed and soon they were outside. He casually took her hand in his as they went.

They stood together outside of the Urahara Shop, regarding one another. For once there was no evidence of Jinta or Ururu about.

Ichigo had decided not to follow Rukia in. He didn't really want to see whatever was going to be done with handling her gigai and also knew that once she was out of it he couldn't see her off any further. He'd be spared seeing her leave through a senkaimon yet again simply because he couldn't perceive it. He rubbed at the back of his head and glanced away. He didn't want their parting to be sappy or sad. It was only for five days. "So, I guess I'll see you again soon," he said, putting a bit of optimism into it.

She'd decided not to drag things out. Their last real departure from one another was still unpleasant to think about. This wasn't nearly so permanent, so there was no point in making it complicated for both of them. "Yeah," she replied, smiling a little.

His eyes came back to meet hers, and something unsaid passed between the two of them that was at once both wistful and hopeful. They both moved at the same time, surprising each other for a split second, before lightly embracing for a moment and pulling apart.

"Take care of yourself, Ichigo," she said softly, before turning toward the door.

"You too, Rukia," he replied quietly.

Before she could reach the door it was being opened by Tessai, revealing Urahara and Yoruichi. It was obvious they'd been waiting and quite probably listening in as well. "Oh, Kuchiki-san, right on time," the shopkeeper said with a smile, gesturing for her to come inside. It was entirely theater. With a last glance and a continuing small smile to Ichigo, Rukia obliged without comment, heading in.

Ichigo turned away then, deciding not to watch, and so the first he was aware of Yoruichi's movements was the arm she put around one of his shoulders, firmly walking him away from the building's entrance and back across the lot outside. She said nothing but her grip was reassuring in nature. Although he found it a bit presumptuous he didn't fight her or object.

Yoruichi chose not to tell Ichigo that they'd take care of Rukia's gigai while she was away. With everything that had gone on that one was definitively hers for the foreseeable future. It wouldn't do to have an artificial soul walking around in it for several days at the shop or to recycle it back to stock format and issue her a new one upon her return, but talking about body-soul duality wasn't likely to help at the moment. She decided to direct his focus to other matters instead. "So, want to know what he's working on?" she asked once they were out of earshot, removing her arm and just walking alongside him. She didn't want anyone getting the wrong idea.
"Would I even understand?" Ichigo said in a deadpan, rolling his eyes over toward her. Most of the mechanics of souls and spiritual matters were nonsense to him.

She was already looking at him, eyes narrowed a bit. "It's not completely accurate to say you have no reiryoku or reiatsu."

He gave her a quizzical look.

"Everyone has some level of reiryoku and thus some level of reiatsu. For you to have none at all would be . . . pretty odd," she said, electing not to explain this wasn't necessarily the whole picture. "What's really going on with you is that your reiatsu is so weak as to be indistinguishable from background noise. Even a highly skilled Shinigami trying to use something like reiraku to track you would find it to be a pain, which is why Soul Society had to largely rely on visual observation to find you. So that leaves the matter of your reiryoku."

He glanced around for a second, trying to figure out where exactly she was leading him, as they were still walking somewhere. It seemed to be back toward Minamikawase.

"Nothing about your reiryoku has actually changed. Your potential remains the same. The trouble is it's not able to be accessed and so its output—your reiatsu—has gone dormant. There are two ways to get it back. One involves using a very large amount of reiatsu to restart it. That'd be like jump-starting and recharging a car battery at the same time. How to do it safely is what Kisuke is trying to solve and he's taking his sweet time doing it," she said.

"What's the other?" Ichigo asked.

Yoruichi smiled at him in a way that was both cool and cryptic, before looking ahead of them. He grudgingly took the hint and did the same, knowing she wouldn't tell him anything she didn't want to.

"So I heard you've been keeping your nose clean and staying out of trouble these past few months?" she asked after awhile.

"I guess . . . Why?" he replied. He'd had a few scrapes with the local gangs but that was nothing new or notable.

She let out a noncommittal hum, leading him more toward Tatsuki's house than his and Rukia's or the Kurosaki household. They were all in the same general area and he wouldn't figure out the difference until they were basically there. She had already talked it over with the young woman. Pitting him against the second strongest female high school student in Japan would do for a start.

Rukia departed the Living World after having briefed Zennosuke—who had been given instructions to see her off by Byakuya, despite the fact the latter had little formal authority over the former—on her expectations while she was gone, having been told about her gigai being stored in a kind of stasis, and having made a few requests about its handling and the procurement of some other items in her note to Yoruichi. She would never admit it, but she'd gotten a bit attached to the gigai. It was an extremely accurate representation of her and she'd been through a lot in it. She would handle questioning Urahara when she had more time on her return.

She arrived in the 13th Division's district right outside headquarters and wasn't greeted by anyone in particular. She'd assumed it would be that way since she had sent no advance notice of when exactly she'd be arriving. She made her way inside to report to Ukitake, having decided to get as much done as she possibly could in the time she had available. Wrapping up the training sessions she'd started
with other members of the Division would surely be the most important thing, especially given an
impromptu month-long hiatus.

She was so focused on reviewing it all she didn't notice Sentarō and Kiyone were for once silent in
their shared office. They intended to wait until she was with Ukitake before getting up to prevent her
from possibly running off and doing anything rash, unlikely as that seemed to them.

Rukia knocked and was greeted with an unusually neutral "Come in, Kuchiki." She did so, making
her way to one of the chairs in front of his desk and sitting down opposite her taichō rather
informally for once. He seemed to be troubled by something. "It's good to see you again, sir," she
offered with a polite smile.

Ukitake's mood lightened, but not entirely. He lifted up a hand from the desk as much in greeting as
to stop her from whatever she was about to say. "You don't need to give me a formal report on
what's been going on or what you intend to do, I trust in what you've provided so far and your
intentions in being here," he said. He knew there was relatively little she could add except some
more detail about Ichigo's disposition, mood, and psychology, and that was all tied up in . . .

She frowned slightly and seemed to consider something before deciding to get straight to the point:
"What's wrong, taichō?"

He looked a bit chagrined at how easily she saw through him, but it was probably to be expected. If
he danced around the issue it would just build things up so he had to cut to the chase. He considered
his words before saying "A situation has developed. Nothing dangerous, but you might not like it.
It's honestly easier if I just show you. I ask that you hear what I have to say before doing anything."
He let his tone indicate this was more a request than an order.

Rukia's eyes narrowed in wariness, not liking it already, but she steeled herself and nodded.

Ukitake withdrew a copy of the Seireitei Communication's special issue from a drawer and turned it
such that it would be facing her before setting it down on the desk in front of her.

Her eyes went a bit wide and her cheeks slightly red at what she saw. It was not at all the kind of
thing she had been expecting.

The white-haired taichō explained that it seemed Yachiru had somehow acquired the footage from
Byakuya's soul pager and then showed it to the Shinigami Women's Association, and things had
gone from there. Byakuya had told him she knew he'd gotten a video, and he felt no need to inform
her he'd gotten a copy too on top of everything else. He did tell her Kiyone had tried to stop it, as had
he, but short of perhaps fighting Kenpachi the best option had been to try and direct it as much as he,
Renji, and Byakuya had been able to.

Something in the petite Shinigami processed all his words but she gave no reaction, instead just
staring at the picture of herself on the cover. As he began to finish she reached out a hand and pulled
the magazine closer before opening it.

Ukitake fell silent and looked away. He suddenly felt out of place in his own office and was keenly
aware of the 3rd Seats standing silently outside the doors.

Rukia gave all of her attention over to the magazine and read through it quickly but carefully.
Hisagi's letter from the editor and the interview with Renji were oddly if only mildly touching. The
photos throughout the program section filled her with an intense nostalgia, though she wondered
how some of them had been taken. It was sometime later when she reached the back cover and the
magazine laid face-down. She turned it over again, considering it once more. The things that
replayed in her mind were the smile Ichigo had given her when she'd left the stage, her brother's exhortation of *Please continue to sing beautifully, Rukia,* and the applause of the crowd. She closed her eyes. "How many people have seen this?"

"It went out earlier this morning, so . . . everyone," Ukitake said quietly. He'd given Hisagi the deadline because if it was going to happen he wanted it over and done with—that was better than having it consume her time or trying to keep it secret until she left only for it to inevitably be revealed in some way.

It was some time before she opened her eyes and gave him a small smile. "Thank you for your concern, sir," she said without elaboration.

He seemed moderately puzzled by this, though he kept his reserve up. "You're not angry?"

She shook her head. She wasn't happy about it either. It would make being there and doing what she'd come to do awkward, but she'd sung for Ichigo in public without care for who heard her. If there were more people that would hear her than had been there that night, well . . . the magazine at least wasn't gossip. If her brother hadn't gone to war over it, it was because he was proud of her. Something occurred to her then. "I want two copies though, and a copy of the recording," she said plainly. If nothing else, she would have mementos to augment her memory. She was due that much.

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Ukitake replied, giving her the first genuine smile of the day. It was then that the doors opened and he looked past her.

Rukia could tell it was Kiyone and Sentarō without turning around.

"Kuchiki, I tried to stop them!" Kiyone said.

"You sing amazingly well, Kuchiki!" Sentarō offered, not one to be outdone.

"It's okay, really," Rukia said, trying to reassure them. Had they really all been this worried about her? The 3rd Seats' concern was always exclusively for their *taichō,* and if they were suddenly extending it to her, she had to stop them before they really got started. She adopted an angry expression, adding "What are you doing just barging in here during a meeting anyway?!

Both suddenly looked surprised before glancing at each other. She saw the flicker of knowing smiles before they retreated in a torrent of apologies, shutting the door again.

She continued to glare at the door for awhile until Ukitake's voice drew her attention back forward.

"So will you go?" he asked.

Rukia looked at him in mild confusion.

"To see it played," he clarified.

She looked down at the magazine again. That could be really awkward, and yet . . .

Ichigo shifted in his *karategi* a bit uncomfortably. It wasn't really all that different from wearing a *shihakushō,* *yukata,* or *kimono,* but there was something weirdly nostalgic about it. He still wasn't really sure about all this.

Tatsuki wore a small smug smile around the mouth guard she had in. It had been years since Ichigo had consented to fight her. Maybe he'd gotten a lot stronger with his Shinigami nonsense, but so had
she, and they were in the real world.

Inoue and Yoruichi sat off to one side of Karakura High School's dōjō. It was otherwise empty. Tatsuki had free access as part of her summer training. It had taken less convincing than Yoruichi anticipated to get Ichigo to agree, and so after having gone to get him a karategi, collecting Inoue, and having lunch with his family, they'd assembled there. The princess was there largely as a medic, although she probably wouldn't be really necessary on the first day. "Get on with it already!" Yoruichi called, earning a glare from Ichigo.

He turned and bowed to Tatsuki, getting a knee to the head protector he was wearing that sent him sprawling backwards for his trouble. Once he'd come to rest he pulled his mouth guard out and shouted "What the hell was that?! That's completely against the rules!"

Tatsuki removed her own mouth guard, replying "Did you really think you were here to practice karate, Ichigo?" a bit coldly.

His eyes narrowed as he began to understand.

Tatsuki smirked and said "Come on then," before putting her mouth guard back in.

Ichigo put his own back in before getting to his feet in a ready stance. If she wanted to play rough then that was on her.

Rukia waited until the show really started before fully clambering up onto one of the walls of the 4th Division's training ground rather than merely peeking over it. She had her reiatsu clamped down as much as she possibly could, not wanting to be a spectacle any more than she already was. Nobody she had engaged with throughout the day after leaving Ukitake's office had said anything, but they'd given her curious or knowing looks on occasion. It was clear everyone was waiting to see what the fuss was about first.

For the Seireitei, the crowd was massive, there being several thousand Shinigami in attendance. It appeared to be the majority of the Gotei 13. She told herself it was because the event was free—the Shinigami Women's Association apparently intended to raise funds through concession stands and snack bars. She'd anticipated it being mostly women, but there were quite a lot of men present too, and the gender balance wasn't all that lopsided away from even. Given that, she told herself it was because there was relatively little else to do on a Sunday night. There were a lot of recognizable reiatsu signatures out in the crowd, including all of the taichō and the sōtaichō. She did her best not to focus on that. They were encamped mostly toward the center at the best viewing spots. The screen that had been put up was massive and easily visible even from her position.

The speakers were no less enormous and as the screen came to life the noise of the karaoke club washed out of them moments before "In an unusual turn, we now have a very special team lineup for you all here tonight! First up, here from Karakura, Yasutora Sado! Please welcome him!" sounded out.

Rukia let her worries fall away and just watched her friends perform. The soul pager had truly impressive audio and video capture for its size, and so although it wasn't quite like being where they'd been covertly sitting, combined with her memory she could easily imagine it. She couldn't help but smile as she listened to the songs again and even found herself quietly singing along on occasion. She didn't pay her peers much attention and it was hard to hear them over the audio, but they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

It was when she saw Ichigo up on stage with Ishida that the footage struck her differently. Her chest
suddenly felt tight around her heart, even though she felt very light, as though she was beset by an ache and could float away at the same time. She fought against the feeling and she tried to just listen but it wouldn't stop. It hurt but also didn't. She'd never felt anything quite like it before and it gave Ichigo's lyrics a new poignancy. She suddenly understood the things they'd been saying to one another beyond what they'd selected their songs for at the time.

She was so distracted by it she didn't notice more than a few heads turning her way in recognition of her reiatsu flickering out from beyond her control. They all politely turned away again.

Soon she was on screen. It was the first time she could recall ever watching scenes of her past self and she found it incredibly strange. She watched intently even as her own memories of the events replayed as she took the stage. It was likewise the first time she'd ever heard herself and she hugged her chest at the feelings the performance conjured up, that soaring-and-aching sensation returning with a vengeance.

When the video ended the approval from the crowd didn't, albeit much diminished, and she realized it was the Shinigami on the training ground. Rukia looked out onto the sea of black uniforms as they reacted, and saw one in a haori stand and turn. She knew who it was even at such a distance. "Nii-sama . . ." she whispered. She abruptly realized she'd stopped suppressing her reiatsu at some point.

Byakuya began to clap for her.

Even as he did so others were rising and following his lead. She recognized them all. Soon the rest of the officers were doing the same and after looking about with confusion so were regular soldiers, spotting her and realizing who she was.

Her cheeks turned a bit red at the standing ovation she was receiving and she froze, not knowing what to do. Most of her wanted to flash step off into the night. Something else in her said to rise, and Shirayuki added her voice in support of that. Slowly she stood and bowed. The clapping only intensified.

Suddenly Ukitake and Byakuya were at her sides and gently grasped at either of her arms.

She looked to both questioningly and was met with reassuring expressions, and then they were on the training ground proper. They released her and led her toward the crowd. It was okay for her to enjoy the moment—it was hers, and she was due her time.

Karin and Yuzu walked with Ichigo as he went to the new house to shower and retrieve new clothes. "I don't need to be chaperoned, you know," he muttered.

"We're just getting some fresh air," Yuzu replied.

"And keeping you from peeking at any of Rukia-nē's things," Karin added quietly, earning a glare from Yuzu.

Ichigo rolled his eyes, not bothering to dignify that with a response. He was still focused on the fight with Tatsuki. He'd been wrong to underestimate her—she'd gotten a lot stronger and was more than capable of giving him a run for his money in a no-holds barred match. It'd been an even thing for several hours until neither could stand and Yoruichi had finally ended it, sending Inoue in. Neither of them had sustained any serious injuries, but the Flash Goddess had explained that was their last match with protective gear. They'd reconvene every other day. As he walked he realized it was like none of it had ever happened as far as his body was concerned. He wasn't even sore.

"You know, you could've invited us all to stay at your new house instead of sleeping at ours," Karin
continued. There was more than enough space, they could easily get back in time to work at the clinic, and business was extremely slow anyway.

"We can still do that if you want," Ichigo replied idly.

"Could we sleep in your room?" Yuzu asked.

He looked down at her and then at Karin. The latter had an expression that indicated she had the same question but wouldn't voice it. He knew they were worried about him.

"Yeah, sure," he said after a moment, "We'll talk with dad about it and if he's okay with it we'll do that after tonight."

They both smiled.
Sunday, August 25, 2002

Rukia sat quietly beside Byakuya. She'd allowed herself to be fêted at the 4th Division's training grounds for only a brief time, mostly behind a phalanx of her few friends and acquaintances. She hadn't really known what to make of the mixtures of respect, adoration, and sympathy that had been directed her way from so many Shinigami she didn't know. Just when the attention she was receiving both from known associates and unknown peers had begun to get rather awkward her brother had whisked her away, citing her need for rest. They'd arrived back at the clan compound shortly thereafter, and he'd asked if she would enjoy snacks and tea. When she'd agreed, he'd sent for such before leading her to a small free-standing tea house by a pond on the manor's grounds. It was moderately lit and opened up to let a light wind through. They'd long since finished with their refreshments and sat in silence, she trying to sort out what had just happened and he letting her have her time.

"You handled yourself very appropriately," he remarked after awhile. It hadn't exactly been good form to spy on the proceedings from the wall rather than facing them directly, but once she'd been discovered she'd acted with grace and borne her social responsibility with as much elegance as could be expected. He knew she was unused to being the center of attention.

Rukia glanced to him in surprise before looking away again, not quite sure what to say in response. She narrowed her eyes a little, trying to think like a noble. "Is it . . . really alright for that to go on . . . for the clan?"

"The whole of the Seireitei now knows the Kuchiki clan possesses the most skilled singer in the Gotei 13. That others seek to gaze upon our wealth is merely a testament to its grandeur," Byakuya replied serenely as he seemed to consider the water.

Her cheeks turned a bit pink at being implicitly described as a treasure of the clan and she fell silent again.

"You ceased to suppress your reiatsu upon seeing Ichigo perform," her brother said. There was no accusation or judgment; it was simply a statement of fact. He'd decided to refer to him by his given name. It was overly familiar, but perhaps appropriate given his sister's relationship with the boy and the debts he owed him, even if being addressed similarly in turn still made him bristle.

"It would seem so," she replied quietly.

"There was a sensation as though there was a hand around your heart," he stated. Rukia looked to him in confusion. How could he possibly know that?

He met her gaze with a very small smile before looking away again. "That is what it is to be in love and to long for the other, Rukia."

She stared at her brother before turning her head, abashed. Was she really that easy to see through? She drew her legs up to her chest, hugging them and fidgeting with her shihakushō. It was rather embarrassing but if he already knew . . . "We confessed to each other yesterday. He didn't want me to leave without knowing how he felt and I . . ." she trailed off.

"How mature of him," Byakuya mused, before adding "I'm glad that you have finally admitted your
feelings to yourself."

Rukia blinked and looked to him again.

"A friend of a few months does not take a month away from her duties and does not mourn for eight months as you did. I have known since the night I found you in Rukongai, though I suspected earlier," he said with some consideration. Her behavior during the weeks after Ichigo and his friends had left Soul Society through to when she'd been deployed to Karakura again had been markedly different. Ichigo's behavior during the invasion had been highly unusual and suspicious for anyone, but it was in the aftermath that he began to wonder if it was mutual. He had the sense that even the fact she had changed her haircut after decades of wearing it in the same style was somehow related to her feelings.

She suddenly wanted to be very small or very far away.

"There is no shame in it," he asserted. He thought back on what she had told him of their meeting, of how and why she had shared her powers with him. For there to be two lonely souls that met and touched each other so directly on their first night . . . one could perhaps call them soul mates. That they'd been maneuvered was of no consequence, they'd still possessed their own free will. It had occurred the way it did because of who they were.

Rukia looked down. It wasn't shame. It was just that the feeling was still new and made her uncertain. She said in a hushed tone "I told him from the very start it wouldn't be fast, and yet now within a month we've declared to one another that . . ."

"I was married to Hisana within six months of meeting her," Byakuya replied quietly.

She stared at him again, stunned by the revelation.

He elected not to elaborate on how their courtship had progressed or the situation around it, instead saying "You should think of it in the context of the time that has elapsed since you met him, not the time since you were reunited with him. Consider too that until recently you never had much time together free from worry or battle. Fast or slow have no meaning outside of a full appreciation of the circumstances."

She internalized the words but didn't act on them. Not just yet.

There was a long pause before he stated "The hour is growing late, Rukia. You may rest here if you desire, but if you are to return to your apartment, it would be wise to depart soon."

They sat silently for awhile longer before Rukia rose and turned, saying "Goodnight, nii-sama," in such a way that thank you and a hug were wrapped up in the words themselves.

Byakuya comfortably held his silence in the face of it but nodded slightly, and after a moment she was gone.

Ichigo lay upon a futon in what'd been his room. It'd become Karin's, although that night Yuzu was also sleeping in her bed because he was there and she wanted to be close by. He was dead tired from how late they and his dad had kept him up and could scarcely move, but also couldn't quite fall asleep. Memories of Rukia kept running though his mind.

He was distracted from them by Karin quietly asking "Ichi-nii, are you still awake?"

"Yeah," he muttered. She could probably tell by his breathing. He knew Yuzu was asleep the same
way.

There was a long beat before Karin replied "I'm sure Rukia-ñē is thinking about you too."

He didn't know what to say to that, although it was probably true. He settled for another "Yeah."

"Maybe you'll meet her in a dream or something," his sister offered.

He found himself smiling a little in the darkness at her efforts to reassure him. He wasn't sad. "Go to

sleep, Karin," he said lightly, even as he felt himself starting to slip.

She let out a sigh and tried again, starting "Ichi-nii—" only to be met by the sound of his breathing

stabilizing. She listened to it until she couldn't distinguish it from Yuzu's and likewise fell asleep.

Monday, August 26, 2002

Rukia's gaze was measured but flinty as she stared down Shirayuki, who in turn looked more coldly

amused than anything else. She'd risen early to visit the secret training ground that Urahara had built

under Sōkyoku Hill. Renji had told her about it. She was so very close to bankai. She'd gotten so

near to it in that nightmare. There was just some final level of conscious understanding that had to be

achieved.

"You are still not ready, Rukia-dono," Shirayuki proclaimed after awhile.

The Shinigami ignored that, holding her posture with her zanpakutō and engaging in a sort of

battlefield variation of zazen meditation. She let her mind drift as she stayed in the present moment,

observing her thoughts without attempting to direct them. Her mind often turned to Ichigo, even as it

also returned to her zanpakutō and her shikai as well. She noted that and let it continue.

"He is distracting you," the manifested spirit offered.

"No," Rukia replied. It wasn't that simple. She didn't know how she knew that, but she did.

Shirayuki turned her head curiously.

The raven-haired woman closed her eyes and took in her feelings for the orange-haired young man

in their totality, considering them. She felt that squeezing sensation around her heart again but

disregarded it. She very carefully set them aside, having discerned what she needed from studying
them. Her thoughts turned as she used them as a sort of key. What was the opposite of love? In some

ways, love and hate could be reckoned to be opposites. In other ways, they were simply mirrors of
one another. They were both strong emotional commitments to a person, thing, or idea. They could
both be considered as violent—while hate was a total rejection of a particular subject, love was an
acceptance of a subject to the exclusion of others. They were both powerful personal motivations,
but . . .

They were not the essence of her shikai. Her dances were structured upon control, discipline, and
precision. Once those were in hand, emotion could flow freely. It was the same with her singing, and
her actual dancing. Only once a structure was in place and understood could it be transcended in the
name of performance. The structure did not care how or why it was used. Love and hate might be
motivators, but what was orthogonal to both was indifference . . . figurative coldness. It was
appropriate, as it embodied literal coldness as well. The cold did not care who one was or what one
wanted or why—it simply was. If one got in its way, it would kill them implacably, without even

noticing. Indeed, it couldn't notice.
Perhaps it was different for other zanpakutō, but for Rukia, for Sode no Shirayuki, the essence of killing intent was in that kind of cold indifference, whether if it was wielded for its own sake or in the name of some higher calling. She knew that was how it had been in the nightmare. "You said 'this is precisely antithetical to my purpose' the other day," the petite Shinigami stated calmly.

"I did," the spirit replied.

In a flash Rukia was immediately before Shirayuki and smoothly brought her zanpakutō down toward her, stopping it only a hair's breadth from the manifestation's neck with masterful control. She stood still for a time, the blade not wavering a millimeter, before she opened her eyes, meeting those of the spirit. Both regarded one another as if it was nothing. Something new unlocked in their shared depths, although it was like it had always been there, and they slowly shared a genuine smile together.

The Kurosaki family wouldn't make the transition to Ichigo and Rukia's house until after the end of the business day. While everyone else stayed on station at the clinic, Ichigo went out to lunch with friends, meeting up with Inoue, Ishida, Chad, Tatsuki, Keigo, and Mizuiro at the local McDonald's. He decided to stick with fries and kept a half-step back from most of the crosstalk. He found it strange to think that a week from then they'd be back in school.

There was a lull in the conversation and he became aware he needed to say something and cleared his throat. "I apologized to some of you for what I did in going to Tokyo, but not the others . . . I don't think I was a bad friend these past months, but I didn't trust any of you with my circumstances the way I should have. I'm sorry for both those things, and I'm glad you're my friends," he said plainly, keeping it brief and to the point. He looked up from the table to find everyone was looking at him strangely.

Keigo reached out the back of a hand to Ichigo's forehead and after a moment declared "Doesn't seem like a fever," while scratching at his chin with the other.

"Who are you and what did you do with the real Ichigo?" Tatsuki asked suspiciously.

"Maybe he ran off to Soul Society after Rukia again and it's Kon," Ishida said with a smug little smirk.

Inoue and Chad just smiled.

Mizuuro looked like he was about to pile on when Ichigo narrowed his eyes and felt a brow twitch involuntarily. He knocked Keigo's hand away before eating a handful of fries, closing his eyes and chewing to keep from saying anything unkind. For once he would simply endure whatever mockery there was. Ishida's reference made his thoughts briefly turn once more to Kon. It was as much to keep from listening to everyone else as it was a return to his thoughts some weeks ago. He'd have to bring it up with Urahara at some point soon.

"Ichi-nii, stop missing!" Karin commanded. If he kept it up they were going to lose the 3 vs. 1 mini-game as she and Yuzu had already been eliminated. They were playing Mario Party 3. Ichigo was Donkey Kong, Karin was Yoshi, Yuzu was Daisy, and Isshin was Waluigi.

"I'm trying! It's hard, these controls are so sloppy!" Ichigo protested. It was no use.

"Wa!" Isshin happily declared in victory, prompting Karin to look like she was about to throw her controller at him. It had less to do with any actual skill on his part and more to do with how
unbalanced the mini-games were. He'd taken to mimicking his character's taunts just to be annoying.

"Bowser is so mean," Yuzu said with dejection.

Ichigo let out a sigh as he took his turn, hoping to keep his coin count high enough to buy a star. He'd thought it'd be a fun activity for the whole family but found himself wondering whether it'd be him or his dad who wound up dead by the end of it. Maybe they should've stuck to something friendlier, like *Perfect Dark*.

Tuesday, August 27, 2002

Rukia was at one end of her obstacle course shouting at an unseated Shinigami who had fallen into the mud pit and could be heard even from a distance yelling "Get up! Get on your feet!" She'd had it installed in a corner of the 13th Division's training grounds after having gained her position, having seen an example of one in the Living World. Her reasoning had been that although Shinigami often had freedom of movement, learning to deal with impediments—especially with an active distraction and source of humiliation such as herself—would build their fortitude, focus, and dexterity.

"How is it that Kuchiki-fukutaichō can sing so beautifully yet be so loud?" Ryūnosuke asked, temporarily pausing on a climbing net to watch.

"You'll quit asking stupid questions and keep moving if you know what's good for you," Shino declared as she paused for a second beside him.

He continued on up the climbing net with her halfheartedly. "Just because you look up to her is no reason to endorse this, you know."

"You just don't appreciate the effort she's put into us because you're lazy!" Shino rejoined harshly with the slightest of blushes. She really did look up to the strength and determination of their fukutaichō. That Rukia was of a broadly similar build and didn't let it deter her whatsoever made her something of a role-model. Shino had been amazed at the video of her performance on Sunday and had resolved to see every other screening—she'd kept up with them all so far.

They made their way up onto the platform at the top of the climbing net when Ryūnosuke paused again, saying "I wonder if she's like this with that Ichigo guy too."

"Don't be stupid!" Shino admonished, as much for the nature of the thought as its ridiculousness. The mood of their fukutaichō in that video was very different from how she'd been and was around them. She was being differently than she had before she'd been assigned to the Living World too, although it was hard to put a finger on what exactly it was about her. She was usually only harsh when they were doing large group training, and that hadn't really changed, but in smaller or slower exercises or one-on-one sessions there were things that were new. She had always been relatively kind in such settings, but there was some new confidence about her. Shino thought she seemed a lot happier.

"I still don't really understand what this has to do with—" Ryūnosuke continued on, only to abruptly stop as he saw Shino's eyes go wide and felt a familiar reiatsu signature very near him. He let out a breath and closed his own eyes in defeat. "She's right behind me, isn't she?" he whispered.

"Drop! Fifty!" Rukia commanded, seemingly without interest in their imminent suffering.

They both immediately got onto their stomachs to do push-ups on the narrow wooden platform, their peers having to clamber over them as Rukia called out a count to make an example of them. Shino
Ichigo wiped away a trickle of blood from his mouth with his right hand as he and Tatsuki circled one another. His lip was split, his nose was bloodied, his left eye had already swollen shut, he was pretty sure he had several cracked ribs, and moving his left arm hurt enough that he was confident it was dislocated at both the shoulder and elbow.

She was moving with a heavy limp and was cradling her left side, but her face was unmarred. A serious fight or not, childhood friends or not, he wouldn't hit her in the face. She'd noticed and wouldn't stop mocking him for it, particularly as she had no similar compunctions. "What if it's some female Arrancar that's beating up Rukia, huh?" she taunted.

"Shut up, it's not about the fact you're a woman," Ichigo replied, continuing to circle. It really wasn't, and his expression darkened at memories of the war rather than any disdain for her. Even if she did grievous damage to him, he knew who she was, what the stakes were, and what it was about. He wasn't going to seriously hurt her in a training match just to prove he had a killer instinct.

She saw it and she saw her opening in it, feinting with a kick before moving to trip him in a sliding lunge as she declared "Don't screw with me!"

Ichigo kept his cool and hopped over it once she had fully committed before turning and engaging in his own kick, only to halt right before his foot snapped against Tatsuki's neck. It was enough to prove the point.

"Enough!" Yoruichi called, gesturing for Inoue to go and following along after her.

Tatsuki eyed Ichigo's foot, assessing what kind of damage he would've done, before pushing herself up and waiting for Inoue to reach them. She gave no objection as he sat down beside her. "You would've won with that," she muttered.

"I'm a lot more messed up than you are, you just got impatient," he replied.

"This will be faster if you're still," Inoue said quietly as she knelt before the two. She didn't like watching them spar and hurt one another, but she understood the purpose as well as Tatsuki did, and she was what made it okay for them to do it without lasting effects. If it helped, she would do it.

She was soon engaging in what Ichigo knew was Sōten Kisshun even though he could see no effects of it. He could certainly feel it.

Yoruichi yawned as she watched the healing proceed and said breezily "Ichigo, Tatsuki was right that you need to take this more seriously. Tatsuki, Ichigo was right that you were winning until you became impatient. Any questions? No? Okay, great! Let's get some food after this, I'm starving."

Ichigo did his best not to roll his eyes, especially since he knew she intended for all of them to come over for dinner.

Renji sat opposite Rukia, sipping from a sake cup.

She was playing with her own cup absentmindedly, batting it between her hands in thought. They were seated within one of the Seireitei's many small cafeterias which, depending on the hour, also functioned as bars. They'd timed their excursion to coincide with one of the Shinigami Women's Association showings of the karaoke footage, wagering there'd be less traffic, but they'd begun to
taper off in attendance. They got plenty of looks given their faces had been in print for two days and on screen for two nights—if anyone didn't know who they were before, they did then. Fortunately, even drunk Shinigami had the good sense not to bother two relaxing fukutaichō, and almost all of the interactions they did get were just requests to sign copies of the Seireitei Communication. They hadn't invited anyone else—there'd be time for that the next day—and it was just a chance to talk.

"You know, I was so worried how you'd take this whole thing I never really stopped to consider it'd make me famous too," Renji muttered.

"Are you complaining that you have fangirls?" Rukia asked cheekily. She'd had a bit more to drink than usual and had been feeling good even before that. A lot of things seemed right and the final round of training for the Division was going well. There was really only one thing that was missing.

"I don't have fangirls!" he replied a bit hotly. It wasn't quite true. He'd always gotten a certain level of attention for walking around in his night clothes on his days off, but that wasn't why he did it. This situation wasn't really helping. He finished off his cup and poured himself some more. He didn't pour for her, reasoning she'd had enough. "What's with you anyway? You seem a lot happier than you did Sunday night." He imagined seeing and hearing Ichigo while being away from him hadn't helped her mood.

She smiled a little as she continued to play with the sake cup.

Renji stared for a moment before asking "No way, really?" If that was so, then she was doing quite a good job of suppressing her reiatsu to its previous level.

Rukia just nodded before looking at him, her smile broadening.

He reached across the table and clasped her on one arm, grinning. He poured her just one more despite his reservations before raising his own cup to toast.

She accepted it and they slowly downed the drinks together, before she set her cup on the table and leaned back, stretching. She would have to get to bed early to sleep the alcohol off.

"I'm sure he'll be really happy for you," Renji said.

"Yeah," Rukia replied. She was sure he would be. Given how he'd seen her off he'd probably do something goofy like bake a cake for her or something. The mental image of Ichigo waiting in front of an oven in an apron made her laugh a little.

The crimson-haired Shinigami gave her a moment before asking "You mind if I come observe what you're doing with training tomorrow?"

"Oh, think you might learn something, fukutaichō-dono?" Rukia taunted.

"Or what not to do," Renji shot back.

"I guess," she replied, ignoring the slight. She didn't really have any problems with it. Maybe it could become an inter-Division thing and he could try his hand at it. She knew Sentarō and Kiyone probably wouldn't be able to keep it up on top of everything else. She stood, adding "If you're going to be there, don't stay here too late. Goodnight, Renji," before starting to make her way back to her apartment.

He waved her off and finished what was left of the bottle in short order before going his own way.
"This will be your last match, so give it everything you've got," Yoruichi declared with an enthusiasm that ranked somewhere beneath interested.

Ichigo kept his eyes on Tatsuki to make sure she wouldn't blindside him as he replied "This is only the third match!" She hadn't reacted and he got the sense she already knew, and perhaps had known all along.

Yoruichi replied: "First and most importantly, you're not actually gaining anything from this except psychologically and mentally—Inoue's powers heal you up immediately, but they also reverse any physical gains you might achieve. Second, your fighting styles and skill levels are quite similar and so even from the perspective of technique this is of limited utility. Third and finally, if Rukia finds out you're getting beat up every other day I don't think she'll be too happy. This has been to knock the rust off. Your real training starts when school does."

She left it unsaid that Tatsuki had confessed to her she didn't find it remotely enjoyable, and that it was clear Ichigo would only try so hard against his friends. Revealing either wasn't her prerogative nor was it helpful. She had already structured a regimen to lead him through and past his friends to people he wouldn't have such reservations with. It was complicated by the fact that, reiryoku or not, he was a de facto powerless human. She would have to train up both his body and soul again given their two-track approach to restoring his powers. Starting with some rough-housing had been her best option to get him in the right frame of mind.

Ichigo said nothing at first, staring down Tatsuki. Things in his head turned. Finally a cocky little smile formed on his lips. "I guess that means this is the last one ever then, because I'm definitely getting my powers back. Don't walk away with any regrets."

Her eyebrows twitched and her expression hardened at the taunt before she growled "At least I'll be able to walk away under my own power—I can't say the same about you!"

It was much later, when they were all eating dinner with his family at the house, that Rukia unlocked the door and walked inside, calling "I'm home," plainly as if she'd lived there for years.

Ichigo was so surprised at the suddenness of her reappearance, her use of a common daily phrase, and her casualness in declaring it as home that he didn't immediately realize he hadn't noticed any tells from the others that she had returned, nor did he join the chorus of "Welcome home!" from everyone else. As she came into view from the dining room he felt his heart rate speed up.

She had a little smile, although it was directed overwhelmingly at him.

"Welcome home," he said belatedly, giving a small smile back. He couldn't look away and they stared at each other for a second. There was something slightly different in her expression and eyes. He couldn't immediately identify it but it was familiar. He realized after a moment that she looked very confident.

Yuzu was already getting up and cheerily offered "Nē-san, we have some more food, please join us!"
I can bring you a plate."

Rukia's attention shifted to her and she smiled more broadly, accepting graciously and going to sit with everyone else at the table.

There was a bit of a break in the flow of conversation as everyone asked how she had been. Ichigo did his best to act natural but was largely lost for words. He suddenly felt incredibly light. He mostly stuck to eating as the conversation turned back toward regular matters.

She did the same, as much because she knew what was happening and didn't feel much different as because she had arrived so late into the meal. Dinner continued on with everyone else making their own private calculations about how much of the couple's time to occupy.

Afterwards, Yoruichi, Tatsuki, and Inoue all elected to help Yuzu and Karin clean up and move the few things that had been brought over to the house back to the clinic, figuring it would help them all clear out faster. Yoruichi also did it because she knew it gave Isshin a window of opportunity, although she didn't know if he would take it. He conveniently disappeared off into a bathroom right before they said goodnight and left and so she shepherded everyone off, stating he could catch up on his own.

Rukia and Ichigo were alone for a moment. She made her way to sit beside him, saying "Hey," with a smile.

"Hey," he replied, unable to stop from smiling back.

They stared at each other again for awhile before she looked away. "It seems like your father wants to try and tell us tonight," she said quietly.

"Are you okay with that?"

She nodded. "I am if you are." She preferred to have it over and done with, even if it interfered with things. It was better than letting it hang over Friday or the weekend. She would make it up to him later if necessary.

A minute later Isshin was back in their vicinity, regarding them a little dourly. From their expressions they appeared to have figured out what was going on. He was pleased his son had at least told her. "It's not polite to spring something like this on two people so recently reunited," he said, scratching at his stubble. He would leave it up to them whether they wanted to hear it that night.

Rukia took one of Ichigo's hands under the table but said nothing.

"We're all here," Ichigo stated. He didn't like it at all, but he preferred they get it over with rather than have it looming over them indefinitely.

Isshin walked into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water before returning to the table and sitting down opposite them. He was quiet for awhile before he began to relate the story of the last unofficial mission of Isshin Shiba, former taichō of the 10th Division.

He told them of how he had left his fukutaichō, Matsumoto, and 3rd Seat, Hitsugaya, in order to investigate the mysterious deaths of Shinigami in Naruki. How he had fought an almost entirely black Hollow of extreme capabilities and been injured by an invisible Shinigami that had almost certainly been Aizen. How he had been saved by a Quincy named Masaki Kurosaki, who had been intended to be wed to Ryūken Ishida. How during the course of the battle she was infected with a Hollowification poison that he later learned would surely have caused her soul to self-destruct. How he and Ryūken had been approached by Kisuke Urahara and told how to save her. How he had
entered a *gigai* that bound his Shinigami powers to stop the Hollowfication process in her. How he had become a doctor, and fallen in love with her.

He did not tell them about how or why Masaki and Ryūken's wife Kanae had died.

When Isshin finished around an hour later, the room was deadly silent. He gauged the looks on the faces of the couple. Rukia seemed both surprised and grim at the same time. Ichigo had an expression that was hard and a look in his eyes that ticked back and forth between hot and cold like a metronome, as if some battle was raging inside him. "I'm sure you have questions, so you may as well ask them," he said.

"Karin and Yuzu, do they also have—" Ichigo began immediately.

"No," Isshin replied flatly. Over the years Urahara had advanced some theories as to why neither of his daughters had echoes of the Hollow but which was correct was unclear and the simple answer would suffice.

"Ichigo's inner Hollow isn't really a Hollow, but a fusion of his Hollow and Shinigami powers." Rukia stated. She already knew. Urahara had told her earlier to be patient and to not delay in returning to Ichigo, but on Wednesday, Shinji had been relatively direct in answering her questions and she knew that the situation Ichigo had described to her was abnormal. Isshin's story merely confirmed it. That left only one possibility as to what the entity Ichigo had been calling Zangetsu really was. She didn't voice it, instead asking "They've been fused since he was born?" as she continued to grip his hand securely.

Ichigo looked away, reaching the same conclusions. He wasn't in a position to follow up on any of it as he was still unable to access his inner world. His dad's abrupt appearance when Aizen had been talking to him suddenly made complete sense. Aizen had said *Since the moment of your birth you have been special because you are the offspring of a Shinigami and—* only to be cut off. He had been about to say *a Quincy*. From his interactions with Aizen, he wouldn't be surprised if he'd intended to specify *a partially Hollowfied Quincy, no less* afterwards.

Isshin narrowed his eyes a little. He would have preferred Ichigo work out the exact truth on his own, but that wasn't possible right then. Likewise, he'd known when he decided to include Rukia that she would probably see through things quickly, and would do her own digging out of concern for him. He sighed and decided to be completely truthful. "That's correct. A rather complicated series of events started the night the two of you met. What happened when you tried to transfer some of your powers to Ichigo was due to the interference of Urahara's Hōgyoku within you, not Ichigo's own latent abilities." He paused before deciding that they had likely gone far enough for him to broach the subject, meeting Rukia's gaze directly. "While Ichigo was fighting Gin in fake Karakura, I fought Aizen. He claimed the Hōgyoku possessed a will of its own and its true ability was to determine and fulfill the desires of others."

Rukia blinked.

"He claimed, among other things, that the reason virtually all of your powers were transferred to Ichigo instead of only half of them were your feelings of guilt," he said.

Her eyes grew wide before she very deliberately narrowed them again, her expression hardening even as she didn't deny the implication. It was a moment before she realized Ichigo was gripping at her hand tightly and she glanced down at the contact. She stilled her mind with the thought of *that was then and this is now* before looking back up.

Isshin continued: "When Byakuya pierced Ichigo's binding chain and soul sleep, it was the powers
he'd received from you that were destroyed. Urahara cutting his chain of fate and forcing him to almost undergo a transformation into a Hollow drew out his own Shinigami powers, which had been fused with his inner Hollow the entire time." He paused again for a moment and took in a breath before saying "This weakened the bonds on my gigai, eventually returning my powers too. Ever since then, Ichigo has just been using a sort of manifested idea of his zanpakutō."

Rukia gripped back at Ichigo as she asked "What do you mean by that?" as her eyes shifted over to him.

"There has never been a Shinigami that has developed a zanpakutō without the use of an asauchi, ever," Isshin stated, making it clear through his tone that even the idea was impossible.

There was another long pause before Ichigo looked back toward the table. His eyes slid over to Rukia first. She was watching him with intense sympathy and brought her other hand onto his, grasping at him with both. He did his very best to channel his true feelings into his gaze to reassure her.

She was momentarily transfixed by what she saw—he was giving her a look that pleaded with her to trust him, that told her it was okay, and that seemed to convey a smile even though his facial expression was impossible to read. She stared as his vision lingered on her until his eyes turned away and the sight was gone.

Ichigo looked to his father again before, as if he was describing something mundane, he declared "So to sum it up, my soul is human, Quincy, Hollow, and Shinigami. The Hollow and Shinigami parts are what I've been calling the Hollow but are really Zangetsu and all of this is probably why he's such an asshole. The Quincy parts are what I've been calling old man Zangetsu and he's probably been doing this to keep me alive even though Quincy hate Shinigami and Hollows. And the human part is what I think of as me. I don't actually have and have never had a zanpakutō and will probably have to get a real one somehow. Did I miss anything, or is that about it?"

Isshin was speechless for a second at his son's attitude before he gave a smirk, muttering "Yeah, that's about it."

Ichigo’s eyes locked with his father's. What he really wanted to ask was: Why do my Quincy powers look like a middle-aged man dressed in black? He had the sense that was part of what his dad wouldn't talk about right then, along with things like why if his mom had still been a Quincy she hadn't easily defeated Grand Fisher. He instead narrowed his eyes and criticized in a deadpan "You knew your former fukutaichō and 3rd Seat were in my room and didn't even say 'Hi' to them?"

"I actually aged in this gigai, I'll have you know! It normally would've taken well over a thousand years for me to look this old! They probably didn't even recognize me and imagine how complicated it would've been to try and explain! Don't assume everything is so simple!" Isshin rebuked with a bit of heat.

Rukia found she could only smile faintly at Ichigo. She let it fade as she turned to Isshin, her eyelids dropping into one of her noble looks as she declared "Suddenly Matsumoto's behavior makes a lot more sense."

"Rukia-chan, you too?" Isshin said with mock injury. He took in a breath before looking serious again and rising as he declared "Anyway, that's probably a lot to process, so I should leave. Everyone is probably wondering where I am and Yoruichi can only keep them distracted for—"

"Dad," Ichigo began, cutting him off.
Isshin abruptly looked to him, surprised by the interruption.

"Thank you," Ichigo said sincerely, meeting his gaze.

"Thank you," Rukia repeated.

Isshin glanced between the two of them and rubbed at his chin before going to the door and getting his shoes on. He lifted his eyebrows suggestively and called "Don't stay up too late!" before leaving.

Ichigo frowned at the innuendo before letting it go and glancing to Rukia.

She was already looking at him and stood after a moment, keeping her hands on one of his and pulling him up and along toward the living room.

He followed willingly and without question, and soon they were sitting beside one another on the couch.

After a beat she released his hand and got her arms securely around him.

"I'm okay," he said quietly, embracing her. If he thought about what the two entities in his soul had said, they'd never really lied to him except when the old man had claimed to be Zangetsu. He had just never put it together. Dwelling on it excessively right that instant wouldn't accomplish anything, even if it all changed quite a lot. He'd been more surprised at what had been said about the Hogyoku. He knew how guilty she still felt about Kaien but to know it had interpreted her desires as to cease being a Shinigami, only for her to wind up in a power-draining *gigai* and to then also flee off into the night . . . the idea of her being alone with nothing and no one wasn't something he wanted to think about.

Rukia didn't let go or say anything, continuing to hold him. Her mind turned back to the nightmare featuring what she'd just learned was the real Zangetsu. Had that really been her own idea of what he was like, or had he somehow crossed over into her dreams? How would such a thing have even been possible? It couldn't possibly have been. Yet it was so very suspicious how he'd acted and how quickly results had come from it . . .

Ichigo knew better than to try and brush it off and just held her.

They stayed together silently for a long time before she pulled her head back and looked up to him, her eyes searching.

He watched her in turn, doing the same.

"Are you really alright?" she asked quietly.

He nodded, not breaking eye contact and being honest. "Are you?"

She nodded back even as she continued to evaluate him for a second. She shifted with him, scooting sideways and pulling him toward her until he was lying on the couch with his head in her lap. She ran one hand through his hair and massaged at his neck with the other, keeping him close.

He was facing toward her and found himself the slightest bit embarrassed at the new and unfamiliar position, but settled against her quickly. Some time passed before he glanced up at her and asked "How was Soul Society?"

Rukia looked askew in a way that communicated quite a lot had occurred. "I did what I needed to do."
"Tell me," he requested.

She looked a bit abashed but also rather happy as she said "There were two big things that happened and I'll tell you about one of them later. The other is that I learned bankai."

He blinked before bringing his arms up around her lower back, gripping one of her sides in his hands and pushing his face to her stomach to hug her. It was the best he could manage without getting up given how they were situated.

She looked to him again in surprise at how securely he was suddenly holding her and could just see the corner of a big smile. Her jaw went slightly slack and she stared before smiling back in response.

It was some time before he said "I knew you'd win that game of go eventually," with warmth and affection.

Rukia pinched one of his ears just a little hard at his impudence. "I had to show that I understood the true nature of my shikai to demonstrate I could handle it."

Ichigo eased up on the hug and looked up to her curiously.

She met his gaze before closing her eyes and asking "Do you remember seeing Some no Mai: Tsukishiro?" She might have told Renji on Tuesday that she had achieved bankai, and told Byakuya earlier in the day before she had left, but it would only be Ichigo who she would tell what exactly it was or what it had taken to learn it.

"Yeah," he replied. Seeing her really fight for the first time had actually been quite impressive.

"That's the first of three dances that I know with Sode no Shirayuki. It's generally thought to be an ice-type zanpakutō, but that isn't really correct. What it really does is to lower my temperature and serve as a means for propagating the effects of that. Heat flows from warm regions to cold ones. Sode no Shirayuki doesn't create ice—it takes heat away, freezing the enemy and environment." she said.

He narrowed his eyes in thought at that, remembering some of the things he'd learned in his science classes.

"The only limit to this ability is when I bring my own body temperature to absolute zero. In that state, I'm technically dead—more so than normal. Doing that in shikai is dangerous and requires a lot of focus. I still can't manage it for more than a few seconds without injuring myself. My bankai is called Hakka no Togame and it dramatically increases the affected area and speed of achieving this temperature, but is even more dangerous. There's no room for error or remorse with it. What were necessary were two things: to demonstrate an extreme amount of precision and control, and a complete disregard for an intended target . . . because the essence of my zanpakutō is both literally and figuratively to kill in cold blood," she continued quietly. This was why Shirayuki had described intervening in helping Rukia open her heart to Ichigo as antithetical—it was the precise opposite of her true purpose, even if it was necessary. Likewise, to commit without hesitation to ruthlessly striking down a confidant that was in truth part of her own soul and to halt in doing so by only the smallest of margins had revealed Rukia's ability to mentally handle such a power.

Ichigo glanced up to her again. She looked rather solemn. He reflected on his own bankai training. He wasn't sure he could quite so succinctly describe the essence of Zangetsu and Tensa Zangetsu . . . or what he had called such. He supposed it was overwhelming force. He briefly wondered if his actual shikai and bankai would be the same before putting the thought aside and pressing his face back to Rukia's belly.
She blinked her eyes open and looked back down at him, surprised at his reaction. She started to brush through his hair again. "You really missed me, hmm?" she asked.

He said nothing but gripped at her more tightly.

"I missed you too," she said quietly, cradling his head against her.

They relaxed together, becoming reacquainted with being in close proximity to one another and continuing to reflect on the evening's revelations. Both had noticed the parallels between their meeting and that of Masaki and Isshin, although each regarded it as little more than coincidence.

It was sometime later, when he found himself starting to get sort of sleepy, that Ichigo asked "What was the other big thing that happened?"

"I'd have to show you. Let's get ready for bed first." Rukia replied.

With more than a little confusion he let go of her and slowly sat up.

Rukia was waiting for him in the upstairs lounging area when he walked out of his room and quietly pulled him along into hers. Once they were sitting on her bed she reached under a pillow and produced one of her copies of *Seireitei Communication*. The other was safely stored away and it was her intent to frame it and put it up somewhere in the house. The one she had on hand was a loose copy to look through. She'd asked Urahara to convert them from *reishi* to matter before returning home.

Ichigo's eyes instantly widened in surprise when he caught sight of the magazine cover. He looked to her.

"It was a surprise for me too," she confessed rather modestly. She moved up beside him and looked through it with him, relating what had happened. She noticed he was equally as captivated by some of the pictures of them as she'd been.

They took their time considering it together. He didn't read it with any real focus—there'd be time for that later—but he'd noticed the schedule at the front all the same. It was kind of disconcerting to think that they'd been 'on tour' all week and would be through Sunday. "Are they really still showing footage of it in the Seireitei?"

Rukia smiled a little and took the magazine from him, setting it aside on a nightstand while simultaneously retrieving her soul pager. "We can watch it together if you want," she said in a hushed tone.

Ichigo stared at her for a moment before whispering "I'd like that."

She turned off the light and pulled back the covers and the two of them got situated together under them on their sides such that they could both comfortably see the screen. She navigated the menus and played the copy of the video she'd been sent, settling back against him.

When it was finished she turned with effort against her rising fatigue, pushing her face to his neck. "Stay," she said quietly, the ache in her chest still haunting her despite the presence of his warmth, his touch, and his scent.

He tightened his arms around her and pulled her close, feeling something similar. "Always," he whispered.
There seems to be a retcon between Chapters 397 and 398, at least in the translations I have access to. In 397, Aizen says "a Shinigami and—" while in 398 he says "a human and—". We know from Chapters 528-537 (which are taken here as canonical) that Aizen knew Masaki was a Quincy and he's the sort to just say things callously. I'm choosing to take 397 at face value over 398.
And Show Me Some Pride

Friday, August 30, 2002

Rukia woke up to the feeling of one of Ichigo's hands lightly brushing the back of her neck. She murmured and shifted against him. His grip on her eased and after a few moments she grasped at his shirt, tilting her head back. They'd angled one of the pillows such that both their heads were on it despite hers being below his. It was when they made eye contact that she could see notes of worry and sympathy in his gaze, though his expression was otherwise warm. "What's wrong?" she asked, still sleepy.

He shook his head a bit as he closed his eyes, pressing his forehead down to hers. "It's nothing."

"Ichigo, tell me," she said, her voice growing a little stern as she closed her own eyes and leaned into it.

He'd been putting things she'd said and done together subconsciously and had woken up to the bitter assembled picture. Having it in mind, he hadn't been willing to let her go. She'd so readily fled from Soul Society while telling him and Kon to go into hiding. She'd told him she would've let Ganju kill her and had preferred he do it to being executed. She'd possessed such a peaceful look when facing execution by the Sōkyoku. She'd told him that when she'd believed Aaroniero was really Kaien that she would've accepted dying by his hands. For the Hōgyoku to have determined that she didn't want to be a Shinigami... fit perfectly. It'd been a year since most of that. It wasn't fair to ask, but it would dog him until he did and she would notice—she already had. He stayed quiet for awhile in evaluation. At last he kept his tone carefully neutral and whispered "Was the Hōgyoku wrong?" He felt her tense for a second in response before she became still.

Only a few moments passed before Rukia quietly stated "You saved me. You're still saving me... but it's not like that anymore."

To know she had hurt that much pained Ichigo, but he forced himself not to dwell on it further. He had to trust her when she said it was in the past. "You saved me first. And you're still saving me too," he replied earnestly.

She was silent for a time before she eventually asked "Do you know why I changed my haircut?"

"No," he said, not having really considered it much other than having long since decided he really did like the way it looked.

"I'd worn it the way it used to be since I was a child. When you lost your powers..." she trailed off, before saying in a hushed voice "Since you gave me a new perspective, I thought it would be an appropriate change for when we met again."

It gave him a moment's pause how much she was crediting him with. "I'm glad you finally stopped resisting being saved," he whispered, remembering how she had been at the top of the Sōkyoku.

"I—I still won't say thank you, fool—" she began to whisper back, his words causing her to make the same connection as well.

He interrupted her on the last syllable by turning his head and kissing her. She didn't have to thank him—simply being there was more than enough.

Rukia let out a noise of surprise before letting out a quieter one of approval, immediately
They both started to increase the pressure of it when a familiar beeping sound off to one side made Ichigo abruptly stop and let her go.

She hesitated for the smallest fraction of a second before pulling away and crawling over to the closer nightstand to get her Soul Candy dispenser, saying with contrition and frustration "Ichigo, I'm sorry—"

"It's alright," he said, sitting up and turning away from the direction she'd gone. There was a note of agitation in his voice too. He knew this kind of thing would happen and he was sort of puzzled it hadn't earlier. He briefly wondered if Soul Society hadn't been sending her alerts until that day. "Stay safe, Rukia," he added immediately.

There was no response. She was already out of her gigai, wanting to get it done as quickly as possible. She knew she would probably run into Ishida and also absolutely had to start lecturing and evaluating Zennosuke if she didn't want the patrols to become a drawn-out distraction.

He hazarded a glance over his shoulder and could tell it was Chappy that was looking back at him. She looked confused. Rukia's gigai or not, seeing it and knowing she wasn't in it completely killed whatever lingering thoughts he had. He looked away again and pushed himself off the bed, stating "You should probably go shower and change." He left the room to do the same, shutting the door behind him.

Chappy was befuddled by a strange urge to follow him for a second before getting up to try and find clothes that would please Rukia on her return.

Ichigo was in the kitchen when Chappy came downstairs, lured by the smell of food after having managed to get attired. He glanced up to affirm it was still the artificial soul before continuing with his cooking. She had dressed plainly yet sensibly in a relatively cute but conservative summer dress.

She took a seat at the breakfast bar, uncertain as to what else to do.

"Hey, Chappy," he said after awhile, not looking up from the work.

"Yes, pyon?" she replied.

"It's not that I hate you or don't like you, it's just that it's weird. You understand, right?" he asked, glancing at her again.

She stared for awhile before nodding. Rukia had only called upon her a few times lately and never explained anything of what was going on between her and Ichigo. She hadn't spent much time around him either but she had the sense that 'weird' was the right term.

He finished making her a rather simple breakfast of white rice with furikake seasoning and some grilled fish, setting it in front of her before starting to clean dishes.

She watched for a second before looking down at her food. "Aren't you going to have anything, pyon?"

"I already ate before you got down here," he said, cleaning as efficiently as he could. He'd had some toast.

Chappy began to eat, not really knowing what else to do, only to find she couldn't stop. It was simple
but really well done.

Soon Ichigo finished and said "Anyway, when you're done just put some water in the dishes and leave them in the sink. You can watch TV or whatever, alright? Tell Rukia I went to my family's place if she's back before me," as he headed for the doorway. She said nothing in response and so he left.

Rukia glanced through Zennosuke's soul pager while he did push-ups. He had an older, much more basic model like the one she'd had the previous year. It felt incredibly primitive compared to the new version and she marveled at how much the 12th Division had advanced things in so short a time period. There was nothing of note on it. He hadn't been slacking off through electronic diversions at any rate.

"Ninety-nine," he called.

She crossed her arms and waited.

"One hundred," he wheezed, collapsing.

"Justice would be to make you do one for every day you've forced the inhabitants of this town to do your duty in your stead," she stated coldly. It had been just barely over a year, and by her reckoning he had managed to beat the other denizens of Karakura to an incursion perhaps one-fifth of the time, so that would translate to around 300 push-ups.

He managed to say "I'm sorry, Kuchiki-fukutaichō!"

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to yourself! Have you no shame, making a Quincy do the job of a Shinigami? Every one of those Hollows he's responded to has been destroyed rather than purified! Erased!" she continued.

He said nothing.

"Of course, Ukitake-taichō and I, as your superiors, are also to blame for placing you in a position you're so clearly ill-equipped to handle and allowing you to remain in it," she said heavily, letting a world-weariness into her voice. She was not at all above guilt-tripping and shaming her subordinates in the name of results—acting was one of her fortes, after all. To build one often had to first tear down.

"The blame is mine, Kuchiki-fukutaichō!" he stated.

Rukia smirked a little since he couldn't see her. Whatever her brother had said to him had done most of the work for her. She adopted a harsh look and shouted "Stop groveling and get on your feet already! I want progress, not penitence!"

She would start with flash steps and other basic techniques of hohō. Zennosuke had only average reiatsu but he also knew his shikai, so he was something more than a mere foot soldier and getting him into battle faster would count for quite a lot. She would put in the time up front if it meant she would eventually be free to attend to her own mission—she was technically there to watch and protect Ichigo, not Karakura. Regardless, she would get Zennosuke to do his own job, no matter what, and would pull his weight until he could do it himself. That was what it meant to be a fukutaichō.

Yuzu blinked at Ichigo's solitary arrival, asking "Where's nē-san?"
Karin's eyes slid away—she already knew. She had been surreptitiously following the flitting about of Rukia's reiatsu. It often moved extremely fast, almost as if it was blinking between different points. She was in close proximity to the weird Shinigami with the afro, though he was hard to notice next to her—she had somehow become significantly stronger than she had been before leaving, and her resting reiatsu was very easy to trace.

"She's busy with work," Ichigo said.

Yuzu stayed quiet at the idea of her adoptive sister out fighting soul-eating monsters.

"I thought I'd use this time to shop for groceries and some other stuff and wanted to see if you were free to come along," Ichigo said nonchalantly, rubbing at the back of his head. It wasn't really that simple, although they did need food. It was the four-week anniversary of he and Rukia officially starting to date, he had to find some way to celebrate her achieving bankai, he still wanted to take her out to dinner, and there was also the abrupt end to their morning to consider. He felt he had a lot to try and answer for and not a lot of time to do it in. He trusted his sisters with helping him without asking too many questions more than he did his friends, at least on such short notice.

Karin glanced to her brother in assessment as she made some calculations. After a second she called "Dad, we need to help Ichi-nii do some shopping!" into the clinic.

"That's fine, just pick up mail first," Isshin replied casually.

Karin started for the door before he even finished, saying "Let's go already."

They returned not too much later with a fairly large padded envelope that was addressed to Ichigo among the usual mail. It'd been delivered from Tokyo, and he'd seemed to know what it was, although he'd dismissed questions about it, stating he'd show them when they got back to the clinic.

Once they were inside Ichigo got some scissors from the kitchen, taking the package to the dining room table.

Karin and Yuzu followed along, the former asking "So are you going to tell us what's in the mystery envelope or are you just going to keep us in suspense?"

"Be patient," Ichigo replied with a tone that made a mockery of his own advice. He carefully opened it up and peeked inside. There were several large glossy photos suitable for framing separated by protective paper covers, along with a film canister and a note. He slid the latter two out first and read the note, which was rather professional and detailed who the photographer woman had been—she apparently owned her own studio and was using the pictures in her portfolio to advertise her services. He set them aside before pulling out the photos and laying them on the table, spreading them out to look at them.

His sisters were confused at first until he pulled away one of the paper covers. Yuzu's reaction was immediate and she broke out into a big smile, declaring "Nē-san looks amazing!"

Karin was more reserved and just stared, shocked at how photogenic the two of them were in traditional dress.

Soon the two were carefully removing the other paper covers and looking at the others. There were ten in all and they appeared to have been carefully selected for posture and facial expression. A few had been taken while they were eating and the rest were when they'd been conversing about music. Ichigo found them at once both intimate and flattering and was quiet as he surveyed them. His sisters became more animated the longer they looked at them.
The noise soon drew Isshin's attention and he glanced out of the clinic, catching sight of what was on the table. The first indication of his presence to everyone else was when he casually said "No furisode, huh? Wonder who she's with." His face gave away that he was impressed.

Ichigo tried to elbow him for the taunt but didn't quite strike home, his father already moving to snatch up the film canister before retreating toward the clinic, calling "Don't worry, I'll return this after we have our own copies!' It wouldn't do for there to be only one set in Ichigo and Rukia's possession.

"You—" Ichigo started, only to be stopped by Yuzu grasping at one of his wrists.

"Onii-chan, it would be really nice to have recent photos of you and nē-san," she said lightly, smiling.

Ichigo stood down, looking back to the photos and smiling a bit himself. As he thought about it he supposed it was alright.

Karin composed herself and cleared her throat. "Weren't we supposed to be grocery shopping?"

"Yeah, you're right," Ichigo replied. He started to carefully collect up the pictures before putting them back in the envelope along with the note, taking it with him as they set off again. He'd figured out what he wanted to get in addition to food.

When they returned to the house, Ichigo carried groceries, while Yuzu carried flowers and Karin carried a cake. The groceries were a wide assortment of meat, poultry, fish, vegetables, and various other perishable items. The flowers were a radial hanakotoba arrangement with a few forget-me-nots at the center surrounded by hydrangeas, narcissus, and a few red roses. The cake was a compact bakery-made one that was vanilla flavored with a mixed berry icing.

Karin and Yuzu didn't know the meanings of any of the flowers but the red roses, and Ichigo had dodged their questions about the others, but the roses alone gave something of what was going on away, especially when combined with the cake.

Chappy looked over at them from the couch as they entered, perplexed at everything they were carrying and at who the girls were.

Ichigo took the groceries to the kitchen without stopping.

"Onii-chan, I thought you said nē-san was working," Yuzu complained mildly.

"She is," he replied.

"That's not Rukia-nē," Karin added, following Ichigo to the kitchen with the cake.

"Eh?" Yuzu asked, looking to Chappy in confusion even as she brought the flowers to the dining room table before going to the kitchen. "Karin-chan, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Her name is Chappy. She stands in for Rukia while she's out working so she doesn't just leave her body lying around," Ichigo explained, starting to load the groceries into the fridge and freezer. He was willing to grant personhood to Chappy even if she wasn't as independent as a mod-soul like Kon, and also willing to treat Rukia's gigai as just an ordinary body for the sake of brevity and Yuzu's peace of mind.

Chappy had gotten up to examine the flowers and was sniffing at them.
Yuzu walked up to her and looked at her curiously before introducing herself. After a moment of uncertainty Chappy did the same and the two started talking, going back to the living room.

Ichigo smiled a bit at his sister's friendliness even as Karin watched a little warily before busying herself by helping him put things away. They were soon finished and had the cake in the fridge as well. Both washed their hands before Ichigo got the package of photos and took them out, setting them beside the flowers. He had a thought and went upstairs to retrieve the loose copy of *Seireitei Communication*, bringing it back down to show his sisters they were mildly famous. Chappy joined in upon seeing Rukia on the cover and Ichigo stood back and let them look through all the photos.

After they'd satisfied their curiosity Yuzu insisted she be allowed to make them a light lunch, deciding to cook there. She dispatched Ichigo to get a plastic container from home so she could bring some back to their dad.

He went to retrieve it.

When he came back he could immediately tell from the voices farther inside that Rukia had returned in his absence and was talking to his sisters.

The moment she caught sight of him she gave him a warm smile. His sisters hadn't hesitated to draw her attention to the photos, cake, and flowers.

He couldn't stop from smiling back and they shared a moment just watching one another before he went to the kitchen with the container to help Yuzu cook.

Rukia sat at the breakfast bar watching Ichigo clean dishes.

Yuzu and Karin had left after lunch to return to the clinic, both discerned the two of them might need time alone.

"So how'd it go?" he asked.

"It was a small Hollow and Ishida was toying with it when I arrived. I think Kurumadani will be able to do things properly in a week or two," she replied. He had picked up on some of the basics of flash steps already. He'd probably be able to use the technique within a few days albeit relatively slowly. Making him confident and decisive would take longer, but with all three he would be able to at least handle one-on-one fights well enough to not require backup. She would probably have to stay alert for any unusually strong Hollow reiatsu signatures for several months, but at least she wouldn't constantly have to run off to help him.

"You work fast," Ichigo said with a small smile and a chuckle. He wasn't surprised given their history.

"You're just lucky I don't treat you the same way," Rukia stated.

"I guess so," he replied, smiling more.

She frowned in suspicion as to whether he was mocking her before letting her expression ease as she decided he wasn't. "I like the flowers." She didn't have to say anything else.

He glanced up to her and she could see he was smiling with his eyes too. He remained quiet for a time before inquiring "Want to go out to dinner tonight?"
She blinked and then let a smirk form on her mouth, asking "What's the special occasion?" in a knowing way.

"I don't know anything about that, I just thought it'd be nice," Ichigo lied, rolling his eyes at her tone and frowning.

"Is it because of this morning, the photos, the magazine, my bankai, me being away, or because it's been a lunar month?" Rukia asked, electing to pursue him.

"Why does it have to be any one thing?" he replied mildly.

She smiled at him coyly. Of course she'd say yes, but she still had to do a few other things to be in a position for them to spend as much of the weekend together as they could. Once school started they'd inevitably have a lot less time for the first few weeks. "If you're offering to take me out on another dinner date then I'd be flattered, Ichigo. But . . ." she began.

"But?" he repeated, looking up to her with a raised eyebrow.

"There are some things I have to do, so we'll have to meet up again in the evening," she concluded.

He looked at her curiously for a second before saying only "Okay."

Rukia met his gaze equally and nodded in agreement, then stood and made her way to the door. She had to get picture frames and have a conversation or two.

Ichigo finished what he was doing before pulling out his cell phone and making a call. He also had to have a conversation.

Not too much later the orange-haired teenager was sitting in a café opposite Ishida, cooling a cup of milk tea by blowing on it.

"You didn't invite me here to ask me for more help with your relationship, did you?" the archer asked with just the barest hint of amusement, sipping at his own green tea.

"Don't be so smug, it's unbecoming," Ichigo lectured in a deadpan. He'd been weighing how exactly to approach the matter and still hadn't entirely made up his mind.

Ishida said nothing, discerning there was something under the usual routine.

The once-and-future Shinigami substitute finally got the tea cooled enough to take a long sip. He set down the cup and said flatly "I want to hear more about how Quincy techniques work."

Ishida raised an eyebrow and set his own cup down, asking "Why the sudden interest?"

Ichigo glanced at the table and let out a breath. He didn't really intend to use the information, but it was probably good that he knew at least a little about his heritage, and maybe if there was an emergency it would be useful or important given his current status. "I recently learned my mom was one, and I just want to know more about it," he said quietly, deciding not to try and dance around the issue.

It was good for the archer that he hadn't been holding his cup or he surely would've dropped it.

Rukia was on her way home from her brief shopping sojourn, walking beside Inoue. She'd asked the bubbly teenager to come along more to have an opportunity to talk in private than for her input on
frames. The young woman had kept asking what exactly they were for, forcing the Shinigami to promise she’d show her once they got back.

After a lull in a conversation about the upcoming school year, Rukia finally decided to press the issue, saying "Inoue . . . Yoruichi told me that you asked Ichigo out this past spring. I . . . I hope this isn't difficult for you and I'm sorry that this is the first chance I've had to really say anything in private." She wouldn't apologize for her feelings for Ichigo, even if they had sneaked up on her, but Inoue was her friend and she had to say something about it rather than just pretending that nothing had ever happened.

"I appreciate you saying that, Kuchiki-san, but it's okay," the teenager replied, smiling a little. Her friend looked to her with moderate concern and so she continued "You make each other really happy, and so . . . well, it's just really cute to watch is all," before smiling more and giggling. That they were happy was what mattered. It made her happy too, even if it was . . . 'borrowed' wasn't the right word, nor was 'reflected', both were too detached. It was just good to see.

Not for the first time the petite Shinigami was stunned at how truly kind the tawny-haired girl really was. She couldn't help but smile back.

"Not—not in like a creepy stalker way or anything, I mean!" Inoue added, waving her hands to chase off her imagination running away from her about how Rukia might interpret it.

Rukia laughed a little and said in reassurance "I know." She paused for a moment before continuing "Inoue—Orihime . . . thank you for looking out for him, you and everyone else." She also knew they had all been there for Ichigo when she hadn't been and couldn't be, even if they had been patient and given him space.

"That's what friends do, Kuchiki-san," the young woman replied gently.

"You can just call me Rukia from now on," the Shinigami offered, holding her friend's gaze.

Inoue blinked before nodding decisively.

Rukia found she no longer felt awkward about showing her what they'd be framing.
Once they were inside Rukia led Inoue to the dining room with the frames, setting down the bags with them beside the table. The photos of her and Ichigo at the Imperial Palace were still neatly laid out and there was a note from him saying he'd gone to hang out. She felt a sudden pang of concern but all their friends and associates were spiritually sensitive and whoever he was with would be easy to locate and probably also capable of handling themselves.

The young woman's eyes slid over the flowers, parsing the hydrangeas, red roses, narcissus, and forget-me-nots as something like *You're my pride and I'm in love with you—draw self-esteem from that and know my love is true*. She felt her eyes widen at the directness and assertiveness behind it as she saw the photos arrayed below them. "Ku—Rukia, your kimono is really pretty!" she said, stunned by how good they looked in the pictures.

The raven-haired woman went over to the coffee table while Inoue looked over the pictures, returning with the loose copy of the *Seireitei Communication*. She was slightly bashful in showing it off. "The other thing is . . . we're all sort of famous now, more so than before."

"It was a surprise to me too," Rukia said with some humility and not for the first time. She handed it to Inoue. "I have another copy that I'm going to put in one of the frames, it'll take me a minute to get it." She went upstairs, leaving Inoue to look through the magazine at her leisure. The teenager was still looking through it with interest when she returned with the other copy, setting about putting it in the frame. It was slightly difficult since it was thicker than a photograph, but she eventually managed it before starting to consider the pictures. She knew where she wanted to put them up in the living room and given how she intended to arrange them and how big they were she could only fit two.

After awhile considering them and finding it hard to choose she decided to ask Inoue for her thoughts. She was going to store the eight that weren't displayed behind the ones that were and could always change them later, but it'd be interesting to hear an outside opinion and she still had plenty of time to hang them before going to the Urahara Shop.

"I want to be clear that I'm not going to teach you how to do anything I just told you about or train you in any of it," Ishida stated, his tone leaving it unambiguous that there was no room for negotiation.

"That's fine, I was never going to ask you to anyway," Ichigo replied irritably, looking off to one side. He had no interest in archery and traps—they weren't his style. It was just that there was nobody else he could really learn about it all in any detail from. His options had been Ishida or Ryūken and given the latter certainly knew who his mom was the former was definitely the less awkward choice. He never really wanted to have that other conversation if he could help it.

The archer paused and narrowed his eyes. On the one hand, whether his friend really was of Quincy heritage or not—Ichigo wouldn't expound on his initial claim but seemed earnest enough about it and had no reason to lie—he very clearly identified with the Shinigami. He was all-but-engaged to one.
To instruct him would be an insult to the pride of the Quincy. On the other hand his disinterest in learning the techniques was also an insult to the pride of the Quincy . . .

Sōken's voice was suddenly in his mind: *No matter if a person is human or Shinigami, seeing a sad face is unbearable to me.* His grandfather had always wanted a rapprochement between the two sides, had always wanted the Quincy to serve as a rapid reaction force until Shinigami could arrive, and had always wanted them to work together. That was why when he'd sensed Rukia's approach that morning he hadn't gone for a lethal shot on the Hollow he'd confronted. It was why he'd followed Ichigo until they had become something that could be called friends. Ichigo had so quickly divined the essence of Sōken's philosophy back when they'd first met. Could it really be that if there was anyone who could actually forge a kind of reconciliation and bring his grandfather's ideals into reality . . . that it was Ichigo?

"Oi, I'm not going to leave just because you're trying to bore a hole in my head with your stare," Ichigo stated.

Ishida blinked and refocused, glaring at his friend before closing his eyes, warring with himself. Something Ichigo had told him more than a year prior provided the last word to his internal debate: *I want to protect . . . a mountain-load of people.* After a moment he reached into one of his pants pockets—he'd modified them to have more space to store some of his gear—and withdrew the *seele schneider* he kept on him when not in uniform. He placed it down on the table in front of Ichigo before opening his eyes again.

The former-and-future Shinigami substitute looked at the silver device in mild bafflement and glanced back up to the archer with a raised eyebrow and an incredulous expression, starting "You just said—"

The Quincy adjusted his glasses, obscuring his eyes behind the gleam of the café's lights. "You'll inevitably treat it like a sword and will only just barely be able to perceive the blade by how it interacts with the atmosphere. Whether you accidentally cut your own arm off or just keep it in case something happens with a Hollow until your powers return, none of that's any business of mine. Just don't lose it," he stated. He wasn't teaching Ichigo anything, nor was he training him, and so he wasn't contradicting himself. With that he stood, going to pay and leaving.

Ichigo sat in consideration of the inert weapon before he picked it up and pocketed it. It wouldn't fall out, but only just. For a second he wondered why he always wound up associating with such difficult people before going to pay and heading to the Urahara Shop. If he was going to be training, he wanted to know beforehand what it was for.

"No," Yoruichi said flatly.

"You really expect me to just accept starting a training regimen without any clue as to what it involves or what the end goal is?" Ichigo groused.

"Yup, because that's just the kind of person you are, charging headlong into unknown danger in the name of whatever you think matters," she replied with annoyance. She didn't want him getting ahead of the program in his current state for several reasons.

"That's not fair, you know," he declared, frowning rather heavily. He decided to let it go again for the moment, stretching with his whole body and reaching his arms over his head to release the tension he could feel starting to build in him. It wasn't like he could force her to talk and it was just one more thing that would sit at the back of his mind until the proper time came.
"Ishida pawned it off on me," he said, hooking his right little finger into its loop and spinning it up into his hand as he withdrew it. After a moment he could hear it faintly hum. The blade was very hard for him to notice. There was a sort of odd visual distortion and the very faintest blue glow when it was on. He'd figured out how to use it on the way over, not particularly wanting to actually cut off his own arm by activating it accidentally at some stage. The business end was basically weightless and so that had been more than an empty warning. He turned it off again and put it back in his pocket. "Won't do much when I can't see anything but I guess it's something."

Yoruichi quirked her mouth to one side in appraisal before deciding it was no more dangerous than handing him a physical sword would be. Unlike that, it at least potentially had utility. She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. Maybe it wasn't just Rukia who was protective of him. Were they all acting that way? As she quickly reevaluated she made the calculation that he was less likely to do anything dangerous if she kept him somewhat informed and let him have at least a little agency. He'd been acting more mature since the war and especially since his time in Tokyo. Still, she wouldn't put too much weight on his shoulders. "Shinigami, Hollows, and Quincy aren't the only kinds of entities with spiritual powers."

"You've got to be kidding me, are you about to tell me I'm some other thing too?" Ichigo complained. "What is it this time? Am I part demon? Or how about part vampire or werewolf?"

"Are you done?" she asked, glaring at him only mildly. Despite it all he was definitely still himself and he was under a lot of pressure at the moment. Perhaps his song choice had been more appropriate than he'd known.

He blew out a breath and made eye contact with her.

"I told you that your reiatsu resembled background noise. The correct follow-up question was 'The background noise of what?' because surely I didn't mean other human souls. The answer is that everything possesses a soul. You can think of it as like Platonic essences or something if that means anything or helps. If you were an actual void, you'd stand out much more than you do. Anyway, there's a type of human that can manipulate these mundane souls while remaining in their physical body, with interesting combat applications," she explained.

He found himself staring at her in disbelief. There were things like chair ghosts? Or would they be ghost chairs?

She ignored his stupid expression and stated with meaning "This particular power occurs when a child is born with at least one parent having previously survived a Hollow attack and arises from minute traces of Hollow reiatsu being passed onto them."

Ichigo frowned again, but rather differently. That certainly applied to both his parents, even if one had been in a gigai. Something odd triggered at the back of his mind at that but he both couldn't figure out what it was and discerned it wasn't immediately important. In any event, in his case it was more than 'minute traces'. "So you want me to train up my body to handle . . . whatever that is . . . and you think it'll somehow grant access to my other powers?"

"Close enough," the Flash Goddess offered.

He considered it for awhile before meeting her gaze again. "Alright . . . thanks for being honest with me."
She gave him a small smile, although it was partially ironic. Rukia's reiatsu was much stronger than it had been, which could only mean one thing, and given its magnitude she was clearly not under the influence of a limiter. When she'd returned Yoruichi had briefly wondered on whose order that was but it didn't really matter in the end. She was very close and would be there any second, which would make things rather interesting.

"I'll be here on Monday then," Ichigo continued, adding "Later," as he turned to walk out through the shop toward the front door. He'd decided it'd be easier to ask about Kon then.

Yoruichi leaned against a wall to watch.

Just before Ichigo reached the door, Rukia opened it. They both immediately stopped and looked at one another, clearly not having expected to run into each other there.

"Ichigo?" she asked with confusion.

"Hey, I . . ." he started. He closed his eyes and exhaled before locking eyes with her squarely. He looked at her steadily for a second and glanced over his shoulder to Yoruichi, calling "Tell her everything—including what you just told me and whatever else it is you're not telling me too!" with resolution and mild irritation.

The Flash Goddess said nothing but smiled a little inwardly.

He looked back to Rukia and said quietly "She can explain better than I can and we can talk about it all later if you want." He didn't want to keep things from her—she didn't need him complicating things like that and there was absolutely nothing that was worth hiding from her.

The petite Shinigami searched his eyes for a second before nodding, discerning his intent and deciding to trust that whatever he was doing there he'd meant to tell her about it all along anyway.

"I'll see you back at home," he added with a tiny smile before walking by her. One of his fingers brushed one of her wrists as he went by.

She stood in contemplation for a moment before her eyes tracked to the purple-haired former noble and she shut the door behind her. She'd intended to talk with Urahara about his plans and more given she had a fuller understanding of Ichigo's nature, but she could start with Yoruichi. There was the matter of the note she'd left with her gigai at the shop and the one she'd received when she'd gotten it back to discuss anyway.

The first thing Ichigo noticed was that the pictures were gone from the dining room table. He looked around curiously and it didn't take him too long to spot the new additions to the living room wall. Rukia had chosen frames that matched the décor seamlessly and it was almost like they'd always been up. He got closer to examine the two she'd picked, not supremely surprised to see the magazine between them. One was the most heated-looking of the ten, taken when they'd clearly been exchanging barbs, but there were still oddly affectionate looks on their faces. The other had been taken during a lull when they'd just been watching one another and looked rather serene. He smiled automatically. It seemed like a good reflection of how they were.

He looked at them for awhile before going to do a brief workout in one of the traditional rooms, then hit the shower and changed into something nicer. Karakura wasn't Tokyo and even accounting for things in Naruki there were relatively few truly upscale places to go. Even so, he wanted to treat Rukia, so he got on something casual but smart. He then spent some time rooting around in his closet for his substitute badge, assuming it'd been transferred to a similar location as where he'd left it in his
old room. He eventually located it and put it and the seele schneider in his bag for Monday. If nothing else he could be more responsible by allowing himself to be tracked again.

When Rukia returned an hour later she found him on the couch in the living room playing a game while wearing a dress shirt and slacks.

He paused and looked to her, smiling a little to test her mood and saying "I like what you did with the photos."

She smiled back fractionally and held it, not commenting, before continuing on upstairs, poking him in the back of the head as she transited behind him and declaring primly "I understand Tatsuki was doing it long before I was so I'm not mad, but beating you up is my prerogative, Ichigo."

He felt a corner of his mouth twitch up but decided not to say anything, letting her continue on.

Sometime later she was back downstairs in a restrained skirt and blouse and stood behind him, dangling something made of plastic in front of his face.

Ichigo also noticed, peripherally, that there was a non-descript rubber wristband on her right wrist, which made for an odd juxtaposition with the bangle on her left. He took the plastic card and looked at it more closely, finding it appeared to be a driver's license. Part of his concern during their adventures in Tokyo had been that the only pieces of identification he'd had were his National Health Insurance Card and his student ID, both of which clearly wouldn't have gotten him in anywhere. The driver's license appeared wholly legitimate aside from the fact that it listed his date of birth as being three years earlier than it really was. He looked to her in surprise.

"This is only for when we're out together," Rukia said, her tone an even mix of gentle and stern. She'd asked Urahara to get it ready for him before leaving the prior Sunday because she didn't want him to worry about that sort of thing anymore if they were out enjoying themselves. If she was there then that was more than enough to make things okay.

He nodded in understanding and got out his wallet to put it away before looking at her wrist again, drawing her gaze as well.

"Given why I'm here, I'm being allowed to operate without a limiter in case I need to react immediately. Broadcasting my reiatsu all the time or having to constantly suppress it isn't good though, so this is something Urahara made to mimic a limiter that I can control. He only finished it today." It was both reusable and apparently expendable, and Urahara had remarked he was making a set for Ichigo to eventually use too.

He stood without comment and made his way around the couch, slipping an arm around her waist and leading her toward the door. "So there's this Mexican restaurant in Naruki that Chad has always told me has reasonably authentic flavors . . ."

The restaurant had a northern Mexican focus in terms of ingredients, but the actual dishes were in a style that resembled southwestern American Sonoran cuisine rather than a purely traditional menu or the Tex-Mex style many people thought of when they thought of Mexican. They were sitting at a rather small table with a long tablecloth. Ichigo opted for a carne asada burrito while Rukia got steak fajitas, both dishes coming with rice and refried beans among other things. They were snacking on chips and salsa and chicken flautas as they waited and, at her insistence, were also trying margaritas and horchata. The flavors were all very different from anything they'd recently eaten but both found they liked them as much for that as for their own sake.
"I was going to tell you tonight about the training," he offered after awhile.

"I know," she said simply.

Their eyes met and he gave something that was halfway between a smirk and smile. "Guess it turns out I'm pretty complicated."

"I don't think so," she replied with a smile in return.

"Really?" he asked.

She closed her eyes and nodded seriously. "It doesn't matter what all your powers are or how you access them, you just need them back and to have someone to knock you around when you get too ate up with them."

"Oh, that sounds like it might be a full-time job, do you think there's anyone that's free to do that kind of thing?" he asked as if it was a sincere question, although his face betrayed it wasn't. He was fine with being self-deprecating with her . . . sometimes anyway.

Rukia kicked one of his shins under the table, although she'd slipped her shoes off and between that and doing it from a seated position it lacked any truly great impact. After a moment she brought her foot back down and rested it atop his opposite shoe, poking her sock-clad toes under his khakis and using them to push his sock down before brushing them against his ankle. She knew he was being especially sweet that day.

Ichigo looked to her with mild surprise at the feeling.

She looked back with a completely disinterested and mildly hostile expression as she continued to munch on their appetizers, eventually asking "What?" testily. Just because it was the case didn't mean she had to acknowledge it verbally.

He stayed quiet and looked away, sipping at his margarita.

When they returned home she wordlessly pulled him over to the couch, getting him to sit down and then sitting on the outside of his lap. She leaned in to him and got her arms around his neck. "You've been worried all day, haven't you?" There had been a lot of subtle tells she'd been noticing and it couldn't go on.

Ichigo said nothing and just gently grasped her sides.

Rukia tightened her arms a little, whispering "I told you it's not like that anymore."

"I know," he said quietly.

"Ichigo . . ." she entreated.

"It's just—" he started.

"We were in the middle of something when I had to leave this morning," she said softly.

He looked down to her to find she was already gazing up at him, and her eyes told him not to worry and to trust in her. He was frozen by the look.

Rukia reached her hands up to Ichigo's cheeks, cupping them and gingerly lowering his head as she leaned up, shutting her eyes and pressing her mouth to his. He was more than agreeable and after a
time she moved her hands to his shoulders and made it only their second deep kiss since the very first
time they'd locked lips. She was patient and exploratory rather than aggressive this time and
gradually invited him to do the same rather than fighting him.

He followed her example until they broke it for want of breath, holding each other only for him to
lead off in starting again.

She kept her hands where they were and so did he, mutually establishing a limit as to what they were
doing as they continued. She physically signaled an end to it many, many cycles later by lowering
her head beneath his and using her hair to press his chin up.

Letting go of her sides, he slid his arms around her waist and pulled her close, letting his hands rub at
her upper back.

Rukia gave him a peck right above where his collarbones met his sternum and sank against him,
whispering "We should sleep separately until I don't have to patrol. I don't want to wake you up in
the middle of the night." Chappy had told her about that morning and Rukia also didn't want him to
be awkward or sulking because he woke up next to her. At the same time she didn't want him
interpreting it as a punishment or anything but her looking out for his well-being.

Ichigo's hands stopped for a second before they resumed rubbing at her back but he offered no
objections. He was still a little light-headed and stunned by what they'd been doing. If it was
temporary and they made up for it by being close in other ways he could deal with it.

She stayed in his arms and he held her until it was deep into the evening. Finally she pushed herself
up, stating that they should get ready for bed. He pulled her in for a final kiss and she joined in with
it before they went upstairs together, saying goodnight to one another before heading to their
respective rooms.
Rukia stood facing the clearing and cave where Kaien had been turned into an abomination. He wasn't there and everything was quiet and still. She tested her agency and found she could move freely, discovering she was wearing her current shihakushō rather than the standard one she'd had at that time. She narrowed her eyes and her expression hardened as she considered the scene. It seemed like it had actually worked. She hopped off the cliff and landed gracefully in the clearing, carefully advancing toward its center. Her sword hand was casually upon Sode no Shirayuki's hilt.

*Have you ever wondered what a zanpakutō does when you have no use for it?* Urahara had asked. The naïve answer was that if it wasn't immediately needed then it went dormant. But just like parts of the body and mind didn't turn off simply because they weren't in continuous use, neither did parts of the soul. And nobody ever said that all of a soul had to stay in the exact same place . . .

As she reached the center of the clearing she heard a harsh, rhythmic sound echo out of the cave. It seemed to come closer with time and at last the source became apparent as Zangetsu stepped out of the inky darkness, slowly clapping. He wore his usual snide smirk and moved up to meet her, stopping several meters away and crossing his arms. "Guess all it took was a chat with daddy and the spook and here we are," he said with gleeful malice. "Nice work with your homework by the way, real impressive." His eyes gleamed.

Rukia kept perfectly still.

"*Reiatsu* fields, matter-soul synchronous contact, blah, blah, blah, I don't know anything about any of that! I know two things: he can't hear me but you can, and when you invite someone in all sorts of interesting things become possible!" Zangetsu said. The innuendo and suggestion in his tone for the second clause were not at all subtle.

Her expression didn't shift a millimeter. She had genuinely wanted to reassure Ichigo and explore being physically intimate with him again. There was no shame in that for him or her. That it might bring this about had merely been a fringe benefit. Urahara's explanation of what might be happening hadn't made a tremendous amount of sense to her but it had fit the evidence.

He curled a lip at her in a leer before raising a hand and snapping his fingers. At once, the clearing melted away and the pair found themselves within the snowy alpine valley of Rukia's inner world. It was faintly overcast and the moon was a crescent, but otherwise it was as it had been previously. Shirayuki was standing some meters behind Zangetsu, facing orthogonally to both of them.

For the first time Rukia noticed how complimentary their colors were to one another—they were both such stark studies in white.

"Must be a real turn-off, huh, knowing that whatever you want to do with him down the road, I'm gonna be there along with that other guy too?" the foreign spirit taunted.

"No," was all Rukia said.

"Wow, I mean I knew you were repressed but—" he began crudely.
"No," she repeated. There was something in her tone that was ephemeral but had the capacity to shut down anything in the universe.

Shirayuki's eyes slid over to her wielder, evaluating. She had no choice but to be there and wouldn't have left Rukia alone with her counterpart under any circumstances anyway, but her role was to facilitate things, not to interfere.

"This charade is over," Rukia stated. Knowing Zangetsu's true nature along with his historical pattern of behavior from Ichigo's anecdotes made his behavior remarkably predictable. He was trying to goad and upset her to keep her off balance and maneuver her into doing something or other. She had the feeling that even without the influence of Ichigo's Quincy powers that he would conduct himself in a similar way, though he wouldn't have gone along with pretending to be a Hollow. It was a relatively basic application of psychology to provide the challenge component in fostering growth. Zangetsu himself was of course the support aspect of growth—for him to truly go against Ichigo was impossible. He had been trying to constantly raise the bar to keep Ichigo alive by serving as a simulated threat. There was more to it than that, but that didn't really matter right that second. What mattered was that he had done the same thing to her last time to shove her back along the path toward her bankai, and seemed to have an interest in doing it again despite her having achieved that milestone. He was trying to modify her growth since he couldn't modify Ichigo's, and Shirayuki had been going along with it.

Zangetsu narrowed his eyes and his face went neutral. "Well, well, you're a lot faster than he's ever been, Queen."

"Ichigo is very good at instincts and feelings," Rukia said calmly, her strengths being rather different. He usually was, anyway, yet he seemed to constantly find and lose himself around her lately. She knew she was confusing his sense of the world and throwing it into chaos, and that was why she had to comfort and protect him and make him understand it was all okay. She was still healing and so was he, but they needed each other to heal—they needed to heal together.

Zangetsu stated "When he's not all screwed up inside there's nobody stronger than the King. You're right that you mess him up but you also stop the world from messing him up. It's a real puzzle! You've made all these proclamations to one another about pride and trust and acceptance and love, but who are you really trying to reassure: each other or yourselves?"

"How dare you—" the Shinigami replied in a low tone.

"I didn't call you a liar. No, neither of you are lying. It's nothing as simple as that!" the foreign apparition declared. He raised a finger and pointed at her, his voice taking on a slightly lyrical cadence even as his tone remained harsh as ever: "The course of true love never did run smooth."

Her expression grew marginally grimmer. What new misdirection was this?

He smirked and continued on in that fashion, saying "His problem is like . . . 'I hate' she alter'd with an end,/ That follow'd it as gentle day/ Doth follow night, who like a fiend/ From heaven to hell is flown away;/ 'I hate' from hate away she threw,/ And saved my life, saying 'not you.'/"

Rukia frowned. The quote was in an obscure form of English but somehow she still understood it. Did it have to do with it being a dream?

Zangetsu continued unperturbed, "Your problem is more like . . . Thy love is better than high birth to me,/ Richer than wealth, prouder than garments' cost,/ Of more delight than hawks and horses be:/ And having thee, of all men's pride I boast:/ Wretched in this alone, that thou mayst take/ All this away, and me most wretched make./"
The Shinigami stared him down for a long time. He was right that saying how one felt was one thing and acting on it was another. She very slowly and deliberately let go of the hilt of her zanpakutō, likewise crossing her arms over her chest. She felt she understood what this was all about.

The foreign spirit lifted an eyebrow at the shift.

"You underestimate me at your peril," Rukia stated. Her volume was soft, but her tone was adamant, that same phantasmal quality underlying her words as earlier. The first concern had been that the difference in power between her and Ichigo was too great—Zangetsu had mocked her abilities and resolve. Whether that was for the sake of his 'King' in not leaving her in the dust, her own peace of mind given her past, or both, was immaterial. He'd wanted her to become stronger. The second concern was their true level of trust in and worries about one another. Ichigo was fixated upon her prior self-loathing. Rukia was stuck upon her concerns about his seeming fragility. In a way they had been worried about the same thing from different ends: what would happen to the other if it all went badly, and what burdens did that place upon them? Zangetsu had preyed upon that fear last time to test her. She had become stronger and would become stronger still, so it was about her fear, not her strength.

After a moment she went on to declare factually "There was never any risk of Ichigo turning into a Hollow." She uncrossed her arms and strode up to Zangetsu before grabbing him by the collar as he’d done to her in the previous dream, pulling him down so they could see eye-to-eye. "You're his Hollow and Shinigami powers fused together and have been right from the start. It's not the same thing as with the Visored. The Hollow that Isshin fought was derived from Shinigami, and was mixed again with his blood. You can no more be all Hollow than you can be all Shinigami, and so neither can Ichigo. When his chain was cut and he supposedly almost turned, when he fought nii-sama for the last time, the Visored training, the form he assumed above the dome of Las Noches . . . none of that was an 'inner Hollow' taking over! That's no more possible than it is for some 'inner Shinigami' to take over! This whole thing has been theater for his benefit. It was you doing what he couldn't or wouldn't to try and give him the resolve to step up."

Zangetsu stared at her dourly before a smirk took up residence on his mouth again. "Who are you trying to convince?"

"Even you miscalculated, given how he reacted to the fight with Ulquiorra," she sneered, ignoring the taunt, "You're . . . 'the manifested idea of his zanpakutō' and a zanpakutō can never truly dominate its wielder. Even if it was otherwise, you could no sooner hurt me than you could kill Ichigo. I'm not afraid of you. If anything, you're afraid of me!" It would never be like what happened with Kaien. There was the way he'd handled her in the last dream, the way he had never appeared around her in battle, the way this only happened when she was physically apart from Ichigo . . . Zangetsu couldn't lift a finger against her because he was a part of Ichigo's soul and Ichigo really did love her. The proof would be in this exchange and if he could do nothing in this moment then . . .

"What, are you gonna kiss me?" the foreign spirit snarled.

Rukia smirked in a supremely superior and arrogant way and shoved him back hard, stating "I have a boyfriend."

"Well that's real sweet and all and maybe you're even right, but you're forgetting two things: how are you going to convince him he doesn't have to worry about you and what about the other guy and what he wants?" the foreign spirit asked after a second. He suddenly had a wolfish grin.

She blinked and locked eyes with him again.

Rukia raised an eyebrow before she suddenly heard her soul pager's Hollow alert noise come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. She was about to demand more time before she was gone, waking up.

The spirits were left alone within her inner world. A beat passed before Zangetsu asked "How long are you going to let her continue to think it's just about temperature?" He didn't know any more science than Ichigo did and had no patience for such things anyway—he simply knew that Rukia's abilities were about nothing so weak and mundane. She was much stronger than anyone dared guess.

Urahara or Mayuri might have been a bit more technical had they been in his shoes. Temperature was a measure of energy—the average energy of molecular motion in an object, be it made of atoms or reishi. Heat was energy—the sum total motive energy of an object's molecules. Normally, heat transfer happened via conduction, convection, or radiation when there was a temperature differential between an object and its environment. What Rukia did with her shikai and bankai was to reduce her temperature and initiate a heat transfer with a particular target or her surroundings, respectively. But the limit to her attacks was the time before she began to damage herself, not the quantity of heat she absorbed—she didn't tend toward thermal equilibrium and start to warm up as her attacks progressed. This suggested her heat capacity was briefly infinite, which was nonsensical, and raised the question of where the heat she took—the energy—was actually going. Her ability to arbitrarily lower her temperature to absolute zero without drawing notice was also preposterous for several reasons, the least of which was the question of where her thermal energy went. It was clear Rukia didn't really have a power that was based on ice, cold, temperature, heat, energy, or even molecular motion. Those were all side-effects. Her ability must surely actually be . . .

"When she fully accepts me, she will know," Shirayuki said. The name of the bankai which Rukia knew was full and true, and she hadn't been wrong in understanding what was necessary to wield it. It was simply that the real magnitude and nature of her capabilities were not yet readily apparent to her. They would be in time.

Zangetsu said nothing for a second before looking over a shoulder at his counterpart. After a moment a smirk flickered onto his face. "So, you want to make out, or—"

"Leave," Shirayuki commanded. She wasn't entirely certain of the mechanics but she knew if he wasn't gone before Rukia's reiatsu left Ichigo's immediate vicinity, he'd be stuck until she was again. Her patience in tolerating him was already thin.

With an exaggerated shrug he was gone and she was alone.

Ichigo was increasingly aware of a rather great difference in his pillows as he awoke. They were a much different mix of soft and firm and were warm. He opened his eyes to see the rabbit-print pattern of Rukia's pajamas and realized his head was on her lap. He glanced up to her, discerning from the light it was sometime in the middle of the morning.

She was looking down at him with smallest impish expression and brought a hand to his forehead, brushing his hair away as she smiled and looked into his eyes.

He was frozen just like he had been the night before by what he saw, although the cause was different. The previous time her look had requested his trust—this time she demanded it through the sheer confidence and certainty she radiated. It was in every little feature, from the set of her lips to the reflections in her eyes. He couldn't look away from the sight of it, let alone deny it, and not for the first time he felt safe just looking at her.

Rukia slid her hand down to his exposed cheek, caressing it and continuing to watch him. She had
slipped into his room after returning from her patrol and instruction of Zennosuke. She had elected to stay upright to avoid falling back asleep and decided to be his pillow, sitting in a seiza-style position with her legs folded under her. He hadn't stirred and so she'd reflected on the past while he slept. What she'd told Zangetsu was her immediate but true assessment, and she stood by it, but she had been racking her memory for anything else of utility. "It's not fair, is it?" she said quietly down to him.

Ichigo blinked up at her and he started to say something when one of her fingers slid onto his lips, stopping him.

"I know what it is to be powerless and to have to rely on the strength of others, Ichigo. I know it's hard. I know it's very hard to trust. It's very easy to doubt. I told you to run or ran to you time and again. . . . When you fought that Menos Grande, I tried to stop you and Urahara used a binding kidō on me and told me 'Please watch quietly. This is a crucial battle. As crucial to you . . . as it will be for him.' I didn't understand what he meant then. It wasn't until I saw you at the Sōkyoku that I could truly admit your strength," she continued, brushing her finger over his lips. Urahara had perhaps meant more things than one given what had unfolded.

His eyes widened a bit at what she was saying but it was like she herself had used a binding kidō on him. He was spellbound.

"I can tell you that I'll protect you and trust you with every breath I take . . . I can show it to you by sleeping beside you, letting you massage me, letting you bathe with me, letting you kiss me . . . but none of it will take if you don't accept it into your heart. None of it will stick if you don't actually trust in my strength. And I know how hard that is, because I've been in that position before too. Words and even deeds aren't always enough to persuade. So it's okay if you doubt. It's okay if you don't trust me when I tell you things like how you've changed my outlook. All I can do is stand by you until I can eventually prove my strength to you, and let you lean on me until you can see it too. There are only two things that I need you to believe from the bottom of your heart, and those are that I love you and I know how strong you are. Even if you don't trust in my strength, know that I trust in yours, Ichigo," she finished, withdrawing her finger and hand.

Ichigo stared at her for several seconds afterwards before very slowly starting to push himself up. He brought his head level to hers, only a few centimeters away, searching in her ultramarine eyes. She was unfazed and sure of herself and of him in the face of his questioning look.

Rukia watched with pride as his soft chocolate eyes started to firm up, gradually taking on a confident sheen. She reached a hand back up to his cheek and cupped it, letting her fingers play against his skin and smiling to gently encourage him.

"I thought it was your prerogative to beat me up," he eventually said.

"It wouldn't remotely be a fair fight right now," she said with surety.

"You sound awfully confident of that," he taunted.

Her smile gained a smirking quality as she saw the light in his eyes acquire its proper glow. "That's because it's a fact."

"I think you're forgetting something," he replied.

Her eyelids dropped to a half-open state as she asked "And what's that?"

He tilted his head slightly and leaned in, stopping only just before his mouth crashed into hers. He
whispered "You know by now I don't play fair," against her lips before kissing her, his hands coming to rest at the small of her back.

Rukia slid her hand from his cheek into his hair, kissing back as a small smirk continued to play at her lips. Her other hand came to rest on his opposite shoulder. Despite the warning she was not at all prepared for when his hands slid down between her pajama-clad rear and her bare heels. She let out a sound of surprise as they found purchase and lifted her slightly, leveraging her mouth against his.

Ichigo used the distraction to make it their third deep kiss, though he kept it patient. Her cheeks became hot against his but she used both hands to hold onto him and didn't resist so he kept it up until they ended it to breathe. He was about to press his forehead to hers when her fist unexpectedly connected with his cheek, knocking him back onto the bed. He was sufficiently stunned that she had time to clamber on top of him, sitting on his stomach and pinning his wrists with her hands.

"Don't just grab my butt without permission, fool!" she all-but-shouted into his face.

Despite his lingering surprise and the stinging sensation on his face he found himself ever so faintly smiling as he almost-yelled back "You started it first, you know!" It was an awfully slow reaction time for a punch . . .

"I did not, you did!" she protested.

"That was an accident and you were the one who dropped down! When you did it, it was deliberate!" he declared.

"You were the one who started talking about it, and don't act like doing it accidentally is better than doing it deliberately!" she said harshly.

"So are you giving me permission or not!?" he demanded, slowly starting to extend his arms over his head so that her hands traveled along while she continued to restrain him.

"How very forward!" she remonstrated, narrowing her gaze at him critically.

Ichigo glared back at her even as he moved his arms a little faster.

Rukia's eyes widened for a second as she realized the motion was drawing her down toward him. She gave him a hostile pouting look before leaning down on her own, cutting to the chase and kissing him again. She took the lead and moved her hands onto his, locking fingers with him too. When at last she broke it off she brought her head down to his neck and just lay against him, lightly squeezing at his hands.

He squeezed in return, feeling her settle against him.

"I'm going to nap and when I wake up you'll make me lunch. Then we're going to listen to the music you own and you're going to tell me about it," she said authoritatively, although her voice was tired.

He'd known all along she must have gotten up early but hearing her become sleepy compelled him to act. He brought their hands down before separating his from hers, pulling her close and turning onto a side with her, shielding her from the sunlight. It wasn't long at all before her breathing slowed and she became relaxed against him. His mind wandered as he held her.

He eventually recalled something Urahara said during their training before the events in Soul Society: When you're dodging, think 'I won't let you hit me!' When you're protecting someone, think 'I won't let you die!' When you're attacking, think 'I'm going to cut you!' He examined the advice before extending it. He glanced down to Rukia's sleeping form. Her look had been so intensely sure
Ichigo tightened his grip fractionally. He didn't have to try and trust her . . . he just did.

Chapter End Notes

There's no particular mechanism in *Bleach* which would explain what occurs in this chapter, but there are instances where characters comment on vaguely hearing others' *zanpakutō* (e.g., Chapters 97, 113) in combat and one can see another's manifested *zanpakutō* spirit (Chapter 133), so I'm extrapolating from that in the service of interesting scenarios.

*Zangetsu* recites sections from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Lysander, Act I, scene i) and Sonnets 91 (XCI) and 145 (CXLV) by William Shakespeare. My excuse is Ichigo likes Shakespeare, their memories are basically coterminal, and he seems more likely to quote something appropriate than directly talk about feelings. *Zangetsu's* true nature requires reinterpreting all of the "Hollow taking over" scenes earlier in the series and the nature of Ichigo's training with the Visored. My feeling is Ichigo's only superficially similar to them in the way that he's sort of superficially similar to the Shinigami until he gets a *zanpakutō*.

I know a tiny bit about physics and Rukia's *shikai* and *bankai* as described in The Thousand-Year Blood War can't be remotely as simple as they're initially framed. If you take what's presented there as accurate (which I do) then Rukia's real power is actually pretty scary. I leave it as an open exercise to complete the last sentence until it comes up in the plot.

Unrelated to this chapter but it's here anyway: Rukia and Ichigo met on a Friday in the middle of May, 2001 (either the 11th or the 18th—I favor the 18th) which means that the next day when she turned up at school was a Saturday. I always found this odd but it turns out Japan actually did have six-day school weeks which were phased out between 1992 and 2002. It was probably a half-day. Their reunion in the fall (September 1, 2001) was also a Saturday.
Saturday, August 31, 2002

Ichigo eventually nodded off with Rukia and they kept together until he woke up again after noon. He swapped himself out with one his pillows and bundled her up in his comforter when she didn't stir, going downstairs to start making food.

She joined him when he was almost done, roused by the wafting aroma of unseasonably hot soba noodles, and they ate together before he got the dishes soaking and led her back upstairs. Their entertainment center was hooked into a stereo system but he knew the sound of the one in his bedroom better and it was less of a hassle than carting his CDs downstairs. They occupied his bed side by side and he got up to change discs every so often.

He led off with some of his favorite punk bands, including Social Distortion, Bad Religion, and The Offspring before starting to tour with Rukia through some of the other material he liked. He owned some older stuff from artists like the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and The Clash, some newer stuff from bands like Green Day and Rancid, and some local stuff from Japanese bands like The Stalin and S.O.B.

From there he wandered with her through some of the other music he owned, playing albums from bands as diverse as Nirvana, Soundgarden, Rage Against the Machine, Biohazard, Black Sabbath, Disturbed, Korn, and Megadeth. He didn't really identify with any particular genre or subgenre of music beyond punk, it was just a question of whether he liked a band or a song or not.

Rukia mostly just listened although between discs she would ask him questions about the songs or the band. She liked some of what they listened to and some of it left her cold, but she always found it interesting to hear what it was that he liked about the work. For her it was as much about discerning his taste in art and how it reflected him as it was about exposure to modern music. "What does 'Megadeth' mean anyway?"

"It's a deliberate misspelling of 'megadeath.' The prefix means 'million' so it literally reads 'millions of deaths'. Something to do with nuclear war," Ichigo replied without any great attachment as he put the disc away. It was the sum total of his knowledge on the subject.

She frowned a bit and quirked her mouth at how morbid of an answer it was, even if she was a Shinigami. "Is that some of what he was singing about?" she continued, not really knowing what he meant by the last phrase and not sure she really wanted to.

"I think in some of the earlier songs, yeah," he replied. They had, among many others, listened to "Set The World Afire" and "Rust In Peace . . . Polaris."

Rukia nodded a little in thought. The earlier work was a lot angrier than the later material, and she found she liked the latter more. She'd actually been moved by "I'll Be There" and "Promises" and had quite enjoyed them. There were several more songs she'd very clearly seen why he liked. As she thought about it her eyes settled on the electric guitar leaning against one of his dressers. She knew what it was due to both Summer Sonic and Hisagi's efforts to learn to play one. She was sure he couldn't be as bad at it as Hisagi was. "Do you know how to play?" she asked after a moment.

"Kinda," Ichigo replied, rubbing at the back of his head. It was well after dark and he'd run out of music he really cared to play for her at that moment. "Chad has a bass guitar and taught me the basics of how to play back in junior high. And eventually dad got me that electric guitar. I've been
practicing at it occasionally ever since. We sometimes talk about starting a band, but—well, I'm not good enough to be a front man or anything."

"Play for me," she said lightly.

"Eh?" he said, looking to her in surprise.

She was looking back at him with a genuine expression of interest.

"I'm pretty rusty, so . . ." he began, rubbing at the back of his head again.

"Ichigo, please play whatever you're comfortable with for me," she asked sincerely, smiling at him a little. His nervous tells were always so obvious.

After a moment meeting her gaze he smiled in turn and retrieved the guitar and one of his picks, shouldering the strap. He fiddled with the amp and the tuning of the strings for a bit, familiarizing himself with it again and trying to decide which of the few songs he knew decently well to play.

Rukia patiently watched.

Ichigo settled on "Anarchy in the U.K." since he'd practiced at it quite a bit and they'd just listened to both the Sex Pistols original and the Megadeth cover, so she'd have an idea of what it was supposed to sound like. He tried a few of the chords before really starting in, deciding to give it his all, singing along as vocal skill didn't matter much to the song. His own twist was to use Megadeth's lyrics and to change "U.S.A.," "M.P.L.A.," "U.D.A.," and "I.R.A." with "Seireitei," "S.R.D.I.," "J.S.K.," and "D.S.K.," using the Japanese acronyms for the Shinigami Women's and Men's Associations.

She thought he was slightly timid to start but as he went on she found herself impressed by how involved in both components he became. His singing was more naturalistic than it had been on their karaoke night and she felt it sounded more like him. It was definitely his own take on the song and his changes made her smirk. When at last he called out "Destroy!" with an echoing riff, she couldn't help but clap. It may as well have been the anthem for when he'd invaded Soul Society on her behalf.

Suddenly he was himself again and smiled at her, giving a small theatrical bow before taking the guitar off and getting it ready for storage again.

"I think you have potential," Rukia said coyly.

"I dunno, I should probably just stick to learning how to play," he replied as he finished and came back to sit beside her. His eyes met hers. "If we ever did put together a band I think there's a local singer that's free who'd be a lot better at doing vocals."

Rukia smiled and reached a hand up, poking his nose with an index finger as she stated "Flattery won't get you anywhere."

"It's not flattery if it's true," Ichigo replied with a small smile. She was the one whose photo was the front cover of *Seireitei Communication* after all.

She glanced away, starting to withdraw her hand only for him to catch it in one of his. Looking back to him she found him holding her gaze and smiling at her, and she couldn't stop from smiling back before she looked down and it faltered. She had to tell him about what was going on and she had to do it that night.

"What's wrong?" he asked mildly, promptly discerning the shift in her mood.
"Nothing's wrong," she said quietly, echoing his words from the previous weekend. Immediately he started to move to comfort her and after a second's hesitation she got her other arm around him, drawing him closer and reclining against his pillows, pulling him with her so that his head came to rest above her heart. He naturally slid his arms around her waist and she got hers around his back as they held each other.

Ichigo's cheeks turned a little red at the position, as it wasn't quite what he'd intended. Rukia was petite but she wasn't flat by any means, front or back, and his attention was being drawn to the fact even more than it was when he occasionally served as her blanket. He forced his focus to listening to her heartbeat and settled against her, staying quiet as he waited for her to speak her mind.

She lifted a hand to the back of his head and began to brush her fingers through his hair for a time before asking "Remember when I told you I dreamt about your Hollow back before we knew he was Zangetsu?"

"Of course," he said in a low tone. It had only been a little over a week ago.

"It wasn't entirely a dream," she said quietly.

He tilted his head back to look up at her in confusion and concern.

Rukia closed her eyes and gripped him a little more securely. "It was really him." She could feel Ichigo tense against her and continued on before he could say anything. "Urahara told me it's like when a zanpakutō spirit is manifested. Obviously in such a case it occupies a physically different space than its wielder. The difference is in this case it's manifested in another person's inner world, if that person is willing to receive it. It has something to do with proximity and perceived invitation. That night when I wanted you to save me from the nightmare . . . he responded."

He was perfectly silent and still against her.

"This morning it happened again . . . but this time I think it was because of what we were doing before bed," she said euphemistically. "Apparently it can't happen whenever we're actually touching. Every time you met him he would push you, goad you, taunt you, lecture you, and force you to get stronger, wouldn't he? That's what he was trying to do for me the first time, because he couldn't do it for you."

There was a long silence. Ichigo had been reflecting on his many interactions with what he'd learned were Zangetsu and his Quincy powers since his dad had told them the truth of what happened. Zangetsu had always said things in odd but ultimately truthful ways. Unbeknownst to him he'd reached somewhat similar conclusions as Rukia had, although he was left uneasy as to what lengths the two entities would go to in fulfilling their agendas of protecting him. Then there was the question of what the merged form of the two during his battle with the supposed Tensa Zangetsu had been. He set all that aside and neutrally asked "What did he want today?"

"It was about our fears," she said simply, knowing he'd understand.

He paused for a second before asking "And that's why . . . you said what you said this morning?"

One of Rukia's hands brushed at the back of his neck as she answered only "Yes." She didn't have to spell it out that Zangetsu had wanted her to bolster Ichigo's confidence in addition to her own. She also didn't have to repeat herself; she absolutely stood by what she'd said to Ichigo.

"What else did he say?" Ichigo asked with a grave tone. He remembered very well the supposed Tensa Zangetsu's declaration of As if I care about what becomes of the things you want to
and the actual Zangetsu had never been even that considerate, given he'd impaled Ishida among other things. The idea of letting either of them around Rukia filled him with foreboding.

She shifted a little and opened her eyes, looking down at him and evaluating for a moment. If she really trusted him, she would tell him, and so it was only a question of how to put it—she didn't really want to repeat much of it only to make him upset. As she thought about it more, Zangetsu's 'turn-off' and 'repressed' remarks, while wholly inappropriate, seemed oddly interested and concerned with her willingness to be intimate with Ichigo as much as taunting. The way he'd asked about whether she would kiss him seemed to be a comment on how she was already interacting with Ichigo as much as anything else. It was only his first remark that had been truly crude. "I think he was concerned about how we're getting to know one another . . . physically," she said after awhile. It was true and more productive than focusing on the fact he'd been hitting on her.

Ichigo blinked before glancing up at her in confusion, blushing a shade. She held his gaze and continued "He said several rude things to try and keep me off balance, but I think underneath them was worry, and he also quoted poetry at me, so together it was almost like a strange kind of affection. He's part of your soul so it makes sense. He's also oddly restrained in my presence. He said that I 'mess you up' but keep the world from doing the same. I'm certain he recognizes how important I am to you . . . Sode no Shirayuki has recognized your importance to me, so that's not surprising." There was a quiet but distinct *Hmph!* in her mind from Shirayuki at being compared with Zangetsu, but she ignored it.

He was at a loss for words as to what to make of it but his arms tightened around her protectively as something like the jealousy and possessiveness he'd felt in Akihabara percolated up in him. It was quite awhile before he managed to ask "What poetry?"

She recited the quotes for him as best she was able to.

"Shakespeare?" Ichigo muttered in disbelief.

"Who?" Rukia responded, raising an eyebrow.

"Really famous English playwright and poet," he said dismissively before hastily adding "I like his work."

She tilted her head slightly at the idea of Ichigo enjoying the finer arts. She would have to follow up on that later.

His expression grew darker before he asked "What kind of 'rude things'?"

"It was nothing of note. To be honest I've heard much worse elsewhere both in Rukongai and the Seireitei, both to and about me and other women," she replied.

That didn't really improve his mood and he turned his face to her chest, quietly fuming at the idea of anyone treating her in such a fashion, let alone a part of him.

Her cheeks went a little pink but she continued to do her best to soothe him through touch as her mind worked through the details again. She'd just sort of accepted it at the time, but it was odd how Zangetsu had seemed to be able to sense her thoughts. Shirayuki had been quiet for the entire interaction and she had a feeling those were related—the spirit was suddenly suspiciously silent which seemed to confirm her involvement. Her mind turned back to consideration of what he'd said. "Ichigo, are we . . . are you okay with the pace we're moving at?" she asked after awhile.

"Of course . . . I told you that we didn't always have to advance things, didn't I?" he replied quietly.
He was only comfortable with trying new things with her when he had the sense she would be alright with them beforehand. He had been sure about touching her rear. He never wanted to surprise her if it meant he might hurt her. He wouldn't be completely chaste but he wouldn't take that risk either, even if it was a natural thing for a couple to do, even if it was natural for him to lead off, even if he really wanted to...

Rukia didn't derive much confidence from the answer and held him to her, pausing before saying "I'm sorry that I punched you earlier."

"I know that's your way of flirting with me," he replied with a hint of exasperation. He'd long since noticed that she didn't really engage in the occasional casual violence she did with him with anyone else. It was one of the stranger ways she showed affection and concern. From what they'd told each other and what he'd been told he had the sense it was due to how she'd grown up.

"You... can always ask if you want us to try something together, you know," she said, narrowing her eyes and looking askance as her cheeks turned more than a little pink again. She didn't know a lot about these kinds of things and being the one to lead all the time was trying. He didn't always have to do or not do things based on his intuition alone...

He was suddenly very aware of where his head was again and could feel his cheeks start to heat up. Even the idea of asking to do things was embarrassing.

She closed her eyes as her cheeks turned from pink to red. She hadn't minded his touch at all and her response had been unfair given that. If he wouldn't ask then she would tell him. "Ichigo, I want to try it—" she began.

"Didn't you say it was based on 'perceived invitation'?" he asked, stopping her before she could continue.

She blinked her eyes open again, looking down to him.

"I don't want him in your dreams," Ichigo continued quietly, not meeting her look and tightening his arms around her. Zangetsu had never truly led him astray but that didn't mean she should have to deal with him.

Rukia stared down at him for a second before her eyebrows scrunched together. You can stop it from happening, can't you?

I could, Shirayuki replied.

Rukia frowned. What does that mean?

Shirayuki began Rukia-dono, are you really sure you want me to do—

"He doesn't have to be," Rukia said gently, ignoring the protest and trying to coax Ichigo's attention up to her. After a second he met her gaze and she smiled at him. "I want—" she started again, only to that time stop herself as she heard the faint beeping of her soul pager from her room. She closed her eyes and clenched her hands in frustration for a second.

It gave Ichigo time to pull away from her. He sat back on the bed. "It's okay. The more you do now, the sooner you can stop, right? I'll make dinner for Chappy."

She pushed herself up and irritably went to her room, saying only "Right," as she walked out the door.
He lingered for a few seconds and sighed before going downstairs.

It was as he was finishing his last few bites of teriyaki chicken that he glanced up at Chappy across the table.

She was happily eating without a care in the world.

He looked away again. "So has Rukia told you what's going on yet?" As he thought about it, it was rather mean to keep the artificial soul in the dark and to treat her in such a standoffish way. He would probably have to deal with her more in the weeks to come, potentially even at school, so it was best if they at least understood each other.

"Nope, _pyon!_" she replied, looking to him in mild surprise.

"Rukia and I are girlfriend and boyfriend. We're dating. You . . . probably don't know that is, do you?" he realized even as he said it.

Chappy shook her head.

Ichigo frowned and shifted his jaw before saying "We have romantic feelings for one another."

"Oh! I know what that is! That explains why I want to follow you around sometimes when I'm in Rukia-sama's _gigai_, _pyon!_" Chappy declared, finally putting it together. It had been a troublesome distraction ever since she'd had to watch over Gringo. If Rukia's _gigai_ was attuned to Ichigo then that explained everything.

He looked to her again with some surprise at the admission.

"You better not get any ideas when Rukia-sama isn't here, _pyon_," Chappy said, narrowing her eyes a little suspiciously.

"I—Idiot, that's why I've been treating you so distantly, because I'm not interested in that at all!" Ichigo exclaimed, waving a hand in irritation.

She frowned and crossed her arms in evaluation. If that was true then why was he suddenly trying to be friendlier?

"I just thought you should know what was going on since we could be at school or something when Rukia has to fight," he muttered, taking his plate to the kitchen to clean it and the rest of the kitchenware he'd used.

Chappy watched before looking back to her own plate. She finished up and joined him by the sink a minute later, setting the plate to one side and looking to him in consideration.

Ichigo started to clean it as well and it was awhile before he realized she was staring at him. "What?"

"Rukia-sama must like you a lot," she said honestly. She could feel the _gigai_'s heart rate increase just looking at him. Rukia's emotions were very strongly imprinted in its reactions. She'd clearly been occupying it and interested in him for awhile.

He blinked and turned to her.

She didn't elaborate and looked out to the living room through the breakfast bar. "Can I do something other than watch TV?"
It took him a moment to reply "There are games if you want to play one."

"Could you show me, *pyon*?" she asked.

After a pause he said "Let me finish this and we can play one while we wait for her to come back."

It was two hours later when Ichigo said with some annoyance "We're not going to capture the point if you just stand there, you know," before glancing sideways to Chappy.

She was fully reclined on the couch with her eyes closed, only one hand still loosely on the controller.

He hit pause and said "Hey," to try and get her attention. When she didn't respond he moved her controller away, getting the same lack of a reaction. After a moment's evaluation he got up and started to turn everything off before gingerly scooping her up and taking her upstairs to put her to bed. Once she was tucked in and he'd closed the door he considered what to do.

He wanted to wait for Rukia, but she would probably get angry with him for staying up late, he was tired, and she probably would be too... after a few seconds he went to his room and shut the door, going to shower and change for bed.

He was trying to fall asleep when he heard the door handle turn. Opening his eyes fractionally, he could see Rukia's outline, faintly illuminated by the wan light coming in through the window and silhouetted by a night light in the lounge. After a second she began to move toward his bed and he knew from the motions alone it was her and not Chappy. Some moments later he felt the mattress adjust as she sat down beside him.

She was silent for awhile before she stated in a hushed tone "You're not really asleep."

"Did I ruin your plans?" he asked tiredly.

She gave him the lightest of swats on the chest only to keep her hand there. "You didn't have to wait up for me."

"I didn't," Ichigo lied, before muttering "We're supposed to be sleeping separately while you're on alert, remember?" He said it without judgment or resentment—it was just how things were.

"I know what I said," Rukia replied. After a moment she leaned down and slid her arms around his neck, bringing one of her cheeks against his and burying her face against the side of his head and pillow. If it made her a hypocrite to want to be with him then that was what she was.

He didn't resist or object, staying quiet for a few seconds before he remembered something she'd said in Tokyo. "You're above the covers, you fool," he quoted.

"It's not unpleasant anyway," she said after a beat, quoting him in response.

He brought his hands up and tugged the comforter and sheets down, getting her cooperation in lifting up as he did so.

She used her legs to kick them down farther before hooking her feet under them and hauling them back up to where he could reach.

Ichigo pulled the covers over both of them before sliding his arms around her back and crossing
them. He held her for a second before he extended them arms a little, bringing both his hands to lightly rest on her butt.

Rukia's cheeks warmed a bit at that and she nuzzled at him before becoming still again, running out of energy and passing out against him just as he was doing the same.
Then Came September

Sunday, September 1, 2002

Rukia once more woke to the sensation of Ichigo's fingers playing at the back of her neck. She loosened her arms and shifted a little against him, discerning his other hand was still on her rear. He immediately began to slide it up her back, making her whisper "Don't," into his ear in response.

He silently brought it back to where it had been resting, bringing the other farther up into her hair and cradling the back of her head.

"How long have you been awake?" she asked.

"Not long," he replied.

"What time is it?" she continued.

"9:17 AM," he said, able to see his alarm clock from his position.

Rukia sighed and stayed still against him for a long time before giving his cheek a peck and starting to push herself up into a sitting position, saying "We should get up. I need to go shower at least." She hadn't done so the night before in order to get back to him as quickly as possible. She smiled as she finally saw him.

Ichigo released her as she moved and gave a reflexive smile back. "Take your time. I'll make breakfast after getting dressed."

"Give your family a call and let them know we'll be over for dinner," she said with approval, getting up and going to her room.

She'd taken him at his word and was slumped against one of the sides of the soaking tub in her bathroom, letting the heat of the water seep into muscles and bones. It was heavenly. She luxuriated in it until she felt completely relaxed and at peace before venturing into her inner world.

As usual it didn't take her long to find Shirayuki. She appeared to be contemplating a pond. Rukia stood and watched for a moment in thought before deciding to get on with it. "Why did you ask if I really wanted to respect Ichigo's wishes in keeping Zangetsu out?"

The set of the spirit's shoulders changed but she gave no indication of otherwise having heard for a time. "You know that a zanpakutō is a reflection of its wielder, Rukia-dono," she said cryptically. That wasn't the entirety of the truth, strictly speaking, but it was as close as she could state to it.

"And?" the short Shinigami pressed.

"And so in that reflection are aspects of the wielder as well. You were correct that Zangetsu was making verbal advances toward you, but only because they reflect Ichigo's interest . . . and only then because there is much he will not say or do. Zangetsu has no compunction with the former, at least," she continued.

Rukia blinked and blushed.
"The more that Ichigo restrains himself, the more Zangetsu will say what he cannot. But if Zangetsu is also being ignored, then . . ." the spirit trailed off. As they were it probably wouldn't be catastrophic but it also wouldn't be good for any of the involved parties.

The raven-haired woman's eyes slid away as she considered the matter with visible embarrassment. She understood and appreciated that Ichigo was being patient and reserved with her, even if she occasionally found it frustrating, but to know it was causing this kind of trouble . . . she was suddenly aware of several instances where she may have contributed to how low-key he was being and felt rather bad. After a time her eyes settled back on Shirayuki before she asked "What about you?"

"What about me, Rukia-dono?" the spirit replied coolly, not turning.

"If Zangetsu is like this . . . if it was reversed and Ichigo could hear you . . ." Rukia muttered.

"Do not be ridiculous," Shirayuki replied tartly, giving a tiny glare over one of her shoulders. She would never be so improper, even if she shared her wielder's affection and interest. "You have been quite open with him about such matters. We do not have a similar conflict," she stated, looking away again. If anything, they were more likely to run into the opposite problem of her wielder moving too quickly for her own good and having to be warned off.

The Shinigami looked away again. The simplest solution to the problem was the one she wouldn't rush into. The only realistic option was to try and help Ichigo open up to her about what he wanted and to try and make him as comfortable as possible, while also keeping communications open with and tolerating Zangetsu. Even if Ichigo didn't want her interacting with him, maybe she could learn things that would help through doing so. "The next time he's here, you won't help him hear my thoughts like you have been," she stated.

The spirit nodded slightly.

Rukia tried to think of anything else to say before deciding it was enough for the moment and leaving. She didn't want to have to hurry through drying off and dressing by staying overly long. She pushed her bowl forward to indicate she was done with it, watching Ichigo as he cleaned dishes. It had already become an oddly common sight. "You could let me do some of that, you know." It wasn't complicated looking.

"I'm not going to explain to Byakuya why I'm letting a Kuchiki do dishes. Besides, it's my responsibility," he said with a touch of repudiation. Byakuya had seen fit to provision them with many things, including a clothes dryer, but an automatic dishwasher wasn't one of them, having never really caught on in Japan. However, just like Ichigo wasn't above drying clothes mechanically rather than on a line, he wasn't above toweling dishes rather than letting them air dry.

"It's not like it's really that much more dignified for the son of a Shiba do it," she said matter-of-factly.

"Well, the alternative is we ask him for some sort of live-in help and that would just be weird," Ichigo groused. He glanced up to catch her pondering and added "No," before she could get any ideas.

"Afraid she'd be a spy?" Rukia asked. She was very certain any such help would be a woman. She actually agreed with him completely, but it was fun to tease.

"Just no," Ichigo said, refusing to even consider the idea any further. Dealing with Chappy and
apparently their zanpakutō was difficult enough already, adding some sort of soul maid on top of it would be too much.

She gave him a small smile and thought for a few moments. She'd already decided she would save trying to talk with him for after dinner as she didn't want him acting awkward for the rest of the day. In the meantime, although she wanted to spend time with him, it was also her last full day without other responsibilities and their weekends would be precious going forward. It was a bit twisted to want to spend the last day of vacation working, but it would free up a lot more time for them in the long run. "Is it alright with you if I attend to training Kurumadani today?" she asked lightly.

"You don't have to ask me for permission to do your job," he replied with a little smile.

"You're my job, this is just work," she replied sincerely.

He glanced away at that as much for the double entendre it created as for the sentiment, drying off his hands. "You have always wanted to get out ahead of things," he said. He understood her intentions well enough and knew she was trying to make more time for them in the future.

"It's a nice day. You could take Chappy out to meet with everyone to get them used to her," she offered. They had only ever had limited exposure to the artificial soul and it might make the first week or two go more smoothly.

Ichigo scratched at a temple in obvious thought before saying "Yeah, I guess."

"I'll definitely be back for dinner," Rukia promised.

Their eyes met and after a moment he nodded.

She smiled at him and got up, going to get her Soul Candy dispenser.

"So do you think Kuchiki-san will be interested in joining any of the clubs?" Ishida asked.

"How would I know?" Ichigo complained. He was keeping a disinterested eye on Chappy and Inoue as they ran around the park after one another. "She probably won't join your handicrafts club, if that's what you're thinking," he added. He didn't think she would have the time or inclination to join any of the clubs, but if she had an interest in them it would probably be in the ikebana, art, or dance clubs. He briefly envisioned her starting a singing club.

"That wasn't my intention in asking the question," the Quincy replied, adjusting his glasses.

"Yeah?" the orange-haired teenager replied sardonically.

Ishida frowned and changed subjects. "I see you still have all your limbs, at any rate."

"Don't assume that weird arrow is so hard to handle," Ichigo replied sourly, looking askew. "I thought you said that was no business of yours."

"It isn't," the archer said with a note of finality, only for a shadow to fall over both of them.

"Yo, Chad," Ichigo said in greeting after glancing to the source of the sudden shade.

"Hey. That's not Kuchiki-san," Chad observed. She was very clearly elsewhere with the odd afro-styled Shinigami and had been for some time. He seemed to be slowly learning flash steps.

"Her name is Chappy. She's like Kon but not as much of a pain in the ass. Rukia thought it would be
good if all of you got to know her a little so we can cover for her in case she has to leave school," Ichigo said. It was also to give her a chance to socialize with someone other than him.

"Mmm," the giant rumbled.

"What happened to Kon anyway?" Ishida asked.

"I intend to ask that very question tomorrow," Ichigo replied.

"I would've thought you'd be glad to be rid of him," the archer said neutrally.

"I'm guessing one of you two will be there?" the future substitute asked, ignoring the jab. Both of his friends were silent in response which gave him all the confirmation he needed. It figured that Yoruichi had already arranged everything with practically everybody but him. He sighed before asking "Oi, Chad, do you know anything about EDM?"

"Eh?" Ishida said.

"Electronic dance music?" Chad asked to clarify.

"Yeah," Ichigo replied.

The giant seemed to ponder it for a moment before replying "Not really."

"Since when have you been interested in electronic music?" the archer asked.

"I'm asking for Rukia, she got interested in it after we heard some at a nightclub and I don't know a lot about it either," the future substitute said.

"You took her to a nightclub?" Ishida asked with a raised eyebrow. There was much about the pair's time in Tokyo that remained mysterious to outside observers and that was a new one.

"I know some people who know some people," Chad offered.

"We probably just need to be pointed to a specialty music store or something," Ichigo said, once more ignoring the Quincy before adding "By the way, that Mexican restaurant is pretty good."

"Mmm," the giant replied again, even as he smiled ever so slightly.

"Yuzu-chan is so good at cooking," Rukia said with a contented hum as they re-entered their house—her style was comforting, subtle, and traditional, in the way that great home cooking so often was. She glanced to Ichigo. "You're really lucky to have eaten like that for so long."

"Yeah, you're right," he replied with a sort of nostalgic look.

She extended a hand to him, taking him by one of his wrists. "Your cooking is good too."

"It's not surprising when I learned from her," he replied dismissively.

"Ichigo," she said gently, looking at him to get his attention.

He looked to her fully at her tone.

"I want to talk to you about something," she continued, tugging him toward the couch. He followed after a pause and they were soon sitting beside one another. She took a moment to collect her
thoughts before saying "I know I've occasionally reacted to things you've said or done in ways that could be considered harsh . . . and I want you to know I'm sorry for that. I don't want you to shy away from expressing yourself because you're concerned about how I'll respond."

He blinked before looking away, suddenly wishing he'd put up more of a fight. "This is still about what he said to you, isn't it?"

She nodded and added "But you've been subdued since I came back . . . other than that one time."

Ichigo looked back to her at this, making eye contact. He set his jaw as he thought of what to say before carefully asking "You know how embarrassed you were when you felt everyone was acting like we were . . . engaged or married?" It took him a moment to say the last three words. He had to consciously think about not adding 'already' to the front of them, even though she'd used it in Tokyo. There was still no way to safely address his thoughts on that matter, even if they had advanced quite far together since then. Saying he liked the idea, that he didn't mind it, that he didn't like it either . . . all of them were equally fraught with peril. He simply wasn't ready to comment on it at all even if all that had transpired since made it clear how things were going—it wasn't the idea of commitment, it was just so early to be thinking about something like that, even if it seemed quite likely to happen. But he could still reference it, and it felt like an appropriate comparison.

Rukia blinked and turned pink at how directly he put it.

"That's . . . sort of how I feel when you say stuff like it's okay to ask to do things or to express myself regarding that. I want . . . to do a lot of things with you," he said, growing quiet and looking away, before meeting her gaze again. He remembered their second night out clearly and stated "And that's natural, it's nothing to be ashamed of . . . But thinking about it and talking about it are two different things, and the truth is I'm scared because I don't know what I'm doing and I don't want to hurt you. I'm not ready to act on any of it . . . and neither are you."

She reached out to him, suddenly unsure of what to say or do even as she felt her cheeks heat up. He wasn't wrong but he was also the only person she'd ever really started to think of in that way and she didn't want him to be afraid.

He gently pulled her to him and brought his head down beside hers, just holding her.

She held on to him in turn, staying quiet for a long time. She reflected on the things they'd said to one another. Finally she said "It's okay if we have reservations . . . If we both want something but we're not okay with it yet then the sensible thing to do is to work toward it together steadily rather than just hoping we'll eventually become alright with it . . . isn't it?"

He was quiet for awhile before saying "I guess that's true."

"We don't have to if you don't want to," she replied.

"I do, but . . ." he trailed off.

Rukia glanced to the side of his head and tilted her own, bringing her mouth to his ear. Her cheeks became warm as she thought of what to say before she whispered "So is it that I have a cute butt . . . or a nice ass?"

Ichigo turned a bit red before whispering back "Both," with certainty to her.

She blushed deeper but lightly rubbed her cheek against his.

He did the same while saying in a hushed tone to her "You sound really cute when you're being
massaged and it's how I know you feel good . . . you shouldn't stifle yourself." The future implication was clear.

At that she pressed her cheek rather firmly to his and shushed him, already on the edge of being uncomfortable with the topic.

He understood and just continued to hold her, keeping her close and just enjoying her presence for some unknown time. It was much later when he softly kissed her cheek and pulled back, saying "We should get ready for bed. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

She nodded and they got up together, going upstairs. Both found themselves lingering beside one another in the lounging area, not wanting to split up.

After several seconds Ichigo leaned down and kissed Rukia's forehead, saying "Sleep well."

"You too," she said quietly.

He tilted his head down so his forehead rested against hers.

She reached a hand up and touched a finger over his heart, letting it spiral there lazily for awhile before she pulled away, smiling at him before going to her room and shutting her door.

He stared for a second with an insuppressible smile before doing the same.

Monday, September 2, 2002

Rukia stood at relative ease, flanked by Shirayuki as they both considered Zangetsu.

"Well, this is new," he sneered, looking between the two suspiciously.

"I'm going to allow you to be here so that you don't get angry at being ignored . . . but understand that I'm doing so purely to help Ichigo," Rukia stated coolly.

"Oh, I know all about how much you want to 'help' him," the foreign spirit said snidely.

"Enough of—" Shiryauki began, having had it with his constant insinuations and antics. She wound up hearing from him significantly more frequently than Rukia did and only sometimes pulled her wielder into her inner world during his nighttime appearances.

The Shinigami held up a hand to quiet her even as a light blush took hold of her cheeks. She crossed her arms and fixed him with a serious look before demanding "Then surely you know that he and I share a mutual interest in that. Your objective is to protect him, is it not? So are you just going to make crude remarks at me or are you going to tell me something of value?"

That time it was Zangetsu who blinked.

Ichigo got up for school rather early compared to his previous norm since he had to cook both breakfast and lunch for them. He showered and got dressed before gathering up his things and going downstairs. Once he was in the kitchen it took him awhile to find his bento box and one adorned with a cute rabbit pattern that was clearly intended for Rukia.

He focused on lunch first since the food would need time to cool. He decided to be a little fancy since it was their first day and made some portions of deep-fried pork tonkatsu and grilled tuna, knowing from experience they'd hold up until lunch time. Once he had that out of the way he started
in on breakfast with an extra helping of rice, intending to split off the excess for the boxes, and set aside various fruits and vegetables to accompany them.

He was rather absorbed in trying to get potatoes to crisp up, having decided on a pseudo-Western take on breakfast, when he became aware of Rukia standing in the doorway. "I was wondering when you'd finally get up," he chided, glancing to her. Her school uniform was the same as it had been the year before. She wasn't wearing the jacket over her blouse given the temperature range for the day, but that was to be expected. She was wearing a hint of makeup, but there was something else that was different... it took him a second to realize that instead of knee socks she had on black hosiery that went up past the hem of her skirt. He couldn't tell if they were stockings or pantyhose and they were almost but not quite opaque, letting the slightest tinge of her skin color through, especially at the knees and other places where the fabric drew taut. He found himself staring.

"You're going to burn the food," she stated plainly, moving around to the breakfast bar and out of his field of view.

He shook his head and muttered "As if," as he went back to focusing on the potatoes.

"I thought it'd be less distracting," she explained from behind him.

"Yeah," he said in a noncommittal way. It wasn't at all. He'd privately been looking forward to seeing her legs again and to conceal them in a way that still hinted at them while showing off how shapely they were felt like cruel teasing.

"This skirt is actually quite short and I also thought you'd appreciate it if others couldn't see my legs," she continued. His occasional modest jealousy in protecting her hadn't been lost on her. She greatly doubted she would be engaging in the sort of hijinks she had the previous year in a gigai, but she also didn't want Chappy to wind up in any compromising situations either.

"You're really noisy," Ichigo stated, doing his best to focus on the food. She wasn't wrong, as usual, but still... and she was being so direct about it too.

Rukia blinked and tilted her head slightly. She thought she knew what was going on and decided to change topics. "So are you going to be in any extracurricular activities other than what Yoruichi has planned?" She'd discerned he'd had a job before going to Tokyo, but he'd never revealed what had happened.

"Nah, I'm not in any clubs and I resigned from the job I had before summer break," he replied.

"Maybe once things settle down we could decide on something together?" she offered. If he was going to be working or engaged in a club she preferred to be with him, and not just for her own reasons. She was supposed to watch him.

He glanced over a shoulder at her and smiled a little. "Yeah."

She smiled back.

After breakfast he got all the kitchenware to soaking and finished packing their bentō boxes. They gave their things one final check before going to the door, getting on shoes, and heading out. "I decided to put the badge back in my bag so you or at least Ukitake-san has some way of knowing where I am," he said.

She nodded with a small internal smile and made a mental note to text her taichō about it. "When I returned Urahara-san gave me a regular cell phone and did something with my soul pager to allow it..."
to receive calls, so give me your phone at some point and I can enter those numbers in."

He nodded back at her before reaching out his nearer hand to hers, taking it and interlocking fingers with her.

Rukia squeezed at him, teasing "Not planning to show off, are you?"

"I don't have to. Why, are you?" Ichigo asked in a deadpan, gripping back.

She squeezed a little harder but said nothing. Neither of them noticed Keigo and Mizuiro in the distance observing before deciding to go a separate way, at least that day.
Monday, September 2, 2002

Ichigo and Rukia were met with glances and stares as they entered through the school's gate, owing mostly to the former's notoriety and the latter's obscurity. Nobody they immediately encountered seemed to remember her prior attendance, which matched what had happened the previous times she'd disappeared; he felt it had something to do with reiryoku. He ignored the reactions at any rate, having endured more in Tokyo with her and knowing holding hands was well within socially acceptable behavior. "Did you already take care of administration?" he asked.

"No, I haven't had a chance to," she replied, likewise deliberately tuning out the looks they were getting.

"Good thing we're early," he muttered, changing course with her toward the principal's office and adjacent teachers' lounge. The principal was the only important member of the administration proper. He waited outside while she went in to meet with him and made her pitch.

She flashed him a smile and thumbs-up upon her return a few minutes later before going to do the same in the teachers' lounge.

He rolled his eyes at the thought of the kind of sob story she must have been feeding them and just quietly hoped whatever it was he wouldn't be called in to verify it.

It was only slightly longer before she was once more outside and confidently took his hand again. Ichigo started walking with her toward their homeroom. "Do I even want to know?"

Rukia shot him a small glare with pursed lips even as she squeezed at his hand again, saying "You never have appreciated my artistry."

"That's not true at all," he replied grumpily. He wasn't a fan of either her acting or her drawing but those were clearly only part of the picture.

"Hmph, fool," she said, looking forward and pretending to pout.

He squeezed back at her hand and led her onward. By the time they arrived there was only a minute left before class began. He slid the door open and walked in with her, surveying the room. He immediately noticed the seat next to his was empty and the rest of the room was full-up—Tetsuo had relocated.

She saw the same right before several heads turned at their appearance with expressions of surprise and disbelief. She pointedly pretended not to notice. Chad, Ishida, Inoue, Keigo, Mizuero, Tatsuki, Chizuru, and Michiru were the only ones who didn't really ultimately react, all politely ignoring the pair. Keigo in particular looked shifty, as if he had been orchestrating things prior to their arrival.

Ichigo escorted her all the way to between their desks before letting go of her hand and sitting down, getting his things out of his bag.

Rukia did the same before starting to patiently wait. They had been through too much together for the gawking of teenagers to faze her. The room was quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

"I knew—" Mahana began, only for the other door to abruptly open.
"Good morning, everyone!" Ms. Ochi declared as she strode into the room, "I see that you all managed to survive the summer! Congratulations, that's no small feat! And Kuchiki, welcome back yet again!"

Rukia put on her best schoolgirl smile until the moment passed.

It was during 4th period when Ichigo noticed several of his friends' heads turn slightly toward Rukia. She surreptitiously silenced her soul pager and got out her Soul Candy dispenser, making eye contact with him before discretely using it.

He watched the change that signaled Chappy's arrival but kept his gaze steady.

Chappy blinked, seemingly at him, before glancing around and then looking up at what surely must've been Rukia and nodding subtly. Everyone else looked away.

Ichigo found his eyes tracking to an open window as he understood. He glanced back to the artificial soul for a moment before paying attention to the lesson again.

Chappy seemed to follow along for a bit before she began doodling.

It was only a dozen or so minutes before Rukia returned, pocketing the soul pill until she could clean it off and regarding the new sketches in her notes with confusion.

She excused herself and went to the bathroom to wash her hands when lunch started. On her return she found him waiting outside the classroom with both his bentō box and hers, one of his traditional scowls on his face.

"What's the matter?" she asked with a small smile, already having an idea, "Someone picking on you for your hair again?"

"Nothing," he said, ignoring the quip, "It just keeps questions away." He meaningfully glanced down the hallway at an assemblage of girls that included Mahana, Ryō, Chizuru, and Michiru. He had the feeling the latter two were restraining the rest as much as anything.

She followed his look for a second before turning back to him and asking "Where do you want to eat?"

"We could try the roof if you don't mind company," he offered, handing her bentō box to her.

Rukia took it and then likewise took Ichigo's free hand without another word, starting to walk with him toward the nearest stairwell.

Keigo greeted them with "Ichigooo, Kuchikiiii-saaan!" and rushed them on their arrival only for the former to kick him aside.

"Don't think I don't know that you're responsible for why everyone knew what was happening!" Ichigo declared.

"To be fair, he was also the one who got Momohara to leave Kuchiki-san's seat," Mizuiro stated.

Chad and Ishida were also present but elected to contribute nothing to the discussion in deference to continuing to eat.
"Thank you, Asano-san," Rukia said primly as she hauled Ichigo over to where everyone else was, sitting down with him and opening her lunch. She was quietly impressed at what he had put together.

"Most of them didn't believe it, you know," Mizuiro continued as Keigo rejoined them.

Ichigo frowned a little at what that was supposed to mean as he got his lunch open too.

Ishida cleared his throat before asking "Kuchiki-san, do you have plans to enroll in any school activities?"

"We're probably going to be busy through next week but we've agreed to figure out what we'll do then," she replied, looking to Ichigo.

He met her gaze and found he couldn't help but smile a little.

Everyone else exchanged glances before continuing to eat, Keigo eventually breaking the ice again.

Their last two class periods passed without incident and after briefly helping clean the room they were confronted with the routine five-minute end-of-day homeroom meeting time. Just as several curious glances were starting to turn their way again they were suddenly joined by Chad, Inoue, and Ishida, with Tatsuki, Keigo, and Mizuiro clearly forming a sort of distraction screen elsewhere.

"Kurosaki-kun, do you know how this is going to work?" Inoue asked.

"Not other than that I'm supposed to show up," he replied, glancing to Rukia.

She gave a slightly apologetic look, not having wanted to burden him with talk of it in advance.

"We'll be working at this daily. You'll be training with Sado-kun to start with, and he'll swap out with me when he has to go to work," Ishida stated.

"And I'll be taking this time to continue instructing Kurumadani," Rukia added.

"Somehow I still get the feeling there's a lot you're not telling me," Ichigo muttered.

"Yoruichi-san and Urahara-san wanted to explain personally," Inoue said.

"Of course they did," the future substitute groused.

"We're starting immediately," Chad said.

Ichigo ran a hand through his hair, saying "I guess we may as well head over there then," before standing up.

Rukia joined him and once more casually took his hand as the group started to leave together.

"Oi, Ishida, what about the handicrafts club?" the orange-haired teenager asked, thinking more about how the timing of all this was supposed to work.

"Your concern is appreciated, but we usually only meet once a week and the scheduling works out fine either way," Ishida replied.

"I wasn't concerned," Ichigo said with irritation.

Rukia squeezed at his hand, drawing his attention.
He blinked and glanced at her to find her smiling softly at him. He did the same and they proceeded
the rest of the way south in relative quiet, arriving at the Urahara Shop around ten minutes later.

She stopped him in the lot outside and looked up at him. Their three friends discretely continued on
into the shop proper to give them space.

He looked back and found himself searching in her eyes.

She smiled, saying "I know you'll do fine," with every certainty. She refused to doubt him in the
slightest.

His look firmed up and he replied "Of course I will, you just focus on knocking that Kurumadani
guy into shape."

"Be careful what you wish for," she playfully warned.

"Why, are you my mystery instructor after Ishida and Chad?" he asked, smirking.

"Maybe," she said coyly before adding "I'll be back in a few hours."

"Yeah," he said with confidence, watching as she once more used the Soul Candy dispenser. It was
becoming a little easier though he still had to force it.

Chappy's eyes slid to one side for a time before she looked to him.

"Come on, we're keeping everyone waiting," he said, heading for the shop door.

She followed after him.

"Ah, so! No doubt you're wondering what all we've been doing this whole time?" Urahara asked
with an air of mystery, holding a fan in front of his face. He was standing next to Yoruichi, all of
them having descended to the training room below the shop.

Ichigo glanced to Yoruichi before looking back to him with mild incredulity, saying "She already
told me about the two different ways of getting my powers back." It was ridiculous that they hadn't
conferred with one another on the matter. He heard his friends and Chappy shuffle behind him
awkwardly as if in agreement.

The shopkeeper's eyes widened and he looked sideways to the Flash Goddess, who in turn just
rolled her eyes, saying "You've barely said more than two dozen sentences to him since the war,
somebody had to give him some idea of what was going on."

"I've been busy working on it and it was supposed to be a surprise," he said quietly, as if the fan
would keep the teenagers from hearing him.

"Get on with it already!" she commanded.

Urahara pulled the fan away dramatically and declared "Kurosaki-san, you still have the potential to
regain all of your powers!" with a serious gleam in his eyes.

"I literally just told you that I knew that already," Ichigo deadpanned.

Yoruichi's eyebrow visibly twitched and she kicked Urahara over, snatching his fan out of the air as
it fell and snapping it closed for emphasis as she pointed at Ichigo with it. "One of the things you'll
be doing will be just like after the first time Byakuya-bo messed you up: training with your spirit
body to try and up your reiatsu and exercise your reiryoku. This idiot has determined that will speed up the other part of your training and also make what he's doing easier. Ishida-kun will be handling that." She had long ago been informed of how his Shinigami powers had been unlocked.

Urahara stood and dusted himself off as she spoke. He began to add rather factually "As you may know," only to draw a glare from the Flash Goddess and reiterating "As you surely know, your reiryoku is intact and releasing an almost imperceptibly small amount of reiatsu over time. This amount is far too minute to do anything with in terms of your powers. However, reiatsu flow is technically speaking a two-way street. If we can increase the amount you emit, we can also increase the amount you can absorb. Using a rather complicated device—"

"It's a sword without an edge—" the Flash Goddess interrupted snarkily.

"Using a rather complicated device," Urahara continued, "we can get you to absorb a very large amount of foreign reiatsu that will jolt your reiryoku into emitting at its natural level. However, this is only safe if we increase your ability to release—and thus absorb—reiatsu. This would happen naturally over time and in response to close proximity to large reiatsu sources—"

"Your reiatsu has doubled from what it was six weeks ago, and it took you eight months to achieve that from basically zero," Yoruichi interrupted again, leaving it unsaid but clear to all parties what had induced that.

"But we have the sense that you're no longer willing to be patient anyway," Urahara finished with a smile. He had had his concerns about whether it was right to do all of this and had voiced them repeatedly to Isshin and Yoruichi alike. Having had time to compare and contrast Ichigo's behavior with and without Rukia though . . . he was certain that the young man would inevitably declare that it was his choice, and Urahara had no doubts about how he would choose, even if the teenager was operating on imperfect and incomplete knowledge.

"Basically he still has to make and charge this 'complicated device' and if its output is too big for your input then you're going to be very unhappy," Yoruichi summarized matter-of-factly. There was more than one lewd metaphor that could be made, but she wasn't that gauche or insensitive.

Ichigo caught on anyway and quietly glared at her before asking "Fine, what's the other part of the training?"

The shopkeeper produced another fan from somewhere on his person, flaring it over his mouth and asking "Surely you have at some point wondered as to the nature of the powers of Inoue-san and Sado-san?"

The orange-haired teenager blinked, glancing back to the two of them before looking forward again.

"Inoue-san is a rather interesting case, but Sado-san shares something in common with you," Urahara continued.

"The kinds of human which can manipulate the souls of objects are called Fullbringers," Yoruichi stated, adding "Sado-kun is one, and you can be too. The particulars aren't terribly important right now—what you need to know is that since the power relies on your physical body, stamina is incredibly important."

"So why are we down here? Shouldn't I be doing cardio or resistance training or something then?" Ichigo complained.

"That's so boring," Yoruichi chided as Urahara began to walk away. She shortly began to follow
him, saying "There's only one rule—"

"Don't get hit," Chad declared.

Ichigo's eyes went wide as he understood what was about to happen from past experience. He turned around in time to see his friend squaring up with both Brazo Derecha de Gigante and Brazo Izquierdo del Diablo visible as plain as day.

*This is even worse than fighting Ururu, at least with that there was a win condition,* Ichigo thought as he hid behind a boulder.

"I can punch right through this, Ichigo," Chad stated, loud enough to be heard from the other side.

"I really don't think this is the best way of training up my endurance!" the would-be substitute hollered as he started to run again.

"My apologies," the giant replied, before the large rock exploded in a spray of dust and tiny fragments.

"Can't we talk about this?!!" Ichigo shouted.

"What's there to talk about?" Chad replied.

"If you actually do hit me I'm gonna die!" the orange-haired teenager called back.

"I'm sure that would make Kuchiki-sa—* Ichigo's eyes widened at this as it forced his mind back to Saturday. *It should . . . it should never even be a question of 'if'!* I won't let you hit me . . . and that's all there is to it! He narrowed his eyes in determination and began to run faster, saving his breath.

Inoue shook her head a little to chase off a daydream and glanced about, noticing the commotion in the distance rather easily. She was once more gladdened that the training regime didn't actually involve Ichigo being hurt like when he had fought Tatsuki. Chad would know exactly how far to press without putting him at risk. It was as she was tracking their progress that she noticed how visibly tense and on-edge Chappy appeared out of the corner of one eye. Turning her head fully, she said "Don't worry, Kurosaki-kun will be okay!" in reassurance.

"Huh?" the artificial soul asked, looking at her in seeming confusion.

"You look worried," the teenager replied with a small smile.

"Rukia-sama said nothing bad would happen, I was just thinking that Sado-san doesn't seem to be trying that hard, *pyon,*" Chappy replied with seeming disinterest.

Inoue blinked. Everything about the artificial soul's affectation was blasé, but everything about her expression and body language looked concerned. Could it be a lingering instinct of Rukia's?
Ishida adjusted his glasses and returned to the book he was reading.

It was long after Chad had left for work and Ichigo's soul had been unceremoniously prodded out of his aching body to have to dodge Ishida's arrows that Yoruichi was sipping at tea Tessai had brought down. She felt Rukia's impending return long before she actually arrived, dampener or not.

The Shinigami was soon surveying the training in the distance along with Ichigo's inert physical body. She pulled Chappy away to consult with her before taking her *gigai* back.

Tessai was on hand to furnish her with a hot towel to clean off with.

After doing so Rukia chatted with Inoue for a few minutes before coming over to where Yoruichi was sitting, standing beside her.

"May as well speak your mind, Rukia," the Flash Goddess said.

"I'd prefer if we could talk in private," the younger noble said quietly. Her tone gave away that it wasn't about what was going on at the moment.

Yoruichi looked up to her, finding that she looked unusually embarrassed and bashful. She raised an eyebrow and opened her mouth to ask a follow-up question before closing it again along with her eyes, smirking slightly and saying "Oh, I see." Rukia had left a note for her among the clothes she'd returned from the trip to Tokyo before leaving for Soul Society. Yoruichi had seen to its contents and left a note in reply for when she had come back, and when they had briefly discussed the matter on Friday she had offered to dispense advice given some of the requests the Shinigami had made regarding the handling of her *gigai*. It seemed the younger woman was deciding to take her up on the offer and it wasn't something she would tease her about. "Oi, Tessai," she called, "Go upstairs and get Kisuke to come down here and take over the watch, I know he's not actually that busy. And if you would, please get some drinks out for us."

The muscular man simply nodded before departing.

The Flash Goddess stood and watched the training idly while they waited for the shopkeeper to return, using the time to review things she might need to say.

"I was working on something, you know," he said when he finally descended the ladder.

"You can make up the hour or so in your own time," Yoruichi stated firmly. Her business was equally if differently important.

"You make for poor target practice," Ishida said with disinterest, "But you're already improving."

"Shut up," Ichigo muttered as he lay on the ground. He could barely move his lower body.

"Do you perhaps need some assistance in returning home, Kurosaki-san?" Urahara asked from behind his fan.

"As if," Ichigo spat, narrowing his eyes. He blew out a breath and looked aside. "By the way, Urahara-san, Kon disappeared after the fight with Aizen." He let his gaze meaningfully lock with the shopkeeper then before asking "Would you know anything at all about that?"

"No," Urahara said with a gleam in his eye. "Though, I can maybe speculate as to what might've happened . . ."
"I've got no use for speculation, but if you have some idea about it, could you look into it?" the future substitute requested.

Urahara took on one of the serious contemplative looks he sometimes wore.

It was then that Yoruichi and Rukia's faces entered Ichigo's field of view. The latter was looking at him with an expression he couldn't quite place. At the sight of her he pushed himself up and slowly levered himself onto his feet, standing with some difficulty. He regarded the ladder back up to the shop in the distance with disgust, as if it might as well be a thousand kilometers tall, before saying with as much nonchalance as he could "If that's it for today we should probably get going, it'll be late by the time I finish cooking."

"Let's pick up something instead," Rukia said.

He looked to her with mild surprise.

"Come to think of it, I'm pretty hungry too," Ishida stated, scratching at a cheek.

Inoue laughed a little before adding "I guess that makes four of us."

Rukia lightly smiled at Ichigo before moving up to him and taking one of his hands, pulling him along and helping to keep him steady. "We can do homework while we eat together somewhere," she entreated. They'd only been given a few pieces of busywork on their first day but still needed to get them done. She mentally made a note to call Yuzu and ask if she wouldn't mind making extra portions of dinner for them and letting them come over during the week. It wouldn't do to make Ichigo cook after such long days.

"I'm not exactly presentable," he replied lamely, even though he knew he wasn't that dirty. He had the sense that Tessai had been instructed to clean most of the dust off his body and clothes while he had been training with Ishida.

"What else is new?" the archer stated as he fell in behind them.

The orange-haired teenager glared back at him even as Inoue smiled and Rukia didn't stop or let go. Yoruichi and Urahara stood together watching the four leave, waiting until they were out of earshot.

"I think it'll work," the former said nebulously.

"Oh? That what will?"

"Everything," she said with a little smile.

Rukia stopped Ichigo inside just after they'd gotten their shoes off, softly commanding "Take off your uniform."

"What?" he asked, thinking he'd misheard at first.

"You were right that you're actually still quite dirty and you shouldn't track sand all over the house. I'll handle washing it," she stated. She'd gone to look at the washer and dryer in her own time and had found they came with rather clear instructions on their use. They were also similar to machines in the Seireitei that the 12th Division had popularized the use of—nobody liked washing clothes by hand.

He looked at her for a moment before partially turning away from her and starting to undress as if she
wasn't there, stripping down to his boxers in short order.

She averted her gaze and waited patiently. It was neither the time nor the circumstance to be eyeing him.

"Should I use the unit bathroom down here?" he asked in a way that was equal parts question and wondering aloud.

"It should be alright for you to get upstairs. Take your time and relax," she replied.

"Yeah," he said, going to do just that. He would have to start bringing workout clothes with him to the training sessions.

She collected up his clothes and took them to the laundry room.

Ichigo lay on his bed, suddenly immensely tired, when Rukia knocked on his door. He blinked at the sound before saying "You don't have to do that, you know." She certainly never had before.

She opened it and poked her head in, finding him languid on top of the covers. After a moment she walked in and sat down beside him, automatically moving to lightly massage at his legs. "Tired?" It wasn't really all that late but it had been a long day.

"Very," he replied, closing his eyes at her touch.

"Lift up so I can pull your covers down," she said quietly after a second.

He looked at her with questions but she met his gaze evenly and so he did as she asked, letting her pull the blanket and sheets down.

She sat back down and resumed massaging him.

Ichigo closed his eyes again, letting her work with his legs.

Rukia kept at it until she felt him relax and his breathing change, transitioning to soothing him for a time before pulling his covers up and tucking him in. She continued to sit next to him for a long time, brushing his forehead reassuringly as she considered him. Finally she carefully stood and left, quietly closing the door behind her.
"Kuchiki-san?" Keigo called from behind the couple.

"Yes?" she asked, not turning.

"You're training Af-san, right?" he continued. He didn't have much of a sense for reiatsu but even so it would've been hard not to notice that she'd been working with him.

"Yes," she replied, figuring out who he meant from context.

"I don't know a lot about what it is Shinigami do or anything, but I know he isn't exactly the best or the brightest. Still . . . he did face down that Aizen guy last year, so don't be too hard on him," Keigo ventured.

At that Rukia turned her head with a perplexed look before narrowing her eyes in appraisal.

"Yeah, he was there when I arrived, so I assumed he was helping to try and keep everyone safe," Ichigo confirmed.

The petite Shinigami glanced to her boyfriend before looking back forward, furrowing her brow in thought. Why had that never been brought to her attention previously? Was it humility? She was certain it had never been in any report. Zennosuke didn't have the capability to even annoy Aizen but if he had delayed him even slightly . . .

"I seem to recall you didn't remember his name," Mizuiro stated.

"You know I'm not good with names," the future substitute muttered.

"Did you know that this guy threw an aerosol can at that Aizen character and blew up an entire alleyway in the process?" Keigo asked with disbelief, pointing at his compatriot.

At that both Ichigo and Rukia looked back at them in surprise.

Mizuiro glared mildly at Keigo before giving a look like it was nothing. "The main reason Af-san was there was because Asano-san stole his sword to try and hold that guy off."

It was Keigo's turn to look annoyed, as much for the revelation of the fact as for having his point about Zennosuke undermined.

Upon her arrival at the shop Rukia found Yoruichi waiting for her upstairs with Chappy. After she'd taken back possession of her gigai the older noble led her to a kotatsu table where she'd already laid out various drink-making ingredients and implements, gesturing for her to sit. She did so, noting everyone else was downstairs.

The former clan leader sat opposite and began making cocktails for the two of them. It was something she'd picked up as a hobby during her century in the Living World. After a moment she asked "So how's your trainee doing?" conversationally. She could already tell the difference in Zennosuke even at a distance, but it was something to fill the time. Rukia had definitely learned to execute her duties as a fukutaichō with surprising efficiency.
"He's improving steadily," the younger noble replied. She'd already moved from the destructive to the constructive half of the training regimen before she'd learned of his actions during the war, but afterwards she'd found a measure of newfound respect for him and had begun to treat him accordingly. She'd decided not to broach the topic of Aizen with him until later as a sort of capstone.

"Mmm," Yoruichi intoned. Silence lingered between them as she finished up the drinks and slid a completed one to Rukia. They toasted and both took a long first sip. "How's the other thing going?"

Rukia's cheeks went slightly pink before she glanced away. "Zangetsu doesn't have much to say really." It was true enough though that the topics of conversation he'd engage in were limited. He seemed to find Ichigo's new training regimen amusing but when pressed on things other than his thoughts on her, including the Quincy apparition, he had little input. He'd largely dropped the hostile act with her although he remained arrogant and occasionally crude, but that was perhaps in keeping with what he sometimes related of Ichigo's thoughts. She saw him more and more as a sort of dark mirror of her boyfriend.

That Rukia and Ichigo were in love had been obvious to everyone but them for some time. As far as the Flash Goddess was concerned it was therefore a foregone conclusion that eventually they would become lovers, although it seemed they were starting to approach the matter differently, and Zangetsu's mild harassment was just another example of that. Ichigo mostly seemed to follow feelings while Rukia followed thoughts. Ichigo had been able to incidentally observe his parents interact as couples did, while Rukia had grown up knowing little love of any kind, so that made sense. Yoruichi drummed her fingers on the table and sipped at her cocktail as she considered it all and what she and Rukia had previously discussed. "You're the one who got Ichigo to drink, right?" she asked after awhile.

"Yes," the younger noble replied, somewhat confused as to what that had to do with anything.

"Did he say anything notable when that happened?" the former clan leader continued.

"He was suspicious and surprised at first," Rukia said as she remembered their first night out. "The only notable thing really was him declaring 'Don't talk down to me just because I haven't had alcohol before. Even if I abided by the law, I'm not the sort of person who has no idea about such things!' I guess."

Yoruichi considered that for awhile and its relevancy to the actual topic at hand. She didn't exactly have her finger on the pulse of what Ichigo's age group was like. She'd spent a lot of time around his peers lately but it wasn't the same as observing them on their own. Still, biology and people talking didn't change even as social norms did. He likely knew a lot more than he let on or his formal education might lead one to believe. He wasn't naïve, which was probably why he was cautious; Rukia wasn't either but her knowledge was likely much more general. "This is all probably going to take quite awhile, so the main thing is that you acquaint yourself with the topic and you're comfortable with it," she said after some time. With that she reached under the kotatsu and withdrew a pair of rather thin books, setting them down in front of the younger noble. Exposure to Zangetsu's betrayals of Ichigo's desires was one thing, but hardly enough.

Rukia blinked at the one on top before turning slightly red. It was a Japanese translation of the Kama Sutra. She looked up at her older counterpart with embarrassment.

"Don't be so ashamed," Yoruichi lectured, "Some of the material is ridiculous but it'll give you an idea, and at any rate it's more informative than giving you dirty manga or something. Think of it as homework so you know what sort of things to ask me questions about."

The raven-haired woman looked back down at the books for quite some time. She retrieved her bag,
opened it, and put them inside before closing it again. She looked aside with measured humility as she continued to partake of her drink.

"Anyway, have you thought about talking to Ishida-kun or his father?" the former clan head asked. If Zangetsu wouldn't address the embodiment of Ichigo's Quincy powers, the next step was to ask actual Quincy directly.

"It would be more productive to talk to Ishida-san, but I feel I should talk to Ishida first," Rukia replied. She wasn't familiar with Ryūken but it was obvious he knew the most about the Quincy given what Isshin had said. She'd heard of his demeanor and wasn't intimidated by it, but Ishida was her friend and going behind his back first thing given how strained his relationship with his father seemed wasn't right. "There just doesn't seem to be time to approach him."

"We'll make time," Yoruichi said, "I'll handle Friday and you can talk to him then." She didn't disagree with her junior's assessment.

The younger noble nodded, returning to her glass.

Rukia kneaded at Ichigo's calves while he reclined on his bed, holding the crook of one arm over his eyes.

"I'm gonna fall asleep if you don't stop," he protested quietly. He'd only acquiesced to help leaving the Urahara Shop's training area when it'd become clear he otherwise wouldn't make it out, and had been relying on her for support throughout the evening as they'd gone to his family's place for dinner. His body ached head to toe.

"We can finish our homework in the morning," she said, her tone soft but her meaning firm. There wasn't much left to do anyway.

"Rukia . . ." he murmured.

She shushed him, saying "Shhh. Just let me take care of you." She would work a healing kidō on him once she'd gotten him to fall asleep.

Wednesday, September 4, 2002

Ichigo stood several dozen meters away from Ishida, facing away from him. His resolve had already hardened and he was just steeling himself for what was to come—he was done running . . . as a soul anyway. There wasn't much he could do yet in his body.

"That doesn't seem like a very optimal evasion pattern," the archer offered from behind him.

The words that came to Ichigo were from something, although he couldn't immediately identify what. "If you're going to shoot, shoot; don't talk," he called irritably.

Ishida frowned but nonetheless drew back an arrow, subtly moving his bow hand half a degree to one side. If the would-be substitute wouldn't take the exercise seriously then there'd be consequences, just not lethal ones. "I don't deliberately miss," he warned.

"Whatever," the orange-haired young man said dismissively, turning to face him.

Even from such a distance the Quincy could see a gleam in his friend's eyes and it gave him a moment's pause before he released the arrow.
Ichigo found he hadn't been wrong; he could actually track the reishi arrow in flight. As his eyes followed it the rest of him was in motion. He withdrew the seele schneider he'd kept on him from a pocket and activated it as he brought it up, simultaneously leaning to one side just in case. He had the blade up just in time to clip into the front end of the arrow, pushing it off course as it sawed through it. A fragment of it sailed past him while the rest veered off and plowed into the ground in a billowing dust plume. A beat passed before a triumphant grin took hold of his face.

Ishida was left with widened eyes at what had just happened and stared for long seconds before he narrowed them in concentration, immediately drawing back another arrow and firing. Once was a fluke.

That time the future substitute took the seele schneider in both hands and held it in front of him, using one side of the blade to simply knock the arrow aside without cutting into it.

The archer grimaced even as his eyes gave off something more like a smirk. He didn't relent for a second and began to gradually up his rate of fire, shooting arrows faster and faster.

Ichigo's confidence grew as he was able to maintain the pace for a time until it faltered as he eventually realized he wouldn't be able to keep up if the speed kept increasing. Soon he was once more compelled to dodge rather than deflect an arrow, and shortly thereafter he was put to flight to avoid being turned into a pin cushion, batting arrows aside as he ran.

Urahara watched the sprays of dust created by the arrows with interest, noting that Ishida continued to track Ichigo quite well through his ability to visually do so surely must be degrading due to the occlusion. It meant there was by then something about the orange-haired student's reiatsu that could be tracked. The Quincy seemed more sensitive to such things than even he himself passively was. "My, it seems we might have to start using a barrier," he said to Inoue conversationally, adjusting his hat.

The princess blinked, looking away from the continuing action to the shopkeeper. He seemed to have a small smile. It reflected something she sensed about Ichigo that suddenly seemed very happy.

"Ryūken," Ishida said plainly as his father exited the hospital's front entrance. He needed answers and there was only one place to get them from.

The Last Quincy stopped, glancing to find his son off to one side. He let out a small exhalation before replying "Uryū," deciding not to press the point about using his first name for the umpteenth time. There was something in the boy's eyes that looked oddly resolved.

Ishida stared him down for a moment before deciding to just get on with it, maintaining eye contact as he said "Kurosaki Ichigo has claimed to be of partially Quincy heritage and has demonstrated a mild aptitude with the seele schneider." His gaze hardened as he demanded "Do you know anything about that?"

Ryūken's eyes widened fractionally before he closed them, standing silent for a time. "You could say that," he said at last, opening them again as a small, knowing smirk appeared on his mouth.

Ishida blinked in confusion at the change in his father's expression.

The Last Quincy turned away and started to walk off, lifting a hand to make a gesture communicating 'follow me'.

Ishida watched for a second before going along after him.
Thursday, September 5, 2002

"Is it just me or was Ishida acting weird all day?" Ichigo asked idly as Rukia once more massaged him.

She was working with his upper back while sitting on his rear and took her time reflecting on the question. She'd noticed the Quincy giving both Ichigo and her unusual looks throughout the day but hadn't thought much of it. "I suppose he was," she replied. She glanced down at Ichigo and asked "Why, does it make you worried?"

"No," he said adamantly, "It was just weird."

She smirked slightly and kneaded with a little more force. The fact they continued to refuse to acknowledge their friendship directly was so immature. It seemed some things never changed.

Ichigo let out a noise at the sensation and sank further against the bed.

Friday, September 6, 2002

"I think you've been getting a little too cocky about your ability to deflect Ishida-kun's arrows, so today is a review day," Yoruichi stated, cracking her knuckles and popping her arm joints as she stretched.

"Eh?" Ichigo asked, confused.

Ishida also looked perplexed as the Flash Goddess pushed past him.

"I'm feeling charitable, so you've got a ten second head start," she said with a predatory air, smirking at the orange-haired young man.

"Hey, come on, I can hardly—" Ichigo began.

"Eight, seven, six . . ." she counted down, locking eyes with him.

The would-be substitute grimaced heavily even as he turned and began to leg it as fast as he could.

Yoruichi continued with the act, giving him the full time before setting off.

Once she had gone Ishida retreated to where Inoue was waiting with Chappy. It wasn't too much longer until he sensed Rukia's approaching reiatsu and something about the timing told him this was all more than coincidence. It was just as well, he wanted to talk to her too. "Ah, Inoue-san, it seems Kuchiki-san is returning early and I have to talk to her about something she said she wanted sewn, so I'll see you later," he lied, heading toward the ladder.

"Eh?" Inoue asked, "Rukia asked you to make her another dress?"

"Yes," Ishida said, not stopping.

The princess considered what that meant and decided to follow-up on it with Rukia later. They hadn't had a lot of time to talk lately given how often she and Yoruichi went off to talk among themselves. It wasn't hard to guess what a lot of that might be about.

Chappy got up and followed after Ishida since it seemed they were going the same way anyway.
"Ishida?" Rukia asked as he and Chappy met her.

"Kuchiki-san, I wanted to talk to you," the Quincy said plainly.

"I wanted to talk to you too," the Shinigami replied.

"I gathered," the archer responded. Sometime later Rukia had taken her gigai back and they were seated at a kotatsu opposite one another, Tessai having brought them tea. They sat in silence for awhile as they collected their thoughts. "I take it you know about Kurosaki Masaki," he said rather than asked.

"Yes," Rukia replied.

"And you know that she was originally to be engaged to my father?" he continued.

"Yes," she repeated, not sure where exactly this was going.

"Then do you know that she was de facto adopted by the Ishida family and she regarded him as a cousin more than anything?" he asked. Ryūken wasn't one for overt sentimentality but Ishida had discerned he had thought of her in much the same way. They actually had been related, albeit rather distantly—their bloodlines had diverged many, many generations prior. Still, if as far as his father and Ichigo's mother had been concerned they were cousins, he and Ichigo could also reasonably be inferred to be like . . .

Rukia blinked as she made the same connection. Isshin had mentioned Masaki had been living with the Ishida family, but . . . she looked aside for a moment before making eye-contact with him. "What he always thought was his inner Hollow is really his zanpakutō spirit fused with the Hollow infection she bore and he inherited . . . and what he always thought was Zangetsu is really his Quincy powers made manifest."

Ishida's eyes widened marginally but he didn't look away for quite some time. When his eyes returned to her he adopted a thin smile and asked "So I guess I should tell you about the Quincy, hmm?"

"I would appreciate it," she said, giving a polite smile back.

Much later Inoue clambered up the ladder, saying in a hushed whisper "It must be a really complicated dress if you've been talking about it this whole time," as if Ichigo might hear her.

Rukia blinked before looking to Ishida.

The Quincy adjusted his glasses before simply saying "Yes," and then looked to the Shinigami, adding "I'll try and have something presentable by next weekend for you to give input on."

Rukia just raised an eyebrow slightly before glancing at Inoue and saying "Right."

"What's the special occasion?" Inoue asked.

"It's nothing important," Rukia said, waving a hand dismissively. The lie was already starting to spin out of control.

Inoue glanced to Ishida appraisingly, determining it was his presence that was making her friend demure. Her purpose for coming upstairs abruptly returned to her. "Do either of you know where Tessai-san is? Kurosaki-kun is having trouble getting upstairs again."
The raven-haired woman sighed and closed her eyes. Yoruichi had, predictably, overdone it.

Ichigo was on his back, letting Rukia do her healing *kidō* without complaint. He'd insisted that she start with that rather than a massage upon their return, refusing to be lulled to sleep again given it was the weekend. He'd shuffled into his sleeping clothes once they'd gotten home, having showered at his family's house before they'd eaten dinner with them.

Rukia was still in her school uniform and was just finishing up, asking "Feel better?"

"Yeah," he said, looking to her. He let his gaze linger on her before he slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position.

Her gaze tracked his as he did so, not breaking eye-contact, and soon she was quietly looking up at him from where she kneeled.

He glanced down for a moment at her pantyhose before quietly asking "Would you please take those things off?"

She blinked and turned the barest shade of pink.

"I don't want to damage them by doing it myself or by massaging you through them," he added, locking eyes with her again. He'd kept her words in mind and would ask for things if it was the most reasonable way of getting them.

She opened her mouth as if to say something before closing it and considering him. She wordlessly found his hands and took one in either of hers, moving them onto the outside of her thighs as he didn't resist.

Ichigo found he couldn't look away from her. The nylon felt smooth and belied the heat of her skin.

Rukia slid his hands up her skirt to below her hips and then let go of them, bringing her own higher still and finding the top of her pantyhose. She carefully pulled them down such that her underwear wouldn't go with them until her hands ran into his again. She didn't look away from him once, wanting him to understand that she appreciated him asking but also wanted him to learn how to do it himself.

He caught on and pulled them down from there, gaining her cooperation in lifting her knees and then her shins and feet as he tugged them down by degrees. At last he set them aside.

She pushed forward then and began to move with him, scooting with him toward the headboard so he could lean back and then straddling his lap, leaning against him.

His hands came to rest on the soles of her feet as he began to massage her, communicating through touch how much he appreciated what she'd been doing for him all week.

Rukia settled into it, pressing her face to his chest. She'd missed his touch.

Ichigo rested his head atop hers, quietly asking "Want to go shopping for music this weekend?"

"Mmm," she replied, lightly grasping his sides, "As long as it's not an all-day thing." She wanted to spend time with him without needing to do anything or be anywhere.

He gave a small nod and continued to massage her, gradually using more pressure as he worked with her calves and later her thighs.
It was as he was kneading her mid-thighs that she tilted her head back and pecked at his cheek to get his attention. She could feel his grip slackening and knew he was running out of energy.

He looked down to find her eyes seemed soft and soon she closed them, kissing him lightly. He returned it and kept his hands where they were, gripping gently.

After a time she broke it and suggested "You can wait in my bed while I clean and get changed." If she had to get up during the night and woke him he would at least be able to sleep in and he and Chappy seemed to have developed a working relationship that would make any awkwardness limited.

He just nodded, having missed sleeping beside her.

By the time Rukia was back out in her pajamas and had slipped under the covers she found him dozing. She tried not to disturb him but as she got close he woke, getting his arms around her.

"I love you," he murmured sleepily, for only the second time.

She smiled involuntarily and whispered "I love you too," as she likewise embraced him. He soon settled against her and fell asleep again. With a yawn she realized she wasn't far behind.
Queen And I’m The King

Saturday, September 7, 2002

Rukia woke to find she was snuggly tucked in and curled up against a pillow, her face buried against where Ichigo’s head had been resting on it. She pulled back and blinked a few times before narrowing her eyes in annoyance that he’d not only left without waking her but had surely helped position her in such a way. It was hardly the first time but it’d been a week since they’d shared a bed and it felt wrong. Sitting, she tossed the pillow back to where it normally laid and pushed herself off the bed, heading downstairs. She heard sizzling and caught the distinct whiff of grilled meat as she descended the stairs. Refusing to be distracted by her rumbling stomach, she made her way to the kitchen entrance, leaning against one wall while crossing her arms over her chest and regarding Ichigo as he cooked.

If he was aware of her presence—and based on previous times she felt he was—he gave no indication of it, continuing as if nothing was different.

"Someone once told me that holidays were for resting the body and mind, and I’m of the opinion the same is true of weekends, so you better not make a habit of doing this . . . even if it is to cook me breakfast," she stated with a somewhat haughty tone. It was only partially selfish; he needed to rest and relax too.

"I heard your stomach growling in your sleep so I just decided to get ahead of the curve," he said with a tinge of annoyance. She would inevitably have demanded they get up to eat anyway.

"You should wake me next time, fool," she said, lowering her arms to cover her stomach as she felt it happening again.

"A Kuchiki needs her sleep," he replied. He never had the heart to wake her as she always looked far too peaceful, and she had gotten up during the prior night to respond to a call anyway.

"We already talked about that," she countered. They weren’t really much different when it came to their statuses.

"You’re right, we did." They were partners and it was his responsibility to do the housework.

Rukia frowned before she turned her head to one side and pursed her lips. Despite everything they could still be so stubborn. It wasn’t worth fighting over but . . . she let out a breath and let her pride go with it. They could tease each other but there was no need for it when it really mattered and they were trying to communicate what they wanted or needed. "When we sleep beside each other I want to wake up next to you," she said, leaving her tone clean.

At that Ichigo glanced over a shoulder at her with mild surprise.

She met his gaze for a second before looking away again. "So I also want to know if you’re leaving. I can always fall back asleep, you know."

He looked back to the food he was working on and was silent for a moment before replying "That’s a two-way street. I know you’re only going to patrol for another week or two at most, and we don’t have to sleep beside one another every night, but I don’t want you worrying about waking me up anymore then."

She turned back to consider him dubiously for a time before walking up behind him and hugging
him around the waist, being careful since he was still cooking. "I am hungry, so thank you," she said quietly.

He brought a hand down onto one of hers and offered "We can go back upstairs after we eat, it's almost done anyway," so she wouldn't have to ask, feeling she would otherwise.

She let her fingers play against his in acknowledgement before letting go and moving to her preferred seat at the breakfast bar.

They were loosely curled up together in her bed, neither having said anything for awhile, when she asked "Ichigo?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry that I didn't try harder to stay after the war," Rukia said uncertainly. She'd apologized for many things, but never that one. Being back in Karakura and experiencing daily life with him, atypical though it still was in many ways, she found that agitated her. Where would they be if they'd had eight more months together without having to really worry about things?

"You probably couldn't have," Ichigo replied, even as he pulled her closer. It had likely taken time for Urahara to win Yamamoto over to the idea anyway. The old man was stubborn and probably figured he wasn't going anywhere. Even if everyone had pleaded their cases on their behalves, it was impossible to say whether it would've worked or how things would've turned out. Sometimes things just took time.

"But—" she started.

"Don't beat yourself up over it," he stated, holding her securely. "We're here now and that's what matters."

She peered up at him before closing her eyes and moving closer, trusting in him even if she didn't fully trust in herself. They stayed together in silence for quite awhile before she noticed his heart rate increase. She glanced up at him again halfway expectantly.

He didn't ultimately wind up saying or doing anything.

After waiting a little longer she brought a hand up and placed a finger over his heart, tracing lazy circles there. "What?"

He tensed slightly at having been so easily found out and quirked his mouth to one side, adopting an annoyed expression. "I was just thinking."

"About me?" Rukia asked coyly.

Ichigo became more irritable-looking at that before glancing down at her and exhaling as he met her gaze equally for some time. "I won't always ask to do things," he eventually said, "and I'd also prefer not to get hit anymore, so . . . "

She blinked.

"My instinct is that no always means no," he muttered, looking aside as he blushed moderately. They were both still opening up to one another and she did have a penchant for playing parts sometimes. It was easily possible that they could misread one another—they already had several times before.
She gained a similar color before looking down. "Fool, you'll know if I really don't like something."

"I'd—" he began to complain, only to be stopped cold as he felt a hand cup his cheek and a thumb stroke across his lips. He looked back to her in surprise.

She had a small smile and said "See?"

It was his turn to blink, watching as her smile became genuine.

"You don't have to worry about that kind of thing," she continued, withdrawing her hand as her eyelids came down judgmentally and she added "No matter what you were just thinking."

"Don't just assume—" Ichigo started, scowling.

Rukia locked eyes with him and grasped the fabric of his shirt in hand. "Do you think I'm the sort to try 'I—Ichigo, no, don't! I'm not that kind of girl! Stop!' or something?" she asked, giving him her best schoolgirl voice but with a slightly naughty undertone.

He turned redder before closing his eyes. When he opened them again he glared at her before saying "No, you'd be more like 'Y—you stupid fool, what do you think you're doing!? Stop!'"

"I don't sound like that," she said with annoyance.

"So are you admitting you liked it all along when I told you that you had a nice ass?" he asked dryly. He already knew she wasn't above pretending she didn't like things.

She blushed more in turn and looked aside, murmuring "We already discussed that."

With nonchalance he brought a hand onto her rear and grasped there, using it to pull her up so her face was level with his and both were only a few centimeters apart.

She instantly met his gaze even as she became fully flushed at the sensation. He'd never really grabbed her like that before, even if he had touched her.

Ichigo searched in her ultramarine eyes and brought the tip of his nose to hers before whispering "It's not something I get tired of talking about."

Rukia likewise surveyed his chocolate eyes before asking in a quiet voice "What were you really thinking of?"

He turned his head somewhat, looking away toward the ceiling and refusing to answer the question.

She hesitated before nonetheless continuing "Was it maybe something like . . ." as she brought her lips to his exposed ear, whispering a modification of something Zangetsu had said into it. She felt his cheeks burn as he brought one firmly to hers and fell silent, deciding to press him no further.

He stayed quiet and just held onto her, a long time passing before the heat left their faces. It was sometime significantly later when they began to hear the patter of rain on the roof. It had been stormy off and on since Friday. "Great," he muttered.

"We can still go shopping if you want," she volunteered.

"Are you sure?" he asked suspiciously.

"Like I said yesterday, as long as it's not an all-day thing," Rukia replied, before pulling back from him and sitting up, going to pick out some clothes.
Ichigo watched her for just a second before leaving for his room to do the same and shower.

Shirayuki tilted her head away, once more putting up token resistance. Her wrists remained gently but securely pinned to the column of the torii gate by Zangetsu. She'd allowed him to kiss her but she wouldn't submit to him by allowing him to make it deep.

He kept her where she was and bided his time, paying attention to her neck and jaw line instead. Showing a rare patient side was the only way he could make her comfortable.

She fidgeted at the feeling of his lips on her skin but didn't demand he stop. It felt wrong, but it also felt right. She didn't really hate him . . . when he had the decency to stop talking, at any rate.

However one wanted to think of their relation to their wielders, as aspects or reflections or subroutines, they weren't them. They shared their affections, but that also bled over to their counterpart. It was awkward. Ichigo and Rukia were complimentary opposites, but Zangetsu and Shirayuki were diametrically opposed. His essence was force and aggression and hers was finesse and reserve. Still, while force was implacable, it could be subtle. After a time he determined that continuing on in the same way would get neither of them anywhere and ran his hands to hers, locking her fingers between his and bringing his head alongside hers so his mouth was by one of her ears. "It's not about power," he said, unusually quiet.

Shirayuki glanced sideways to him and narrowed her eyes. Character was what one did when no one was looking, and so even if it was just the two of them, even if no one else ever knew including their wielders . . . but . . .

"It's not about—" he began to continue, only to be cut off as she turned her head back to him again and kissed him, making it deep to shut him up.

Chad had put together a short list of specialty record stores for the couple that focused on different kinds of music. Most were located in Naruki, and the nearest focused on various forms of rock and metal. Upon arriving they were immediately greeted by the unusually friendly proprietor who set about inquiring as to their interest—they didn't look like the usual clientele.

After sharing a glance Ichigo and Rukia let it be known they'd been referred and began to list some of the things they'd listened to on the previous Saturday that they both especially liked. After a moment's consideration, the owner led them about, plucking up CDs as he went. The shop seemed otherwise empty and so they followed and allowed themselves to be attended to, eventually being led to a stereo that was set up for customers. He plugged another pair of over-ear headphones into it and gestured for them to help themselves.

The couple began reviewing the album recommendations he'd given them.

They'd skipped through the first several songs of Nine Inch Nails' The Fragile before landing on "We're in This Together." At first neither was much interested, but Ichigo's policy was to stick with any non-instrumental song through at least the first instance of the chorus. He found himself hooked by the second line. It was when the chorus actually started that he found Rukia's closer hand and grasped at it.

She looked sideways to him as she felt his fingers slide between hers, finding he was looking away. She squeezed as she understood, trying to get his attention.

He reluctantly let his eyes track to hers, knowing he wouldn't be able to look away once he did.
She gave him a small smile. The song felt dark and melancholic but hopeful at the same time and she held his hand and his gaze alike.

Slowly starting to smile back, he found himself surprised by exactly how perfectly the last three lines seemed to fit them, even if they were Zangetsu's terms.

Rukia noticed too, feeling her eyes widen a bit before she let her smile broaden.

The song came to an end before the titular "The Fragile" followed. Ichigo immediately saw them in it as well and halfway turned toward her, bringing his other hand to hers so he gripped it between both.

She turned to do likewise, looking down at their hands as she felt she heard the things he did in the song. When she looked back up to him she found him smiling confidently at her.

He brushed at the back of her hand at the sight of her eyes going soft. They continued to hold onto and watch one another well into the instrumental "Just Like You Imagined" before he reached over and hit stop, ejecting the disc and putting it back in the case. He set it aside by itself. They didn't have to hear the second disc—it was already clearly a must-buy.

The new CDs were housed in one of the cabinets of the entertainment center—it was their music, not Ichigo's, and so it would be kept somewhere they could both easily get to. While he was squaring the cases away he began to consider moving some of his own music that Rukia had clearly liked into the collection and likewise started to think about getting her a portable player and headphones.

He was just finishing when she called "Want to have dinner with your family tonight?"

"Sure, why not?" They'd stopped for lunch while they were out and he hadn't entirely been looking forward to cooking anyway. It could be fun, and it was one of his duties in the house, but making three meals a day was a lot of work. It gave him a newfound appreciation for Yuzu.

"Then give them a call to let Yuzu-chan know we'll be turning up," Rukia said, entering the living room.

"Yeah," he replied, pushing himself to his feet before rubbing at the back of his neck. added "There's gonna be some time before then and I was thinking of going out for a jog . . . wanna join me?" It was the late afternoon and they had a few hours.

"What did I say about resting and relaxing?" she asked, crossing her arms and looking at him critically.

"It's nothing strenuous and you know that part of training is keeping up a certain minimum level of activity. You'll be there to watch me too," he countered steadily, making eye contact with her.

She considered it for a moment before grudgingly saying "Fine."

Ichigo was already moving past her and put a hand on her shoulder to turn her around and lead her to the stairs, saying "Let's get changed then."

They reconvened in the lounge some minutes later. The activewear outfits Tatsuki and company had gotten them were a matching set in black with white accents, relatively form-fitted, and cut for seasonable weather. They'd clearly been intended to be coupled with jackets or hoodies in the winter, and were likewise very obviously allusions to Shinigami shihakushō in terms of their color scheme. Ichigo's was slightly looser and Rukia's slightly tighter, and he had to make an effort not to stare.
"So what's jogging anyway?" she asked, moving a bit awkwardly in the outfit and carrying her running shoes in one hand. She didn't usually like and wasn't used to such tight clothing and it was more restrictive than the hosiery she'd been wearing, but it wasn't unpleasant.

"You agreed and you didn't even know what I meant?" he asked with disbelief.

"Anything you can do, I can do, Ichigo," she declared.

He scowled a bit at the obvious lack of truth behind the statement but said "It's a paced low-speed run, usually over distance," as he made for the stairs.

She followed along with some confusion as to what the point of that was.

Rukia leaned back against Ichigo. They were sitting sideways on the couch watching a movie and she had her legs tucked up in front of her to give him better access to them. She wasn't that sore but she wasn't used to doing much in her gigai anymore and had felt her legs cramping during dinner. It probably hadn't helped that she'd had to hand it off to Chappy while showering off from the run to respond to a call.

He continued to gingerly work with her calves while trying to pay attention to the film. They were watching Jurassic Park. He'd thought it would work given how wowed she'd been by the dinosaur skeletons they'd seen in one of the museums in Tokyo.

Much later, long after the movie had finished, she lay against him with her head on his chest, idly watching a weird domestic game show. "Hey," she said after a time.

"What?" he asked.

She paused as she thought of how to say it before releasing a breath and settling for "You should know that Zangetsu isn't really that bad."

Ichigo's focus was instantly upon her.

"He doesn't actually bother me often and he's not always so . . . nasty," Rukia continued.

He frowned a little at the fact that his zanpakutō spirit had continued messing with her and suddenly felt guilty, even if she didn't seem perturbed by it. He blinked as she abruptly looked up at him.

"You better not be upset or thinking that it's your fault," she lectured mildly, before giving a small lie of "The only way we could stop it is to stop doing what we're doing." It wasn't entirely true but it was close enough. She kept her gaze steady.

He looked away before mumbling "I guess if he's not bothering you . . . and it can't happen if we're touching . . ."

She lifted a hand to one of his cheeks and turned his head so he was looking at her again, teasing "You're so defensive."

"Of course I am," he said quietly.

Rukia smiled before resting against him again. "Let's just be lazy tomorrow. Your sisters can come over to play some games and we'll have to do homework, but let's not go anywhere." She wanted them to start being more social given they had the accommodations to do so and it was good for
them, but that could wait another week until they had the free time to manage it.

Ichigo studied her for a second before looking back to the TV and bringing his hands onto her back, rubbing there and saying "Sounds good to me."
In A Tidal Wave Of Mystery

Sunday, September 8, 2002

Rukia exhaled and set her notebook down on her lap, reclining slightly. She was sitting beside Ichigo on a mamasan chair in their study with her legs slung over his. "Why do they call it 'college algebra' if it's taught in high school?" she asked wearily, rubbing at her eyes. She had the same schedule as him—other than the fact that, like all the girls, she had half the PE and a home economics class instead—and they were in what were formally known as Mathematics II and Mathematics B, which were covering trigonometry and vector spaces respectively. Although she'd mostly copied off him during her first time in Karakura, she'd had to familiarize herself with the work during his time with the Visored and she was a quick study. Still, she didn't have nearly as much exposure to the subjects as an actual student would've by that point in time.

Ichigo glanced down at her notebook and turned his head slightly to read it more clearly. "You forgot to simplify the answer on problem 19," he said after a second. She was actually really good considering, but she didn't need to know that.

She lowered her hands and gave him a small glare before picking up the notebook again and frowning, eventually making a correction. She dropped it off to one side of the chair and then took his, doing the same.

"Hey, I wasn't done yet," he complained.

"Work faster next time. We're taking a break," she stated imperiously. He had been quite patient and helpful with her on a variety of subjects, but he didn't need to know it. It was important to vary hard work up with a bit of play time to keep the mind fresh. She poked him rather hard in his nearer bicep and demanded "Tell me about that Shakespeare guy you mentioned."

He lifted an eyebrow at her slightly before waving a hand somewhat dismissively. "Like I said, he's a really famous English playwright—the most famous one. They sometimes call him 'the Bard'. He lived about 400 years ago in England, and wrote a bunch of plays and poems. The plays range over comedy, tragedy, and romance, and the most famous of the poems are the sonnets, which follow a particular structure."

"Where's England?" she asked. She was sort of vaguely familiar with the idea of the place because of Sasakibe's fascination with it and the rest of the West, having attended the Tea Ceremony Club on occasion when he had been demonstrating features of their traditions, but she knew little else about it.

Ichigo frowned slightly before he remembered something and leaned toward a nearby bookshelf, retrieving a relatively small but quite ornate desk globe. It was rather heavy for its size and he had the sense it was made entirely out of gemstones and precious metals—another one of Byakuya's ostentatious choices. He leaned back toward her and held it between them, spinning it so they could both see Japan. "So we're here," he said, pointing at the Kanto region with a finger before rotating it nearly halfway around and doing the same for the British Isles, "and England is part of the bigger island here."

Rukia blinked at the distance, remembering what he'd told her at Haneda airport about how large the world was. She took the globe from him and spun it around slowly, considering all the other places on it and realizing she had no real idea about any of them other than what little she'd seen in movies or heard in their classes. After a moment she looked up to him. "And what Zangetsu related were parts of his poems?"
"Sure sounded like it," he replied.

"Read some for me," she said in a way that made it clear it was a request.

He glanced away, fairly sure that his personal books had been placed in the study but still sort of hesitant. "They'd be in English, you know, and a pretty old form of it that."

"Ichigo," she said simply, smiling at him. She would have to get him to help her learn English characters at some stage too—or letters or whatever they called them.

He watched her for a second before moving her legs off him, getting up to replace the globe and to search the shelves.

Rukia and Karin were huddled together on one side of the couch while Ichigo and Yuzu were on the other, all four of them concentrating on the TV as they played *GoldenEye 007*. It wasn't fair to the twins to do a free-for-all since they'd never played the game before, so they'd split up into competing teams.

"Nē-san, behind you!" Karin called.

"Karin-chan, don't screen-watch!" Yuzu replied.

Rukia whipped her character around to shoot Ichigo's with the golden gun right as hers was cut down in a hail of KF-7 fire.

The two shared an icy glance before Ichigo muttered "I'm starting to think we should've stuck with the Power weapon set." The golden gun was cheap and they were both evil when it came to proximity mines.

"Maybe you'd care to try throwing knives?" Rukia challenged.

---

**Monday, September 9, 2002**

Rukia glanced up toward the roof of the school yet again—exactly how often she'd done so was something all the other girls had noticed. She'd gone along with them to lunch because Inoue and Tatsuki had invited her and it wasn't bad to spend time apart occasionally.

"So I was right that you like him," Mahana stated with an air of triumph. Everyone had acted like she'd been so blunt and insensitive the year prior and vindication was sweet even if she hadn't been able to gloat properly for a week.

"We're dating, so he's my boyfriend," Rukia replied, looking back to them and smiling. She wouldn't explain the inconsistency with last time to them but she also felt no shame about it at all and was slightly surprised at how prideful she suddenly was. They were really a lot more than that but his peers didn't need to know and probably wouldn't know what to make of it.

"Aren't the two of you living together?" Ryō asked with a raised eyebrow. Everyone else had been unusually quiet about whatever they had seen and so the general knowledge was limited to the fact that they liked each other, had met back up over the summer, and were supposedly roommates.

"Yes, nii-sama is very busy with the family business and didn't want me to live alone, and one thing led to another and so . . ." Rukia trailed off with a smile. It was the story they'd agreed to and although it left open the question of where she'd stayed during her first time in Karakura, nobody had
ever questioned that. It was close enough to the truth.

"Kurosaki seems a lot nicer with you around," Michiru offered. He didn't scowl and frown as much as he usually had and she swore she'd seen him daydreaming and smiling a couple of times.

Tatsuki and Inoue acted studiously disinterested while Chizuru actually looked the part.

"How many dates have you been on?" Ryō asked. Hadn't Ichigo been out of town for the summer break? She remembered vaguely hearing something about it.

Rukia gave a small chuckle but gave the appearance of looking away bashfully before saying "It depends on what you mean but by my count more than a dozen."

At that everyone but Inoue and Tatsuki looked shocked, while the latter was merely surprised at the number and the former had seen enough to know that that was probably an underestimate. In some ways the couple's whole time in Tokyo seemed like one long date.

Before any follow-up questions could be asked the lunch bell rang to signal a return to class and they were forced to gather their things and leave. Rukia was the fastest and Inoue took a bit of initiative in following her, asking "So what sort of dress is Ishida-kun making for you?"

Taking a second to recall Ishida's cover-story, the petite Shinigami replied "Eh? Oh, it's nothing, Orihime, don't worry about it," with a light laugh.

The princess glanced to her friend in evaluation. She could be just as stubborn as Ichigo. She would have to talk to Ishida about it after all.

Thursday, September 12, 2002

Ishida managed to pry Rukia away from the group heading to the Urahara Shop without raising too much suspicion under the guise of talking to her about the clubs that their school had to offer. In truth his goal was somewhat different.

"So is this when you make a sales pitch for the handicrafts club?" she asked with amusement.

"Actually, I need to talk with you about what kind of dress you'd like," he said without humor, adjusting his glasses.

She looked to him suspiciously before laughing. "That was pretty good. You almost had me going for a second."

Ishida said nothing in response and opened his bag, withdrawing a notebook and flipping it open to a set of design sketches and a few sample fabric swatches.

Rukia blinked and stared at what he'd assembled, muttering "Ishida . . ." before looking to him again in surprise.

"Inoue-san has been bothering me about it every evening after we leave the shop and I figure it's no trouble to actually do it, so whatever you like," he stated as if it was nothing serious. He'd tried to come up with things he thought were flattering to her figure and personality. She was fun but usually proper, and from what he knew of Byakuya he was traditional and staid—if she was likely to be lacking in anything, and if Ichigo was likely to be stunned by anything, it would be an outfit that was a bit more adventurous while still being classy.
She watched him for a second before returning to the sketches and considering them with due gravity.

Friday, September 13, 2002

Rukia easily parried Zennosuke’s attack and knocked his zanpakutō aside, sliding her own up to his neck and holding it there steadily to show she had won.

He exhaled and adopted a defeated look yet again.

"Hollows don't practice zanjutsu or kendō," Rukia said, withdrawing Sode no Shirayuki and sheathing it. He wasn't much good at kidō and was mediocre at hakuda, but he was proficient enough at zanjutsu and had become passable at hohō—his flash steps were relatively slow, but he could get to where he needed to be. She reckoned he was at perhaps the traditional level of a mid-to-high 4th Seat or a low 3rd Seat—the balance had tilted after the war given a renewed focus on training and so he was perhaps at the current level of their 12th or 13th Seat. In theory, he was ready to do the work. Still, it wouldn't do to leave the job only partially done if it got him injured or killed. "You'll be ready to take over again in a week," she said with a cool confidence.

He blinked at her before he grinned and declared "I'll definitely be better by next Monday!"

"I'm sure," she said with a small smile.

Tatsuki observed the duel between Ichigo and Ishida with widened eyes from behind the safety of Inoue’s Santen Kesshun—the teenager had volunteered to use her abilities rather than letting Urahara or Tessai put up a kidō barrier as a form of endurance training for herself.

"He was initially only able to keep up with about 30 arrows a minute. What you're seeing right now is approximately 300 a minute," Urahara said once he noticed her expression. He didn't add that Ishida's prior maximum with his ginrei kojaku had been 1200 at once, or that he had declined to say what the maximum was with his new helig bogen.

The fighter glanced to him for a second before her eyes drifted back to the action. She could only just follow it but saw pieces of reishi arrows spraying every which way as they were torn apart by the seele schneider. None of them had actually hit the shield—yet. "And this isn't even . . . a fraction of how fast he used to be?" she asked with disbelief.

The shopkeeper smiled slightly in response.

Tatsuki glanced at Chappy, still finding she expected it to be Rukia, only to see she was doodling happily without any interest in the events. It had apparently become mundane. She resolved to try and talk with the Shinigami more sometime soon.

Ichigo checked his phone to find there was a text message from Rukia.

It read "Got to do some official stuff. Make sure Chappy eats and don't wait up for me, strawberry."

He frowned a little at what that was supposed to mean before deciding it was just as well as he had to get gifts and didn't really want her to be there when he had to do it. "Hey, Urahara-san, can I use the shower here?" he called.

The shopkeeper just gave him a cheeky thumbs-up.
Rolling his eyes, the someday-again substitute went over to Tatsuki and asked relatively quietly "Mind helping me out with something when I'm done?"

She raised an eyebrow at him before asking "Are you planning on doing something behind her back again?" She referred, of course, to their sparring matches.

"No," Ichigo said defensively, "I just think your opinion would be good." He trusted all of his friends but he trusted each of them more than the others with different things, and in this particular case Tatsuki was probably the most trustworthy and would give the best advice. Chappy would have to come along but could probably be easily distracted.

Tatsuki frowned slightly before saying "Alright, but you'd better not keep me in the dark."

"Yeah, yeah," he said dismissively, starting to head for the ladder.

Ryūken was reviewing budgetary reports on his way back to his office at the hospital when he finally saw Rukia leaning against a wall. He'd known she'd been there for quite awhile beforehand due to reiatsu. "Hospitals are no place for Shinigami to be haunting," he commented without interest, continuing past her.

"I have some questions," she said, falling into step behind him.

"I'm surprised it took you this long to come ask them," he replied.

"I wanted to make sure I wasn't wasting your time," she stated, picking her words and letting her tone soften to indicate a degree of deference.

The Last Quincy stopped for a second and halfway turned to consider her. He wasn't used to receiving respect from Shinigami. After a moment he resumed walking but didn't object further. Apparently the son shared the father's good taste.

Sunday, September 15, 2002

Ichigo sauntered up to the door of the Urahara Shop with Rukia alongside.

She remained confused as to what they were doing there on an off-day and was mildly annoyed that he continued to refuse to answer her questions about it or what was in the bag he was carrying.

He knocked on the large shutter door with the bottom of a fist, the shop appearing to be closed up for the weekend.

It was sometime later when Jinta popped open a section of it, looking irritable and sullenly demanding "What do you want?" when he saw the two of them.

"Here to see your boss and the lady of the shop," the would-be substitute replied.

After a moment the young teenager stepped aside and let them in.

"Ah, so, Kurosaki-san, why are you here today again?" Urahara asked with an air of confusion once he, Yoruichi, and the couple were assembled around a kotatsu having tea.

Ichigo wordlessly opened up the bag he was carrying and reached into it with both hands to withdraw two items, setting them in front of both the former Shinigami.
Rukia blinked as she saw they were both gift-wrapped packages.

Yoruichi immediately narrowed her eyes and twitched an eyebrow, glaring at the teenager and saying "That's not funny, you know."

"Don't blame me for how you talk," the young man replied steadily, "Besides, you more than meet the cutoff." It wasn't his fault that she chose to use washi as a personal pronoun instead of watashi and her word choice sounded like that of a stereotypical depiction of an old man.

"So does she," the Flash Goddess said with annoyance while pointing a finger at Rukia. The Shinigami wasn't young by human standards and her speech was hardly feminine either.

"As does your father," Urahara added, although his tone was neutral.

"Um—" Rukia began, confused as to what this was all about.

"That's different," Ichigo replied, scowling in turn. He wasn't that stupid and also didn't think of either Rukia or his dad in those terms.

"No, it isn't," Yoruichi stated, crossing her arms and declaring smugly, "You just don't want to admit that you're hot for—"

She was cut off by Rukia demanding "What's going on here?"

"It would seem Kurosaki-san has decided to get us gifts for Respect for the Aged Day," Urahara said conversationally. He had the tiniest of smiles, though it wasn't immediately clear whether it was because he found it funny, was just happy to receive a present, or both.

The petite Shinigami looked to her boyfriend in surprise before suddenly realizing what he probably meant by acknowledging them as such but not her or his father.

Ichigo glanced aside. The normal threshold for celebrating someone was 60, and all the Shinigami in his life more than qualified, but that didn't mean they all had to be treated equally. "Anyway, throw them out if you don't want them, but I thought we should also treat you to dinner, considering everything," he said with boredom.

Yoruichi continued to glare mildly, although her expression took on a look of appraisal. After a second she glanced to Urahara, who was already gazing her way, and they shared a look for a moment. If they were being treated, then given everything else that meant it was probably on Byakuya's credit, and so . . . "Fine," she said at last, "But you'll have to wait while we get changed."

If they were going out they would at least look more presentable. She stood and took her leave, taking her present with her.

Urahara gave the couple a mild smile before doing the same.

Ichigo and Rukia sat in silence for a time before she playfully asked "So why didn't you get me something?"

He grimaced and silently drank his tea.

When she returned, Yoruichi was wearing a jacket, blouse, a mildly conservative skirt, and heels, although the colors were somewhat loud and she moved with no less swagger than usual. Her only additional adornment was a black silk choker with a small silver bell set at its front. She'd found she liked the gift.
Both of the couple blinked at her appearance, never having seen her attired so femininely before.

The Flash Goddess took on a snide smirk at the expressions on their faces. "What, surprised?" She'd decided to use their state of dress as a benchmark and had then gone for a very slightly more formal look. If Ichigo was going to tease them about their ages, she had no problem with turning his offer around on him by making it a double date.

Ichigo was about to say something when Rukia covertly elbowed him in the side. She had more than enough intuition to tell what was going on.

Soon Urahara returned, having made a similar calculation. He wasn't really one for casual modern fashion and was in a dressed-down suit without a tie, although he'd put on a vest and a pocket watch chain was visibly poking out from one of its pockets. He'd also liked the gift he'd received.

"Let's eat," Yoruichi stated confidently.

They wound up in a rather nice yakiniku restaurant in Naruki, clustered around a table together, grilling barbecue on a gridiron. It was called Japanese barbecue elsewhere, but in Japan it was usually recognized as being Korean in origin. The place was proud of its beef and so they had overwhelmingly gone for rōsu, karubi, and misuji—slices of chuck, de-boned ribs, and shoulder—with vegetables, eschewing pork, chicken, seafood, and offal.

Somewhat unusually, Urahara wound up being the main tender of gridiron, appearing to have an eye for it.

Yoruichi kept their drinks coming as they ate, focusing largely on sake and cocktails as palette-cleansers while she herself served as their entertainment, belting out unusual stories about the Seireitei and the Gotei 13 and eventually getting Rukia to join her in sharing.

They weren't really loud or obnoxious, but given other diners were relatively scarce considering the day and the ages of those who were in attendance, they shortly wound up surrounded by empty tables.

"And so that's why Old Man Yama banned drinking sake before 5:00 PM for a year," the Flash Goddess concluded.

Rukia laughed before taking a drink.

Ichigo smiled and sipped at his own before beginning "Uh, Urahara-san, do—"

"No, shut up," Yoruichi demanded, pointing at him irritably.

The young man looked at her like she'd gone crazy.

"This is a nice evening out and there will be plenty of time for formality and talking about business and all that later. Tonight we're just people eating and drinking together," she stated sincerely. There was a lot to talk about, and a lot of it had been pre-planned, but it could wait until the next day.

Ichigo conceded and lifted his drink in agreement and deference, taking another sip.

Yoruichi assessed him for a moment and then looked to Rukia and back again before a wicked smirk took hold of her lips. "So, do you want to hear about what Byakuya-bo was like when he was around Rukia's age?" she asked.
Both of the couple blinked.

"Oh my," was all Urahara said at that.

Ichigo had practiced more moderation relative to his tolerance than Rukia had and so by the time they got home she was leaning against him rather notably. He took care to help her upstairs once they'd gotten their shoes off only for her to stop in the lounge at something she spied on one of the small tables. Sitting out in the open was a portable CD player with a cute but tasteful pink and silver-white color scheme, along with a pair of matching ear-bud headphones. He'd laid it out after she'd already gone downstairs when they'd left for the Urahara Shop.

She turned and looked up at him.

"I just happened to be out shopping for things, so I thought I'd pick it up," he explained with disinterest, the lack of packaging and wrapping being a deliberate choice to convey it wasn't the same kind of thing as the gifts for Yoruichi and Urahara.

"You never did deny you'd gotten me something," she said lightly, her eyelids coming down.

"It has nothing to do with the—" he started to explain.

She pulled him down by the collar and kissed him softly.

He took hold of her shoulders and held her, returning it.

She kept it simple, knowing he didn't care about her age but still unused to getting gifts from him. It was several long seconds before she pulled away.

"Need me to help you to the shower?" he asked with a hint of superiority. It was an odd role-reversal from the first time he'd drank.

"I know how to handle my alcohol, strawberry," she said with only a hint of irritation. She took up the CD player and headphones alike, seeming to consider them for a moment longer before going to the door to her room. "When I open this again I expect to see you ready for bed," she added, glancing to him before walking inside and closing it.

Ichigo settled onto Rukia's bed only to be surprised when she shifted to sit down on his stomach rather than getting situated.

She left his arms free and asked "Who's taller now?" in a flirty way, slowly leaning down and getting her arms around his neck and one of her hands up into his hair, maneuvering him upwards a bit as she made eye contact.

"Rukia—" he started.

She shushed him and kissed him again, gradually starting to make out with him, not being quite as patient as the last time and having decided there'd be fewer limits.

He grasped her sides and squeezed at them, immediately cooperating with her. After awhile he used his grasp on her to turn her onto her side and then onto her back, shifting down as he did so and getting a hand into her hair. When they occasionally broke for air he played at her neck, the underside of her jaw, along her cheeks, and with her earlobes.
It was after much more of the same that she kissed his forehead and pulled his head to the crook of her neck, whispering "Love you," to him.

He gave a peck there and replied "Love you too," as he got comfortable against her.
On Each Other's Team

Monday, September 16, 2002

Rukia stopped Ichigo on their way to the school's main gate and stood close, sharing a relatively private moment. "I'll be back early today," she said quietly, "It's a big day."

"Yeah?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," she said, smiling slightly.

He scowled at the mystery but it wasn't really any different than what he'd done the other day so it was only fair. He elected not to press her on it and finally looked at the retreating backs of his friends to indicate they were falling behind.

She stood with him a moment longer before producing her Soul Candy dispenser and swapping out with Chappy.

It was more than an hour later when Yoruichi hollered out "Time!" loud enough to be heard across the training area.

Ichigo immediately began stretching his legs as he returned with Chad to where the observational group was assembled. He'd started getting used to the ridiculousness of their training and was no longer much bothered by it but it was important to warm up and wind down so Rukia didn't have to keep babying him every night—even if he didn't really mind her attention. He was surprised to find not only Tatsuki but Keigo and Mizuiro were waiting with Yoruichi, Inoue, and Ishida. Urahara had also come back down, and Rukia had returned. The only ones of the makeshift club missing were his dad and sisters. His eyes searched across their faces, focusing mainly on his girlfriend's—they all knew something he didn't. "So what's the big surprise?" he asked with a small frown once he got into conversational distance.

Rukia walked out the short distance to meet him, passing by Chad, and they stood together for a second looking at one another before she abruptly thrust a gloved palm up into his chin, knocking his soul out of his body.

He staggered back, proclaiming "You could at least warn me you're going to do that, you know!"

"I was feeling nostalgic," she said without concern.

Tessai collected his body before it could topple over and as Ichigo rubbed at his jaw he saw that his dad was actually there, just in his Shinigami form, arms crossed and looking on.

Rukia waited until Tessai was out of the way before stepping forward to stand beside her boyfriend, although she faced the opposite direction.

After a moment of confusion, he turned the same way, such that his back was to everyone else.

"Today we've got a guest to tell you—and all the rest of us—what's going to be going on," she said in a low tone.

He glanced to her and was about to ask for clarification when a *senkaimon* materialized a short distance in front of them. A moment later it opened and Ukitake stepped out. "Ukitake-san?" Ichigo
asked immediately. It wasn't who he might've expected.

"Taichō!" Rukia called with a polite smile.

The white-haired taichō smiled in return and walked up to them, nodding at Rukia and greeting her with "Kuchiki," before looking to Ichigo and doing the same, adding "Ichigo-kun, it seems you're due for an explanation about what's going on."

Ichigo just held his tongue. Exactly what more was there to explain? He watched as Ukitake's eyes shifted to something behind them before a smile took hold of his face again.

"It would seem everything's already prepared," Ukitake said, extending a hand to gesture for them to go first.

Both Ichigo and Rukia turned to see that a picnic-style spread had been laid out on a large blanket by everyone else while they'd had their backs turned. Apparently someone had gone to pick up food. Ichigo blinked before he felt Rukia's hand take his and she started to lead him over.

Ukitake followed behind.

They'd been eating and making small talk as a group for awhile when Ukitake finally cleared his throat and spoke up, saying "I understand you've already been informed about your substitute badge," to Ichigo.

"Rukia told me early on in Tokyo," the orange-haired young man replied, brushing it off.

Ishida's eyes widened as he recalled his first reaction to having seen the badge.

"Unfortunately, Kuchiki doesn't know the entire story," Ukitake continued, glancing to Rukia for a moment.

The petite Shinigami's eyes also widened slightly at what that was supposed to mean. She hadn't been told of any other functions.

"The badges were created as a contingency a long time before there were ever any substitutes wielding them. In addition to functioning as tracking and communication devices, they also function as reiatsu limiters. The authority they supposedly confer to represent the Gotei 13 is a cover-story . . . as you no doubt learned when you encountered Kurumadani and he had no idea what it was. I told you that the badge would be issued to those deemed beneficial to Soul Society, but the truth is we issue them to anyone who gains Shinigami powers to keep track of them and control their abilities," Ukitake went on rather grimly. "Only taichō and the sōtaichō know the true nature of this program, and I'm the one who came up with it," he finished, looking directly to Ichigo. There had been a proposal to extend that knowledge to fukutaichō but it hadn't gone forward—yet.

The picnic was deadly silent. On some level, Ichigo was aware of the fact that the information was being presented to him directly while he was surrounded by his friends and family by the man responsible for it as a show of trust and confession. On another, he could see the logic: there was no way to ensure the loyalty of substitutes to Soul Society and so they had to be treated as liabilities no matter their utility; he didn't take orders from anyone but sometimes Rukia, so if she was a soldier, then he was like a kind of mercenary. He looked down in thought. Neither of these things was truly at the forefront of his mind.

They were however in Ishida's, as was something else: If a Shinigami transferring powers to a human is a crime, like what happened with Kuchiki-san, then how do . . . He stared at Ukitake
openly as he remembered that Renji had repeatedly assumed Ichigo had taken Rukia's powers. The substitute badges were issued to those who crippled or killed Shinigami for their power. It was no different than the method of gaining a position as a taichō through trial by combat, as the 11th Division did. If the Shinigami in question didn't die they were punished for their weakness and their attacker was shackled without their knowledge . . . The Gotei 13 really is . . . a brutal organization!

Rukia was likewise staring, having connected all the same dots much more quickly.

Yoruichi and Isshin were both looking away from the proceedings. It wasn't a pleasant topic of conversation.

It was Urahara who didn't look away, eyes gleaming from under his hat. "You should also know that, historically, there's been no such thing as retirement," he said after a moment.

All heads and eyes turned to him except for Ichigo's.

"Central 46's philosophy is 'The Gotei 13 is a noble institution. Anyone who has successfully entered it must not be permitted to leave.' When someone is no longer capable of performing their duties, they're given a leave of absence; when they can no longer uphold the values of their Division, they're expelled and put in another . . . but nobody withdraws. Nobody retires. Ensuring that is one of the responsibilities of the 2nd Division and the Onmitsukidō," Urahara concluded darkly. He didn't elaborate on his prior role as the head of the Detention Unit and warden of the Maggot's Nest. He also didn't elaborate on what that meant about the status of himself, Tessai, Yoruichi, Isshin, and the remaining independent Visored. The particulars weren't important.

Once more there was a lethal quiet and all eyes returned to Ichigo. Rukia instinctively reached out for one of his hands. She'd heard rumors about the 2nd Division since becoming a fukutaichō but she hadn't known any of that. Something at the back of her mind also tugged at her thoughts regarding Urahara's intentions. When he hid the Hōgyoku within me and tried to turn me into a human . . . was he trying to get me away from the Gotei 13 . . . to be with Ichigo? At the time, the Gotei 13 had been a cold and indifferent organization to her—her brother had ignored her existence except as a burden and Renji had been lost to her for decades. Ichigo had been the first person who had really cared about her, who had refused to abandon her, since Kaien . . .

Ichigo didn't resist her grip but let out a short laugh, prompting concerned expressions before he asked "Is this supposed to be the part where you scare me off?" It didn't matter. He'd already gone too far, and he would have to deal with them eventually anyway. There was no way around the matter so they just had to go straight through it. Rukia had told him he had changed things, and this conversation was proof of it, so he would just have to change them more. "You think I didn't notice something was weird about the badge or that the Gotei 13 wasn't exactly what you'd call friendly? If you wanted to deceive me in a way I'd never notice you easily could have," he said. He then glanced to Rukia, adding "One of the first sentences out of her mouth to me was 'Usually, I would kill fellows like you.' If you wanted to scare me then you're too late, and I don't really care that much, so drop the Yakuza act and tell me why you're really here." With that he picked up his chopsticks and started to eat again.

Rukia found herself staring at Ichigo in disbelief at how casually he took it.

Ukitake was as surprised as everyone else and took a moment before retrieving papers from his shihakushō. Opening them, he withdrew six photos, laying them out in front of Ichigo. They weren't the greatest quality and had all clearly been taken surreptitiously. "This group calls itself Xcution. These are, respectively, Ginjō Kūgo, Kutsuzawa Giriko, Dokugamine Riruka, Tsukishima Shūkurō, Jackie Tristan, and Yukio Hans Vorarlberna," he stated, pointing at each in turn.
"I'm not very good with names and faces," Ichigo said curtly, his mouth still full.

Ukitake continued: "Ginjō is their leader. He was the first substitute Shinigami and gained his powers through murdering multiple Shinigami and taking theirs by utilizing his abilities as a Fullbringer. When he discerned what I just told you, he disappeared without a trace. He had by that time met Tsukishima and since then he's found and recruited the others. Although we've been able to gather some intelligence on them, we've never been able to successfully mount a strike against them. It's our belief that they'll eventually seek you out under the guise of convincing you to join them, while their real objective will be to take your powers and divide them among themselves." With that he looked at Ichigo directly and began to relate what was known of their histories, personalities, and abilities.

Ichigo found himself looking at the pictures of Ginjō, Tsukishima, and Kutsuzawa as he quietly ate. Their attitudes and powers were the most concerning, especially Tsukishima's. If they were coming for him, then they also wouldn't hesitate to go after those around him. Ukitake, and by extension Yamamoto, weren't really doing this to convince him to do Soul Society's dirty work. It wasn't even a question of proving his loyalty or anything like that. If they were right, this would happen regardless, and so it was really about informing him so he could defend himself and others. That was good enough for him. After a moment he collected up the photos and handed them off to Ishida to memorize and pass around. It would be more difficult for Tsukishima to screw with their histories if they all had a memory of coming together to discuss him as a threat. "So if I actually become a Fullbringer that makes them more likely to show up sooner rather than later, right?" he asked.

"That seems like a distinct possibility," Ukitake replied.

"Urahara-san, how long until you can get that sword-thing ready?" the orange-haired young man asked over one shoulder.

"There are still some issues but in theory I could do it in a month. However, charging it will take quite awhile without Soul Society's help," the shopkeeper replied, looking to Ukitake.

"We'll do whatever we can," the taichō stated.

Urahara nodded before glancing to Rukia. Although he was sure she wanted to contribute the bulk of the reiatsu if she could, sharing the burden of filling it would make the process much faster.

"Then it's settled," Ichigo said, looking to Rukia in the process. Though his tone was light, there was a note of finality to it. If that was the price to be paid for the things he wanted, then he would pay it. There was whatever his dad was worried about on the other side of Xcution as well, which was probably why he was being so quiet. It was just how things were. Life for him was never meant to be normal. "When do we start this Fullbring thing?" he asked.

"Tomorrow, if you're up to it," Yoruichi replied. She was satisfied he was in near peak physical condition for his age and body type and that he was ready.

It was only after they had left Ukitake, Urahara, Yoruichi, and Isshin behind in the shop to discuss things that their friends really spoke up.

"We'll be on our guard too," Ishida said with assurance.

"Mmm," Chad affirmed.

"We'll definitely stay alert, Rukia, Kurosaki-kun!" Inoue chimed in.
"Let us help too," Tatsuki demanded, and from the expressions on Mizuiro and Keigo's faces it was clear they agreed with her.

Ichigo rubbed at the back of his head and exhaled, gesturing at the shop and saying "I don't know how you could but if you want to try then talk to them, they'll know better than I do." He could try to stop them but they'd do it anyway, just like he would in their shoes.

Rukia silently tugged at one of his wrists and started to pull him back toward home. Her grip was unusually strong and insistent and she didn't look his way or at anyone else.

He blinked and glanced toward her before he discerned what was meant by it coupled with her general silence and went along, giving everyone else a casual wave goodnight.

Nobody said anything at their departure. As a group the other teenagers walked back into the shop.

It was only once they were home and had their shoes off that Rukia turned to Ichigo and looked up at him, saying "I didn't know," like they were the most serious words that would ever leave her mouth.

"I know," he steadily replied.

"I didn't know!" she repeated, reaching up and grasping his sides.

His expression softened at the pained look on her face and he pulled her to him, hugging her. "It's okay," he said quietly.

"No, it's not!" she objected, even as she pressed her face to his chest and embraced him in turn. She had gotten him into all of this and she knew he was continuing on with it in spite of everything he'd been told because of her more than anything.

Ichigo held onto her for a long moment before very slowly taking a knee, and then taking the other such that he was kneeling in front of her. Given their differences in height it brought him to just below even with her. He made eye-contact and reached his hands up to her cheeks, cupping them.

Rukia searched in his eyes and found they were clear and resolute, which just made her feel worse. "You fool . . ." she whispered.

He exhaled and likewise searched in hers for a moment before saying "I told you once that you helped me be who I was supposed to be and that I wouldn't trade it for anything. A long time before that I told you that sacrificing yourself wasn't about complicated stuff like ideals and duty. I've always wanted the power to protect people . . . as many people as I could . . . and it's because of you, mom, dad, Urahara-san, Yoruichi-san, and everyone else that I had it and can have it again. Even if I wanted to escape this, Rukia, it would seek me out. I was born into this. I was born to do this."

"Ichigo . . ." she muttered, before closing her eyes tightly and pressing her forehead to his. She'd volunteered, she'd had a choice—he'd been conscripted, he hadn't. It wasn't fair and to call it his birthright . . .

"If people are coming to harm me and the people I care about, I'll just get stronger. If Soul Society's rules are harsh, I'll get stronger until I can change them. If they refuse to change then I'll just get stronger still. That's the kind of man I am in your heart, right?" he asked quietly. It wasn't about fairness or choice; it was still about doing what needed to be done when it needed to be done. What else was he supposed to do . . . sit and cry? He would lose it all anyway if he did that. That was why he had promised to keep going no matter what.
It was a long interval before she slowly pulled her head back and opened her eyes to regard him again and he followed suit. "Yes, you are," she replied, giving him a weak smile.

Ichigo smiled back a little cockily and gently ran his thumbs under her lower eyelids. "Besides, it's not like you'd run off from the job or you'd ever want to retire anyway, so sooner or later I'll be stuck doing the work with you no matter what the rules are, right?"

Rukia blinked and he could feel her cheeks heat up against the palms of his hands as she shook her head slightly. He was wrong. There was only one thing that could convince her to leave her duties behind, but it still meant he was wrong. She knew that if it came to such a choice that he would give up everything to work alongside her just as she would give up everything to be free alongside him. That he seemed closer to making that sacrifice and not her, or not the both of them together . . . how was she supposed to respond to that?

He let his smile become sincere and watched her for a time before beginning to whisper "You should stop feeling so guilty about everything that's introduced me to my future wi—" Although he was on his knees it wasn't a proposal, it just felt like the right time to finally acknowledge the reality of their situation. There was no one else for him in his world and no one else for her in hers. They had both hinted and teased and demurred and they both knew it.

She realized what he was going to say and cut him off by leaning her head forward and kissing him tenderly, not ready to hear him say that word yet no matter what the reason, even if she knew the same things.

He returned and held it for awhile before bringing his head alongside hers and just holding her.

She held onto him in silence for a very long time before saying "We still need to do homework," rather lamely. She normally found the mundane aspects of the Living World sort of charming, but as of right then they were definitely a burden.

"How practical," Ichigo muttered with a small smile. He pushed himself up onto his feet before picking her up, supporting her with one arm and using the other to get their bags.

"H—Hey! What's the big idea?" she demanded.

"I've got to rescue you from English homework, so stop complaining about how you're being rescued," he said drolly, carting her off to the study.

Despite herself, she held onto him and went along without further objection.

It was deep into the evening when Ichigo noticed Rukia's focus was drifting away from their impromptu English lesson and he decided to bring it to an end, shutting the notebook she was using.

"I was still working," she said.

"You're tired," he rejoined, adding "Come on, time to get ready for bed."

She made a show of acting grumpy about it but didn't actually put up any resistance, going along. Once they were upstairs she noticed that his attitude was a bit different—he seemed slightly distant. She looked to him with mild concern.

"It's nothing," he said with a small smile, before he rubbed at his hair and said "It's just there's a lot to think on, so . . . tonight I'd like some space." He'd almost always allowed her to determine how their nights would go except when she threw the question back at him, and so it was no crime or insult to
request time alone. He knew she'd understand.

She looked down for a second before returning her gaze to him and nodding.

He reached a hand out and brought the tip of an index finger to above her heart, drawing a lazy circle there as she did to him lately, noticing a resistance under the fabric of her school uniform. He smirked a little at it and said "'Night, Rukia."

"Goodnight, Ichigo," she replied, giving a small smile back.

With that they parted ways.

Tuesday, September 17, 2002

"Mayuri-sama is very busy," Nemu said with ambivalence.

"I understand, but we're not leaving until we get the doll," Ukitake replied with a smile.

"Be specific or she'll get confused," Kenpachi muttered.

Byakuya stared with disinterest.

Shunsui stretched and yawned.

It was an odd assemblage on an odder mission. Ukitake had been briefed on Kon and his likely whereabouts the previous evening by Urahara and had decided to take up the matter given how unshakable Ichigo's commitment had been. He'd gotten Shunsui to come along because they were old friends, Byakuya by the fact it was something Ichigo had requested, and Kenpachi for the same reason plus the fact he liked pressing Mayuri's buttons. He probably could've gotten others but four taichō was sufficient to be impossible to ignore—more was just gratuitous.

Nemu stared at them in turn for awhile before saying "I will inform him of your presence," and turning to leave. He surely already knew, and the threat of authority and violence posed by this particular group of taichō if they didn't get what they wanted was very easy to discern. It was perhaps a matter on which concession was the smart play.
Now We Are On A Mission

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tuesday, September 17, 2002

When Ichigo woke up he found Rukia curled up against him. Her arms were in front of her and her fingers were loosely dug into the fabric of the t-shirt he'd worn to bed. He watched her for a moment as he tried to figure out why she was next to him before deciding she'd probably switched rooms after a patrol. He found he couldn't manage to even pretend to be upset that she'd joined him—he'd said 'tonight' and she'd given it to him. Was she worried about him? He brought his hand up to one of her cheeks and started to caress there, whispering "Hey."

She only faintly stirred.

"Oi, Shinigami, come on, you're the one who asked me to wake you up," he continued, letting his tone and expression become a bit tetchy although none of it translated into his motions.

It was after another minute or two of prompting that she finally opened her eyes fractionally.

He stopped at the look she gave him, pretty sure it would've melted his heart if she hadn't stolen it away sometime prior. She looked sleepy, concerned, and glad all at once. He hesitated for only a split-second before narrowing his eyes and scowling hard in response to it to avoid betraying himself. "Don't wake up all the way. I'm just letting you know I'm going to start cooking. Sleep in," he quietly commanded.

Her fingers tightened to grasp his shirt as he started to pull away.

He looked back to her in surprise to find some purpose on her face, but it gave way and she only observed him for a second before letting go, shutting her eyes again. He got up and tucked her in, quietly leaving to get breakfast and lunch started before showering and getting dressed.

Rukia took her time getting ready, distracted by the thoughts and feelings that were still swirling around inside her. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about the future and her mind had churned through an endless number of questions since the night before. They mostly revolved around whether it was right to allow Ichigo to choose to let the affairs of the dead take precedence over his life, even if he'd likely become involved whether he wanted to or not, but also because while she had initially framed it as something in which she'd had a choice and he hadn't, from a different perspective the reverse was true . . . she'd never gotten to really live. They were approaching the matter from two completely different directions. What kind of balance would they strike? How would they . . . be? That fool would probably tell me not to worry so much and that it'll all turn out fine, she eventually concluded, though it did nothing to stop her from worrying.

She knew he'd spoken from the heart, and she also knew that he meant what he'd been about to say. That had left her both trepidatious and giddy and made her even more worried. But if everything filled her with doubt, at her core was a certainty in him. Was it the same for him with her? Was that what they really meant to one another when they called each other their pride? Every movement away from that surety just seemed to yield questions. She asked Shirayuki Is this what you meant . . . when you said he'd make me soft and break my heart?
The *zanpakutō* spirit answered *Yes, and you know your certainty is the place you have to start from again, Rukia-dono.*

Rukia exhaled. She did. All she could do was to hold onto that one absolute and advance from there one step at a time with him. Talking about what she wanted in the future with him was all well and good but to truly achieve it they had to be ready to seize it for themselves. *Ichigo, you and me . . .* she thought, before she realized she was almost quoting one of the songs from their music shopping trip. She mentally recalled it and used it to steel her resolve.

Finally centering herself, she went on with her morning routine, making a mental note to send a text to Zennosuke to let him know she would be arriving for his training later in the evening. She not only had an obligation but a need to be present for when—she knew it wasn't a question of if—Ichigo regained some measure of power.

They were on their way to the Urahara Shop after school with everyone else when Ichigo looked sideways to her, asking "Don't you still have to train that guy?" Whatever had bothered her that morning, she'd shown no sign of it at breakfast or at any other point during the day and had seemed to be her typical blend of mischievous and proper.

"Think I'd miss seeing you become useful again, strawberry?" she needled, returning the look with an air of superiority and a degree of indignation that he'd even suggest she'd prioritize one over the other.

"I thought you'd trust I had it under control and would go handle your obligations," he said, somewhere halfway between vexation and indifference. He wasn't mad because she was probably doing it as much out of pride in him as concern, but it felt kind of like she was turning up at practice to cheer him on or something. It was weird.

"How many times do I have to tell you that watching you is my mission?" she asked with pique, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You can't use that as an excuse when I'm surrounded by practically everyone I know and the whole point of helping him do his job is so you can do that better," he retorted, starting to argue more for the sake of it than anything.

"It's not an excuse, fool! I told him I'll be meeting with him afterwards. However late I am is really just a matter of how long it takes you to do whatever it is you need to do." she said, putting it back on him. She left it unstated that it would probably cut into her homework time and they'd have to stop and eat somewhere.

"Tch," he replied, turning his head.

"Hmph," she said in turn, likewise looking away.

Chad, Inoue, Ishida, Tatsuki, Keigo, and Mizuiro were trailing behind them—the latter three had eschewed their plans for the early evening to be present for the occasion as moral support. They all shared knowing glances with one another at the couple's antics. It was clear they were both nervous.

Keigo took his time to think up the perfect stupid thing to say to break the tension.

Ichigo stood opposite Chad in the training room, uncertainly holding onto his substitute badge. "Why'd you tell me to bring this along?" He wasn't entirely sure what to think of it after what Ukitake had said but he'd decided to be practical and kept it with him as a reciprocal show of trust.
"Fullbring is manifested through an object. Usually one you have an affinity for. I have this," Chad replied, pulling out the old Mexican *peso* which he wore as a necklace before gesturing at the badge and adding "That's the best thing I could think of for you."

The orange-haired teenager blinked and looked down at the badge. He didn't have remotely the attachment to it that Chad had to the coin.

"You had it on you all throughout your time as a Shinigami, so it soaked in your *reiatsu* and has been modifying it too, right?" the giant asked before putting the necklace back away. Although he hadn't seen it on Ichigo after the war until recently, it seemed like the closest thing he had and it would do by virtue of what it was and when he'd carried it. "It can be anything you've kept on you for a time, but if you want to fight, then . . ."

Ichigo looked back up to him. "Yeah, I get it. Alright, so what's next?" he asked.

Chad drew in a breath. He'd been told what was known of the ability by Urahara some time ago while they'd been training, and it had fit with his own memories. He wasn't usually one to explain these kinds of things, but . . . "What I felt when I was first able to use my powers was pride. My grandfather gave me this *peso* as a lucky charm, but to me it became a symbol of my promise to only fight to protect others. So my skin can be like armor, and much like the eagle on the coin is holding itself up with one leg and攻击ing with another, I can defend with one arm and strike with the other. I've run into a lot of trouble for who I am, how I look, and for associating with you . . . but I never once lost pride in my grandfather and what he stood for and taught me, and what that's enabled me to do! So when I could finally fight Hollows to help you and Kuchiki-san and everyone . . ." he trailed off, glancing away.

The would-be substitute found he could only stare.

The giant's eyes returned to rest on his friend as he said "So try and remember when you felt pride in being able to stand up for others, or for being a Shinigami! The badge will surely respond to that! Remember, Ichigo!"

Ichigo looked down at the badge again as a whole host of scenes flashed through his mind. There were so many and yet . . . he looked up again and turned to face where everyone else was gathered in the distance to observe. They were too far away to be audible but he could see all his friends plainly, watching him. Standing with her arms crossed among them was Rukia, looking straight at him resolutely and confidently. He surveyed them all but his eyes kept returning to his girlfriend and that unflappable certainty in how she was postured, visible even from such a distance. He clutched the badge in hand and shut his eyes tightly. *I don't need to remember, because I can barely stop thinking about it as is!*

Chad's eyes went wide as vanes of what looked exactly like jet black *reiatsu* erupted from the badge before they instantly began to warp and twist, forming perfectly dark tendrils and spines that relentlessly advanced up his friend's arm.

What . . . is that!?

Rukia's eyes went wide at the darkness that appeared to be consuming her boyfriend's right arm. Even from so far away she could see what seemed to be long blades coming off of where his hand should be. "Ichigo!" she called out in dread and fear. She was about to run to him when a hand firmly came down onto her shoulder. Her gaze snapped to the source to find Urahara watching the proceedings.

His expression was cold and he said nothing, not even looking to her.
She clenched her hands and her jaw as she forced herself to remain still, yet again recalling what the shopkeeper had told her during Ichigo's fight with the Menos Grande. There was a very delicate balance to be struck between believing in him and knowing when to intervene that she still couldn't precisely identify.

Urahara withdrew his hand and continued to watch implacably.

Rukia flinched slightly as a rather more reassuring touch replaced it and she realized Yoruichi was standing behind her. Her opposing wrist was likewise soon being lightly grasped and she glanced to see it was Inoue, who offered her a tiny smile before looking back toward the action. Rukia's eyes flickered over the others, finding they all looked grim and concerned but also oddly confident. She let her gaze return to Ichigo and poured all of her own certainty into it. *Whatever this is, you can definitely . . . !*

Ichigo grasped at his right bicep with his left hand as the darkness seemed to be trying to entwine itself around his shoulders and torso. His pulse was elevated and he was starting to sweat but did his best to keep his breathing under control. "Chad," he said after awhile, glancing up at the giant, "try and hit me."

"What?" Chad replied incredulously, still no less confused by what was happening.

"Try and hit me! For me, this kind of thing . . . it always resolves when having to deal with outside force!" the future substitute declared as a smirk seized hold of his face.

After a moment's hesitation, the giant summoned up Brazo Derecha de Gigante and drew his right arm back.

Ichigo brought his own arms up into a ready stance. He could feel the hilt of the blade trying to form in his hands. He just needed to focus more.

"El Directo," Chad declared.

It took quite awhile for the dust from the impact to begin to clear. Although Rukia swore she sometimes caught fleeting sensations of Ichigo's *reiatsu* when they were close, it was still far too weak for her to passively sense at a distance. Her eyes searched the dust plume for any sign of him, although she refused to assume the worst. The first thing she saw was a black outfit. It took her a moment to realize that it wasn't the wispy darkness. It was something that looked an awful lot like a *shihakushō*. It continued on his right arm up into what was very clearly a sword, and that did continue to warp and curl. All around him the ground was deeply scarred from the impact of Chad's attack, and she could tell he was grinning.

She couldn't stop herself from smiling.

Chad blinked as he saw the outfit his friend was suddenly cloaked in.

"Guess I finally don't have to run anymore," Ichigo said confidently as the last of the dust settled.

The giant gave a rare smile and stood up straight before saying "It's not that simple."

"Eh?" the future substitute said, suddenly looking perplexed. He'd done it, hadn't he?

"It's incomplete, but it's a start," Chad continued. He was about to explain when
a senkaimon suddenly appeared between and off to one side of them, stopping him.

There was a pause before the door slid open and Renji stepped out, spotting the assembled group off in the distance before turning to Chad on his right. Something about the teenager's expression clued him in and he then turned to the left, spotting Ichigo. "What the hell happened to you?" he demanded as he saw the ensemble. Despite the resemblance it wasn't a shihakushō, and the thing in his hands was clearly no zanpakutō.

"Oi, what are you doing here, Renji?" Ichigo demanded in return, before he blinked and stopped, staring at the crimson-haired Shinigami and then the senkaimon itself "Wait, why can I suddenly see that and you . . . ?"

Renji scowled and rubbed the back of his head. Whatever he had just arrived in the middle of was strange and he immediately took it to somehow be Urahara's doing. "Don't ask me that like I should know! I'm just here because Kuchiki-taichō needed somebody to make a delivery," he said irritably.

He refused to publicly admit that he didn't at all mind a break from the usual routine, no matter how short it might be—even if it involved him basically being an errand boy.

"Huh?" Ichigo asked, even more confused. What could Byakuya possibly need to send them on such short notice?

The crimson-haired Shinigami took a moment to fish something out of his shihakushō before nonchalantly tossing it to the would-be substitute.

Ichigo instinctively caught it with his left hand only to immediately realize it was a lion plushy. "Kon?" he asked, not quite believing it.

"Stop squeezing me so hard! What kind of a greeting is that, especially after I was forced to travel along in that guy's uniform?! Ichigo, do you have any idea of the hardships I've been through!?!" the mod-soul exclaimed, writhing about.

"Still the same as ever, I see," Rukia said curtly as she walked up. Her disapproving image was compromised by the fact she couldn't stop smiling, although it had taken on a character closer to a smirk.

Kon immediately snapped his head around at the sound of her voice before whining "Nē-saaan! I've been so lonely!" and managing to extricate himself from Ichigo's grasp, lunging for her.

The petite Shinigami was about to smash him into the ground when he was instead snatched out of the air by Urahara with one hand, while he used the other to spray some sort of aerosol can onto Ichigo's hand and wrist. "Oh, it would seem that the illustrious 'King of New York' has finally returned to us," he mused aloud before he pocketed the can and began to walk off with the plushy firmly in hand, adding "I'll have him back to you in a short while." The decontamination screening would only take an hour or two.

"Stop squeezing so tightly and let go of me you—" Kon began, before he caught sight of Inoue, Yoruichi, and Tatsuki watching events from a few steps back. He immediately fell silent at the rapturous sight . . . although Tatsuki wasn't as impressive, he'd been away for a long time and even she looked a lot more feminine.

Ichigo and Rukia were left regarding one another, their eyes locked and small smiles on their faces. "Still think it was a good idea?" she asked after awhile, deliberately being vague as to whether she meant Kon or not.
"It'll work out somehow," he replied, likewise being vague and just continuing to watch her.

"Well, that's probably enough for one day anyway, we can reconvene again tomorrow. No point in rushing things," Yoruichi said. It was true and obvious to her that they needed time together at the moment.

"I should attend to Kurumadani then," Rukia stated, starting to reach for her Soul Candy dispenser.

"Is he still not ready yet?" Renji asked with disdain.

"I want to be sure he's prepared," the 13th Division fukutaichō replied with a haughty tone.

"So you're coddling him," the 6th Division fukutaichō declared, before adding "Let me evaluate him then." He'd noticed the same thing as Yoruichi had.

"Renji—" Rukia began with a note of annoyance.

The crimson-haired Shinigami was already making his way past the teenagers for the ladder, calling back with finality "Shut up, if you trained him it'll be fine, just like those rookies in your training program." He wouldn't trash the guy and it was obvious she'd rather stay with her other charge instead. It would be more productive for everybody and it kept him away from his desk job longer.

The raven-haired Shinigami crossed her arms but let it go, not willing to acknowledge what he was doing aloud.

Ishida adjusted his glasses before piping up by asking Ichigo "So you were able to see the senkaimon and Renji?"

"Yeah," the orange-haired young man replied, suddenly stumped by that again. He tried releasing the badge and as his grip on it slackened the sword and his imitation shihakushō evaporated away, leaving him in his workout clothes. He looked about himself curiously before pocketing the badge and then producing the seele schneider, handing it out to Ishida.

"Keep it," the archer said blithely.

"You said—" Ichigo started, only to stop as he abruptly realized Rukia was next to him.

"I guess we can spend the time on homework," she declared with a hint of amusement.

"Um, could we maybe do that over food? I'm really hungry," Inoue said with an apologetic laugh.

"You're always hungry," Tatsuki admonished, glad matters were back to something she felt she could give some input on.

"Inoue-san is still growing, after all," Mizuiro noted without a hint of subtext.

"Don't just say things like that when you clearly only mean her—" Keigo began, only to be slapped upside the head by Tatsuki.

"And don't you just say things like that yourself!" she exclaimed.

Ichigo put the Quincy device away and smiled a little more, glancing to Rukia.

She returned the look before starting to head toward the ladder herself, saying "Let's go then."

They wound up having to queue up at the ladder, with the girls insisting the boys went first.
"Urahara-san really should invest in an elevator at this rate," Ichigo muttered as he started climbing.

"Talk less and you'll eat sooner, strawberry!" Rukia called out authoritatively from below him.

The pair were about to start heading home from the study session and dinner at the local MOS Burger when Yoruichi arrived and placed an order, joining them at their table. She immediately produced the lion plushy from her jacket and set it on the table before placing a spherical pill next to it. "Kisuke wanted to make sure he didn't have any surprises on him like what happened to Ishida-kun," she stated. She left it unsaid as to why exactly she'd removed the mod-soul from his avatar for transport as it seemed obvious.

"Wait, what happened to you?" Ichigo asked, glancing to the archer. He'd never heard anything about it before.

"It was nothing," Ishida said sourly, making it very clear he didn't want to talk about it.

Ichigo frowned a little before looking back to the doll and pill, putting both in his school bag. He'd put Kon back together once they were home.

"So what are you all studying here anyway?" the Flash Goddess asked.

"World history," Tatsuki said with evident disgust.

"Oh, really? Anything in the 20th century? I'm a first-hand source you know!" Yoruichi proclaimed with evident pride.

"Yoruichi-san, you've traveled?" Mizuiro asked with disbelief.

"Of course, you think I'd stay in that stuffy shop all the time?" she said with obvious annoyance, before gesturing at their books "Name an event."

The members of the study group glanced at one another uncertainly before Rukia decided to play along, looking down at the text and picking out "The Suez Crisis, 1956."

The Flash Goddess seemed to ponder it for a moment before going "Oh yeah, I was in Tangier," she said, before adding "That's in Morocco . . . which is in northern Africa. It had just stopped being the Interzone—a UN international zone—about a week before that all went down, so it seemed like most people were still too preoccupied with recovering to really notice. It was rather strange because I was present at the end of an international experiment simultaneously watching one of the last gasps of imperialism . . . ." She trailed off as she noticed all the weird looks she was getting and cleared her throat before saying "Anyway! It was kind of worrying because of how many players were involved! Did you know that later contributed to Canada changing its flag to what it is today? Now there's a fact you can impress a teacher with!"

"Ah—" Tatsuki began, looking sort of confused.

Yoruichi turned her head as she heard her last name called and waved the young woman to a pause before getting up to get her order.

"Well, we should probably get going," Ichigo said at the awkward silence, standing. He sort of wanted to know more about the woman's adventures in the Living World but if they stayed they'd be there all night. He waited for Rukia to join him, which she did after a moment, before offering "See you all tomorrow!" with a smile.
They were given a mildly enthusiastic chorus of "Goodnight," as they departed.

Rukia took up one of his hands as they left, saying "Let's stay and listen next time."

"Yeah, yeah, it's just Tuesday night isn't exactly the time," he replied. He didn't have to admit it was interesting.

Kon abruptly found himself inhabiting the lion plushy again, looking up to see Ichigo peering down at him curiously. "What took you so long??" the mod-soul demanded.

The young man's expression became annoyed before he stood and yawned, dismissively saying "We wanted to enjoy some peace and quiet one last time now that you're here."

The stuffed animal blinked at what exactly that was supposed to mean before glancing around. They were definitely in a room with Ichigo's things, but it wasn't his room. It was a lot larger. Even the bed he was on was larger. Where were they? And why was Rukia there again? Why had it taken them so many months to spring him from the 12th Division? What was with that weird outfit he'd been wearing? And her hair had been different and . . . had she been wearing pantyhose? "What's going on?" he demanded suspiciously, standing up and pointing a finger at the teenager.

Ichigo already had his back to the plushy and said with modest contrition "Sorry, I wasn't really in a position to get you back earlier, and if I'm honest I sort of forgot about you for awhile."

Kon immediately faltered. It wasn't at all an answer to his question, but it also wasn't the Ichigo he remembered. Ichigo never apologized—certainly not to him.

Before he could respond the young man was already on his way out of the room, saying "Anyway, feel free to look around, but don't get into trouble and you're not allowed in Rukia's room."

The plushy's face faulted at the implication that that was where he was going even as his mind noted she'd never had a room to herself before. When he finally reacted and ran over to the door he was just in time to see the one opposite close and was left to consider it in shocked silence. He could hear them talking through it.

"I don't think whatever happened to him was too bad," Ichigo said.

"He certainly seems the same," Rukia replied. There was a pause before she added "You did really well today."

"Are you the expert on that then?" he asked, a smirk practically visible from his tone.

"As a matter of fact I am," she asserted confidently. With that there was the faint rustling of sheets and blankets and the click of a light, and then there was nothing.

It took the mod-soul a long time to recover his composure. Ichigo and nē-san . . . ? No, none of this is real, it can't be! This has got to be one of that mad scientist's crazy experiments!

Chapter End Notes

I thought it was bizarre that Kubo set up the coin that Oscar Joaquín de la Rosa gave Chad as being so important both he and Ichigo risked their lives to protect it only for
Chad's Fullbring to be his skin. You could argue his incredible durability early on is a latent aspect of it, but I think that's equally ascribable to him just being ridiculously tough and I prefer the symbology of the coin, so this is something I'm disagreeing with the canon on. Technically the eagle on the coin is attacking with its right arm and perched with its left, so the iconography of attack and defense are reversed relative to Chad's abilities. The asymmetry is still an interesting fit even if the sides are reversed, in my opinion. Regardless, it doesn't really change much but one scene.

Ichigo skips straight to the penultimate phase of Fullbring because his psychological and emotional focus, resolve, and general stability are much improved here relative to the Fullbring Arc.
Watch Me As I Gravitate

Wednesday, September 18, 2002

As Ichigo was about to leave Rukia's bedroom he noticed what seemed like an incredibly lame tripwire made out of shoelaces near the base of the door frame. After a moment's pause to consider it he stepped over it and shut the door behind him, only for Kon to immediately jump onto his leg. "What do you think you're doing?" he muttered with incredulity, shaking the limb to try and dislodge the mod-soul.

"You're not the real Ichigo, and that's not the real ne-san! This is all some kind of simulation designed to break me, and I'm not having any of it!" Kon exclaimed, trying his hardest to do any kind of damage at all.

The teenager frowned and leaned down, grabbing the plushy by the head and hauling him up to eye-level, albeit safely outside of striking distance. "Shut up before you wake her," he warned. He immediately started looking around to see if there were any other surprises.

"You're not real! Ne-san would—would never . . . !" Kon proclaimed, doing his best to struggle.

Ichigo's eyes slid back to the mod-soul in a glare before he promptly stepped away from the door and went to his room, moving quickly but cautiously. Once he was inside he shut the door behind him and tossed the stuffed lion onto his bed, demanding "Would never what?"

"Never stoop to the likes of you!" the mod-soul asserted, jumping up and pointing accusatorially.

At that the young man's expression shifted from annoyed to exasperated before he closed his eyes and rubbed at the back of his head, finally saying "Yeah, it's kinda confusing to me too sometimes."

Kon blinked at seeing self-deprecation from him again before severely frowning at it.

"I guess nobody ever told you what happened?" Ichigo asked, looking to the plushy again.

After a moment the stuffed lion shook his head. It seemed obvious Aizen had been defeated given what little he'd seen of the 12th Division seemed to be functioning normally—as best he could tell anyway—but he didn't know anything other than that.

"Well, I gotta go start on food . . . but I can fill you in while I cook. So are there any more stupid traps you set up?" the teenager asked.

Kon shook his head again, looking down at the bed, his frustration losing momentum. He hadn't been able to scrounge up much even with hours of preparation time—he had no idea where anything was. It'd taken a lot of time just to explore the house. If he was truthful it was too convincing of an effort to be a fake.

Ichigo exhaled and reached down to pick the stuffed animal up, being marginally considerate about it for once, before going to dismantle the shoelace tripwire and taking Kon downstairs to explain what had transpired while he got breakfast and lunch ready.

"And so that's the short version of what happened," the young man concluded. He hadn't gone into a lot of depth about Tokyo because Kon didn't really need to know, but he'd gotten the point across.
The stuffed animal just stared at him before looking away.

There was silence between them for awhile before Ichigo asked "You call her 'nē-san' because she saved your life from Urahara that one day, right?" After Kon said nothing for awhile he continued "Well, she's saved my life too . . . a lot more than once . . . so . . ." He trailed off as he was suddenly aware she was present and glanced over a shoulder uncertainly to confirm it, spotting her leaning against the entryway to the kitchen. He realized he had no idea how long she'd been there or what she might've heard.

Kon followed his gaze before blinking in surprise.

Rukia looked rather pleased with herself at finally having managed to sneak up on Ichigo while he was cooking, but gave him and then even Kon a sincere smile before going back upstairs to get clean and changed.

"I'm starting to think we should've pushed for the hybrid robot angle," Keigo complained while wagging a finger. He remained convinced that if Urahara could make something like Rukia's gigai then he could make them power armor or something. What he had in mind was something somewhere between the suits in the OVA of Starship Troopers, Armored Trooper VOTOMS, and Guyver: The Bioboosted Armor.

"You should be more careful about what you wish for," Mizurio replied, barely paying any attention to him as he concentrated on sending text messages with his phone. Somehow he had the feeling that would've wound up with them looking like rejects from Science Ninja Team Gatchaman or something. They could've maybe arrived at a position that enabled them to fight regular Hollows, but that was the job of the Shinigami and they had their own talents.

The jester frowned and glanced off to one side before looking back suspiciously, demanding "What are you doing anyway?"

"Actually trying to help them," the playboy stated with disinterest.

"How many times do I have to tell you that spreading rumors doesn't help anybody?!" Keigo admonished, shaking his hands for emphasis.

Mizuiro glanced up at his compatriot with a slightly raised eyebrow before returning to what he was doing. He'd been the source of more than a few of the rumors about Ichigo and Rukia during her first stint at the school and was resuming that role. His reasoning was pretty simple: it would happen anyway, so it made sense to control the narrative. Ichigo always got a lot of flak because of how he was and deserved respect, and Rukia wasn't exactly typical either and deserved the same. He knew a classy woman when he encountered one and he kept his own rumor mill clean—he had never once disparaged her or insinuated anything that was inappropriate. That was more than could be said about some of the others playing the game.

"I'm serious, it's not cool," Keigo said, trying to do a deadpan voice.

"Arisawa does enforcement, you're entertainment, and I do public relations," Mizuiro replied calmly. Yoruichi and Urahara had been gentle but rather direct with them: there was no real way they could be relevant to any of the fighting their friends would be doing. It wasn't just the danger of trying to bring them up to speed, but the time constraints, and they'd be liabilities if they tried. Tatsuki had taken it particularly hard, but hadn't ultimately objected. So their job was as supports to enable the rest of the group to function without worry. He had personally decided to take that a step farther by trying to provide the couple with a sense of high school normalcy. It couldn't be easy for a
moonlighting teenage spirit medium and a noble ghost military officer to be dating, let alone practically engaged, and being grounded was important.

"Don't say it like I'm a joke!" Keigo demanded, giving him a look that was part frustrated and part wounded.

"Sorry, sorry, the great Captain Asano deserves only top billing as an entertainer, not mere entertainment," the playboy corrected himself.

The jester was torn between boasting about the sudden elevation in his status and yelling at him for his nerve when the door to Ichigo and Rukia's house opened.

"Did you know there are a lot of whispers going on about the two of you?" Mizuiro asked, glancing over a shoulder at the pair. He and Keigo were at the front to afford them some privacy since they tolerated their continuing presence. It didn't escape his notice that they were holding hands, as usual.

Both the future substitute and the Shinigami blinked beforeglancing at one another.

"Yeah, it's almost like it was before—worse even!" Keigo added, not looking back.

"'Before' . . . ?" Rukia asked, simultaneously realizing he meant during her previous times at the school. She'd known then that she had to at least try and conceal her working relationship with Ichigo, and he'd always seemed so avoidant and pissed off about being seen with her, especially during their first two months together . . . her eyes shifted to him as she not-so-subtly demanded "What was being said before?"

Ichigo steadfastly avoided her look as he remembered. He hadn't heard anything since the start of this trimester though . . . had he just not been paying attention?

She frowned mildly at him.

He caught the expression out of the corner of his eye and squeezed at her hand in reassurance. He just didn't want to say it given they were still only slowly becoming acquainted with intimacy.

"You know . . . things," Keigo helpfully clarified.

Her cheeks only went the slightest bit pink but all she said was "Hmph."

"It probably had to do with how you were always running off together at the time, and it's hardly surprising now when the two of you live together and everybody knows you're an item," Mizuiro said as if relating a simple fact.

"And when you spent the vacation together!" Keigo added, raising his hands for emphasis.

Ichigo screwed his face up into a mildly nasty expression at that. They'd agreed to be direct on all those points to prevent questions, not to fuel the fires of speculation. Plenty of people were dating or hooking up. There had to be something else which had made them such a topic of conversation. Was it because of his reputation? Or was there more to it? Was there a leak? And if so . . . who?

Rukia glanced down as she realized she might have said too much at the start of the prior week to the other girls. Her Kuchiki training and Byakuya's words were at the forefront of her thoughts in that moment: she was admittedly not well-versed in the social maneuverings of couples, living or not, but this was childish and beneath her. "Let them say what they will then," she declared with an imperial tone as she squeezed back at Ichigo's hand and lifted her head up high, "such is always the way of
small, jealous minds.” If people wanted to paint her as Ichigo's girl . . . well, perhaps that was the only way his peers could even begin to comprehend what they shared. Not that it would stop her from dismantling anyone who might dare try and use such rumor to disrespect her to her face, male or female, junior or senior. There was pride and then there was honor.

All three young men glanced at her for her suddenly superior language and attitude, the two up front quickly looking away from the intensity they saw radiating off both her and Ichigo.

The would-be substitute held onto her hand securely as he grimaced. He'd never admit it, but although he deeply resented how any rumors were likely slanderous and biased against her, he sort of liked being associated with her in that way. Regardless, he'd beat the hell out of anyone he heard of talking trash about her, and woe betide whoever dared to do so in his presence. If whoever was talking knew what was good for them they’d keep it to themselves or he'd personally ensure Karakura's medical industry enjoyed a windfall.

The short Shinigami glanced to him and immediately identified the protective look on his face for what it was, squeezing back at his hand.

The young men at the front shared a momentary look once they were sure Rukia and Ichigo were fully distracted by their own thoughts and each other.

Mizuiro gave a tiny smile. The other thing about there being controlled rumors was that for the couple it was basically harmless but it still made them defensive—and when they were defensive they got closer to one another.

Keigo looked entirely nonplussed.

Tatsuki sighted her intended target in the school yard as he milled about. A smirk took hold of her lips as she began her final approach—they hadn't really begun their operations yet so it was to be expected nobody really knew to be wary. It was in her nature to fight, and she didn't like what she felt was on the horizon, but if she couldn't do anything about that, she'd make sure the people who could were able to clearly focus on it. Soul Society, Hueco Mundo . . . she didn't know anything about them, but in Karakura, at their school . . . maybe Rukia was a soldier, but she was a fighter . . . and maybe Ichigo was thunder, but she was lightning.

Moving up to her quarry from behind she grinned lazily and lifted a hand to near one of his ears before clenching it firmly, cracking every joint in her digits at once in a single loud pop as she asked "So I heard you were talking shit about some of my friends?"

Rukia glanced to Ichigo occasionally as they ate lunch on the roof, debating whether she should commit to her obligations or not.

"What?" he asked with some annoyance after what was at least the fourth time. It was really obvious she wanted to say something.

"I should stay later today, since I wasn't there yesterday," she said, assuming it clear she was talking about her training of Zennosuke. It wasn't that she doubted Renji, but it was her duty, after all.

"That's fine," he replied, not really thinking anything of it.

She stared at him for a moment in evaluation before picking up the juice box she'd brought for lunch in one hand and its straw in the other, asking "Anyway, help me with this."
Ichigo looked at Rukia like she pulling some kind of prank on him.

"I'm serious," she said, shaking the juice box slightly. For some reason she still consistently had trouble putting the straw through the casing.

After a moment he reached out his hands and secured the wrist of the hand she was holding the juice box in with one and took the hand she was holding the straw with in the other, moving them so she punched the straw through with his help rather than just doing it for her.

She looked a bit embarrassed while he was doing all that before looking up to him with mild appreciation once he'd finished.

That was when they both realized everyone else they were eating with was staring at them.

Ichigo scowled before looking aside, continuing to eat his food in a rather ticked off fashion.

Rukia looked the other way and drank her juice, pretending she'd never noticed.

"Like I said yesterday, your Fullbring is still incomplete," Chad stated.

Ichigo glanced down at the sword, which seemed more solid than the previous day but still sort of . . . flowed. It didn't seem that incomplete.

"When a Fullbring is finished, the process is pretty dangerous, so . . . " the giant trailed off. As they had lacked for another Fullbringer, Urahara had assisted with his. It had been rather concerning.

"So you want to make sure I can deal with it," the would-be substitute finished cockily, spinning the sword about by its hilt in one hand before taking up a defensive stance.

Chad smirked as he drew up his own armaments. "Yeah." This was how his friend was supposed to act.

They were still training when Ishida announced his arrival from his handicrafts club by beginning to fire a few token arrows at Ichigo while he was otherwise occupied. It was no good to start too seriously.

Once the training ended for the evening the three headed over to where Tessai, Inoue, and Chappy were situated for their things and, in Chad and Ichigo's cases, for the usual minor medical attention to remove the various token scrapes and cuts they'd picked up. Inoue had insisted at the outset it wasn't any problem so they went along with it mostly because it gave her something to do.

As everybody else was packing up, the new Fullbringer told Chappy "Hey, meet me upstairs in ten minutes, alright?"

"Mmhmm, pyon," she said, focused on putting the finishing touches on her latest masterpiece.

Not for the first time Ichigo looked chagrined at the fact the artificial soul seemed to share both Rukia's drawing sensibilities and her talent before getting his bags and going to the ladder, heading upstairs to shower. At least she wasn't asking if she could put her drawings up on the fridge or something. Since Rukia was preoccupied he could take her out for a quick shopping trip.

Sometime later they were wandering around Karakura's largest department store.
"What are we doing here anyway, pyon?" Chappy asked, looking about. They were in the children's section, going through the toy aisles.

"We're actually here to get something for you," Ichigo replied noncommittally. He'd had the idea in mind before Kon had returned, but that morning had made him decide to actually go through with it.

"Huh?" the artificial soul said, clearly surprised by the answer.

He ignored her and continued surveying the shelves. If Rukia was going to stop being on alert by the end of the week it meant Chappy would no longer need to be permanently on standby either, and it seemed wrong to leave her in the Soul Candy dispenser—even if she would be surrounded by her . . . sisters? He had a notion from things Kon had said that soul pills maintained at least some rudimentary degree of awareness even when stored, and this particular Chappy had been out and about enough to develop something more of a personality, so the idea of just shelving her bothered him a lot more than it did with Gringo. Plus maybe she could keep Kon out of trouble.

Chappy peered at him with growing suspicion before finally prodding him and demanding "What are we getting for me, pyon?"

"I figure you should have a body of your own," Ichigo said dismissively, growing a bit frustrated he couldn't find something that seemed to fit. Chappy obviously liked rabbits, just like Rukia, so some kind of bunny plushy that was sort of anthropomorphized like Kon's was probably best. Preferably it wouldn't be creepy looking . . .

Chappy blinked before looking about, taking a moment to survey the aisle before her eyes locked in on something. "That one, pyon!" she stated decisively, pointing.

The teenager looked at where she was gesturing to before sighing. It was close enough.

Ichigo had gotten a text from Rukia letting him know not to wait to eat and so after having dinner with his family and Chappy he went back to the house to start in on homework, occupying the study. Chappy and Kon did the same, the former continuing to draw at a desk, while the latter seemed to mostly brood and regard the artificial soul with confusion and mild suspicion—the two had never interacted before and it was weird to see Rukia's gigai without her in it.

It was sometime later when Rukia finally returned. Kon and Chappy called out "Nē-san!" and "Rukia-sama!" at the same time, drawing Ichigo's attention.

He looked up to spot her in her shihakushō and couldn't resist smiling at the sight. No matter how good she looked in whatever she wore, she always looked right in her uniform. "Welcome home," he said.

"Hi," she said, smiling back. She was pleased to know he apparently really could permanently see her as she truly was while in his body again.

She made her way over to Chappy and took her gigai back, only for Ichigo to say "After you wash that off, don't reload the dispenser. Come back here first."

Rukia looked at him curiously before deciding to play along, and when she returned the bunny plushy was sitting on the desk Chappy had been drawing at. She stared in wonder at how cute it was for a second before looking to Ichigo with genuine surprise and consideration.
"Don't look so impressed, Chappy picked it out herself," he said as if it was nothing, waving it off.

The Shinigami took on a coy expression before going over to the desk and pushing the soul pill into the plushy's mouth as they had with Kon.

It immediately came to life, Chappy taking awhile to try and figure her new body out. "This is a lot different, pyon," she ventured. For starters it didn't feel so incredibly weird to look at Ichigo anymore. Then there was not having any bones.

"You get used to it," Kon offered.

Rukia suppressed a small laugh before going to get her bag.

A few hours passed and the couple was alone, the stuffed animals having gone off to watch TV in the living room. Rukia shut her notebook and leaned against Ichigo, her thoughts drifting to the end of the week. Things would be changing again for them soon. "We should do something fun this weekend," she said. She found she missed the comparatively carefree atmosphere of summer break, even if it had been its own kind of roller coaster.

"Like what?" he asked, looking to her curiously.

"We could go out to celebrate the end of my patrols," she offered with a little smile. She had yet to hear anything more from Ishida about the dress he was working on, but she didn't have to wait for it.

"That sounds alright, I guess," he replied, feigning disinterest.

"Do you have something better in mind?" Rukia asked dubiously, raising an eyebrow and adopting an imperious look.

"I was just thinking we never broke in that karaoke microphone they got for us and that might be nice to do with everyone," Ichigo said, scratching at a temple. It seemed like a good way to try and bring everyone together again, especially since Tatsuki, Keigo, and Mizuiro hadn't been present for the last event.

She smirked slightly, taking it at face value even though she knew that at heart he really wanted to hear her sing again. "I don't see why we can't do both." There was a pause before she asked "Does your family celebrate ohigan? Monday the 23rd was going to be Autumnal Equinox Day, which was a public holiday, so they'd have a three-day weekend. Ohigan was a traditional Buddhist event which stretched out three days on either side of it and Vernal Equinox Day in the spring, with the equinoxes themselves being its height. It was normally a time to visit family gravestones and pay respects to the departed—sort of the opposite of obon. They hadn't gone when she'd been there last September, but it hadn't been a normal time either.

"Not really," he said. His family had never been much into religious festivals, for what seemed like obvious reasons. They always settled for just the anniversary in his mom's case.

"Would you like to?" she asked tentatively. The last time she'd been with him to his mother's grave the year prior had hardly been traditional, she'd missed it that year, and they'd missed Tokyo's obon by leaving when they had . . . given everything that was happening it seemed right that she try and be there with him. It was silly given everything she knew, but . . . she had the approval of all the rest of his family and it seemed like a gesture she had to make.

Ichigo found she looked unusually sincere all of a sudden. Something about it was incredibly disarming. "I can't promise the rest of my family will want to go," he said, even though he knew they
almost certainly would if the two of them were.

"It's okay," Rukia replied with a smile.

They stared at each other for a moment before he took on an irascible expression and rubbed at the back of his head, looking away and saying "Well, sounds like that's the whole weekend spent out and about then."

She playfully swatted at his chest with the back of one of her hands before letting an impish look onto her face. "Nobody said we wouldn't have time together alone," she replied with a mildly sly tone.

He turned back to her, looking into her eyes.

She let her expression become sincere again before turning her hand around and slowly running a finger around over his heart. "It's really nice, but my soaking tub is missing something just like the hotel's was," she said quietly.

Ichigo's expression softened and he reached a hand up to cup one of her cheeks.

Rukia brushed against it before tapping his sternum with a finger and pulling away, standing and collecting her things before saying "I'll see you upstairs," with a little smile.

"Yeah," he replied with a small smile in return, "I'm almost done."

Chappy and Kon scrambled back toward the couch from outside the doorway before she could turn and leave.

Kūkaku was idling in her room when her attention was drawn to approaching voices. She couldn't quite make out the words and she only heard Koganehiko and Shiroganehiko, but they were clearly talking to someone else. She couldn't really feel any reiatsu coming off of whoever else might be with them . . . clearly she had a guest, but whom?

"—you can't enter unannounced!" one of her retainers stated, coming into earshot.

"Koganehiko?" she asked, elevating her voice to be heard, "Who is it?"

At that the door slid open and Isshin stepped through before he immediately shut it behind him. He was attired in his shihakushō and studied her for a second before walking to the center of the room, saying just "Hi. Long time no see."

The older of the Shiba siblings stared at him in open disbelief for a long moment before narrowing her eyes and pushing herself to her feet, advancing to stand opposite him. She'd heard about the ersatz concerts in the Seireitei and some vague rumors about Ichigo and Rukia, but . . . after a short time considering her uncle she reached her arm back and slapped him as hard as she could.

"I really should've stopped by after the war . . ."

Kūkaku glared at him for several seconds more before hugging him.

Isshin gave his niece a hug back, stating "Yeah, I deserved that." Saying 'sorry' would've just made it worse.
The former head of a cadet branch of the Shiba clan and the remaining head of the Shiba family sat together drinking tea. Isshin hadn't been there very long and there was a lot he needed to discuss with Kūkaku regarding the circumstances of Ichigo and Rukia.

In addition to forcing his attention to the conflicts on the horizon, their relationship had also necessitated he begin to seriously contemplate what to do regarding his obligations to his remaining relatives. Setting the resolution of the former aside, he was resolved to remain in the Living World until Karin and Yuzu left high school at the absolute minimum, and preferably only after they'd completed their university degrees if that was what they wanted to do. That meant he was going to stay until at least early 2009, and perhaps even out to 2013 or longer. That was something of a problem given he sincerely doubted his son and future daughter-in-law were likely to wait that long. It was workable though. Since Kūkaku had become the head of the main branch on Kaien's death, his status was rather simple: he was technically only the clan elder, which was why he was there to advise her.

If one ignored the Royal Guard and Soul King—which was rather easy to do on a day-to-day basis —then the political situation of Soul Society resembled that of the Japanese Heian period far more than the various bakufu of the later Kamakura, Muromachi, and Edo periods. In the Heian period there had been four noble houses, much as there were in modern Soul Society, some of which had been descendants of the Imperial family but not successors to it, and all of which competed for influence in the court of the Emperor. Soul Society had no Emperor or an attendant court to one, but it did have Central 46, which filled the same role. In Japan, the bakufu had arisen when a noble house had utilized military force to achieve a parallel—and superior—power to the Emperor and his court and their leader had been declared shōgun, setting a precedent. Although the sōtaichō superficially resembled this position, he remained subordinate to Central 46. The noble houses of Soul Society were roughly militarily balanced and thoroughly integrated into the structure of both the court—Central 46—and the military—the Gotei 13.

Of course, that balance and integration wasn't a guarantee of stability. Ichigo was still really only a fledgling but was easily capable of yet again becoming one of if not the most powerful combatants in the Seireitei. Rukia likewise seemed to be capable of much more than one might have initially suspected, and Byakuya was already one of the most powerful taichō. In reality events were being driven by emotional considerations, but politically what Byakuya allowing Rukia to associate with Ichigo represented was an attempt by the Kuchiki to appropriate a significant military asset that could in time significantly alter the physical balance of power. That could in turn potentially be used in an attempt to alter the political balance of power, just as eventually one of the Japanese noble houses had established a bakufu.

Isshin didn't think this was Byakuya's intent, dutiful as he was, but that didn't necessarily mean others wouldn't come to that conclusion, which could easily become dangerous . . . and even if Byakuya wasn't interested in that at all, if there was anybody who hated heavy-handed rules and might decide to one day just force change through sheer power, it was Ichigo. It seemed to run in the Shiba nature —Kaien had also held Central 46's autocratic and often draconian governance in disdain, and Isshin was no fan either. Isshin wasn't really interested in reviving the influence of the Shiba for its own sake, but for the sake of the appearance of maintaining the status quo of a balance of power it might ironically be more expedient for the number of noble houses to go back to five rather than for the remaining four to become unbalanced.
It would be a hell of a thing to go through all the fighting Ichigo would only to confront an aristocratic conflict or, maybe worse, something like assassination attempts. If Ichigo was judged to be a threat, he wouldn't be the only one in the crosshairs, and if anything ever came of something like that, then all bets were off . . . and that was assuming they all made it that far and nothing drastic happened before then. Isshin was optimistic on that score and at any rate it was better be prepared.

It was his intent to get to all that but he was trying to relate what had happened to cause him to wind up in the Living World first and Kūkaku was grudgingly humoring him when the soul pager Yoruichi had demanded he take with him began to ring. They'd set it up so calls to his cell phone were forwarded to it.

Kūkaku narrowed her eyes before her expression became disbelieving and she gestured at him, saying only "What . . . is that," in a way that wasn't a question. The ringtone was terrible.

Isshin lifted a hand to silence her before withdrawing the device and taking the call. "Moshi moshi?" he greeted.

"It's me," Ichigo replied. He sounded pensive though he was trying to make it seem more like he was annoyed to even be calling. "So . . . on Monday, Rukia and I are going to go visit mom. You know . . . for ohigan. I thought I'd ask if you guys wanted to come too."

The elder Kurosaki blinked and looked sideways toward the device before glancing back to Kūkaku, finding she looked no more credulous. Something suddenly occurred to him. "Of course we'll go!" he replied cheerily.

There was the smallest indication of his son exhaling before he continued more confidently with "We're also thinking of having a karaoke night at our place on Sunday."

"Wouldn't miss it for anything! I'm sure Yuzu would love to make something for it," Isshin replied without skipping a beat.

"Yeah, I'll talk with her about it tomorrow, I just wanted to let you know early. 'Night," Ichigo concluded, ending the call before his dad could reply.

Isshin pulled the soul pager away, reverting to a rather sober mood and finding his niece was peering at him with growing suspicion and irritation. He smirked slightly before asking "Before I get back to what I was saying, how would you feel about a little family get-together?"

Kūkaku blinked.

Thursday, September 19, 2002

Rukia finished her science homework and set her pencil and notebook aside before stretching and turning slightly to one side, leaning back against Ichigo. After a moment she glanced to him, finding he had finished awhile ago and seemed engrossed in a book. "So what is that?"

"It's a play," he responded, not looking up from it.

"By Shakespeare?" she asked.

He nodded before looking to her.

"What's it called?" she continued.
"The Taming of the Shrew," Ichigo said.

Rukia frowned as she tried to figure out what that was supposed to mean. Why would anyone make a play about subduing a rodent?

Seeing her confusion, he suddenly felt rather conflicted about having to explain the title, let alone the plot. He was reading it again in his spare time because it was his favorite. He wasn't really one for the tragedies or the histories and in his estimation it was a rather deeper play than many might initially give it credit for. He regarded it as more a satire of its conceit and subject matter than an endorsement of it. "'Shrew' is a term used to describe an ill-tempered woman prone to violent outbursts," he said carefully.

She brought down her eyelids and lifted an eyebrow as she crossed her arms and regarded him with a rather suspect gaze. "And is there any particular reason you're reading it right now?" she asked with barely concealed critique.

"It's my favorite because of a lot of the wordplay," he said, looking back to it. "If you just read it literally, it's mostly about how this guy, Petruchio, gets this feisty woman, Katherina, to marry him and act respectably, but I think it's really telling you 'Don't be like this as a man,' and it's not clear that Kate ever actually is 'tamed' anyway."

Rukia's expression only eased a fraction as she continued to watch him dubiously, studying him a bit more closely. It was usually pretty obvious when he was being sarcastic or teasing her, and he wasn't giving off any of his normal tells.

Ichigo looked back to her and locked eyes before smirking a little. He reached a hand up and lightly tapped the tip of her nose with a finger. "You shouldn't get so defensive."

"And why not?" she asked, making a show of looking at him with more disapproval.

He took on a more arrogant look in return before letting it go, his face becoming sincere. "Because it makes me appreciate you even more," he said quietly. She wasn't his unless she wanted to be. No matter how the specifics of their relationship worked, no matter who led on what, to him they'd always be partners.

She blinked and her demeanor started to relax a little at how painfully honest he looked, before she began to take on a sly mask. "And how do I know that's true?"

He brought his head down a little closer, saying "I thought you trusted me," in a hushed but playful way.

"Maybe," Rukia replied insincerely, turning toward him and bracing a hand over his heart, letting her fingers dally there.

Ichigo took the initiative and leaned down, whispering "Only maybe . . . ?" as he got an arm around her waist and a hand into her hair, pulling her closer and kissing her.

Tatsuki poked at what was left of her ice cream with her spoon, asking casually "Have those two always had that much eye sex?"

Inoue immediately blushed at the phrase, the spoon in her mouth forgotten as she promptly began saying "Tatsuki-chan, you shouldn't say things like that!" only to lose it, causing her to scramble to desperately try and grab it before it hit the floor.
"What other phrase is there for how they look at each other?" the fighter replied testily, waving her spoon for emphasis before having another bite. She didn't genuinely regard it as lustful, but the way Ichigo and Rukia looked at one another all the time was deeply meaningful in a way that typical eye contact wasn't. It wasn't normal and was constant, which made it both sort of cute and kind of irritating at the same time. It was no wonder she had to take up anti-rumor duty given it and how inseparable the two were.

The princess blinked before frowning slightly and quirking her mouth to one side, trying to think of a more delicate way to put it. They definitely did look at one another in an entirely unique way—she'd noticed that very early on. Finding she didn't know how to put it, she eventually just said "Yes, they have," quietly.

"Well, I guess that's good for them then," Tatsuki replied, before scrunching up her face at her empty cup of ice cream. She internally weighed getting a second helping while she sighed and said "I don't know about this karaoke thing."

"It'll be fun!" Inoue said with sudden cheer.

"I'm not good at singing," the dark-haired teen replied dismissively.

"That's not what really matters," the princess replied with a broad smile.

Tatsuki looked sideways to Inoue's beaming expression and exhaled with annoyance. It was basically impossible to say no to a smile like that, so she went to go treat herself to seconds instead.

---

**Friday, September 20, 2002**

Ichigo halted one of Chad's enormous fists in his off-hand while snapping his head to one side as a pair of Ishida's arrows sailed by before swinging his sword up to cleave another pair such that they'd break apart to either side of him.

It was as the pieces tumbled past that the giant unleashed El Directo, sending the future substitute careening off toward a large boulder at high speed and throwing up a spray of dust.

The archer altered his aim to compensate before unleashing a measured volley of only two dozen arrows into the point of impact.

Ichigo emerged from the dust plume in a great leap, a hard scowl of concentration on his face. His outfit was tattered but immediately began to reassemble itself. They were relentless—they weren't really trying to kill him, but at this level of pressure if he made even one mistake . . .

Rukia slid Sode no Shirayuki back into its sheath, closing her eyes and turning away as she made a final evaluation. Zennosuke was more solidly at a low-tier, pre-war 3rd Seat level, although relative to the 13th Division's ongoing composition she wouldn't rate him any higher than the 9th Seat. They had been training rather diligently at the fundamentals. Still, perhaps when his tour was completed he could try and become an officer. "Kurumadani," she began coolly, "why was it not mentioned in any report that you faced off against Aizen?"

Zennosuke blinked at the question before looking away.

Rukia opened her eyes and turned to consider him. "I've heard from multiple witnesses that you used your shikai against him," she continued, "Why wasn't it in any report?"
"I couldn't do anything but run," he finally said, making eye contact with her and adding "It was shameful."

She evaluated him for a second before letting her tone ease up, saying "You helped keep Ichigo's friends alive until he could arrive, didn't you?" The parallel between his experience and theirs wasn't lost on her.

"I didn't think that would be of interest to anyone," he said quietly. A lot of humans had died that day—permanently—from mere proximity to Aizen. His mission had been to protect the town—the fact it had happened at all meant he had clearly failed, even if it had been a matter far and away above his station.

"They're my friends too, so . . . thank you," Rukia said with measured honesty. When he said nothing and simply stared, she withdrew her soul pager, punching in a notification to dispatch to cease sending her alerts for anything less than an Arrancar . . . not that she'd need them to notice something like that. "Responsibility for this town is once more in your hands," she stated, before adopting a more casual pose and smiling slightly. "Now, if you would, I'd like to hear your thoughts," she requested with a modest degree of chipperness.

"Eh?" he asked, confused by the sudden change in her demeanor.

"The training," she clarified. It was always good to get further feedback and she'd need it if she was to really do right by Ichigo.

Ishida and Chad had discussed the possibility of trying to emotionally provoke Ichigo into completing his Fullbring. Chad was convinced he was ready even after only three days, and the ammunition to do it was there, but neither had the heart or the character for it and it didn't feel right to try that at all given everything that had happened. They'd instead decided to settle for ever-increasing and unrelenting force until he had no choice but to advance.

The would-be substitute was pinned behind a rock by the archer's arrow fire when it simply evaporated, the giant following up his first punch with a second to knock the orange-haired teen aside. Ichigo scrambled to try and get to his feet only to notice he was in the midst of a large glowing pentagon-shaped rune. As he looked up in shock he saw Chad lift his left hand, disks of energy aglow at his fingertips. His face contorted into a mask of frustration and anger as he forced himself to his feet. He wouldn't be fast enough. He wasn't good enough. He wasn't going to make it out of this attack and he was going to disappoint them all. He was going to disappoint—

Not now, and not like this! Not without a fight!

He brought his sword up as if to block the incoming sprenger and La Muerte attacks, calling out against what was surely to come even as his outfit seemed to crackle as if with electricity, streamers emanating from the badge before everything began to change in a bizarre way, like Chad's arms did when he formed them . . .

. . . Only for Ishida to use hirenkyaku to move away and for Chad to grab and slam the solidifying end of Ichigo's sword down onto the ground with his right hand, using the shield form of Brazo Derecha de Gigante to protect himself from the enormous blast that consumed the pentagon.

Rukia's head abruptly turned toward the Urahara Shop as she felt a pulse of reiatsu that seemed like an echo of how Ichigo's once had. As it flowed by she discerned other things she couldn't put a finger on it its signature. Her eyes widened slightly as she tried to make sense of it.
"Go, Kuchiki-fukutaichō," Zennosuke said from behind her.

She glanced over a shoulder at him.

He gave her a stoic look. Watching Karakura was his job again, and watching Ichigo was hers.

She nodded seriously once before using flash steps to head for the shop.

Ichigo brought his left arm down from shielding his face, finding it was covered in a sort of dark undersuit and white, bone-like armor that was only faintly scorched and pitted. He saw then that Chad's right arm seemed to be in a similar state before the giant released his sword and slowly stood. Ichigo looked down to the blade and found it was solid, resembling a sword bayonet more than anything. He lifted it up and considered it before he rose and looked about. The pentagon had been completely obliterated and Ishida was moving about its former periphery to retrieve his tools. He looked to Chad.

"I told you it was dangerous," the giant said, brushing soot off his right arm and looking around at the damage that'd been caused. The amount of energy the badge had put out had been even greater than his coin had—he had the sense that had been at least as powerful as the sprenger would've been. If his right arm hadn't been specialized for defense . . .

"Yeah," Ichigo affirmed, getting it. He regarded the sword again: it was shorter than he was used to. He still couldn't hear Zangetsu . . . or the old man . . . but he had the distinct impression of a sneering smile when he looked at it. After glancing to confirm his right was clear he swung out the blade while focusing as he once had, calling "Getsuga Tenshō!" The wave of blue energy that was emitted was much smaller than it once had been, but was stupendously quick, blazing across the width of the training room in an instant to cause a great explosion on the distant opposite wall. He looked away from the column of smoke and flame after a moment, turning back as a smirk took hold of his mouth.

The other Fullbringer smirked back before his eyes moved to something behind the future substitute.

Ichigo saw the shift at the same time as he sensed the faint sparks of familiar presences in close proximity, including a certain very important one. He turned to find Rukia standing behind him in her spirit form with her arms crossed and her eyelids partially down, looking at him with something that seemed to be a mixture of affection and happiness. He knew instantly from her eyes that it was really pride. He let his smirk become a small grin. He scarcely noticed Urahara, Yoruichi and Inoue behind her.

"Not bad . . . but it looks like you've got something on your face," she chided as she gave a smile in return and pointed at the bit of armor that came up over his cheeks and nose. Her tone was only playfully mocking.

He gave her a confused look for a second before reaching up with his off-hand and patting at his face. He closed his eyes and frowned, shaking the hand for emphasis as he immediately retorted "I think maybe the badge had enough with certain people hitting me there." He sounded irritable but the warmth in his voice made it clear it was meant to be taken in kind.

"I don't know, it doesn't seem to protect your jaw," she countered, smirking a bit and raising an eyebrow.

He looked back at her with his own smirk before replying "I'm not too worried about it—it'd be a real problem for some concerned parties if that stopped working properly."

Rukia's expression became disapproving and haughty at that even though her eyes twinkled rather
mischievously.

The three other teenagers present were by then studiously pretending not to hear their flirting.

Yoruichi rolled her eyes even as she looked a bit amused. He didn't even notice there was more than one way to potentially take what he'd said. That was mostly good—too much self-awareness was a bad thing.

"My, my—it's a real distraction to have to fix the wall when that kind of level of damage is done to it," Urahara said as he assessed the new expansion of the training room, lifting his fan to cover his mouth.

"Don't say that like you don't always get Tessai to handle it," Yoruichi rebuked, giving him a tiny glare.

"I'm a very busy businessman, you know," he said, looking to her as if in shock.

She crossed her arms and regarded him skeptically.

"We can hardly go eat if you look like that," the petite Shinigami asserted, deciding to ignore the shop's proprietors.

Ichigo gave her an insolent look before trying to loosen his grip on the sword, finding the outfit seemed to melt away. He pocketed the badge as a small, arrogant smile took hold of his mouth.

Rukia replied with an expression that communicated 'that'll do' before going to get her gigai back from Chappy. It was her intent that after dinner with his family they knock out as much of their homework as possible, if not all of it, so they'd be free from having to worry about it for the rest of the weekend.
Cover You In Moonlight

Saturday, September 21, 2002

Rukia and Ichigo were situated opposite one another at a compact table for two in a rather small French bistro in Naruki. It had apparently been founded by a chef who had gone to France for classical training and decided to come back home. They'd dressed up only a bit for the date, deciding to stop short of formal attire. She had on a colorful one-piece dress with medium-length sleeves that went up to the base of her neck and down just past her knees and had on a light scarf against the unseasonably cool weather. He wore dress khakis, a nice polo that he'd tucked in, and had a snap-collared black leather motorbike jacket with red and white accents draped on his chair for the same reason. The place's focus was Burgundian, and the former was finishing her order of *beef bourguignon* while the latter was idling, his dish of *coq au vin* already gone.

She set her fork down as she finished and took a long sip of the *Grand Cru* class *pinot noir* they'd picked out to accompany the meal. It was a bit dry for her taste but had interesting hints of fruit to it. Their waiter had explained that the appropriate pairing of food and wine was important, and she found she liked it more after having had her meal, although she wondered if that was just the alcohol getting to her. She set her glass down and looked at Ichigo levelly. "Given any thought to what you might want to do next week?"

"Hmm?" he asked, looking to her.

"About school clubs or work," she said, her tone chiding.

"It was a vague question," he retorted, before asking "What would you like to do?"

"I asked you first," she stated.

Ichigo adopted a put-out expression before taking a moment to think about it. He'd sort of contemplated it before but not in that much depth. "None of the sports clubs really interest me, to be honest, and they all have demanding schedules anyway," he eventually said, before rubbing the back of his head and adding "I figured you might want to try the art, dance, or *ikebana* clubs, but I've got no real talent at any of that. There's no singing club and maybe we could put one together but considering we're almost halfway through the year . . . I kinda feel like maybe it'd be best to try and look for work—just something part time. I know what Byakuya said about our funds being a gift and all, but . . ."

Rukia considered him as he spoke and smiled a little at what she thought was under his conclusion, even if he was wrong about his skill at dancing—he was just untrained. He might genuinely want some token financial independence, but . . . she decided to see if she was right. "Looking for a charity case that needs help making ends meet?" she offered warmly. It was always the same: he always wanted to help more than anything.

He blinked and looked to her in surprise before scowling and crossing his arms, glancing aside. "I just don't want to have to rely on your brother for everything," he lied.

Her smile became knowing as she extended one of her legs, letting her ankle brush his as she took another drink of wine, only withdrawing it once she'd finished. "I'd like that. Two pairs of hands are better than one, right?" she asked, as if he hadn't said anything.

"Yeah, I guess so," he eventually said, looking back to her.
"How about we start looking for openings tomorrow?" she asked. They'd finished most of their homework the night before and the rest that morning, and everyone wouldn't be over for karaoke until the afternoon of the next day, so they'd have time.

He nodded at her before picking up the wine bottle and pouring what was left out for both of them. "Let's finish this and head home."

"Still a true romantic," she taunted with a small laugh. They hadn't had time to share a bath since she'd proposed it on Wednesday and had agreed to do so that evening.

He only halfheartedly glowered at her before taking up his glass to sip at it.

"I'm home, sorry I'm a bit late," Isshin stated with a hint of apology as he entered the Kurosaki household.

"We've been waiting for you, you know," Karin called out irritably, glancing toward the door. She was starving.

"Didn't you say there were going to have two guests tonight?" Yuzu followed up with a bit of confusion. He seemed to be alone.

Isshin glanced back out the open door and waved in whoever was with him.

Both of the twins blinked at the man and woman who entered, Yuzu continuing to just look perplexed.

Karin began to assess them critically. The man was bulky and rather rough looking. The woman was pretty, curvaceous, and looked both exceedingly proud and bossy. They were an extremely unlikely pair, the clothes they were wearing just looked off somehow, and the contrast with their dad made it even weirder. "Who are they?"

Isshin was about to say something when Ganju began to declare "Hello! My name is—" only for Kūkaku to turn and slug him in the face with a left hook.

"You're being disrespectful," she declared.

"S—Sorry, nē-chan!" he immediately replied through the hand he'd clasped over his face following the blow.

Karin's expression became suspicious both at the casual violence and its delivery. Why had the woman turned and used her left arm instead of just bringing up her right? She kept it limp by her side, as if she wasn't used to using it . . .

"These are Kūkaku Shiba and Ganju Shiba," Isshin said with a bit of amusement, gesturing to each, "Ichigo's already met them; they're your cousins!"

Yuzu's face immediately lit up while Karin's turned completely incredulous.

"Yo!" Kūkaku said with a bit of mirth, looking at the two young girls for a second before her eyes settled on the light-haired one and she said "So you must be Yuzu-chan," and then moved to the dark-haired one as she added "And you must be Karin-chan, right?" The former looked sweet and innocent and the latter looked leery and irritable. Her perennial smirk became a small grin as she decided she liked them already for their expressions alone.
Rukia leaned forward and brought her arms up to rest on the side of the tub, laying her head on them to give Ichigo easier access to her back and neck and murmuring her approval as he started to really massage her. His grip combined with the hot water was impossible to resist and she was soon slumped forward, totally relaxed.

He kept a bit distant from her and tried to just focus on her muscles, not really wanting to let his mind wander or to think too much. They'd soaked in the tub next to one another for a good hour after showering before he'd started to idly massage her and she'd turned into it without resistance or comment. He found himself peering down through the water and abruptly flushed, glancing aside before shutting his eyes. He gave away nothing through his touch. Not trusting himself not to keep looking, he took to reminiscing. It wasn't long after that his mind turned to about a month prior.

Eventually she quietly asked "What's on your mind, Ichigo?" Her tone was lazy.

"Nothing," he replied absentmindedly.

"You're not looking at my butt again, are you?" she asked, letting both playful and critical notes into her voice.

"No," he muttered defensively.

"It's alright if you are. Or were," she said, becoming sincere-sounding. Her cheeks became only a touch pink. She liked knowing she had his attention . . . that he liked looking at her, especially in that way. She'd been looked at lecherously before, and she knew that wasn't what was ever in his eyes.

Ichigo screwed his face up a bit before exhaling. What he'd been remembering was the morning of the day they'd first told his family they were dating. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't try and think his way through interacting with her, and he'd promised her that there'd be no rules. He'd qualified that to whatever we've done up to now then but there was no good reason to limit it that way. She'd told him he could ask to try things, she'd always leaned into his touch, and she'd just said . . . he still wasn't comfortable with doing that yet, but . . . it was difficult to properly massage her given both the water and the fact she couldn't stretch out. "I can't really do this right if we're still in the tub," he said with a hint of frustration.

Rukia blinked her eyes open and slowly turned her head to look over her shoulder, considering him. He was already looking at her, somewhere between sheepish and confident, and gave a small smile when their eyes met.

She stared at him for a second more before her eyelids dropped slightly and she smiled back, languidly pushing herself back into a sitting position and turning to face him. "We could dry off and lay out a towel in here," she suggested primly.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable on your bed?" he asked.

"Are you sure you're okay with that?" she asked, not taunting.

"Don't say it like that." He frowned slightly and looked aside, adding "We can put on some—" only to stop as a finger was pressed against his lips. His eyes widened a bit as he looked back to her.

Rukia was giving him a confident and trusting look. "You never have massaged my arms," she redirected, teasing a little as she remembered the morning after he'd first massaged her. She knew there was nothing to worry about with him, no matter what happened.

Ichigo flushed slightly but didn't avert his eyes and eventually just kissed her finger.
She withdrew her hand and brought it underwater, finding one of his. "Let's go then, strawberry," she said with a smile.

"Ready when you are, peach," he shot back affectionately, taking on a moderately arrogant look.

She blinked and blushed before looking aside as she figured out the source of his new nickname for her. "Fool," she declared with a touch of acid, putting on a show of appearing irritated as she found his other hand.

Ichigo didn't want to move at all as Rukia finally finished with his neck. He'd led off and although he'd still kept his hands off her inner thighs and chest, he'd otherwise been as thorough as he could, even with her rear. Afterwards she'd asserted it was her turn to massage him. They'd had the lights off from the start and he was right on the verge of falling asleep. She'd massaged him more than he had her by that point and he felt it showed. She knew exactly how much force to use to disable, calm, and relax him. He stayed still for long seconds, mind empty, until he realized she was carefully moving him. "What . . ." he murmured.

"Shhh," Rukia shushed, gingerly pulling him onto his side on the bed proper and tossing the towel they'd been laying on back toward the bathroom. She lay down on her side facing him, keeping her body apart but bringing her head and limbs forward to contact his.

"Rukia," he whispered.

"Shhh . . ." she repeated, pulling the covers up over them. She wasn't concerned, couldn't be bothered to put anything on, and she was almost as tired as he clearly was. She brought a hand up and pressed his head down into the crook of her neck, burying her face in his hair. "It's okay," she said soothingly.

He moved a hand onto one of her sides and surrendered, falling asleep against her.

She inhaled deeply before likewise letting go.

Sunday, September 22, 2002

Ichigo only woke up slowly, resisting the incidental sunlight that made its way to him. He hadn't moved much with Rukia and kept his face where it was for a long time, just breathing in the scent of her skin. At last he slowly pulled back from her, bringing his head fully up onto the pillow she was using.

She was still asleep and was turning her face into the pillow after being deprived of his hair.

He felt his chest clench around his heart at the sight of her and carefully brought the hand he still had on her side up, cupping her exposed cheek with it and caressing it.

Her eyes opened fractionally then, already locked onto his as if by instinct.

"'Morning," he whispered.

She just made a small noise of affirmation.

"Sleep in," he said quietly, moving his hand up and brushing her forehead.

Rukia watched him for a second before closing her eyes, seeming to acquiesce.
Ichigo continued to stroke her for a time and made sure she was bundled up before carefully slipping out of the sheets and standing. He was about to head for the bathroom to retrieve his boxers at least when her voice stopped him.

"Ichigo," she called sleepily.

He looked over his shoulder at her with some surprise, finding she looked every bit as tired as she sounded.

"You've got a cute butt and a nice ass too," she said, smirking a little before closing her eyes again.

He couldn't decide whether to frown or smile and finally just let out a "Tch," before going to do what he'd intended.

"I'm not working for a private investigator," Ichigo said flatly, holding his hands up in an X shape. It was never going to be as glamorous as it might look on TV.

"You're no fun at all," Rukia declared with disappointment.

He chose not to lecture her on how romantic her idea of the profession likely was and went back to considering the newspaper in front of him. After getting dressed he'd gone out to pick up things that might list job opportunities before he'd started in on making brunch for them. She'd only come downstairs once he was near done with it.

"What about this one?" she said after a time, reading: "Looking for workers of many talents and open minds to do a wide variety of jobs—offering flexible hours with reasonable pay and benefits. Please contact the Unagiya Shop at . . ." before giving a phone number.

"Why would we want to work at an eel-specialist shop?" he deadpanned.

"'Unagiya' not 'unagi-ya', one word," she replied with a touch of irritation, enunciating the difference more clearly.

"What's an eel, pyon?" Chappy asked in the background.

"It's like a water snake," Kon replied.

"Huh?" she said.

Ichigo frowned a bit, ignoring their commentary, before asking "Why would what sounds like 'do a bunch of odd jobs' require an 'open mind'?"

"Who knows, but 'flexible hours with reasonable pay and benefits' sounds look a good fit," Rukia replied. There was no guarantee as to exactly how often or reliably they'd really be able to show up.

He shifted his jaw from side to side as he considered it before waving a hand and saying "Fine, write it down, we can at least call," and going back to considering the listings he had.

Ichigo had coordinated with Yuzu on splitting the workload for the day in terms of food and was deep into preparation, Rukia at his side. She had demanded he let her take a more active role given what was expected of her in her home economics class and he was doing his best to instruct her at some of the simpler tasks while continuing to do the bulk of the work. She knew how to boil water and was good with a knife, at least. He was showing her how to julienne vegetables properly when
the doorbell rang. "We can get back to this in a moment, would you go get that?" he asked.

"What's the magic word?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips and looking a bit irked.

"Please," he added with a smidgen of annoyance.

She lifted her eyebrows in a 'was that so hard?' way before leaving the kitchen and going to the front door, opening it up and saying "Hey!" in greeting automatically. She didn't actually look outside, not thinking anything of it.

Immediately Karin and Yuzu filed in carrying plastic containers, greeting her with "Rukia-nē!" and "Nē-san!" in turn.

Isshin followed carrying far more containers, saying "Rukia-chan, looking radiant as always!"

Rukia gave a look of abashed embarrassment before she started to move to close the door, only for a hand to appear on the edge and stop the motion with ease. She immediately blinked before it withdrew and its owner stepped into view, already looking her way with a cool turquoise-green gaze. Her eyes went wide at the familiar shade even as she processed who it was.

Kūkaku instantly made a calculation from the look on the short Shinigami's face and let her smirk back onto her face. It was so obvious she still felt guilty, and that just wouldn't do. "Yo, been awhile . . . Rukia," she greeted with a hint of warmth, her eyes swinging away to the interior of the house as she added "Nice place!" before stepping out of her shoes and into the interior. Ordinarily she would've asked permission, but Yoruichi had brought Ichigo and his friends into her house without asking, so she reasoned it was just a reciprocal gesture.

Rukia continued to track the elder Shiba sibling in shock before another voice drew her attention back to the door.

"Oi, oi, Rukia, hey! Say, that's a nice haircut, you look good!" Ganju offered with what seemed to be genuine candor as he entered with two bags in hand.

The petite Shinigami took a moment before shutting the door and following after them, not immediately sure what to say.

Ichigo hadn't missed the new but familiar voices and momentarily abandoned his work to look through the breakfast bar to confirm what he was hearing, calling with some disbelief "Kūkaku-san . . . Ganju?!" as if his senses were playing tricks on him. He immediately looked to Rukia and then to his dad for confirmation.

Isshin gave his son a look that was a strange mixture of serious, amused, and ever so slightly apologetic but said nothing. It was technically a faux pas to bring uninvited guests unless that was explicitly allowed by the hosts, but when it came to family, all the normal rules didn't really apply.

"Dad brought them home last night because apparently we're having a family gathering," Karin deadpanned, not just referring to that evening's activities.

Isshin gave his son a look that was a strange mixture of serious, amused, and ever so slightly apologetic but said nothing. It was technically a faux pas to bring uninvited guests unless that was explicitly allowed by the hosts, but when it came to family, all the normal rules didn't really apply.

"Dad brought them home last night because apparently we're having a family gathering," Karin deadpanned, not just referring to that evening's activities.

The future substitute blinked before beginning "Ah, Kūkaku-san, your arm . . ." as he finally figured out what was off other than seeing her in normal clothes and without all the bandages.

"Yeah, yeah, and you're taller and Rukia cut her hair," Kūkaku said dismissively, still looking around. Urahara had said something about gigai not being able to account for 'large physical aberrations' and she'd just punched him for putting it in such a way rather than hearing whatever else he had to say on the subject. It had gotten a laugh out of Yoruichi, at any rate.
"You're not going to say anything to me, dandelion?" Ganju called out with incredulity.

"What's to say?!" Ichigo shot back with a scowl.

"Onii-chan, you can't get distracted when you're cooking things," Yuzu scolded, abruptly drawing his attention back to the kitchen as she began to make sure that nothing burned.

"Yeah, sorry," he replied, turning around and returning to the work at hand.

Rukia soon rejoined him, still looking a bit lost and surprised.

He watched her for a second before asking "Yuzu, could you . . . please . . . handle that for a second? I was helping Rukia with a cutting technique for her class."

"No problem!" his lighter-haired sister replied, immediately conciliatory.

Ichigo gave his girlfriend a reassuring look under the guise of returning to the impromptu lesson.

Rukia replied by mouthing 'it's okay' as she took the work back up. She'd just been caught completely off-guard.

"Hey, what did you mean about her arm?" Karin whispered from behind them.

"Nothing," Ichigo said dismissively.

Karin frowned before leaving the kitchen, deciding to just be direct about it.

Kūkaku was continuing to survey the ground floor of the house, finding it looked rather tasteful but sort of flummoxed by the juxtaposition of the traditional rooms and the more Western-looking ones. She'd been confused by the Kurosaki household as well and still wasn't sure whether she liked the permanent fixtures or not. It was as she was looking about that she noticed a tiny reiatsu signature and her eyes wandered up the stairwell to find a stuffed animal looking at her.

Kon stared at her, enraptured, the only thing that stopped him being his complete disbelief at what he was seeing. She put even Inoue and Yoruichi to shame and it'd been a long time since he'd seen Matsumoto. Right as he began to decide to take action he was put into a headlock by Chappy, who immediately dragged him off.

The Shiba clan leader raised an eyebrow before Ganju's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Nē-chan, this is a really nice place!" he whispered, looking at her with wide eyes. He didn't know what half the things were, but he knew they were nice.

"I said that already," she stated.

"Byakuya will only accept the best," Isshin offered, joining them.

Kūkaku frowned slightly before she was suddenly aware of Karin beside her. The girl was looking up at her fearlessly and questioningly. "What?" the elder Shiba asked with a bit of amusement, the expression once more reminding her of more than she'd admit.

"So what's with your right arm . . . Kūkaku-iito?" she asked.

The Shiba woman became a bit critical looking before smirking again and kneeling down so they were face to face, saying in a conspiratorial way "Normally I don't have it."
Karin blinked.

"From here down, gone," Kūkaku almost-bragged, tapping her left hand against her right bicep.

"So you're not used to using it? That's gonna make it hard to play video games," Karin immediately replied.

At that the Shiba clan leader blinked.

"So how'd that happen? her young cousin continued.

Kūkaku stared for a fraction of a second before smiling and saying "Well, that's a bit of a story . . ."

By the time everything was finished being fixed the living room was full, with Yoruichi, Urahara, Ishida, Inoue, Chad, Keigo, Mizuiro, and Tatsuki having joined them. The only one missing from the first time was Renji; there hadn't been enough advance notice to get him time off. They'd all been tasked with bringing various items, from soda to tea and from games to the karaoke DVDs they'd be using.

Ichigo assessed the crowd while transferring food to the trays they had. Counting himself and including Chappy and Kon—although they hadn't yet seen fit to interact with the others—there were 17 of them present, which was a bit crazy to think about. It was too many for the dining room table and so they'd set up their traditional rooms with multiple connected kotatsu, forming a single long table everyone could eat at.

Yoruichi, Kūkaku, Tatsuki, and Karin were all playing some sort of tag-team fighting game while laughing and taunting one another while Inoue watched their match closely, Isshin and Urahara appeared to be chatting, and Keigo and Mizuiro seemed to be trying to bullshit Ganju about something or other while Chad and Ishida were countering them.

The would-be substitute gave a small sigh of relief. Only he, Rukia, and Yuzu were in the kitchen. It was a miracle a fight hadn't broken out yet—it was inevitable Mizuiro or Keigo would try and hit on Kūkaku and then everything would go to hell. He blinked as he felt a hand on one of his wrists and turned, finding Rukia smiling at him. His eyes met hers and he smiled back as they shared a moment.

Yuzu gave them a bit of time and privacy before saying "Well, looks like we can start to move it all!" cheerily.

Dinner was raucous and mostly occupied by Isshin, Kūkaku, Yoruichi, and Urahara, exchanging stories of their interactions with one another in their youth as a kind of entertainment for the younger parties present. They got a lot of laughs at any rate.

Kon and Chappy joined them afterwards, the former looking rather disgruntled at whatever the latter had said or done to get him to behave. The only one really surprised was Ganju—Yuzu had heard about the origins of 'Bostoff' long ago, and she was far more interested in how cute Chappy looked at any rate.

Fully assembled and fed, they started on karaoke.

It was after many hours, dozens and dozens of songs, a few token fights that were mostly settled by Tatsuki and Kūkaku abusing Keigo, and more than an hour of video, board, and card games to wind down that all the couple's friends had left for the night and Ichigo's family were getting ready to
"Oi, Ichigo," Kūkaku said, coming up alongside him, "Would it be alright with you if we stayed here for two nights? Uncle's house doesn't have that much space for guests."

The orange-haired teenager blinked at the request and rubbed the back of his head for a second in thought. Why two nights . . . ?

"If not it's fine, it's your house after all," his cousin continued, glancing to Rukia and making it clear she understood it was a plural 'your'. Just as she wouldn't accept being told what to do in her house, she wouldn't tell someone else what to do in theirs, even family . . . even family technically under her leadership.

"We've got a guest bedroom on this floor and . . . my bedroom is basically free and the bed hasn't been used since the last wash. My room's got more space, a bigger bed, and a bigger bathroom, but . . . well, it's your choice which you want," he responded. His room was probably more befitting of her but he didn't know if she had any problems with that kind of thing.

Kūkaku ignored the seemingly obvious conclusion of what he'd said and replied "Fine, I'll take your room." She didn't care who'd last used a space if it was clean. "You sure she'll be okay with this?" she added, looking to Rukia again as she said it.

Ichigo followed her gaze and thought for a moment. He felt he knew why Rukia wanted to celebrate ohigan and had wanted to celebrate obon, and if he was right that reason encompassed his cousins too. "You're going to go with us tomorrow, right?" he asked.

"Yeah," she replied.

"I think she'll be fine with it," he assessed, thought his tone was confident.

Kūkaku surveyed him for a second, silently judging him positively for not automatically assuming his choice would carry the day. "I'll ask her too, just to be sure," she said cockily, giving him an out and going to ask before he could say anything more.

Ichigo exited the bathroom to find Rukia sitting on her bed in pajamas, still looking through job ads. He made his way over and sat down beside her, looking at them with her for a few seconds before collecting them up and dropping them off the side of the bed.

"I wasn't done yet, jerk," she said without any venom.

He said nothing and gently pulled her to him.

She moved closer without complaint while also pushing and pulling him so they wound up together on their sides.

He turned out the last light and pulled the covers up before bringing a hand up to caress her face as he had that morning, whispering "Hey."

"What?" she asked in response.

"You're beautiful," Ichigo said quietly. He felt he should've said it after massaging her.

Rukia reached her own hand up to stroke at him and replied "You're tired," coyly.

He lightly nipped at her hand for her dismissive attitude but settled with her, relaxing.
She waited until she was sure he'd closed his eyes before smiling broadly and doing the same.
Monday, September 23, 2002

Rukia wasn't entirely sure how long it'd been since Ichigo had briefly woken her to let her know he was getting up but she'd tried not to linger in bed too long after. Their schedules seemed to be diverging a little since he consistently had to get up early and she wasn't really a morning person by nature. She didn't like that drift in the slightest and if she had to get up around when he did to bring them back into alignment then she would. She opened her bedroom door, dressed for the day in a relatively sober and conservative dress, only to immediately stop as she found Kūkaku waiting for her in the sitting area.

The elder of the surviving Shiba siblings had made a greater effort than usual to look presentable: her mane of hair had been put into a rough sort of order and she had dressed relatively restrained given the occasion and the weather—she was wearing a thin black sweater and a medium-length skirt, having decided she didn't much like pants. Upon sighting the Shinigami she fixed her with an open but meaningful look and held it for a time before glancing to an empty chair, making her intentions clear.

After a moment's hesitation Rukia made her way to the indicated seat, sitting down. She glanced at her counterpart before looking away.

"Do you remember what I told you the last time we met?" Kūkaku eventually asked. She didn't really want to go back over it but from the look she'd gotten on her arrival she felt it needed to be addressed. She'd wondered if Isshin hadn't deliberately concealed their visit for exactly that kind of effect and this kind of conversation—he'd never liked ordering people to do things and could be sneakier than one would at first think. That after so long an absence he was suddenly maneuvering things around was proof of the same.

"Yes," Rukia said quietly. She knew better than to say 'sorry' again. She also knew that despite her words and penchant for brevity, Kūkaku still hurt at Kaien's loss even more than she did, if differently.

"Good, then I won't repeat it," the Shiba leader said, looking her way. "I know you liked him," she stated.

The petite Shinigami blinked and turned to her with a touch of shock.

"It's one thing to be guilty about something and it's another to bear that guilt along for such a long time and so blatantly," Kūkaku explained. She knew that Kaien had been faithful to Miyako but she also knew that he had regarded Rukia as something more than a subordinate or a kōhai—he had seemed to view her as not only a friend but as a kind of apprentice and had been genuinely interested in her well-being. "In his own way he liked you too. He thought of you like a protégé. He'd talk about you sometimes when he came over to visit us. He had a lot of hope for and faith in you," she continued.

"Why are you—" Rukia whispered, not sure what to make of it. She hadn't known that he'd spoken of her to them but . . .
"He'd be proud of how you turned out," Kūkaku said decisively, making eye contact with the her. She didn't know many of the particulars other than that Rukia had Kaien's former position, but she had three mental impressions of her affect and _reiatsu_ output and that was enough to make a conclusion. She seemed much sturdier than she had been when they'd last met and she was vastly more powerful than when they'd first met. "He'd also be proud to know you helped and were helped by another Shiba," she said after a beat, glancing downstairs and not referring to Ganju.

Rukia stared.

"I know how he was about things, so I know he probably told you about 'heart'. Considering what we're here to do . . . well, in his case I don't have to visit a grave. What happened . . . happened . . . so just keep on." the Shiba clan leader concluded. The words for what she wanted to say didn't really exist and so she decided to leave most of it to inference.

Rukia suddenly looked away.

Kūkaku blew out a breath and glanced aside before once more looking at the woman who seemed certain to be her future cousin-in-law. With how much they were sure to wind up interacting with and having to trust one another because of that, it just wasn't possible to hold onto things. Bygones had to be bygones. "That's enough about the past," she said less weightily, "Things will get complicated in the future. We'll talk about that later, but I want you to know we've got your back."

The raven-haired Shinigami's gaze returned, confused and surprised as she realized that this was the Shiba woman's way of declaring it was truly water under the bridge and that she should let it go.

Kūkaku let her trademark smirk back onto her face. "Anyway, I'm glad it seems Ichigo's better at cooking than _kidō_. He almost blew my house up, you know." It wasn't lost on her that if someone as stubborn as Ichigo was doing domestic work then Rukia wasn't the only one who'd gone through changes.

Rukia carefully put what they'd just discussed aside for the time-being. "Yuzu-chan is a really great teacher, but maybe we should check in on him just to make sure?" she suggested after a moment, testing a small smirk in response.

"Yeah, maybe," Kūkaku replied, letting her own expression become a bit arrogant and standing to do exactly that.

They went downstairs together, finding Ganju was already at the breakfast bar trying to offer Ichigo cooking advice he'd picked up from things 'Hawk' Taichi had said. The orange-haired teenager looked like he was going to snap but was trying his best to be polite.

Ichigo, Rukia, Karin, Yuzu, Isshin, Kūkaku, and Ganju arrived at the nearby cemetery during a light rain, the couple sharing a single large umbrella and having provisioned the latter two with their spares from Tokyo. It had been and was projected to be overcast and cloudy the entire day. It made for a marked contrast with the previous day's sunshine and seemed to fit the tone of the occasion. They stood before Masaki's gravestone in a tight cluster. There were some other people scattered about paying respects to their own departed.

There was no need to clean the gravestone or its surroundings as that was all seen to by the caretakers of the cemetery. The weather made burning incense, offerings of food, and pouring water over the gravestone unnecessary or impractical, and the need to hold umbrellas made traditional prayer difficult. They stood in solemn silence with their thoughts instead.
Since the Kurosaki family had never really celebrated *ohigan* before, the Shiba were unaware of it, and Rukia's knowledge was vague, before setting out together they'd briefly reviewed what it was genuinely about other than the reverence for one's ancestors and relatives, which was something of a Shinto twist. *Ohigan* meant the 'other shore' and as a whole was concerned with transitions—the changing of the seasons, the transition from life to death, and the journey from a world of suffering and illusions to one of liberation and enlightenment, as embodied by six *haramitsu*, or pathways: generosity, right conduct, endurance, endeavor, meditation, and wisdom. That had been as far as they'd gotten when Karin and Kūkaku had become frustrated with how grim and dour it all sounded.

Ichigo had his farther arm from Rukia crossed over his stomach to hold the umbrella between them as his nearer hand was holding hers. He was thinking back on his memories of his mom through the lens of what his dad had told them. It was strange to think that she had always been an incredibly strong Quincy under it all, but somehow he could see it. When his thoughts turned to what she'd think of Rukia though, they were perfectly clear and required no effort to parse: *I know you'd love her, especially because of how much I do...* He also reflected on how some of the six *haramitsu* reminded him of things they'd said to one another since being reunited. Not that it was enlightenment he was seeking... Rukia held onto his hand securely as she tried to picture the woman in the photographs and in Ichigo and Isshin's stories. *I never knew you, and I know I never will, but I want you to know I care about your son more than anything and I...* She had also noticed the same things he had about the nature of the holiday as it related to them, and spent some time wondering at it.

Everyone else's thoughts were their own.

No one really noticed the sound of slowly approaching footsteps until they stopped behind them all.

"I didn't know you celebrated today," Isshin offered with a bit of humor, discerning exactly who was behind them without needing to look.

"You're one to talk," Ryūken replied dryly. The Kurosaki family had never come to visit her during *ohigan* and he had never gone to visit her on the anniversary—it had worked and seemed to suit both parties fine.

Everyone else turned to look at him. All were somewhat confused except Rukia, who knew why he was there. He had gone for a more subdued suit for once, although his shirt reflected his preference for white clothing. He was also carrying an umbrella.

The Last Quincy felt no need to explain himself and just closed his eyes while paying his respects, able to figure out why they were being less than traditional and guessing at who the two new additions were.

After a moment everyone else returned as they had been, Ichigo giving Rukia a small perplexed look as he noticed her absence of any surprise.

She gave him a glance that indicated she'd tell him later. She hadn't learned terribly much from the elder Quincy she hadn't known already but she could at least explain his presence there.

It was a minute or so thereafter that another pair of approaching footfalls could be heard above the muffling effect of the rain and they all turned to see who it was. Only Ryūken wasn't surprised.

Ishida glanced from his father to Ichigo and Rukia, from them to the Shiba, and then to the gravestone and back, deciding not to make any comment on the things he inferred as he approached, simply taking up a place and quietly paying his respects. He too had his own umbrella.
Only a few seconds passed before Isshin let out a small chuckle and said "Dear, you're drawing a lot of attention this year—it must be all the good news afoot." He knew she wouldn't have been one for such a sober occasion.

Karin shot him a glare.

Ichigo and Rukia didn't react other than to squeeze at each others' hands.

Ryūken glanced to Ishida in such a way as to catch his attention before turning and starting to walk off, saying only "We have another visit to make."

Ishida blinked before taking on a mildly chagrined expression and following along. It was as he was leaving that he gave Masaki's gravestone one last look and noticed the date on the side of it that detailed when it had been placed. He kept his eyes from betraying anything at what seemed like a very unlikely coincidence as a lot of other things suddenly clicked into place.

The Shiba, the Kurosaki family, and the lone Kuchiki watched them go before exchanging glances, staying for awhile more before deciding to go their own way. There was only so long one could stand in the rain being morose and contemplative, even in solidarity with family.

They all wound up back at the Kurosaki household for lunch, family activities, and dinner. It had been decided to split the events up by day to share the burden of the eventual cleanup. Yuzu had used most of the morning to work on preparing food for them all. They ate, talked, played games, and did their best to learn about one another and come together as a family in celebration. Each of them—even Kūkaku and Ganju, from what little they'd heard from Isshin—had the sense that was truly how Masaki would've wanted to be remembered.

It was well after dinner and deep into the evening when Ichigo and Rukia left with Kūkaku and Ganju to head back home.

Ichigo found something bothering him and realized it was how long his elder cousin had requested they be allowed to stay. "Hey, Kūkaku-san, why two nights . . . ?"

"Because I didn't want to ruin your plans with too much serious talk and wanted to see if you'd just trust in what I asked of you," the Shiba clan head replied plainly. She actually intended to stay longer but there was no reason to bother her family with that as she could just impose on Yoruichi instead. Ichigo's shower was really nice though . . .

Ichigo blinked and glanced to Rukia. She once more seemed to know something he didn't and he found himself wondering if they'd already talked about Kaien. Had it been that morning before they'd come down together?

She gave him another look that communicated she'd explain and took on a somewhat guilty expression as she realized how many small things she just hadn't told him.

"Don't worry, dandelion, we already have everything squared away regarding your training tomorrow!" Ganju offered.

"I'm not going to be training with you, am I?" Ichigo deadpanned, making it clear what he thought of the idea as he was distracted from attending to Rukia.

"No, but don't say that so cruelly, cousin!" Ganju shot back, glaring at him.
They continued to bicker with one another while Rukia and Kūkaku just listened with growing amusement, both of them deciding to take the diversion instead of dwelling on what the latter had meant by 'serious talk'.

Rukia turned off the last light as she joined Ichigo on her bed, sitting down beside where he lay. "I'm sorry I haven't told you certain things, I just haven't wanted to trouble you with them," she confessed after only a few seconds.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it," he said earnestly. He didn't question her honesty or forthrightness; they were just small things she seemed to know something about before he did. She always thought things through more than he did anyway, so it always seemed possible she just figured stuff out that he hadn't. It wasn't something worth worrying over or being upset with her for.

"I . . . went to go talk to both Ishida and his father after we learned the truth about your powers," she admitted.

"I talked with Ishida too," he said, not understanding why she felt guilty about having done so herself. He found one of her hands and took it in his.

"The reason they were there today is . . . Ishida-san and your mother apparently always regarded one another as cousins, although they were much more distantly related than that. It would seem Ishida has decided to accept that at face value," she said. She didn't really want to intrude upon or betray the nature of his relations with his friends if she could help it, but it was impossible to otherwise explain their attendance.

Ichigo raised an eyebrow and looked at her rather disbelievingly in the darkness. The Shiba were one thing, but the Ishida too? Given Byakuya would eventually be his brother-in-law, and after he'd tacitly acknowledged Yoruichi and Urahara the way he had . . . exactly how quickly was his extended family going to keep growing?

Rukia didn't notice and continued on, saying "Yoruichi didn't really tell me everything but you should know that your next instructor is going to be the former."

"What?" he asked with mild incredulity. He still had no interest in archery.

"She said he knew something you needed to and that it'd fit with your interests. That's all I know," Rukia said with pained honesty. There were a lot more mysteries than she liked in Yoruichi's training program but she'd decided she trusted the woman and so she'd simply accepted that.

He contemplated it for a short while before gripping her hand and asking "Did Kūkaku already say something to you?"

"Yes . . . she told me that Kaien would be proud of me. And you," she replied quietly.

He slowly pushed himself up at that, sitting beside her. "Is something like that really bothering you so much?" he asked softly.

"I . . ." she trailed off, not knowing what to say.

"You remember the last time we were at that cemetery?" he asked after awhile.

She just nodded and he knew somehow.

"I know you were listening when I asked my dad why nobody blamed me for what happened to my
mom, and I know you heard what he said," Ichigo continued, "It sounds like . . . that's the kind of
ting Kūkaku was trying to tell you."

Rukia turned toward him then, pushing close. She didn't have the heart to say that in a way Kaien
had told her that himself, she had just never wanted to hear it. After all the time that had passed and
everything that had happened, she still had trouble hearing it.

He got his arms around her and held her tightly.

They stayed together for a long time before she started pull away. "Sorry, I'm being selfish right
now, this isn't—" she began. The day wasn't supposed to be about her problems and to end it in that
way . . .

He leaned down and kissed her tenderly to cut her off, keeping her in his arms.

She protested mildly at first against his mouth and made a halfhearted effort to pull free, but soon
relented and joined in with it.

Ichigo soothed her with his hands while holding it, just wanting her to know through touch that she
was loved.

Rukia eventually broke it off and sank against him, her hands finding his shoulders and gripping
them as she understood what he was doing. She leaned against him silently for another very long
interval before sitting up to kiss him more firmly in appreciation.

He tried doing the same in return, putting all other thoughts out of mind.

She lightly bit his lower lip in reply before turning her head farther, wanting and needing more of his
affection at that moment.

He took her invitation and French kissed her, taking his time and being patient. He knew
instinctually that she was vulnerable and didn't at all want to exploit it, but he likewise knew he had
to comfort her.

She let out a quiet moan against his tongue to encourage him and it was a long time before they
ended it for air.

Ichigo made a snap decision then and moved back from her for a second, pulling off the t-shirt he
had on so he was left with only his boxers. With how frequently and the ways in which they were
around one another there was no question of their trust in each other. He'd already seen her and felt
her and he knew she needed to feel secure and wanted, and he needed to help her, and so there was
simply no room for distance or thin layers of fabric—both had to go. "I'm not—I just have to be
closer to you," he whispered as he tossed his shirt aside before getting next to her again. He didn't
want her to misinterpret him but she also had to understand . . .

Rukia began to say "Ichigo—" only to stop as he pressed a finger to her lips. Her eyes became a bit
wide as she tried to read his expression or body language in the dark but he was already playing at
her jawline and neck as she was still trying to catch her breath. She finally just kissed his finger.

Removing his digit, he took the bottom hem of her pajama top in both hands, slowly pulling it up.

She blushed slightly but helped, throwing it away, only to blush more as he carefully took off her
pajama pants in the same way, leaving her in just her panties. She wasn't used to him being so
assertive about such things and she was more than a touch embarrassed to find that she liked it.
He pulled her close again so she was against him and resumed playing at her neck, basking in the feeling of her skin against his.

After a moment she brought her hands up onto his chest, tracing the outlines of his muscles. Once she felt she had her breathing back under control she kissed him deeply, taking her turn.

Ichigo played with her tongue while also bringing his hands up to brush his fingertips across her front as she had with him, making sure not to linger too long in any one place or to tease in any fashion.

Rukia let him until he moved his hands away for a moment, pressing against him to wordlessly restrict access—she understood the limit he'd set and was willing to abide by it, but she was more sensitive than he was. She let out a noise of surprise as his hands found purchase on her rear instead but continued to explore his mouth.

They continued for a time until eventually she was on her back with his face against her neck, most of his torso draped over her. He'd made very sure that where he might've marked her with love bites fell below the collar of her uniform.

She had her arms and legs around him and had buried her face in his hair, clinging to him.

"You're not going to be able to fall asleep like that," he said without teasing, gently massaging her sides and trying to get her to relax.

"Shut up, fool," she whispered back with barely restrained attachment. She was beset by a maelstrom of different feelings and was only really certain in the physical presence of his heft and warmth.

Ichigo suddenly felt guilty. Had he gone too far? He tried once more to comfort and reassure her, abruptly much less confident than he had been.

Rukia sensed the shift in his mood from his body language and constricted her grip, holding onto him as tightly as she possibly could. She brought a hand up into his hair and grasped there, pulling his head back so they were face to face, just barely able to see reflections glinting off of his eyes. "I love you, Ichigo," she whispered to him, her voice as sincere as she could make it.

"Rukia, you're really, really beautiful . . . Not your gigai, not your spirit body, not your singing . . . you . . . are so beautiful . . ." he replied in a hushed voice, putting his adoration and reverence for her on full display in his tone.

Her expression became impossibly soft and she closed her eyes, shifting a little so her forehead was against his, slowly easing her grip and starting to use her hands to calm him in turn. As she did so she made up her mind about something—not for the first time she hadn't really wanted for them to stop, guests or not, and if they could be together in such a way as they were right then, then she . . . she was ready, and she wouldn't make him wait long.

"I love you," he continued, trying to mollify her with renewed focus. The things he whispered to her then weren't sweet nothings, because there wasn't any nothingness to them—they were all things she needed to hear about what she meant to him.

Rukia slowly settled under his litany and eventually pulled him to her one final time, moving his head back to her neck and finalizing her grasp on him as she felt herself start to fall away, feeling secure against him.

Ichigo kept on until he was sure she was asleep before sinking against her.
Although it was established in the first chapter, I'm going to address something pertinent to the current chapter since it won't wind up being discussed because it's something the characters know or can infer from how others act. A lot of people in the Bleach fandom assume souls eaten by Hollows are destroyed. Given how big a deal it is that Quincy destroy souls, this strikes me as unlikely—Hollows would receive much higher priority if that was true because that'd definitely upset the balance of souls. The more obvious conclusion is they're locked in a Hollow in some fashion until it's purified or destroyed—if the latter, maybe they're also destroyed, hence why Quincy are a really big problem from the Shinigami perspective. Basically, Hollows are a convenient if dangerous dense soul storage mechanism that can be broken open when necessary. Souls consumed in such a way could either be sent to Soul Society or directly reincarnated, it's not clear. My inclination is toward the latter.

For the purposes of this story, Masaki would've been released when Grand Fisher was eliminated by Isshin while Kaien would've been back when he perished. (My view is Metastacia didn't consume his soul but it doesn't really matter given even if it did, Rukia terminated Aaroniero.) The short of it is, their essence goes on but they as individuals are gone.
I Don't Wanna Be Friends

Tuesday, September 24, 2002

Ichigo slowly woke by learned habit, only gradually becoming aware of anything other than Rukia. Her presence was like a constant in his mind from the start that made his heart sing. He shifted against her, lightly kissing her neck and the underside of her chin before bringing his head up alongside hers.

She murmured something and turned into him as he did so.

He lightly nibbled at one of her earlobes and whispered her name to try and gradually wake her, not really thinking about it beforehand. He didn't want to have to rouse her but being able to do it in such a way made it more acceptable.

Eventually her fingers tensed against him slightly as her eyes slowly opened, sliding over to him at the sensation of his lips against her ear. She whispered "Ichigo . . ." back to him, acutely aware of how warm he was against her.

"I'm here. You can sleep in, but I have to get up," he said, kissing her temple and lingering against her for a moment before starting to pull away.

She didn't slacken her grip in the slightest and hung onto him, preventing him from moving as she felt her pulse start to quicken.

He looked back to her with mild surprise, not sure what to make of it at first.

Rukia started to push herself up then, saying "I'll get ready with you," in a way that made it clear it wasn't negotiable even if she still sounded sleepy. She didn't want him to go but he had to and so she'd just go with him. It'd at least make the transition apart from one another smoother.

Ichigo stared at her in the dim light for a second before giving a small smirk and closing his eyes for a moment, surrendering. He started to move again but helped her up with him as he went.

He was going for his body wash when he was stopped by one of her hands grasping his wrist. He glanced at her with confusion.

She used her grasp to pull at him and indicate he should turn to face her, at the same time reaching with her free hand for the body wash and taking up the bottle.

He blinked and his cheeks became slightly flushed as he discerned her intent, but after a second he cooperated and rotated to stand face to face with her, looking slightly embarrassed.

Keeping her eyes on his and her face carefully controlled except for a tiny smile, she let go of his wrist and squeezed out some of the soap, replacing the bottle before getting a washcloth and lathering it up in her hands. She reached up to start soaping and scrubbing his shoulders, being gentle but not too delicate or familiar, making it clear that they'd just be cleaning each other . . . although she wasn't going to put a limit on the extent of that and intended to do it fully and properly and expected the same from him.

He leaned down a bit to make it easier for her, turning his head and putting on a show of looking chagrined to hide his interest.
Ganju surreptitiously glanced from Ichigo to Rukia as they all ate breakfast together. He'd had a lot of
time to observe their interactions over the last two days. They almost seemed to be ignoring one
another, although neither seemed angry at the other. It was strange as they were normally quite noisy
and animated when they weren't doting upon one another. He couldn't figure it out and hazarded a
glance at his sister to see if she noticed too.

Kūkaku's eyes found his after a split second and immediately transitioned to a glare that couldn't be
interpreted as anything other than 'Don't you dare say a word about it'.

Ganju blinked before he looked down at his plate and decided to focus exclusively on it, putting the
entire enterprise out of mind. Whatever was going on was way too scary to bother with.

Mizuiro noticed immediately that the couple seemed off somehow, like they were both distracted and
preoccupied.

Keigo didn't, but followed his friend's gaze and started to pick up on it.

They watched for a few seconds until Kūkaku appeared in the doorway after Ichigo and Rukia's
departure, casually saying "See ya later," to them while giving the two young men a death glare that
was totally at odds with her tone.

Both immediately looked away from the couple and took up point on the walk to school, making
small talk about whatever they could to avoid bothering the pair behind them and incurring the wrath
of Ichigo's buxom cousin. Somehow they both felt she'd find out if they did otherwise.

Keigo decided to save his recriminations about Ichigo being related to such a warrior goddess for
lunch. It was already bad enough that he had wooed a maiden like Rukia and just blithely associated
with beauties like Matsumoto!

The jester clasped a hand over his nose to keep from losing too much blood. It wasn't serious but
Ichigo's reflexes had improved dramatically.

"I told you already I didn't know she was my cousin until summer break!" the orange-haired student
declared hotly, exasperated.

"You know you have no chance anyway, Asano-san," Mizuiro offered mildly.

"Don't you start either!" both Keigo and Ichigo declared.

Rukia watched their antics from beside their other friends and started to laugh quietly.

During breakfast Kūkaku had elaborated on the fact that training was simply cancelled that day and
that they'd meet up later for dinner, and so after school Ichigo and Rukia decided to follow up on
their job-hunting prospects. They began with the Unagiya Shop since it was at the top—not that it
was a very long list.

They idled near the school gate while Ichigo called on his phone, waiting for someone to pick up.

"Thanks for calling! Cheap! Fast! Safe! We'll do anything! That's Unagiya!" a woman's voice called
out aggressively on the second ring.
He was momentarily taken aback before beginning "Yeah, I'm calling about the job ad in—"

Rukia watched him, lifting an eyebrow slightly at how loud the voice coming out of the phone's speaker was.

"When can you come in to talk?" Ikumi immediately interrupted.

"Uh, right now, I—" he started.

Ikumi promptly rattled off the address and a short list of directions from the nearest major intersection before declaring "See you soon!" and hanging up.

Ichigo pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it for a second before closing and pocketing it, looking to Rukia.

She was regarding him rather dubiously.

"Somehow I think we're gonna regret this, but let's go," he offered, absentmindedly taking her hand and starting to walk with her toward the address he'd been given.

Once they found the place in question they exchanged a look before going upstairs and ringing the doorbell. He noticed the door swung outwards and made sure they were both clear of its arc.

They didn't have to wait long before the door was open and they were being greeted by the same voice as before saying "Customers? Come on in!"

Ichigo let Rukia go in first even though he immediately said "Actually, we're here about the job, I called earlier."

Ikumi blinked as she recognized his voice and regarded the short, dark-haired young woman and the tall orange-haired young man with some confusion, looking back and forth between them and seeming to evaluate for a moment. They were obviously students. "Both of you?" she asked after a second, puzzled.

"Yeah, why, is there only one opening?" Ichigo asked.

Rukia cleared her throat, looking to the proprietor. She was struck by the fact she seemed rather pretty, if gruff-mannered. "My name is Kuchiki Rukia, and this is Kurosaki Ichigo—as you surely noticed, we both go to Karakura High School. As he said, we're both looking for a job with the same employer. Ichigo is my roommate and resides with me at the behest of my brother, who is attending to family matters out of country—nii-sama was very specific that he was to look out for me at all times, and so..." she trailed off, making it sound like it was matter of familial principal. It was close enough to the truth and explained their circumstances adequately.

"Basically if you're looking for only one employee we won't waste more of your time," her boyfriend added, playing along.

Ikumi was about to say something when a boy's voice called out "Mommy," faintly from the other side of a door into the shop. Her expression immediately became concerned as her head snapped toward the door and she promptly began to take off her hat and gloves, retrieving an apron as she briskly made her way over to it.

Ichigo and Rukia watched her go with some confusion and tracked her until the door opened.
"Mommy, I'm hungry," Kaoru asserted, walking through it.

"Aww, Kaoru-chan, I'll make something soon! I told you about coming into the office," Ikumi replied sweetly, hugging him.

Kaoru's eyes found Ichigo and narrowed in suspicion before he spotted Rukia as well and his calculations changed a bit. After looking between the two of them for a second he said only "Okay," letting his mom usher him out while she continued assuring him.

Ichigo blinked before his expression changed, taking on a sort of grimmer character as he put it all together.

Rukia glanced to him, figuring out what he was probably thinking and letting the back of one of her hands brush his.

After seeing her son off Ikumi threw the apron back onto the desk she'd retrieved it from and returned to them, starting to say something again.

"If it's not workable otherwise we're willing to accept reduced rates," Ichigo abruptly volunteered, making it sound like it was only a grudging concession in the face of their need to find a place that'd hire both of them.

The single mother reassessed them again for a second before saying "I pay a standard minimum wage. My name's Unagiya Ikumi, but you can call me Ikumi-san. When can you start?"

"We're still working on getting some of our affairs in order, so if it isn't an imposition, next Monday would be best. We'll be available in the evenings and perhaps on Saturdays and should usually be able to give advance notice if we can't make it," Rukia stated.

"That's fine," Ikumi said, waving it off. Nobody had even bothered applying for a long time and she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Well, in that case we'll be back here on Monday then," Ichigo said briskly, before making for the door, holding it open for Rukia.

Giving Ikumi a final glance and a polite smile, she left and headed downstairs.

He followed after her, shutting the door behind him.

Once he was at the base of the stairs Rukia took his hand and gave it a light squeeze of approval.

Ichigo pretended not to notice but held onto her.

Neither noticed Ikumi watching them from the door's window with a curious look on her face, wondering what their real story was.

They stopped for ice cream on the way home and idly window shopped a bit, not having expected their adventure to take so little time. By the time they got back home it was after dark. As they stepped inside they were struck by the delicious smell of Yuzu's cooking and could hear not just the Shiba siblings but the rest of Ichigo's family.

After dinner Isshin asked Ganju to see Yuzu and Karin home until he got back and after only a bit of persuasion they went along with him. Only a minute later, Yoruichi was at the door. It became
obvious to the couple that this was the 'serious talk' Kūkaku had promised.

Soon thereafter they were all situated in the dining room. Rukia sat beside Ichigo while Kūkaku sat opposite, with Yoruichi on her left and Isshin on her right. The Flash Goddess busied herself with making them all drinks using some of the supplies she’d gotten them as a house-warming gift since she was really just there at Kūkaku's behest. They also had glasses of water and waited until she was done to really start.

Kūkaku led off by addressing Ichigo with some distaste at having to say it at all, stating "I'll just get this out of the way first: no matter how we choose to act here, I'm the head of the Shiba clan, meaning that despite your familial name being Kurosaki, when it comes to affairs regarding your status in Soul Society, you answer to me. I know you're not used to that so I'm going to ask you to trust me, and trust in both my judgment and that of those who advise me." She glanced to either side of her briefly to make it extremely clear who she meant.

The would-be substitute furrowed his brow somewhat but ultimately just nodded.

"Should I really be here?" Rukia asked quietly. She already understood that it was going to be some sort of strategy session and as a Kuchiki she couldn't truly be trusted not to divulge whatever was said.

"Yes, because it involves you and there's no need for deception here," Kūkaku replied. She exhaled before moving on with "I could ask a bunch of embarrassing and awkward questions to try and fully determine exactly how serious you two are but that's pretty clear, so I'll save us all the time: you're in love and you understand you're being set up to eventually be married at some point in the future, yes or no?"

Rukia and Ichigo looked at one another as their gazes tried to communicate a dozen different things. Their nearer hands simultaneously found each other and they interlocked fingers as that number was whittled down to just one. "Yes," they both stated firmly, looking back to the head of the Shiba clan.

"If I may?" Yoruichi asked, choosing to play along with her advisory role.

"Go on," Kūkaku replied, rolling her eyes. She already hated having to be so serious.

"The thing to know about marriage at the level of the upper and especially the great noble houses is it's not really about tradition, land, wealth, or anything like that—it's about whatever the ruling parties want, which is usually power, prestige, or heirs," Yoruichi explained, figuring neither really knew much about the world they'd entered.

Both of the couple flushed at the idea of kids being brought up, neither of them remotely even on the same planet as the concept.

Isshin grinned a bit but said nothing at their reaction. He didn't like having to take everything so gravely but he'd save teasing them for his own time . . . mostly.

"Calm down," Yoruichi taunted, adding "Byakuya-bo obviously only really cares about what makes you happy, Rukia, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have to keep up appearances. Ichigo's not very demanding in that regard because he's basically a free lunch . . . for now."

"That's a problem itself though," Isshin stated, not having missed Kūkaku's disinterest in the proceedings. He pointed at Ichigo and said "To make a long story short, if it winds up looking like you're with the Kuchiki, then they'll seem to have gained a significant amount of power." He then pointed at Rukia, saying "Whereas if it winds up looking like you're with the Shiba, then it'll just start
to bring them back up to par."

The petite Shinigami frowned as she started to trace the logic.

"Why would that matter?" Ichigo asked, grimacing as he tried to wrap his head around it.

"Soul Society loves the status quo. It's not surprising given Shinigami once used to be known as 'Balancers',' Kūkaku said with heavy ambivalence.

The future substitute blinked before remembering some of the exchanges he'd had with Byakuya during the invasion of Soul Society. He took a moment as he made the connections and gripped Rukia's hand securely before venturing "Kaien . . . hated that, didn't he?"

Rukia's eyes flickered downward before turning to Ichigo and then back to the panel opposite them. She gripped back at him, focusing on their point of contact as she put it aside.

"Yeah, he did, and he wasn't the only one," Kūkaku replied.

"Although Kaien was extremely gifted, his ability to influence things was limited and would have been for a long time. He was still relatively young, only a fukutaichō, didn't know bankai . . . In terms of raw power—and destabilizing influence—there's no comparison, and you've already seen the results of that." Isshin stated, looking at his son. His tone was clinical out of respect for Rukia, Kūkaku, and Kaien himself, but it had to be said directly.

Both the women decided to take it as a declaration of fact rather than an insult to his memory and stayed silent.

"You also have a lot of political and personal good will and you very easily gain the loyalty of others," Isshin continued, "Rukia knows bankai now and has her own established relations in the Gotei 13. You're already two taichō-level combatants who will only improve and accumulate influence with time. Put all that together with Byakuya and the other forces of the Kuchiki and it wouldn't be surprising if some people started getting scared." The fact that Ichigo was still working his way back up didn't much matter—it was inevitable that he would. Meanwhile, the number of active Shinigami who knew bankai outside the taichō remained limited; there were only Renji, Ikkaku, and Sasakibe in addition to Rukia. There were outsiders such as him, Yoruichi, and Urahara. Love knew bankai too, but was the only one of the independent Visored who did. There were also a few de facto retired taichō. The total number was quite limited—less than thirty. Even putting three bankai users into a single tightly-knit house was a significant concentration of power, and that was before one reckoned with who would take their side in any conflict . . .

"Sometimes people who are scared make drastic decisions," Yoruichi added darkly. The Kuchiki were obviously a non-factor in the equation, and she wasn't worried about the Shihōin either—Yūshirō was still young, brash, and sort of a goofball, but she knew he would correspond with her on anything of real importance. Still . . .

Ichigo scowled heavily. He could be perceived as a danger just for being who he was, let alone for what he did?

"Would it really be any different if we were in the same noble house as you?" Rukia asked, thinking about it seriously. Isshin had obviously also been a taichō, and one of not-insignificant capabilities to have stood against Aizen for as long as he had . . .

Isshin smirked and put on his best 'normal' face, smiling and waving his hands dismissively as he said "I'm old and rusty and have to watch the girls, what could I possibly do!? And Kūkaku is
"missing an arm!" He hoped to make it clear that appearances were what really mattered in these kinds of calculations.

"So what are we supposed to do?" Ichigo asked with exasperation. He understood that they were trying to prevent anything dramatic from possibly even occurring rather than discussing something that would inevitably happen.

"Nothing," Kūkaku replied flatly.

Both Ichigo and Rukia looked at her with some confusion as to what that was supposed to mean.

The Shiba clan head gave a rather put-upon expression before saying "You two can keep on giving each other lovey-dovey eyes all the time."

The couple both blushed slightly and adopted rather irked looks at being described in such a way even as they squeezed at each other's hands. Neither failed to notice Isshin and Yoruichi's amused expressions.

"I can take care of the work of directing the political theater," Kūkaku immediately continued, "Byakuya will probably rather quickly pick up on it and play along." If he didn't, she would just tell him outright in confidence; she had no patience for fooling around or miscommunication on such a matter.

"Everybody already knows who Ichigo really is because of that karaoke performance, so there won't be any great surprise over that," Yoruichi added with a smirk. There was something funny about a recorded concert having so easily paved over such a potentially thorny and dramatic dynastic issue. In a way it couldn't have been planned better.

"Essentially, your marriage would be arranged and made public knowledge!" Isshin said with his usual cheer as he gave them a thumbs-up and a big grin.

Kūkaku glanced to him with disdain before looking back to the couple, adding "The terms would be, anyway. The timing will be up to you, but you'll basically be locked in. I'll be serving as your guarantor, Ichigo, while Byakuya will be Rukia's. The main gist of the arrangement would be that Rukia would enter the Shiba clan on marriage and any heirs would be to the same. There will also be negotiations on things like property and financing and so on, but don't worry about that." Generally speaking it would probably look like the Kuchiki were taking an immediate loss for the Shiba's immediate gain, elevating the stature of the latter again tremendously. Of course, that kind of concession required some sort of reciprocal gesture as a compromise, and she wasn't yet sure what that might be. In fact, that was the most concerning thing: there was essentially nothing the Shiba could offer that the Kuchiki didn't already have . . . but that was her problem.

"Of course, none of that will really reckon for whatever else you choose to do or what happens between now and then," Yoruichi said airily, knowing they still hadn't decided when and where and how they wanted to be together—and that other things were far from settled.

"Like I said, it's political theater." Kūkaku concluded with a wave of a hand. She wanted to throw a 'mostly' in there but didn't, choosing instead to add "Better safe than sorry."

Rukia and Ichigo were once more staring at each other as they had another searching discussion with their eyes.

"It's okay if you need some time to think about it, it's no small thing—" Yoruichi offered casually, looking aside.
"No," Rukia mildly interrupted, smiling a little at her boyfriend. She was remembering him kneeling down in front of her and even though he hadn’t been proposing, it had been close enough. She knew he would someday.

Ichigo gave his girlfriend a small smile in return.

The three adults considered them closely if covertly in their own ways.

"...Alright," Ichigo said, glancing back to the panel with a resolved expression. He'd trust that they knew better than either of them about such matters, knew what to do about it, and that they could do it in a way that didn't change things for them. He returned to regarding Rukia, suddenly unable to do otherwise.

Kūkaku watched them for a second further before glancing to Yoruichi and then to Isshin. Her thoughts turned to their behavior that morning and after another moment she picked up her drink and downed it in a single go, setting it down on the table with a clack. With that she pushed her chair back and stood, saying "Well, it's settled then, so . . . later." She immediately turned to leave.

Yoruichi promptly finished her own drink and followed after while Isshin took just a bit longer, taking the hint and deciding not to provoke his niece's ire.

"Um, Kūkaku-san . . .?" Ichigo said, confused at how suddenly the meeting had concluded.

"Ganju already moved our stuff to the Urahara Shop. We'll be there for a few more days if you need something and we'll be around for dinner," she declared, not stopping. She was out the door before another word could be uttered, having decided they needed people to stop imposing upon them.

Yoruichi followed her out and Isshin stopped only to give them another grin and a double thumbs-up.

Rukia and Ichigo blinked at the shutting door before their gazes returned to one another.

The former couldn’t stop a warm smile from taking hold of her lips as her eyelids came down a bit, even if she was still sort of abashed.

The latter gave her a genuine smile in return, leaning forward and closing his eyes as he pushed his forehead to hers. "I told you—" he started to whisper.

"Shhh," she quietly admonished, leaning against him.

He held onto her without another word.

After quite some time she pulled back and started to stand, taking on an amused expression as she said "Come on, those math problems won't work themselves."

He decided not to protest and stood with her, following along to the study.

Kon and Chappy both stared at them as they went, peeking over the back of the couch. They'd heard everything.

"Nē-san . . ." Kon muttered once they were out of earshot.

"Rukia-sama looks so happy, pyon!" Chappy quietly gushed.

Rukia put her second set of her other homework away under the bed when she heard Ichigo's
shower turn off and got up to meet him in the sitting area. When he eventually left his room she pulled him along into hers with a coy smile, tugging him into bed and getting comfortable with him. He held onto her, relaxing and letting his mind idle.

"Not worried?" she asked eventually, lightly running a hand across the fabric that covered his chest. "No, and if I was you'd tell me not to be," he replied with a hint of annoyance.

She smiled sincerely and pushed closer to him, settling in.

Curling up with her, he buried his face in her hair and did the same.
After they got up Ichigo went with Rukia to her bathroom's door before giving her a parting kiss on the forehead and pulling away.

"Where do you think you're going?" she questioned sleepily, taking on something of a pouting look.

"I don't want to go without food all day or be late because I was in the shower too long, so I'm taking a rain check," he said without any subtext at all, making his way back toward her room's door. They'd kept it simple and clean the previous morning but there had been more than a couple of firsts for both of them—it hadn't been until second period that he'd been able to stop thinking about it constantly. Although he'd liked it, it had been incredibly distracting and was better saved for the evenings.

Rukia smirked a little at what could be called a compliment, saying "I'll hold you to that," as he retreated. She understood what he meant, but also really did want them to be completely comfortable around each other. She'd decided Friday night would be the night and she didn't want anything about it to be truly awkward, even if she also wanted to make it something of a romantic surprise.

"I know," he said, pretending to sound annoyed despite his own smirk.

The day went uneventfully until Ishida followed along for training.

"Doesn't your club meet today?" Ichigo asked.

"You always bring that up, but Inoue-san is a member of the handicrafts club too, you know," Ishida countered.

"Orihime, you've been skipping out to help with this?" Rukia asked.

"It's nothing!" the princess said earnestly, smiling and waving her hands. Her role was critical, even if she hadn't really been required since the start of school.

"Inoue-san is one of the most senior members, so it's okay for her to not show up for awhile," the archer stated.

"Aren't you the club president?" Chad asked.

"The vice-president is quite capable," Ishida replied with annoyance, adjusting his glasses.

Ichigo halted momentarily as he found the ladder in the Urahara Shop's floor no longer went down to the training room and instead ended in a hallway only a few meters below.

"Kisuke decided to take your advice," Yoruichi said blithely from behind him.

After giving her a quizzical frown the would-be substitute climbed down, followed by his friends, to find the hallway led off to an elevator. He looked about curiously.

"He said something about it not being convenient to have an elevator in the shop or to have one going straight down into the middle of the training area and that it had to be built into the side; I
wasn't really paying attention," the Flash Goddess continued dismissively, brushing past him toward the door at the other end of the hall.

"How did Urahara-san put this all together so quickly?" Rukia asked with some disbelief, following alongside Ichigo.

"I wonder if it incorporates the usual safety features?" Ishida mused.

"You shouldn't ask those kinds of questions," Yoruichi replied from the front, not making it clear which of the two she was responding to.

All of the students, including Chad and Inoue, adopted awkward expressions at the less-than-reassuring comment. Nonetheless, they were all soon standing in the elevator, which seemed normal, modern, and took them down at a rather ordinary pace to the tune of perfectly anodyne elevator music.

"Is that 'The Girl From Ipanema'?" Chad asked after a moment. It was a rather low-key rendition.

"Maybe," Yoruichi replied with disinterest. She enjoyed the song but Urahara had only been able to get a rather tinny-sounding version to play on the elevator's speaker.

"Is this supposed to be a reference to The Blues Brothers?" Ichigo followed up somewhat crabbily.

"Blues . . . Brothers?" Inoue asked quietly, confused.

"Shut up, I just like the song," the Flash Goddess stated with irritation, although she had to try to keep from smiling at how funny the idea of them all dressed that way struck her. She wound up stuck with a smirk.

"What's The Blues Brothers?" Rukia asked, glancing at Ichigo suspiciously.

"It's a movie," he said, as if that explained everything.

She continued to stare at him but the elevator came to a halt and she decided to let it go.

They filed out on one side of the training room, although Ichigo's focus was immediately upon who was standing at the room's center. Just as Rukia had specified, there was Ryūken, dressed in a typical white suit and looking away from them while smoking a cigarette.

Ishida wasn't nearly as surprised as Chad and Inoue. Although he hadn't felt anything of his father's reiatsu on their approach, he'd been told of his eventual involvement and knew he'd be there that day, which was why he'd gone along. Yoruichi hadn't wanted it to be a shock.

The Last Quincy was already turning and taking a final drag on the cigarette before flicking it away, his other hand coming up smoothly as his heilig bogen materialized in it. He effortlessly took aim at Rukia's right shoulder and instantly fired an arrow one-handed, deciding to give Ichigo the maximum incentive for a cold start but not to punish any failure on his part too heavily. A number of things happened all at once in response.

Ishida immediately produced his own bow and drew back to fire, as if intending to hit the arrow with one of his own.

Chad formed up Brazo Derecha de Gigante and moved to shield Rukia.

Inoue summoned Shiten Kōshun in front of them for the first time in Ichigo and Rukia's presence.
Rukia herself began to move to form a kidō barrier, slowed only marginally by her gigai.

Yoruichi rolled her eyes.

Beyond them all, far out ahead of Inoue's shield, was Ichigo, his Fullbring still materializing about him as he conjured the sword out of his badge. He swung mightily and batted the arrow away with a side of the blade as if he was hitting a baseball pitch, knocking it back at an acute angle that caused it to explode off in the distance to one side of the Last Quincy. He brought the blade back and assumed a ready stance, glaring at his mother's 'cousin'.

"Oi, what if you hit the elevator!?” Yoruichi called irritably, "We'd all have been stuck down here!"

Technically the elevator shaft also had a ladder but if the elevator itself was a wreck getting to it would've been difficult.

Ryūken looked completely unperturbed and let out an ambivalent "Hmm," before starting to unleash a torrent of arrows that made the volleys Ishida had fired at Ichigo pale in comparison.

Ichigo immediately began to move to draw the fire away from the axis that led to Rukia and his friends, only slowly at first to deflect the arrows that were still headed their way, before increasing his speed as he realized all of them seemed to be adjusting course to track him.

Everyone behind Inoue's barrier refused to drop their guard, watching the sudden battle that had erupted in shock and silence.

"It's fine," Yoruichi said, moving up past Rukia, Chad, and Ishida to stand just behind Inoue.

The former three looked at her with confusion and more than a little suspicion but slowly relaxed their postures. The latter maintained her shield.

"Inoue," Yoruichi said, putting a hand on the princess's shoulder.

"No," Inoue replied quietly but adamantly. No matter what happened she wouldn't drop the barrier. To go after Rukia just to provoke Ichigo was . . .

Ishida frowned heavily as he followed the fight. Ichigo was already much faster than he had been when his Fullbring had still been incomplete, but Ryūken appeared to be toying with him more than anything and an attack like that was surely intended to put him psychologically off-balance . . .

The maneuver warfare between the Last Quincy and the future substitute continued for a short time, the floor and walls of the training room peppered in explosions as the former fired and the latter evaded and deflected. In truth it was only a dozen seconds before Ichigo felt he'd determined the limits of the arrows' tracking and discerned a pattern in the firing rate and trajectory. The older archer could fire extremely fast, had shots that could track, and inhuman reflexes, but he was still limited by the range of motion of the human arm, and so . . .

Ryūken noticed the teenager trying to move in ways that took advantage of his firing arc and decided to let it happen rather than continuing to play around. It wasn't the worst tactical solution and he had a limited schedule of three days to do everything in, so he'd reward it with progression. He let his cousin once removed draw closer and closer in.

Ichigo saw his opportunity and decided to go for a disabling strike on the Quincy's arm, crossing the final distance and bringing his sword into position to do it.

"Kurosaki, it's a trap!" Ishida shouted out, too late.
Ichigo was stunned as the older archer simply reached out and grabbed the blade with his free hand, halting it instantly and bloodlessly. There was some kind of odd pattern under the skin of his hand . . .

"A sound observation," Ryūken stated, before tapping the bow in his other hand against the side of Ichigo's head. "But a foolish recklessness. You lose."

Rukia's eyes went wide at the sight and her throat caught as everything within her wanted to call out Ichigo's name. He—he wouldn't really . . . ! She suddenly felt but didn't react to Ishida reassuringly touching one of her arms.

The Last Quincy dispersed the bow and let the sword go, stepping away from the Fullbringer as he retrieved and lit another cigarette.

Ichigo watched in something of a daze, trying to figure out what had just happened. "I don't think Urahara-san would appreciate you smoking down here," he eventually quipped, deciding that his 'cousin once removed' would probably tell him exactly what that had been soon enough.

"Quincy come in two types, echt and gemischt, pure and mixed," Ryūken began to explain, wasting no time. "Echt are much more powerful and know certain abilities from birth. Masaki was an echt. Normally you'd be considered gemischt, but I think we all know there's nothing normal about you. What I just used is an ability called blut; the ability has two modes, blut arterie and blut vene, which are offensive and defensive and can't be used at the same time. Both involve the concentration of reishi in the blood vessels. Usually a gemischt Quincy would have to train extensively to use the ability but . . ." he pontificated, before locking eyes with the teenager and asking "Perhaps you might've asked that manifestation in your head to lend you his power?"

Ichigo's eyes went wide as he remembered having done exactly that during the fight with Kenpachi. His wounds had sealed up and his attack power had increased . . . which had it been, blut vene or blut arterie? That had also been right after the first time he'd really fought Zangetsu . . . had that also been when he'd first really tapped into his Hollow and Shinigami powers along with his Quincy ones? Had he been using all three at once? His zanpakutō had taught him to call upon the Quincy . . . while it was portrayed as an inner Hollow teaching him to call on his zanpakutō? Exactly what kind of relation did the two of them really have . . .?

"I see," Ryūken said, adjusting his glasses. He would start with that first before getting into hirenkyaku and ransōtengai. Fullbringer high-speed movement was amusing but an insufficient replacement for the former, and the latter might serve Ichigo well. He'd explain that Quincy didn't normally have manifestations at the end. The boy might style himself a Shinigami, might seek to become one again, and might hold most of their techniques in disdain, but he was Masaki's son and so . . .

It was after the training became rather mundane and technical and Rukia had fully assured herself that nothing would happen that she finally looked away from it, glancing to Inoue. "Orihime, it's okay, really."

"I won't let him use you as a distraction again," the princess replied, her tone unusually cool.

"It's okay," Rukia repeated, giving Ichigo another glance before taking a breath and saying "Ichigo will be alright so I'll just go upstairs."

Inoue finally looked her way, evaluating.
"Kuchiki-san, I'll have your dress finished tomorrow," Ishida stated flatly, neither taking his eyes off the proceedings nor bothering to try and mince words.

"...Yes, thank you," the petite Shinigami replied. She gave Inoue a small smile and lightly touched one of her arms before turning and doing the same to Ishida and Chad as she made her way to the elevator, glancing to Yoruichi meaningfully as she passed her.

Once the doors opened the Flash Goddess followed her in, saying "I'll send Tessai down in a moment." Right as the doors closed they could see the golden light of Shiten Kōshun disappearing. As they started on their way up she added "Sorry, I didn't think he'd do something like that."

"You don't have to apologize," Rukia said. She understood exactly why Ryūken had done it, and knew Ichigo probably did by then too.

Yoruichi blew out a breath and leaned against one of the walls of the elevator. "So how are you doing?"

Rukia gave her confidant a look that communicated more than a few things, if mostly that she preferred to be comfortable and situated before discussing that because it was going to take awhile.

The Flash Goddess lifted an eyebrow before letting her lips make an unvoiced 'Oh,' and adopting a much more tactful expression. It was a good thing Kūkaku was out exploring the town as she doubted her junior would want Ichigo's cousin around for that sort of conversation. On the other hand, maybe the next day or the day after they could at least have something of a girls' night in to try and help put her at ease. She began to think through both the subject immediately at hand and the other matter as the elevator bore them upward.

It was much later that Ryūken decided he'd done enough for the day and took his leave, moving past his son, the remaining teenager, and the muscular former Shinigami without so much as a word.

Ichigo was already demonstrating a capability to use both forms of blut to his satisfaction. The other two techniques would also probably take a day each for him to achieve basic proficiency.

It was right before the doors closed that Ishida stepped inside, starring his father down. "I've never heard reference to that ability you used," he stated.

"You wouldn't have. It's dangerous and meant for fighting Shinigami," the Last Quincy stated, making it clear by inference that Sōken would never have brought it up.

Ishida blinked and frowned.

"Are you going to ask me to teach it to you?" Ryūken asked coldly.

"I already understand the essence of the technique," Ishida replied equally frigidly.

Ryūken brought a hand up to adjust his glasses, using it to hide a small smirk. You always were a quick study when you felt you were being insulted..."

Ishida just continued to glower. He'd finish Rukia's dress that night so he could start in on learning it himself without distractions. "So, do you know who the other two were at the cemetery?" he asked after a moment, turning to lean against one of the sides of the elevator. They hadn't really talked after that—not that they ever really did—and there was no getting away from one another until they left the shop.

"In-laws are always a pain," Ryūken said mildly. As if their reiatsu wasn't enough, he'd heard..."
enough from Isshin over the years to know they had been Kūkaku and Ganju Shiba.

That time Ishida smirked, letting it fall on the side of his face opposite his father. From what he’d seen during the invasion of Soul Society, that was putting it mildly.

Ichigo rode up with Inoue and Tessai once the elevator came back down. Chad had grudgingly left for work earlier.

"Inoue," he began.

"Hmm, Kurosaki-kun?" she asked, glancing to him.

"Thanks," he concluded. He hadn't failed to notice she'd kept her shield up until Rukia had gone upstairs. He didn't know how much it'd really have done if Ryūken had been serious but he appreciated the sentiment.

"Eh?" she asked, confused.

He just gave her a small smile and then crossed his arms, closing his eyes and thinking over what he'd just been taught.

She watched him for a second before giving a small smile herself and starting to wonder what to have for dinner.

After briefly showering, Ichigo found Rukia waiting for him with Yoruichi.

"I'm telling you that it's fine," his girlfriend was saying. Inviting the woman over to dinner was the least she could do after she'd heard her out on everything, and Yoruichi had demanded she hang out with her and Kūkaku the next day so it was just quid pro quo.

"I don't want to impose," the Flash Goddess retorted.

"It's not an imposition," Rukia replied, crossing her arms.

"Fine, since you won't stop and he's finally here, I'll go with you," the older noble conceded, feeling she'd put up enough resistance. She'd never really turn down an opportunity to sample Yuzu's cooking but that didn't mean she had to give in on the first offer.

"I hope we're talking about dinner," Ichigo mumbled. He was ravenously hungry—that Quincy technique was nothing to mess with.

Rukia socked him in the stomach with only mild force for his sass before taking one of his hands and pulling him along, squeezing at it firmly as she did so.

He followed after while holding his stomach with the other, feigning injury even as he gripped back at her.

Yoruichi followed behind with amusement while hoping Isshin had some alcohol on hand.

In the aftermath of dinner, while Ichigo and Ganju were trying their best not to get lured into an impromptu drinking contest started by Yoruichi and Kūkaku—with Isshin's encouragement—Rukia took Karin and Yuzu aside to tell them a bit about the previous night's discussion.
"So you're probably wondering what was discussed last night . . ." she started once they were in a different part of the Kurosaki household.

"Serious soul stuff," Karin said disparagingly. It inevitably had something to do with Soul Society, just like everything else they'd been kept out of the loop on.

Rukia laughed a little, saying "That's right, Kūkaku-san is actually pretty important and is for you guys what nii-sama is for me."

"Eh?" Yuzu said, confused.

"You're saying she leads the Shiba?" Karin asked, vaguely remembering what their dad had told them about Byakuya.

"And all their descendants," Rukia added with a small smile.

The darker-haired twin's face became mildly interested as she thought about it. "Kūkaku-itoko can boss dad and Ichinii around?" she asked, on the cusp of developing an even deeper respect for her new cousin.

"Mmhmm," Rukia said.

"Karin-chan, that means she could boss us around too!" the lighter-haired twin said with mild alarm, putting it together.

"She's too cool for that," Karin declared, before continuing "So Kūkaku-itoko wanted to talk about something to do with you and Ichinii in Soul Society."

"Yes," Rukia affirmed.

Karin resumed looking disaffected at that. Whatever weird rules governed that place were boring and it was enough to know that someone direct like Kūkaku was involved.

Yuzu seemed to ponder it for a bit before her mind turned to the related event. "Nē-san, why'd you want us to go to ohigan anyway?" she asked. She'd liked it, but it had been a bit unusual given they'd never celebrated it before.

Rukia blinked before putting up her hands and smiling, giving a little laugh as she said "I just thought it'd be fun for everyone to get together!" It wasn't a lie, it just omitted a lot.

"Mom would've liked you," Karin said quietly, seeing right through it.

Yuzu glanced at Karin but for once didn't find fault with her lack of tact.

"That—" Rukia started.

"Rukia-nē, Ichinii is happy with you. Mom would've loved you for making him smile. All the rest of us do. Wherever he goes, whatever happens . . . if he's happy, that's what matters to us," Karin continued. It was simply the truth.

The young woman looked away, suddenly not sure what to say.

"Karin-chan is right, nē-san, and we know onii-chan will make you happy too, so it's all okay," Yuzu added, giving Rukia a hug.

Karin exhaled before doing the same.
Rukia stilled herself and looked down as she got an arm around each of them in turn. It wasn't just getting Ichigo caught up in things, whether it seemed like she would take him away from them, or what Masaki would think, it was that the more she was around the Kurosaki family the more they felt like her family and she . . . She hugged both of Ichigo's sisters close and took her time before quietly saying "Thank you." She promised herself then that she'd explain to them the full depth of what it meant to her when they were a little older. When she looked up she found they were both smiling at her and she couldn't help but smile back.

It was then they heard Ichigo shout "Shut up! I'm not drinking on a school night!"

Rukia's smile became a bit coy before she said conspiratorially "Sounds like we're going to have to save your brother, but before that, can I ask for your help with something?"

Both the twins nodded seriously.

After returning home they put in a solid amount of time on homework. Rukia finished before Ichigo and went to watch TV while waiting for him.

By the time he finished and walked out into the living room he found her watching *Inuyasha* with the stuffed animals. It was some fight sequence involving the two characters he knew to be the leads. He watched along for a little while before rubbing at the back of his head and asking "Do they always say each other's names that much?"

Kon glanced up at him with an are-you-kidding-me look and was about to say something about glass houses when he was covertly jabbed by Chappy.

"Does it bother you?" Rukia asked, keeping her tone neutral as she looked up to him with a judgmental expression.

"Nah, just makes it kinda obvious what the show's really about," Ichigo said. He sounded cocky but had a small self-deprecating smile.

Rukia raised an eyebrow critically at the same time as she gave him a tiny smile, before standing and making her way around the couch to head upstairs.

He followed after her without further comment, only leaving her side to go get his sleeping clothes.

"His room is wasted on him," Kon said grumpily.

"It sounds like now you're suddenly complaining about how his bed still smells like Kūkaku-san, pyon!" Chappy said in a tetchy way. She'd had to endure how weird he'd been acting about that the entire prior night and wasn't in any mood to put up with his shenanigans.

"One doesn't mean the other!" Kon replied hotly, before demurring at the sight of her withering glare. He really didn't want to get beaten up again.

Rukia kept her forehead to Ichigo's on the pillow they were sharing and ran her right index finger in circles over the t-shirt that covered his chest. "Hey," she whispered.

"Mmm?" he replied.

"I won't be down to watch you train tomorrow or Friday," she replied.
"Getting bored?" he asked.

"Never," she replied.

"It's not because of what—" he began to ask.

"No," Rukia replied, "Tomorrow I want to talk with Yoruichi and Kūkaku about things in Soul Society some more, and Friday I promised to help Karin and Yuzu with a project they're working on at school—we'll probably be there until it's kind of late so we won't be having dinner. You'll probably just want to pick up something after training and I'll meet you back here." The first wasn't entirely a lie and Yoruichi had insisted; the second was but she'd gotten both his sisters to go along with it in the event he called or otherwise talked to them, and she'd tell Kūkaku about it the next day. She planned to ask Inoue to make sure he ate dinner on Friday. Yoruichi was the only one besides her who really knew the full plan and she wanted to keep it that way because of how private a subject it was. She didn't like skulking about but she needed time to get everything she wanted set up just right and also viewed it as justified by how sneaky he'd been with their first karaoke night—turnabout was fair play.

"Okay," was all Ichigo said, not thinking much of it.

"Is Ishida-san going to keep on with whatever the training was today?" she asked.

"He said something about 'hirenkyaku' and 'ransōtengai' before leaving," he responded, "The first is basically the Quincy version of flash steps or sonido, dunno what the second is."

"Mmm," she replied. She had found herself wanting to invite Inoue and Tatsuki to Yoruichi's girls' night as they hadn't had a lot of time to hang out lately and she wanted to make an effort. If he wasn't doing something directly related to fighting, then Inoue definitely didn't have to be down there. He'd be fine and she deserved a break from having to constantly attend the training sessions given how often there was nothing for her to do. She'd pull the two off for lunch the next day to bring it up and figure out a way for Ishida to secretly get the dress to her as well. Maybe she could try it on at the shop and see what the other ladies thought. "I'm going to ask Inoue and Tatsuki to be there tomorrow too," she ventured, not having a convincing reason for them to be present but knowing he'd notice if they were there.

"If you want to have a girls' party you could just say so," he chided lightly.

"It—it's not a party," she said defensively.

"Sure," he said diplomatically.

"Ichigo—" she started.

"Whatever it is, it's okay for you to spend time on your own. I'm sure Urahara-san or Tessai will be down there to watch tomorrow and I'll be okay anyway," Ichigo said.

Rukia pressed her hand to his chest above his heart. "Yoruichi did make it sound kind of like a party but I really do want to talk with her and Kūkaku."

"Just don't let them get Inoue or Tatsuki drunk," he replied.

"Promise," she said, snuggling with him.

"I'll hold you to that," he replied sleepily.
"Shhh," she shushed.
Thursday, September 26, 2002

Rukia made time in her morning routine to visit her inner world and confer with Shirayuki. The manifestation had been unusually quiet again lately and hadn't offered any resistance to her decision regarding Ichigo, and she wanted to make sure she wasn't opposed. Finding herself in the familiar alpine valley and briefly noting the pleasant weather, she set out to locate the spirit. It wasn't long before she did so, and found she wasn't alone.

Shirayuki was being held against one of the gates by Zangetsu and the collar of her *kimono* was loosened a bit—the latter seemed to be playing at one of the former's clavicles while the former fretted and appeared distressed.

Rukia blinked and stared for a second before her expression instantly hardened. She crossed the distance between them in a flash and grabbed Zangetsu by the collar as she stopped, using her momentum to turn and wrench him away from Shirayuki. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing to her?" she demanded.

"Easy . . ." the foreign spirit said, holding his hands up in supplication and surrender and trying his best to appear non-threatening.

"Don't you—" Rukia began, only to stop as a hand grasped her wrist. She turned in shock as she realized it was Shirayuki's and was even more surprised to find she looked intensely embarrassed.

"Rukia-dono . . ." Shirayuki pleaded.

The Shinigami was mute for a second before letting go of him and looking between them, saying incredulously "You've . . . you've been . . . in my head . . . ?"

"We've done a lot less than you two have," Zangetsu said sarcastically, although there was no real judgment in his voice and he looked oddly contented at the fact.

Rukia flushed a bit as she noticed the collar of his *shihakushō* had been loosened too and she realized the two of them had been marking one another. She looked away in consternation, commanding "Leave. You can come back later or . . . whatever. Just go."

Zangetsu almost said something but thought better of it and disappeared.

"Rukia-dono, I—" Shirayuki started.

"I'm not mad at you," Rukia said firmly, meeting her gaze before quietly adding "I know you probably started doing this for my sake."

The spirit shook her head. "You would distinguish between him and Ichigo, but I do not really, and I . . . feel what you feel."

Rukia blinked and looked away again.

Shirayuki lightly grasped her wielder's shoulders and moved so she stood in front of her, looking into
her eyes.

The Shinigami only slowly made eye contact.

"You are strong, Rukia-dono, and I . . . do not doubt your decision," Shirayuki stated.

"You know everything else I've learned too," Rukia stated in turn.

Shirayuki nodded seriously.

Rukia looked away and back to the spirit a few times in evaluation before reaching a hand up to cup her cheek, saying only "Then don't be ashamed."

The *zanpakutō* spirit blinked before smiling a little and withdrawing her hands.

The Shinigami smiled back before crossing her arms and saying rather properly "But make sure he treats you right too."

"He respects me as an equal, and that is why . . ." Shirayuki replied.

Rukia made the parallel connection immediately and closed her eyes, saying only "Yeah."

They stood together for awhile until the latter lightly clasped the former on the arm and left.

------

"I dunno," Tatsuki said, "I really should go to practice today . . ." It wasn't that she actually needed to but it was the principle of the matter.

"Come on, Tatsuki-chan, it'll be fun!" Inoue said sweetly.

"I just thought it'd be nice to hang out more," Rukia offered, giving a warm smile.

Tatsuki blinked before exhaling. She *had* decided to try and hang out with Rukia more so turning her down wasn't really an option. "Okay, fine," she said, smiling back. She held it for a second before whispering "They're not going to try and get us drunk, are they?"

"Ichigo told me not let them," Rukia replied.

". . . Well, one or two drinks wouldn't be the end of the world," Tatsuki commented, suddenly feeling rebellious.

"Tatsuki-chan," Inoue whispered with a touch of disbelief.

"Don't 'Tatsuki-chan' me after you watched him drink in a karaoke bar," she replied in a hot but quiet tone.

Rukia laughed quietly at that.

------

It was as lunch was ending that Ishida approached her and passed a thin package off to her containing the dress, having slipped away from the other group on a fictitious errand. He let her know that he wouldn't be going to the shop for awhile, as he'd told the others.

------

While Ichigo and Chad went down the ladder with Urahara, the three ladies instead met up with Yoruichi, who was slightly surprised but accepted Rukia's statement that she'd invited them without
question. She led them to a room in the shop that'd been outfitted with lots of pillows, a rather large TV, and an extensive table of foods and refreshments, including more than a few cocktails in the process of assembly. There were some rather pretty-looking ones with bright, colorful gradients and stripes, adorned with straws and what looked like tiny paper umbrellas. "What are those?" Rukia asked.

"Tiki drinks," Yoruichi proudly declared.

"They're the best," Kūkaku stated, the slight flush to her cheeks and nose indicating the one she was drinking wasn't her first.

Tatsuki picked one up, considering it.

"Aren't you underage?" Yoruichi asked airily.

"It's a girls' night in, isn't it?" the fighter shot back.

"It'll be your only one and they're rather strong, so make it last," the Flash Goddess stated, before looking at Inoue and adding "You too." They were young women and so she wasn't opposed if they wanted to experiment a little, and it was best to do so under supervision and in the company of friends anyway.

Inoue waved her hands about and laughed nervously in dismissal before she suddenly remembered something. "Oh! Rukia, your dress! Can we see it?!"

The two older women and the fighter turned to the petite Shinigami then, Kūkaku asking "Dress?"

"The one Ishida-kun mentioned yesterday?" Yoruichi added, having overheard him.

"Yes," Rukia affirmed, smiling a little.

"Well, go put it on then and let's see what the president of handicrafts club can really do," Tatsuki said encouragingly.

---

All of the women stared when Rukia reentered the room.

The dress was a long-skirted one-piece made of a dark matte black silk. It was closely-fitted but not excessively tight, had a long slit on the left side going up the hip, its bust continued up in an A-shape with the center cut out to a choker-style collar, and it was completely backless down to the waist. Her shoulders and arms were likewise bare. It showed off a lot while still also leaving almost everything important to the imagination, revealing only hints.

Kūkaku nodded seriously in approval.

"Ichigo's done for," Tatsuki deadpanned.

"Going to have to put some ice on that for how hot it's running," Yoruichi said, referring to the diamond jewelry she knew Byakuya had inevitably provisioned Rukia with.

Inoue's eyes just shimmered.

Rukia blushed slightly and turned around in it slowly.

"You'll also need a thong," Tatsuki quietly stated. The slit in the dress went sufficiently high to see a bit of white fabric underneath and it had a rather visible panty line in the back.
"You're not wrong, but fortunately we already took care of that," Yoruichi stated. "It's got some padding at the chest, right?" It clearly couldn't accommodate a bra.

Rukia blushed a bit more at the suggestion but nodded in affirmation.

"It'd look great with a matching half-jacket too!" Inoue offered.

They continued admiring Ishida's handiwork for awhile before Rukia went to change back into her school clothes so they could actually get started.

"But—" Rukia started.

"Nope, this is a time for relaxation, not discussion," Yoruichi said firmly, placing an enormous scorpion tiki drink in Rukia's hands. She wasn't going to let her worry about things so far off in the future before her big night. That wasn't what any self-respecting friend would do . . . what any self-respecting big sis—she gestured at the pillow pile and turned Rukia around, lightly pushing her forward.

The petite Shinigami grudgingly went to where Tatsuki and Inoue were already assembled with their own much smaller drinks and sat down, soon flanked by Kūkaku and Yoruichi.

"So what are we doing anyway?" Kūkaku asked.

"We're watching movies," Yoruichi stated. It was implicit that she and Kūkaku, at least, would also be having their fair share of drinks.

"Which?" Tatsuki followed up.

The Flash Goddess turned on the TV and hit play rather than answering, starting up a DVD of 10 Things I Hate About You. She intended to follow it up with Clueless and Dirty Dancing.

It was several hours later when Ichigo knocked on the door that Tessai had indicated, hearing some sort of muffled audio from inside.

Many seconds passed before the door slid open to reveal Yoruichi cradling a sleeping Rukia in her arms.

Ichigo's face immediately became concerned and he dropped his bags.

"Don't worry, she just got a bit sleepy from how much she had to drink," Yoruichi said quietly, before asking "Will you be able to get her home by yourself?" The scorpion may have been just a bit too strong—it was hard to tell how much alcohol was really in them.

"Yeah, of course," he said. She was rather light.

Yoruichi stepped forward and helped to transfer Rukia over to him, brushing her dark hair back into place after doing so. She was already shouldering Rukia's bag and another, and took up both of Ichigo's, saying "I'll carry these for you." She turned her head and added "Oi, Kūkaku, hold down the fort, I'll be back soon."

"Yeah," was all Kūkaku said; she and the two students were rather engrossed in the last movie.

When they finally got to the couple's house Yoruichi followed Ichigo inside and set the bags down,
opening the one she'd brought along and removing its contents. "It's nothing fancy, but I brought some of the food we had in case you're hungry or she wakes up. She just needs some rest. I'll stop by your family's place and let them know you're back here." Yuzu would probably want to bring them leftovers too.

"Thanks, Yoruichi-san," he replied with a contrite smile, starting to move to take Rukia upstairs.

"Ichigo," the Flash Goddess said mildly.

Something in her tone made him turn his head.

"Take good care of her," Yoruichi added gently, before turning and walking out the door, shutting it behind her.

He blinked before continuing on to tuck Rukia in.

Friday, September 27, 2002

Rukia stopped with Ichigo by the gate of the school while Inoue and Chad continued on, taking a private moment with him. "Let's just relax after you get home, okay?" she asked with a smile. She didn't want her surprise to be absolute and wanted him to be in vaguely the right mindset about what to expect.

"Planning on running up the hot water bill?" he quietly teased, judging their friends were far enough away not to hear.

"Maybe," she said primly, before looking at the two retreating backs and adding "Don't fall behind. I'll see you later . . . strawberry."

"Later . . . peach," he said with a smile, taking off after them.

She smiled and started to go her own way. Fortunately the florist and the other places she needed to visit weren't too far from Karin and Yuzu's school, so it'd even seem like she was there.

"I'm home," Ichigo called as he stepped inside. He immediately stopped and blinked. The lights were mostly off and the few that were on were subdued. There were candles scattered about on small catchers forming a kind of trail toward the stairs, although they'd been carefully positioned so they wouldn't be easily knocked over. From the extent they'd melted he could tell they'd been lit for awhile. They were faintly vanilla-scented and mingled with the smell of incense in the air. He got his shoes off and set his bags down a bit further inside, moving forward cautiously.

As he went he realized there was a trail of rose petals that grew denser toward the stairs and led up them. Slowly ascending, he once more stopped in place at what he saw in the sitting area. On one of the small tables, exactly where he'd left the CD player he'd bought for Rukia weeks ago, was an elegant ikebana arrangement surrounded by several small candles and what looked like a card. It was composed of three flowers in descending vertical order: a yellow camellia, a red rose, and a cactus flower. He'd picked up enough of hanakotoba from having bought flowers for her to know what they meant and blushed. The message was something like longing in love and lust. The last flower also stood for sex, and once he'd learned that he'd stayed far away from it.

He instinctively looked to her door to find it was slightly ajar before turning to the flowers again, getting closer and carefully picking up the card. The only thing on it was a message: "Go shower and meet me in my room. Don't worry about anything, strawberry." The word 'anything' had been traced
over several times to bold it for emphasis.

Ichigo stared at it for a time before setting it back down and looking to her door again as a hundred things shot through his mind. He forced them all aside and composed himself. It'd been almost a month since he'd told her neither of them was ready. She had clearly made up her mind that she was, and he . . . he wanted it but just didn't trust himself with her. But if she trusted him, then . . . trying to turn her down would only hurt her. He went to do as she asked, finding she'd washed his linens and set out a bathrobe for him on top of them. He took it up and made his way to his bathroom, trying to center and calm himself.

Rukia looked up and smiled as she both heard and saw her door opening. She was sitting on the nearest edge of her bed in a matching bathrobe waiting for him. "Surprise," she said warmly and a touch alluringly as she caught sight of him.

He looked slightly uncertain and slowly stepped inside, closing the door behind him. Only a few of the room's lights were on at their lowest settings and once more there were several candles scattered about. The smell of incense was heavier. The space felt much different than usual and very intimate.

"Come here," she entreated, patting at a spot beside her.

He did so and sat beside her as they regarded each other, smiling weakly.

She looked away first and reached down to withdraw a bottle of champagne she'd already opened from a bucket of ice, pouring some into two long-stemmed glasses on the nearby dresser. After replacing the bottle, she took one for herself and held the other out to him.

He took it and considered it before saying "Rukia . . ."

"What'd the note say?" she asked quietly.

Ichigo sighed and took a sip of the champagne before placing a hand on the soft fabric that covered one of her legs. "You know I can't help it."

Rukia took a long sip before bringing her free hand up to cup his cheek, locking eyes with him. "When I went to Soul Society a month ago and left my gigai at the Urahara Shop, I also left a note with it asking Yoruichi-san to do a few things for me," she said softly, "Urahara-san's gigai are fully functional and I knew we'd do this eventually, and I didn't want either of us to have to worry. Don't fret that it's irreversible either. I've also been talking to her about this kind of thing regularly. I know it's your first time, and it's mine too, but you don't have to worry about protection, or getting me pregnant, or hurting me, or taking advantage of me."

He stared at her for a second before looking away and taking a long, slow gulp of his champagne, suddenly feeling a great need for it.

She took another drink herself, watching him.

"What about Cha—" he began to ask.

"They won't hear anything," she promised. She'd knocked Chappy and Kon out of their avatars first thing and they were disassembled down in the utility room.

He emptied his glass.

She stroked at his cheek and slowly finished off her own before setting it back on the dresser and
taking his, doing the same. She cupped his other cheek with her newly freed hand and started to scoot back to the middle of the bed, using her grasp to encourage him to move with her.

He did so until she stopped and found he couldn't look away from her ultramarine eyes.

"I love you, Ichigo, and I want to be your lover. I want you to make love to me," Rukia whispered, looking deep into his chocolate eyes. She continued to gently stroke at his right cheek while using her left hand to find his right, guiding it to the belt of her bathrobe before finding his. She slid her right hand around into his hair and drew closer, closing her eyes and whispering "I need you," against his lips before kissing him.

Ichigo kept the kiss light but held it for a long time, pulling back slightly and looking in her eyes again before whispering "I love you, Rukia" as he started to undo the belt of her robe.

She smiled and started to undo his in turn.

They spent awhile just looking at one another completely unabashedly for the first time and were slow to start to touch, stopping often to stare and give each other disbelieving smiles. Although they both felt a bit giddy, Rukia found Ichigo somewhat timid and he found her a little reserved. After a time he pulled her to him and kissed her, choosing to advance from what they already knew as their bodies brushed together.

Once they calmed their nerves and got comfortable she took the initiative, kissing her way down his neck and starting to explore him with her hands and mouth. She was enticed by his scent and taste and gave him release, not wanting him too tense or eager for their first time. The way he moaned her name made her shiver.

He was soon exploring her in turn, no less tempted by her than she had been by him and likewise wanting her at ease. She was still shuddering and panting from her first ever climax when he kissed her deeply, mingling their tastes together.

Rukia held the kiss and indulged in it until she needed air, breaking it and rolling with him so she was on top. She looked at him with an uncertain smile as she caught her breath, reaching out a hand to caress one of his cheeks.

Ichigo turned his head to kiss at it, finding it impossible to not smile back.

She started to shimmy backward into position and glanced down as she did her best to relax, only to freeze as she suddenly found her hands entrapped in his. She looked up at him and made eye contact, surprised at the abrupt gesture.

He looked back at her confidently and squeezed at her hands for a moment, whispering "Just like that first night, okay?" before bringing their hands down, helping position both himself and her, keeping a hand with each of hers on both of them.

She blushed but cooperated with him. "I'm going to take it slower than that."

"I know," he said quietly. "Let's do it."

"Yes," she whispered, taking one last second before starting to push herself down onto him, advancing their union incrementally to keep from hurting herself.

Ichigo groaned at the sensation but gritted his teeth and got his hands on her hips, just helping keep her stable.
Rukia moaned, gripping his shoulders for balance. "If you—don't worry if—" she whispered.

"Don't worry about me," he interrupted, letting her move at her own pace. If he had to withstand it to both wait for her and keep from hurting her, he would. He wouldn't ever hurt her. It was some time before they were fully together and he pulled her down to him, keeping still and listening to her panting by his left ear. All his instincts screamed at him to move and he had to fight them down, nuzzling at her cheek and running his hands along her back to soothe her as he whispered "You feel incredible."

She clung to him, staying still other than to rub her cheek against his in turn, doing her best to keep from tensing as she whispered "Fool," affectionately, her voice wavering—he was the one that felt unbelievable.

They just held onto one another until after a time his gaze turned to her left shoulder as the rest of that first night played out in his mind. There was only the very faintest hint of a long scar there and on her right abdomen from where she'd been bitten by Fishbone D, but he knew what to look for. It seemed almost unreal—just like being with her did. He turned his head and kissed along it, brushing at her side with his right hand where the other half would be. It was just one set of scarce or erased scars among dozens and dozens—healing kidō left almost no traces and Sōten Kisshun left none at all. He brought his left hand up to likewise caress at where Grimmjow had so grievously wounded her, knowing there was nothing there anymore. They'd endured so many injuries, both apart and together, and gone through so much pain . . .

"What's wrong, Ichigo?" Rukia asked softly, sensing the shift in his mood and pressing closer, kissing his cheek to reassure him.

"Nothing," Ichigo replied in a hush. Even if he couldn't quite believe it, it was only fair that after everything they could finally bring each other pleasure. She'd given him so much and so to give something back to her in return wasn't any mere privilege—putting it in words would cheapen it, but she was his goddess and he felt pleasing her was his sacred duty. "Everything is exactly right, Rukia," he whispered a little more fiercely, turning his head to kiss her and moving his hands back to her hips, starting to test slowly moving.

She let out a soft moan and held the kiss for a moment before beginning to move in opposition to him, trying it for awhile before slowly righting herself again as she found she needed more leverage.

He adored her—everything about her. It was the way she'd whisper his name in between breaths, the way she'd chant it like a prayer, the way she'd cry it out with so much stress on the last syllable when all her muscles tensed. It was the way she'd look at him like she was staring into the depths of his soul afterwards.

She treasured him—everything about him. It was the way he'd whisper her name like a ward, the way he'd groan it like a solemn oath to the divine, the way he'd call it out like the only word in the world with any meaning. It was the way he stared at her with pure infatuation when she returned to him.

His motions became more assertive and dominant as he moved her onto her back and then onto her hands and knees, but never demanding or domineering. He'd seen so clearly in her eyes that bringing her pure bliss was the way to truly set her free.

Her gigai betrayed her in every little movement and she finally just gave in entirely. Her spirit body wouldn't have stood any more of a chance and she wanted him to attend to her in every possible way for as long as they could do so.
He needed her to know that she never, ever had to tell him 'thank you' for anything, that nothing for her was ever out of obligation.

She'd never tell him 'thank you' in words but she was helpless to stop herself from telling him every other way she might.

Ichigo was addicted to Rukia beyond all hope of any cure—they were partners, but he was hers.

Rukia was devoted to Ichigo beyond any allegiance—they were equals, but she was his.

Ichigo turned so he was no longer atop her, spooning with her for a moment before slowly lifting his legs up and moving hers with them, bringing them both into a fetal position. He brought one arm across her chest and the other across her belly, drawing her back to him firmly as he buried his face in her hair.

Once she could finally begin to form coherent thoughts again she slowly got one arm under the back of his knees and the other over one of his. Her breathing was ragged, her mind was fogged, and all of her nerves were still singing from the intensity that had surged through them. She'd long since lost count of how many times she'd climaxed, only knowing for certain that he'd made sure she had every single time.

"I love you," he whispered.

She just gripped at him a little more firmly in response, pressing back against his warmth and trying to draw his legs up farther. She had a new understanding of those three words and wanted to cover herself in the comfort of them.

He was silent and held fast to her, not knowing how to describe everything he felt.

Rukia was quiet until long after her breathing returned to normal. At last she whispered "I need to hold you."

Ichigo kissed the top of her head and started to gently move with her, helping her turn and reorient while pulling the sheets up over them.

She got an arm firmly anchored around his neck and the other around his waist, cuddling with him and pressing her face against his chest. It wasn't long until the little tension still in her limbs left her and she fell asleep against him.

He was already joining her.

---

**Saturday, September 28, 2002**

It was late in the morning when Ichigo finally woke up. He didn't have the heart to wake Rukia immediately and instead held onto her, slowly collecting her up and cradling her against him before carrying her to the bathroom.

"Ichigo . . ." she murmured, waking on the way.

"I'm here, we'll clean up together," he whispered back.

She just let out a drowsy "Mmm," and buried her face back against him.

He took his time ensuring the shower was pleasantly warm before getting under it with her, not
wanting to shock her fully awake with water that was either too cold or too hot. She pressed closer to him at the feeling of it and after getting her bottle of soap and a washcloth he sat down with her on his lap, starting to gingerly clean her.

She let him for a time, gradually growing alert and aroused under his touch until she couldn't take it anymore, slowly leaning backwards and pulling him forwards as the water cascaded onto them.

---

Rukia glanced up at Ichigo from the breakfast bar while finishing the food he'd made for her. They'd both been starving and she'd been dehydrated enough that she'd lost track of how many glasses of water and juice she'd had to compensate. They hadn't said a word to one another since they'd started eating.

He seemed oblivious, washing dishes.

She slid her plate and glass forward slightly to indicate she was done with them, watching him as he took and cleaned them. "I'm kind of sore, you know," she eventually said in way that sounded slightly miffed.

"Don't say that like it's all my fault," he replied steadily. There was only the barest hint of annoyance to his voice but he'd closed his eyes and screwed up his face at the comment.

"Isn't it?" she asked, before stealthily getting up and moving around the bar into the kitchen.

"No, it is—" he began, only to stop as he felt her hands at his waist through the fabric of the bathrobe he was wearing.

"I'm only saying something because the best way to relieve tension in muscles is to work with them more," she whispered from behind him.

Ichigo stopped what he was doing at that.

"Forget the dishes, Ichigo," Rukia entreated.

He carefully washed off and dried his hands before turning to face her, looking into her eyes.

She smiled at him and brought her hands up to his shoulders while standing up on her toes, wanting him to carry her.

He smiled back and slid his hands down the back of her robe to her rear, picking her up and bearing her upstairs as she got her legs around his waist.

"The water bill this month is going to be crazy," Ichigo murmured as he scrubbed her back. He could barely move.

"Don't say that like you're going to look at it," Rukia said mildly. She was all but immobile.

They'd gone in cycles all day, making love and napping together before rising to clean and replenish themselves and back again until they'd finally worn each other out. They'd taken the forgotten champagne down to chill and had finished it with dinner, and although it'd been rather flat there'd been enough left to make them both feel pleasant.

He took his time before moving onto her shoulders.

She started to giggle.
"You're not ticklish here," he stated, knowing it to be true.

"I was just thinking," she replied.

"What?" he asked.

She leaned a little so her back was against his chest, just wanting the proximity. "We're not going to be able to help that woman on the weekends for a long time," she said factually.

"You shouldn't say things like that," he replied with a note of embarrassment.

She remembered something then and smiled, quoting herself with "I didn't say anything obscene or that wasn't the truth, Ichigo."

He blinked before placing the remark. After a second he leaned his head forward and kissed her cheek, starting to soap her arms. It was once again probably technically true.

They'd put all her bed's sheets and their robes in the wash before their final shower and got into fresh sleeping clothes afterwards.

Ichigo went to put her bed back together.

Rukia cleaned up what was left of the candles and the petals and moved the ikebana arrangement she'd made to her room.

It was only once they'd gotten the place back into order that they put Kon and Chappy back into their plushy bodies.

"What the hell was that about?! Do you know how long it's . . . been . . . ?" Kon said, before raising an eyebrow. He didn't know exactly how long it'd been himself, but what stopped him was that something was different about both of them. It was difficult to pin down . . .

Chappy didn't say anything, immediately noticing how relaxed both of them seemed even though they looked exhausted.

Ichigo plucked them both up by the scruffs of their necks and carried them out to the living room, not saying a word in response to their protestations before lightly dropping them on the couch.

Rukia immediately got one of her arms around his afterwards and guided him upstairs, suddenly dead tired.

He went along without complaint, in no better state.

"No respect, I swear," Kon muttered before he turned on the TV. It defaulted to a news channel and he caught both the date and time in one of the corners. "It's been thirty hours?!" he said incredulously.

Chappy blinked before a thought struck her. Her knowledge was limited, but she knew enough, and if she could've blushed she would've. Rukia-sama, did you . . .

The stuffed lion noticed the expression on her face before saying "What? Why are you . . . ? You . . . you don't think they . . ." His expression grew panicked before he whispered "Nē-samaan!"

The stuffed rabbit immediately punched him off the couch with a flying uppercut, calling out "Don't begrudge Rukia-sama her happiness, pyon!"
Rukia and Ichigo, meanwhile, were already curled up together and fast asleep.

Chapter End Notes

When the 12th Division gets Rukia's first gigai in Chapter 69, Akon remarks that its creator would be exiled from Soul Society for how accurately it's made. There's no overt indication as to what exactly the parties present are talking about, but it's not hard to guess from the framing (and the later revelation that Isshin's been in a gigai the whole time) that they're shocked by the fact it's basically a fully working human body—it can reproduce. I assume here all of Urahara's do and his standard issue is that all features are set to on.
We're One Just Me And You

Sunday, September 29, 2002

What slowly woke Ichigo was the sensation of one of Rukia's hands lightly rubbing at the back of his neck. He became aware of the fact his face was pressed to her chest and she had hers buried in his hair. She was curled up tightly against him and smelled like fabric softener and the various fruits in her soap. He tried moving his hands slightly to figure out where they were and got one onto her side, brushing at her through her pajama top in response.

She nuzzled at his hair before pulling her head back a little, whispering "Hey."

He tilted his so they were facing one another, immediately meeting her gaze. "Hey."

She smiled and brought her hand around from the nape of his neck, gently stroking her fingers across his face as if to map him by touch.

He smiled back and lightly kissed at her fingertips.

"Sleep well?" Rukia asked.

"Very," Ichigo replied, pressing a cheek to her hand and gently gripping her side. "You?"

"Mmm," she intoned, before bringing her forehead to his, closing her eyes and resting with him. She laid her one hand on his cheek and brought her other up to above his heart, trying to discern his mood through his body language. He'd finally started to loosen up when they'd begun to regularly bathe together and he'd clearly enjoyed their intimacy, but she wanted to be sure . . .

He hadn't really had time to think about things except beforehand and he'd done his best to try not to, instead reflecting on their time together in Tokyo and some of his own decisions. He knew they'd both still sort of been afraid for one another just as they were then, and if he was honest he'd still been afraid of losing what they had, and he knew she'd still been afraid of not having what they wanted. In committing he'd begun to feel oddly calm, like they'd finally found some sort of equilibrium in their approach, like they were really just . . . together. He squeezed her side and brought his other hand up likewise, letting his fingers idly trace some of the curves beneath her top.

She didn't shift at the motion and started to caress his cheek, satisfied that she had her answer. “What were you thinking about when we were first . . . together?”

“Why you had to give me your powers that night,” Ichigo said after a slight pause. He didn't want to address all the rest and it was true enough.

Rukia opened her eyes fractionally to assess him before closing them again and rubbing her forehead against his. “Injuries happen, fool.” It was hardly the worst wound she'd ever received.

“That's not why I was thinking about it,” he replied, matching his stroking of her to how she brushed at him. His voice was quiet but there was a deeply serious note to it.

She faintly blushed as she started to understand, pushing closer to him. “Did you hear a single sound or word of complaint out of me?” she asked with quiet confidence, bringing her hands up to cup his jaw and stroking her thumbs along his cheekbones. He was a great lover—she had no point of comparison but from how she'd felt even that was dramatically understating the case.
He abruptly reddened against her palms as he recalled all the audible ways she'd encouraged him. She'd taken his request not to stifle herself to heart. “I guess not, but complaints were the farthest thing from my mind then,” he replied with a touch of irritation and an endless certainty. She was a perfect partner. He felt her face heat up in response due to their proximity.

“Hmph . . . so, was it everything you hoped for?” she asked rather arrogantly.

He got his arms securely around her waist and pulled her close. “More.”

“You . . . better not start to think I'm easy,” she replied, notes of awkwardness and humility creeping into her voice. Once they'd truly started she hadn't been able to think of anything else and each cycle neither of them had lasted for any real amount of time, but she especially . . .

Ichigo tensed for a split second at that and lightly shook his head against hers, whispering “Never,” in reassurance, drawing his arms tighter around her. Maybe they'd take to talking dirty to one another occasionally, but no matter what they said or did he would never think of her in that sort of way. They'd just been inexperienced and eager, and she . . . “That wasn’t just your first time with someone else, was it?”

Rukia turned fully red and just nodded slightly. She'd never explored herself. It had never really occurred to her to do so—there had been no place or purpose in her world for that kind of thing. By the time she'd actually begun to consider it she decided she wanted him to be the first instead.

“I'd never have guessed,” he whispered, even though he just had, and kissed the tip of her nose.

She stayed flushed and slid her arms around his neck while pressing her face between his cheek and the pillow they were against.

He shifted a bit and cuddled with her, bringing a hand up into her hair and brushing his fingers through it. He'd noticed a pattern with them: their first meeting, their first bath, their first kiss, their first time making love . . . their firsts tended to run out beyond the control of both of them, and they always had to follow up in their wake. He resolved then that he'd lead off the next time, that he'd be as patient as he could in learning about her, and that he'd help her learn about herself too. At that moment though he just had to be there for her, and so he began to massage her neck and rub her back.

After a time she quietly sniffled.

He blinked at the noise and whispered "Rukia . . . are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said in a low tone. It sounded less than convincing.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he replied, trying to pull his head back to see her.

Rukia clung to Ichigo as if for dear life and pressed her face tightly to his neck, digging her fingers into his shirt and back. "It's not about what we did, so don't . . ." she managed to get out, not wanting him to worry. He was always so concerned that he'd hurt her or done something wrong. What had summoned up a churn of emotions within her was exactly the opposite.

She'd always put up barriers with people—put up emotional fortifications and firebreaks. She'd put up walls with Renji, she'd put up walls with Kaien, and she'd tried putting them up with Ichigo . . . she'd tried so hard . . . and he'd simply gotten around or over or straight through them all, like some sort of phantom. He'd gotten closer and closer to her and finally she'd embraced him but there was always one last barrier: her composure. She'd been composed for so long, been tough and distant and hardened to almost everything, and he simply didn't care about any of that at all. He'd drawn out who
she was underneath it and had so steadily chipped away at and put cracks in that final defense. In the end he'd gotten past it too. She had been trying to reestablish it but the foundations were simply gone and it just gave way every time. She was defenseless to him just like she'd been the first time she told him she loved him, but she could scarcely control it anymore and she felt emotionally naked and raw. Why would someone like him want her so much? Why was he so accepting of her? Why? Why . . . ?

She hated crying. Long ago she'd resolved never to cry in front of anyone for any reason if she could possibly help it. She wouldn't be perceived as weak or helpless or worthy of pity. She'd slipped and faltered occasionally but overall she'd done it. In that instant it all failed her as she started to cry—she didn't sob or tremble but she just couldn't stop the tears from falling. She couldn't recognize in the moment that it was a kind of relief. It was so hard to believe she could really . . . really just be with him in every way she wanted and not have to worry what he thought, what anyone thought . . .

Ichigo's eyes widened as he processed her words and felt his skin and shirt dampen. He closed them and hugged her as tightly as he could. Despite his sudden misgivings he took her at her word. He had always been one for feelings and she had always been one for thoughts, and so just as he became lost when trying to think his way through things, for her to suddenly be beset by such intense feelings must be . . . "It's okay," he whispered softly, "Just let it all out."

Rukia couldn't do otherwise and kept on until she had nothing more to give.

He eventually pressed his cheek to hers to draw her attention before slowly turning over onto his other side with her, gently moving her head to his other shoulder so she could rest her face somewhere dry. His collar was soaked on the other side.

She accepted the change without complaint. She was silent and still for a long, long time before whispering "Sorry, I—"

"You don't ever have to apologize," he interrupted lightly but firmly.

She went quiet again and squeezed at him a little more, wiping her face against his shoulder.

He waited patiently until her grip started to ease and then pulled his head back, looking to her and trying to meet her gaze.

She wouldn't look at him at first and only hesitantly locked eyes with him, finding he seemed compassionate, resolved, and loving. She could only stare.

Ichigo smiled. "Let's go clean up and have something to eat. We've still got to do homework, right?"

Rukia wiped her eyes one last time with one of her sleeves before nodding and giving a weak smile.

She sat on his lap in the soaking tub, her head just above the water against his chest. In the shower he hadn't demurred or been bashful but had been gentlemanly, just helping her wash and keeping her company. Afterwards he'd tugged her over to the tub and held her close, rubbing her back. She hadn't failed to notice his conduct and knew he was trying to comfort her—she quietly appreciated it. He really did seem to finally be confident and at ease with her no matter what. It was nearly an hour after they'd gotten in that she lifted a hand and lightly brushed her fingers over his chest, asking "How did training go on Thursday and Friday?" She hadn't really had a chance to ask—they'd spent Friday morning rushing to get a math assignment done once she'd finally woken up and hadn't had much time to talk since Wednesday night.

"He seemed satisfied that I knew what I was doing, I guess," he replied after a second. Ryūken
wasn't exactly personable but he was competent and clear in his instruction and didn't mess around. He'd found the basics of *hirenkyaku* rather simple, although it was a lot different from using flash steps. Learning *ransōtengai* had taken him more time since he'd had trouble not just moving the limb in question—he'd been surprised but pleased the elder archer hadn't tried to just temporarily cripple him given Inoue had been there that day.

"So how does it feel to be a Quincy?" Rukia asked, sounding only the slightest bit saucy.

"Meh. How does it feel to associate with one?" Ichigo shot back in a deadpan.

"I could get used to it," she replied coolly, getting her arms around his torso so they were just under his.

He continued to just brush at her back underwater. "How was the party?"

"I told you it wasn't a party," she said with a tinge of annoyance.

"Uh huh, which is why I had to carry you home while Yoruichi-san carried our bags," he replied.

She blinked and tilted her head slightly to peer up at him. "She really did that?"

"Ask her yourself if you don't believe me," he replied.

"... We just watched some movies and had some drinks. She wouldn't let me ask what I wanted to," Rukia quietly confessed.

"I think she was worried about you," Ichigo replied after thinking it over for a moment.

"Eh?"

"Before she left she told me to take good care of you, and you said you were talking with her regularly about things related to ... doing *that*, right?" he continued quietly. He was still a bit averse to openly discussing sex, particularly given how they were situated, and not everything had to change at once.

Her cheeks went a bit pink and she closed her eyes, leaning against him. "Hmph, that woman ..." She wasn't actually mad at all but wasn't entirely sure what to make of it. She felt that they could be called friends by that point, but ...

"You watched out for Inoue and Tatsuki, right?" he needled.

"Yoruichi-san was very direct about the fact they could have one and only one drink each if they wanted, and I didn't see any harm in that given you told me to not let them get *drunk*," Rukia said rather primly. They'd had a lot less than she did and had seemed fine for as far as she could remember.

Ichigo frowned but said nothing, resting his head atop hers.

She leaned against him a little more. "I think one of the movies we saw was an adaptation of that favorite play of yours."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mmhmm," she said, nuzzling at his sternum.

"Still feeling defensive about it?" he asked quietly, rubbing a cheek against her silky hair.
"Maybe," she said noncommittally.

"How about we go somewhere on Friday?" he offered after a moment.

"Have anywhere in mind?"

"Not yet . . . but let's spend an evening somewhere really nice," he said earnestly. Taking her out was the absolute least he could do. He wasn't sure what was really available nearby that was truly upscale but if he had to take her all the way back to overnight or spend the weekend in Tokyo to show her he was really serious, he would—anything for her.

"I'd never turn down a dinner date, Ichigo," Rukia said, letting her fingers play at his back. Going somewhere really nice would be a good opportunity for her to let him see her new dress. She idly wondered if he'd appreciate Ishida more after seeing it for a second.

Ichigo lightly kissed the top of her head before whispering "How'd you get that champagne anyway?" When he'd seen her last on Friday she'd been in her school uniform and no amount of acting would've gotten her around that.

"I had a change of clothes in my bag for when I went to go pick things up," she said as if it was obvious. It would've been awkward to buy the flowers she'd gotten in a school uniform too—she'd received a rather interesting look as it was. He said nothing in reply and she idled with him a little longer before planting a kiss above his heart. "We really should go eat and get started on studying."

"You'll have to get up first in order for me to," he said without any subtext, grudgingly sitting up straight.

She glanced up at him dubiously before smirking a little and deciding he'd been sweet enough for her to oblige him. It was flattering that he liked her showing off around him anyway.

Shirayuki was standing in front of a pond hugging herself when a set of arms slid around her waist from behind. She already knew it was Zangetsu and didn't move at first as he lightly pressed against her and brought his head up alongside hers. After a time she brought one of her hands down onto his and the other up to cup his opposite cheek. Their wielders had been basically inseparable and she'd watched the physical and emotional roller coaster than Rukia had gone through with more than a little embarrassment—she felt very much like a voyeur and could only assume it was the same for him with regard to Ichigo.

He said nothing for a time and just held onto her. "We don't have to," he eventually whispered. Ichigo and Rukia were clearly finally synced with one another again, so it wasn't truly necessary that they also . . .

"I want to," she said, lightly gripping at him. She wanted to understand him fully, and she wanted him likewise familiar with her . . . for them to be comfortable together as their wielders were. Ichigo and Rukia would someday fight together and it was important that she and Zangetsu know the same breadth and depth of commitment that they already had.

He looked sideways to her for a moment before loosening his arms and moving around to face her.

After a moment considering him she leaned forward to give him a light kiss before finding one of his hands and leading him somewhere more appropriate.

Rukia was considering a trigonometric identity problem by herself—Ichigo had gone to use the
bathroom—when she became aware of a presence in the room with her. She glanced sideways to find Kon staring at her. He looked unusually serious. "What, Kon?"

The mod-soul hardened his expression before asking "Does he really make you happy, nē-san?"

She blinked before exhaling and adopting a knowing and mildly annoyed expression. "Of course he does, fool. I don't need you looking out for me."

Kon was about to say something when Chappy appeared at the door to the study looking rather irritated.

"Don't think that I'll forgive you for—" the rabbit plushy began.

"I appreciate your concern, but it's unnecessary," Rukia continued, drawing the gaze of both. "Ichigo is—"

"Is what?" Ichigo asked, suddenly appearing in the doorway behind Chappy.

". . . A fool," she finished, giving him a modestly sour look even as her eyes twinkled. She maintained eye contact with him for a second before looking back to her notebook and returning to the problem.

Ichigo scowled somewhat before glancing to Kon and then to Chappy, maneuvering past them to take up his place by her side again without a word.

Kon watched them for a moment before sighing, turning, and withdrawing, walking past Chappy back out into the living room.

Chappy glared after him as he went past before glancing at Ichigo and Rukia and then following him out.

Rukia yawned and leaned sideways against Ichigo, shutting her English notebook and lightly tossing it aside, finally done with her work.

He absentmindedly got an arm around her shoulders and finished the line he was reading before closing his book and setting it aside.

"We should go to your family's place for dinner," she said mildly. Their breakfast had been more like a brunch and it was the mid-afternoon. From the perspective of Ichigo's dad and sisters they probably seemed to have gone missing for three days.

"Yeah, I'll call," he said. Karin and Yuzu had brought leftovers on Thursday and he idly realized then that since her story about helping them with a school project had clearly been a cover story for her surprise it likely meant they had a vague idea what had happened . . . at least Karin probably would. He wasn't exactly looking forward to dealing with her scrutiny. "Think Kūkaku and Ganju will still be there?" he asked.

"She said they'd be staying until Tuesday morning," Rukia replied.

"You could try asking her about what you wanted to discuss on Thursday after dinner," Ichigo offered.

She shook her head, stating "I'll do that Monday." They would need to stop by the Urahara Shop for a short time before heading over to meet with Ikumi anyway, and she could say what she needed to
say to Kūkaku then—there was no point interrupting the evening to do it. She lightly prodded him and added "Go call already."

"Fine, fine," he said dismissively, going to get his cell phone.

She collected up their notes and other effects before going to the living room to relax in the meantime. They had a few hours and she didn't really want to do anything until then. When he returned she just got comfortable with him, not particularly caring if the stuffed animals saw them in such a way.

Ichigo steadfastly ignored yet another one of Karin's assessing gazes and asked "So, Kūkaku-san, now that it's been a week how do you like it here?"

"It's not so bad, I can see why Yoruichi likes it so much," she replied. The food and drink were certainly more interesting. She glanced to Ichigo's sisters for a split second before saying airily "I could see visiting more often." She liked hanging out with her best friend and new family the most, though she wouldn't admit to it out loud.

"How about you?" Ichigo continued, looking to Ganju.

"I have a name, you know!" he shot back.

"That's not an answer," the orange-haired teen replied blithely. Relatives or not, they seemed to remain not-quite-rivals.

"It is pretty nice, even if everyone here dresses weird," Ganju pontificated. He likewise glanced about to everyone else present before saying "Television is pretty okay." He'd taken to going over to the Kurosaki household to watch reruns of Iron Chef with Yuzu after she came home from school—it was a lot of fun, but it was seeing it with someone else that got just as into it that was special.

"You just think Chairman Kaga is cool," Karin said in a deadpan. It was ridiculous how involved in the show the two of them got.

"He is!" Ganju and Yuzu replied earnestly at the same time.

Karin rolled her eyes and Rukia found herself laughing, which drew a warm smile from Ichigo and a tiny one from Kūkaku.

Isshin abruptly clapped his hands for attention. "As chairman of Kurosaki-Shiba family activities—" he began rather pompously.

"Who made you the chairman?" Kūkaku asked, her tone echoing Karin's.

"As chairman of Kurosaki family activities—and since this will probably be the last dinner we're all at for awhile considering some of us have decided to be responsible," he continued, glancing to Ichigo and Rukia, "I propose we give over the rest of the evening to a game night!"

There were no objections.

Rukia settled against against Ichigo in bed after turning off the last light. "Your family is really fun," she said quietly. It was hardly the first time she'd ever said it and she knew exactly why she felt that way, yet it never failed to surprise her.
He got an arm around her waist and slid his hand under her pajama top to rest on her side while bringing the other up, placing an index finger to her forehead and running it down along her nose. "They'll be yours too someday."

She turned a little bit pink and brought one of her own up to interlock fingers with it, pressing closer to him.

He squeezed at her hand before releasing it and getting his other arm around her, drawing her to him and curling up around her a little, suddenly feeling very protective of her.

Sensing his mood, she snuggled up against him and became still. They were quiet for a time before she whispered his name.

"Hmm?" he replied.

"I want you to know that we don't have to wait for the weekend," she asserted.

"Shhh," he whispered, brushing at her side. He knew. "You don't have to keep wearing those pantyhose if you don't want to," he offered. There was little point in continuing to pretend they kept him from being distracted.

"I like that you're the only one who really gets to see my legs regularly," she replied with more than a hint of smugness. He was certainly the only boy to, anyway. She didn't count the PE locker room and the gym shorts the girls wore weren't much more revealing than a reasonable skirt—bloomers had fortunately fallen out of favor some time prior.

"I like it too," he replied with a small smirk. He also liked the idea of taking them off her again, but she didn't have to hear it.

She kissed his chest before getting comfortable and starting to drift off.

He kissed the top of her head before doing the same.
Monday, April 1, 2002

"Are you really okay?" Tatsuki asked, glancing sideways to Inoue after finishing the last of her chocolate ice cream.

"Yeah," the princess replied, meeting her friend's look and giving a small smile. It still hurt but knowing where she stood with Ichigo and what his true feelings were was like having a weight lifted from her shoulders. If she was honest she'd known—the way he responded to her wasn't at all the way he reacted to Rukia, whether it was the way he looked at her, the way he carried her, or anything else. She'd known even before the invasion of Soul Society that Rukia had been the one to change his world and had said as much near its conclusion.

Tatsuki watched her for a moment before glancing to her empty cup of ice cream and then back again. "So what did he say that was so nice?"

After a short pause the princess said "He told me I was like a sister to him," with a little smile.

The fighter's eyes slid away at that. He'd probably say the same about her if he was forced to but that didn't make it any less true. She internally weighed something then. She wouldn't reveal what she'd seen on that chill December day to anyone but . . . "I think he misses her."

"He does," Inoue said with certainty. What she remembered then was Rukia talking with her on the high school's roof after Urahara had dismissed her from the war, particularly the way she'd so forthrightly said If any of you were less than who you are, I wouldn't be where I am today. For such a decisive battle as this . . . There must be something that you can do. Let's find that something together, Inoue. She recalled yet again what Matsumoto had told her when she'd been distraught at how easily Rukia lifted Ichigo up and she realized that the Rukia who'd told her that hadn't been the same one that had kept so distant at school before then; it was so clear he'd worked changes in her too.

If Ichigo loved her like a sister and what he needed was to see Rukia again, and if Rukia was her friend . . . what a sister and friend would do was to help him get back to her, just as she had in Soul Society! "Everyone . . . has to help him along until she can come back," she stated with quiet confidence.

Tatsuki's gaze returned to her and she assessed for a moment before saying "We've already been thinking about that . . ."

Inoue looked at her with some surprise and blinked before asking "We?" What was going on she didn't know about?

---

Saturday, April 12, 2002

"Oi, Inoue," Yoruichi said with seeming disinterest as the teenagers were preparing to leave.

"Hmm, Yoruichi-san?" she replied.

The Flash Goddess gestured for her to follow with a finger before making her way back into the depths of the shop, leading her to a private room.
Inoue excused herself from Chad and Ishida and followed along uncertainly but curiously, looking around the sparsely furnished room.

Yoruichi sat down on a rather plush sitting pillow before gesturing at another. Once the princess had taken a seat she reclined a bit, supporting herself with her hands and considering her for a few seconds. "Are you really okay with this?"

"Huh? Why wouldn't I be?"

"I know you like him," Yoruichi stated, locking eyes with the young woman. It hadn't been hard to notice and although she was earnest in her desire to help Ichigo it was also clear there were things she hadn't said. Yoruichi wouldn't cut her out no matter what she revealed but it was important to know what she was comfortable with and that mandated a little talk. *I won't botch this like Kisuke did during the war by not taking your feelings into account.*

Inoue blinked before looking down for a time. She hadn't shelved her feelings or anything like that; she did love him but she'd been trying to use it productively—to truly love someone was to set them free. She understood why the older woman had pulled her aside and felt that if anyone likely knew about such things . . . she fidgeted for a few seconds. "I . . . asked if he'd go to hanami with me just under two weeks ago. He never really said no, but he told me that he regarded me like a sister and I knew . . . he really misses Kuchiki-san and what's important is that he sees her again. Even if she's in a similar way, they can both definitely help each other, so . . . it's up to us to help them along as best we can just like they've helped us!" she said with growing sincerity.

The Flash Goddess blinked before giving a small smile at the young woman's attitude; she closed her eyes and let it broaden slightly as she considered what to say in response. She eventually looked at the teenager again with a softer expression. "I normally don't do this kind of thing, but . . . if you ever need to talk to someone about anything and there's no one else you feel comfortable talking with, you can talk to me, okay?" The kind of selflessness she was displaying shouldn't be borne alone.

The princess blinked again before smiling back.

---

**Monday, September 30, 2002**

Ichigo exhaled and slowly opened his eyes, finding he was looking down at Rukia's dark, silken hair. He stared for a moment, taking in how soft it felt against his face and the scent of her shampoo as the protective urge he'd felt before falling asleep assailed him again.

It was nothing he could put a name to, just a collection of jumbled thoughts atop a deep desire to keep her safe. He knew she was strong and didn't really need his protection, knew that as he was he couldn't really stand up for her in any way she couldn't against her insecurities, but . . . Three months ago he would've become sullen and brooding at the mere mention of her. Two months ago he would've called her his partner and said aloud that she was his best friend only if she'd gotten him a lot drunter than she had even though they both knew it. Since then she hadn't just become his girlfriend, his love, and his lover but he'd realized she was eventually going to be his fiancé, his wife, and the mother of his . . .

He tightened his grip on her marginally at the train of thought but was careful not to wake her by holding her too firmly. It wasn't the first time but acknowledging how important she was to him all at once and how radically she'd redefined his life yet again was a lot to take in first thing in the morning. Likewise not for the first time it hit him how crazy it all was when he was only 17—he wasn't even in his senior year yet. He may have been born into the business of fighting to protect but to have in his arms the one person he absolutely had to shield beyond any other was . . . he had to get
stronger. He just had to. He had to be ready when she needed him.

It was awhile before he slowly began to release and move back from her to get up.

She shifted at his motion and unconsciously moved with him for a moment as he went.

Ichigo felt his chest clench around his heart at that and at finally seeing her serene expression. He reached a hand up to gently brush her hair into place, smiling at her.

Rukia slowly blinked her eyes open, taking a second before looking up to see him cast in the morning light that was making its way through the curtains. He looked oddly sentimental despite the smirk on his face and there was something about his eyes that arrested her attention; there was a deeply affectionate emotion lurking in them. "What is it?"

"Nothing, I just didn't want to wake you and then you woke up anyway," he said with a touch of annoyance, making his face look the part. It'd do no good to voice what he felt; telling her that kind of thing always seemed to make her uncertain and he knew she'd tell him not to worry about her. He turned and slid off the bed, standing and heading for the door before she could reply.

"Ichigo—" she began to say, mildly frustrated at what was clearly a dodge on his part.

"I told you that showers in the morning are distracting; I'll see you downstairs," he said with greater nerve, opening the door and leaving before quietly closing it behind him.

She frowned at the door before getting up to get her clothes, her drowsiness dulling her agitation.

Inoue was immediately stopped by the sight of Ichigo and Rukia when they entered the classroom. What struck her was how the former moved with the latter—something about it was different, like he was much more relaxed and confident. Her friend likewise seemed slightly changed, though she had much less of a sense for reading her. She'd seen how distracted they'd both been at the start of the previous week and this was completely different, like there was no real tension between them whatsoever and they were suddenly very at ease with one another... Her cheeks turned pink as she put it together and she suddenly looked away, immediately beset by memories. No matter what faces they put on for the world they moved each other so easily and seemed to move everyone else along with them as well—they really did draw out the best in one another and by virtue of the same, the best in those around them too. To see the two of them move so effortlessly with one another and to know the cause was that... she studiously refused to imagine the particulars but she could only believe it'd been loving and truly special. She was really happy for them.

Tatsuki had known Ichigo long enough to be able to read subtle shifts in him and she could also tell he was happy about something or other. The expression she saw out of the corner of her eyes on Inoue's face and the motion of her head made it plain what it might be. She glanced from her friend to the couple with a look of appraisal as she took on the faintest blush. She still knew it was a lot more meaningful than the phrase implied but she couldn't help but think I told you it was eye sex! without judgment before looking to Inoue again—she didn't seem upset and if anything looked glad, so it was probably alright to wait and make sure she was okay during lunch. She stole a final glance at Rukia and decided to likewise follow up with her sometime soon; it wasn't that she wanted to hear details about that kind of thing when it came to Ichigo of all people but Rukia was the only one she knew their age who... well, she wasn't their age, but she at least acted it. Tatsuki didn't actually know a lot about such things and it'd be different hearing about them from her rather than Yoruichi.

Ishida noticed both women's reactions and adjusted his glasses before studying Inoue for a moment and then returning to his study materials. It was hardly an unexpected development and not really
any business of his, but . . . he decided to make sure she was okay later.

Rukia and Ichigo obliviously made their way to their seats while bantering about an action movie they'd watched; the latter was coming up with ideas for other things they could see in the same vein and was trying to find out what the former had liked about it.

Keigo was pretty sure they were talking about *Die Hard*.

Rukia had let Yoruichi know they'd be starting working during an offhand moment at the beginning of their movie party on Thursday. She hadn't offered any real objections since Ichigo was nearing the limits of what he could do for the time being and needed some time to just adapt—accordingly she'd postponed the training sessions indefinitely.

Given that, Chad went to work immediately after school to make up for some time he'd missed over the past few weeks.

Rukia and Ichigo headed off to the Urahara Shop as usual anyway. She needed to talk to Kūkaku before she left; he wanted to prove something to himself after that morning and also had a small score to settle given how Yoruichi had played with him earlier that month. They took each other's hands and started off.

Inoue started to follow after only to be stopped by Ishida saying "Inoue-san."

She stopped and turned, looking at him curiously. "Hmm, Ishida-kun?"

He watched the couple for a few seconds. "I don't think they'll be doing anything that needs medical attention and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind discussing some activities for the handicrafts club since we won't need time away for awhile."

Inoue blinked before saying "Sure!" She then let a warm smile onto her face, adding "By the way, Ishida-kun, I saw the dress you made for Rukia—it's really pretty!"

The Quincy blinked in turn and adjusted his glasses to hide his eyes. " . . . Thank you," he said after a second, before gesturing for them to find somewhere to sit on the school grounds. What he'd said wasn't a lie; he just intended to work his way around to the matter of how she was doing in his own time.

Jinta looked up at the couple with confusion, saying "Heard you weren't supposed to be here today," as they approached the front of the shop.

Ururu just watched them.

"We have some business to attend to," Rukia declared.

The boy exhaled before opening the door for them. It wasn't like they were strangers or an uncommon sight.

She headed in with Ichigo, soon finding Yoruichi and Kūkaku drinking tea and chatting at a *chabudai*. Urahara was doing work and Ganju was at the Kurosaki family home.

"Aren't you both supposed to be at your new job?" Yoruichi said idly, glancing up to them. She wasn't entirely surprised by their arrival as she'd noticed Rukia drawing nearer but it was still a bit strange. She studied the younger noble a bit intently then, trying to discern how things had gone.
Rukia just gave a small smile before looking to Kūkaku and saying "I'd like to talk before you leave."

Ichigo crossed his arms and considered Yoruichi, adding "I'd like to make sure this all paid off."

The former head of the Shihōin and the current head of the Shiba exchanged glances and then small smirks before the former stood, gesturing for Ichigo to follow her. "Come on then."

Rukia waited until they'd left before sitting down opposite Kūkaku and looking at her levelly.

"So, what's on your mind?" the elder Shiba sibling asked.

"I want to talk about the arrangements you said you were going to be making," Rukia stated.

"Okay," Kūkaku said with a shrug. It was her right since a lot of it was about her.

Yoruichi and Ichigo silently stood opposite one another on the elevator ride down. She leaned against one of the walls and glanced up at him. "So . . ."

"Thanks for watching out for her, Yoruichi-san," he said quietly, meeting the look.

She blinked and took on a sort of quizzical expression at that, not at all having expected it from him. "She approached me, you know," she said with some disinterest. She wasn't used to the surrogate older sister role she kept finding herself in lately and didn't want to have to admit it.

Ichigo smiled a little at her evasiveness and knew he'd already put her off-balance. "I heard."

"It was fun, right? You're not going to give her a reason to need to keep talking with me about that kind of thing, are you?" she said directly, deciding to counterattack.

He flushed marginally and adopted a put-out expression, crossing his arms and saying "We'll manage fine," rather hotly as he looked away.

"I'm sure," she said with a slightly wicked smile that belied the fact she was glad for them.

"So . . . are you and Urahara-san—" he started, deciding to duel since she clearly had no problems doing the same.

"Don't push your luck, Ichigo," she said with a tone that was both testy and vaguely playful. The elevator came to a halt then and she led the way out, gesturing about. "So what, are you still pissed at how I chased you around? Want to play a game of tag or some—" she taunted, abruptly stopping to flash step aside as his hand came within a centimeter of snatching away the tie that held her ponytail in place. She whirled about to find him in his Fullbring armor and narrowed her eyes as she discerned he was using *hirenkyaku* and high-speed movement simultaneously; pairing both seemed decently fast. She smirked and then grinned as she remembered that at the *yakiniku* restaurant she'd told him and Rukia about how she'd previously teased Byakuya. "Didn't anybody ever tell you that you shouldn't play with a girl's hair unless she asks?"

"All the girls I grew up around had short hair," he stated; his mom didn't count. "I'm feeling charitable, so you've got a ten second head start," he added pompously, quoting her back to herself and smirking in turn.

"I told you not to push your luck," she said back just as arrogantly, flash stepping away.

He immediately gave chase.
"What do you think nii-sama will request in exchange for allowing me to join the Shiba?" Rukia asked.

"I don't know," Kūkaku said honestly. "But you shouldn't worry about it too much." She wasn't any more certain as to what it might be than she'd been almost a week prior, even after having discussed the matter at length with Yoruichi.

"Nii-sama . . . still misses Hisana, and if I join you then there'll be no immediate prospective heirs for the Kuchiki clan," the petite Shinigami said, doing her best to consider things like a noble might. "Nii-sama, and by proxy the clan, lacks for nothing except for what's embodied in those two things—a Lady of the clan."

The leader of the Shiba quirked her mouth to one side as she considered that; it matched with some of what Yoruichi had said.

"He's still quite young, so it's not like there's probably a lot of pressure on him to remarry to produce heirs, but if . . . if all the children Ichigo and I might eventually have will be associated with the Shiba, that will increase any pressure on him," Rukia continued, thinking her way through it aloud. She kept her thoughts on the topic carefully neutral and distant, not any closer to thinking about the matter than she'd been the night it'd been brought up at the tableside discussion. "If there's a provision that if he lacks heirs of his own, he can select from among ours to succeed him as the head of the Kuchiki, it will probably be more equitable and reduce any pressure this puts upon him."

"Would you really be okay with that?" Kūkaku asked with a stoic air, meeting the petite Shinigami's gaze. She wouldn't have been comfortable proposing something like that but if Rukia brought it up herself and was certain of it then she could definitely relay it.

Rukia nodded seriously. She might have been adopted into the Kuchiki clan and not have always felt welcome in it, but things had changed and she felt she'd earned her place among them. She didn't know what her brother might intend to do in the long years ahead but if it should come to that she had no doubt that any children of hers—of theirs—could fill that role and that he would think the same. He wouldn't choose spuriously or foist it upon one who was unwilling.

"So you don't think he'd look to immediately try and redress the current lack of heirs?" the Shiba leader asked, following off Rukia's comment about Hisana. She didn't really know Byakuya well; they'd only briefly met a few times and it'd been quite awhile ago.

The petite Shinigami shook her head, adding "No," for emphasis. Her brother hadn't moved on and the idea of him demanding Kūkaku in exchange for her joining the Shiba was . . . she simply couldn't imagine it.

Kūkaku exhaled. She was acutely aware of the fact she was the only eligible woman in the Shiba clan—the thought of Ichigo's sisters had never remotely entered her mind in that capacity—and given the facts of the situation that'd made her the biggest potential bargaining chip on their side in addition to the chief negotiator. To hear that he'd have no great interest in her was a relief even if it left her with little else to offer other than their loyalty to Kuchiki interests. She gave her future cousin-in-law a small smile. "He'll still be your brother, you know. It's not like noble houses can't interact. You've heard me talk about how Yoruichi and I met and I know she told you about how she met Byakuya."

"I know," Rukia replied; she knew it was all really smoke and mirrors.

"Well, I don't know how, but I'll make it work," Kūkaku promised, locking eyes with the noblewoman.
Rukia held eye contact with her for a moment before nodding again. "I trust you."

They watched each other for awhile before the green-eyed woman looked away, taking a sip of her tea. "You don't feel guilty about having gotten Ichigo into all this, do you?" Given how Rukia wore her guilt over Kaien on her sleeve she wouldn't be surprised.

Rukia blinked and looked down.

"You need to stop that," the clan leader said firmly. "Doesn't the way he looks at you remind you of something?"

Rukia's scrutiny returned to her with a note of confusion. Ichigo certainly did look at her in a very particular way but . . .

"Because I know what it reminds me of," Kūkaku continued mildly. It was more than a little reminiscent of the ways she'd seen Kaien look at Miyako. She kept her gaze averted from her counterpart, giving her a moment.

Rukia's eyes went wide as she put it together and she couldn't do anything but stare at the elder Shiba sibling. She didn't know where to begin in response to that and barely even knew what to think. Memories of watching Kaien and Miyako returned unbidden to her then and her mind automatically compared and contrasted. She turned slightly red as she realized the truth behind the words and felt like her heart was being squeezed. He really did look at her like that . . . after so long did she really have what she'd envied? Once again she was beset by the simple question Why . . . ?

Kūkaku slowly made eye contact again. "Shiba men can be kind of stupid sometimes but they never back down when they think they're right and they always follow their hearts." Her cousin, her brothers, her uncle, her father, his father . . . there were more than a few similarities between them all.

Rukia's thoughts gradually turned to all the times and ways she'd apologized to Ichigo for things or tried to warn him off. What entered her mind then was what he'd told her the other day: You don't ever have to apologize. She was quiet and looked down again. It was a very long time before she looked at her future cousin-in-law again. She tried a tiny smile and asked "What about the women?"

"How do you think the clan lasted for as long as it did?" Kūkaku said sardonically, wearing a wry but warm smile.

Rukia started to smile back more genuinely and they again watched each other for a time.

"Tell me how you met," Kūkaku entreated. She'd only heard the outlines from secondhand sources; the details honestly didn't really matter after everything she'd seen but it felt like something she should know.

After a second of looking abashed, Rukia started to relate the story.

It was about an hour later when Ichigo and Yoruichi returned. She hadn't lost her hair-tie but it hadn't been easy to hang onto it; she was quietly impressed.

Ichigo was satisfied with how he'd done and pleasantly surprised the armor had kept his school uniform from getting dirty. He'd wondered about whether it'd be prudent to change before challenging her but had figured he might get dirty at work anyway—who knew what Ikumi would have them doing?

Rukia wrapped up her chat with Kūkaku and was about to stand when the latter reached out and
took her wrist.

"Don't worry," she stated firmly, adding "See you at dinner," with a small smile and letting go of her.

The petite Shinigami blinked and smiled back before nodding and getting up, going to Ichigo and taking his hand.

"Later," the future substitute said with humor to Yoruichi, nodding at Kūkaku.

Rukia gave Yoruichi another smile that communicated they could talk later, as well as 'thank you'.

The Flash Goddess nodded at both in response before they departed. It was after they'd left the shop that she decided to tease Kūkaku, saying "They're pretty cute; you looking forward to having lots of nieces and nephews in the future?"

The Shiba clan leader just exhaled and rolled her eyes even as she smiled.

"Shouldn't there be more paperwork for us to sign or something?" Ichigo asked curiously.

"I know what the contract law says," Ikumi said with annoyance; she'd kept it simple and only required a few signatures from each. She cleared her throat before producing a small stack of requests that'd piled up. "Anyway, I've already got a bunch of jobs lined up for you! Nothing that a pair of youths can't handle, I'm sure. I figure you'll want to move as a unit so I trust two of you'll make them go twice as quick!" With that she handed each of them a sheaf of tasks for the week to review.

They both started to look through them. Ichigo spoke up first, asking "Cleaning rain gutters?" with mild incredulity. How were they supposed to do that? Were they being issued tools and equipment?

"A job's a job," Ikumi said with an ambivalent shrug.

He was about to follow up when Rukia suddenly drew in a sharp breath, getting the attention of both. He glanced to her with mild worry only to see her eyes were lit up and she looked incredibly happy about something. "What?" he asked with growing concern.

She almost smacked him in the face with the order to look after a pet rabbit.

After barely dodging he took it and looked it over with growing wariness before turning his attention back toward her. She'd closed her eyes and was almost grinning as she practically wiggled with excitement. He couldn't keep up the act and smiled lazily at the sight before looking the request over again. He knew better than to make fun of her for her enthusiasm didn't have the heart to anyway. It looked like that'd be a recurring job on Wednesdays.

Ikumi watched them for a second before offering "Uh, the jobs for today should be in Ichigo-chan's stack."

He frowned at her way of addressing him and shot her a glare before sorting through the papers to find the ones in question, quickly arranging them by distance from nearest to farthest. After doing so he pocketed them and stood, pulling Rukia up by the shoulders and saying "Come on, let's get started," as he led the way out of the shop.

She followed him out cheerily, still clearly excited at the prospect of seeing a real bunny.

Ikumi considered them as she watched them leave. They were definitely doing more than just holding
The hours of their first day at work were something of a blur. Dinner came and went all too quickly and both Ichigo and Rukia were surprised when they were given parting hugs by Kūkaku and Ganju.

After returning home they spent another hour doing their light homework load for the evening before Rukia pulled Ichigo along upstairs to get ready for bed.

Once they were in her bathroom he lightly caught her hands in his as he noticed her going for one of her uniform jacket's buttons.

She blinked as she found her hands trapped before peering up to him, stopped by the look he was giving her. It was another one of those incredibly sentimental expressions and she couldn't help but recall Kūkaku's comparison; she found herself staring again.

Ichigo brought Rukia's hands down to her sides before bringing his own up to grasp her biceps, leaning down and kissing her gently. He didn't fail to notice her attitude and although he didn't know the exact reason for her mood he could guess.

She just held the kiss, not immediately sure as to his motives but wanting him to carry through with whatever his intent was.

He released her arms and started to undo her jacket, eventually pulling it off her. He'd seen her undress a few times since they'd started bathing together regularly and he'd a mind to learn how to do it himself—he needed some innocent practice before he could make it sensual for her. He took his time, never lingering or teasing to make the nature of what he was doing clear, although he didn't hesitate to take in the sight of her at each stage. When at last she had nothing on at all he grasped her arms and gently smooched her again.

She eventually broke it, her cheeks quite pink, before starting to undo his jacket and disrobing him in turn. She didn't conceal her interest in looking him over either and when she was finished she mirrored what he'd done, using her grip to get him to bow a little and locking lips with him a third time.

After once more finding her hands he ended the kiss and pulled her along to the shower. It was too late to use the tub but they could relax and take their time bathing.

They were snuggled together in bed when she asked "Did you catch Yoruichi-san?"

"Nah, her hair-tie was always just beyond my fingertips," he replied quietly. "Did you say what you needed to Kūkaku-san?"

Rukia pushed closer to him. "Mhmmm." She was still trying to process the comparison Kūkaku had made and the more she thought about it the more she wanted to bury herself in his arms. "What was on your mind this morning?"

"You."

"What about me, fool?" she said affectionately.

He shook his head mildly and pulled her closer, pushing his face down into her hair and inhaling
deeply. "Nothing about you . . . just you."

She exhaled lightly and kissed his chest, unwilling to push the point—she felt too secure and comfortable to dwell on it right then.

They slowly drifted off together.
Tuesday, October 1, 2002

Ichigo woke with a murmur, blinking his eyes open as he was moved—he was suddenly on his back and his wrists were gently pinned down against the pillow he was using. "Huh?"

Rukia kissed him, keeping it light at first since she knew he was still drowsy.

He took a moment to stare up at her in surprise before closing his eyes again and going along with it, slowly increasing the pressure of it as he found his bearings. She was sitting on his stomach and leaning over him.

She kept pace and eventually softly bit at his lower lip, tightening her grip on his wrists.

He murmured something before nipping at her in reply and trying to kiss her harder, finding he didn't have the leverage.

After pulling her head back out of range she gave him a mischievous smirk and said "Good morning," in a chipper but exceedingly proper way.

He glowered up at her for a few seconds before glancing aside, not sure what to make of her behavior given the hour. What time was it anyway? Wasn't it Tuesday? They had to get up . . . He was immediately distracted from such thoughts as she kissed above his clavicles and playfully bit him again before starting to mark him.

"You're gonna leave a bruise," he protested quietly.

"You can wear a tie," she stated mildly before resuming. He'd marked her at about the same height; it just happened to be that she always kept her uniform's collar closed to wear the ribbon and she'd still had to play it off during PE. Turnabout remained fair play even if that predated their new circumstances.

Ichigo started to struggle at that. "I'm serious—"

"So am I," Rukia whispered, holding him securely as she continued. She wasn't just fooling around with him because it was fun . . . though that was certainly an upside.

He fidgeted for a little longer before giving up, deciding he could roll with her if she did anything more sensual.

Once he calmed down she stopped, satisfied her point was made, and planted kisses up his throat and jaw to his lips, rewarding him with a deep kiss. She only kept it hers for a short time before inviting him to make it his.

He took the invitation and French kissed her until they both ran out of air.

She brought her head down next to his, just breathing.

"We . . . we have to get up," he said quietly.
"It's about 15 minutes earlier than we're used to," she replied, not slackening her grip. She let her breathing steady a bit more before saying "Tell me what you meant about yesterday morning." The look of loving worry he'd given her had been among the first things she'd recalled that morning and after the previous night she was determined to get to the bottom of it, if not by putting him at ease then through more active persuasion. She felt so safe around him and he deserved to feel the same way around her too.

Ichigo was silent for a time before pushing his cheek to hers. "I was thinking about all the things we are and will be, and . . . how important you are."

Rukia's cheeks heated up a bit at that and she said "Fool," quietly.

"Tch, see, that's why I didn't want to tell you," he replied, not moving his head but looking away again.

She released his wrists and got her arms around his neck, hugging him.

His gaze returned to her and he got his arms around her in response, pulling her to him as he sighed and closed his eyes. It wasn't exactly how he'd thought she would react, but it was pretty close and . . .

She didn't have the exact words for that moment. Once she would've told him not to worry about her but that wasn't fair and didn't fit anymore. She didn't like conceding weakness but there was no longer any mystery as to how far their complementary natures went, so . . . "It's not that I don't worry about you too, but we should appreciate this while we can, Ichigo."

He elected not to say anything in response to that and ran a hand along the full length of her back while rubbing his cheek against hers.

Rukia shifted at the sensation and held onto him for a time. Finally she gave him a peck where she'd marked him and slowly pushed herself up so she could see him. "Shower with me."

"You know—" Ichigo started.

"It's flattering that you keep complimenting me but are you really going to hide behind the excuse that it's 'distracting' when I feel lonely?" she asked with a saucy but understated confidence.

He gave her a small scowl before sitting up with her and starting a short staring contest.

She didn't flinch in the slightest and held it for long seconds. "Time is wasting."

He used one hand to bring her head forward over one of his shoulders and brought the other down onto her butt, squeezing and picking her up before bearing her off to the bathroom. He supposed they didn't have to wash each other fully and it wasn't like he couldn't already distract himself with thoughts of her at will.

Once her face was out of sight she smiled at his concession before lecturing "Don't grope and kidnap me first thing in the morning!"

"Shut up, midget," he replied without any heat.

"Oi, Ichigooo, what's up with the tie anyway?" Keigo said, glancing over his shoulder. He'd only ever seen his friend wear them with the winter uniform and he'd never cinched them up all the way before. He actually looked kind of respectable.
"It's for the job," Ichigo replied dismissively, being very careful not to let his gaze drift toward Rukia or anywhere else that might give away that he was embarrassed. "Have to look decent for the first thing we do today."

"It makes you fit in better with Kuchiki-san," Mizuiro offered, not bothering to turn and look again.

The orange-haired student frowned at that.

Rukia waited until Keigo looked away before smirking and giving Ichigo a smile that was one part devious and two parts sprightly. Her eyes twinkled.

He gave her a grudging look back but squeezed her hand in response.

"I'm gonna miss you, Ganju-itoko!" Yuzu said plaintively, her eyes going watery as she hugged him hard.

Ganju did his best to look stoic and lightly patted the back of her head as his expression faltered. "Oi, oi, don't cry, Yuzu-chan! Just think of all the episodes of Iron Chef we can watch when I come back! You can record them, right?"

She sniffed and nodded vigorously against the side of his head although she didn't ease up a millimeter.

Karin tried but failed to put on a look of disdain as she watched them. She turned to face Kūkaku with an exaggerated sigh and looked up at her, smiling weakly.

Kūkaku smiled and kneeled, giving her young cousin a firm one-armed hug.

The dark-haired twin embraced her tepidly at first but quickly tightened her grasp as she scrunched her face up. She wouldn't cry or be sappy about it; she'd only just met them barely over a week ago.

The head of the Shiba clan brushed at her hair soothingly and just held her, only slowly remembering to get her other arm around her waist.

"Orihime could probably fix your arm," Karin whispered after awhile. She didn't know much about how Inoue's powers worked or what their limits were but she'd seen her training at the Urahara Shop a few times and the princess had cheerily explained the gist of them.

Kūkaku glanced sideways toward her before closing her eyes and using her still-unfamiliar arm to hug a little tighter. Normally she'd have taken it as an insult but... well, that clearly wasn't how it'd been intended. "Maybe next time," she said quietly. There'd definitely be a next time in the not-too-distant future.

Isshin watched the whole thing with a warm smile and gave them time while keeping an eye on the clock. He waited until his daughters genuinely did have to leave before putting on a show of freaking out, clapping his hands above his head and proclaiming "Look at the time! At this rate you're going to be late! Then I'm going to have to go with you to explain why! Dear, what am I to do?!"

Karin and Yuzu took the hint and started pulling away from their cousins, each having already said goodbye to the other.

Kūkaku and Ganju both adopted controlled expressions before putting on smiles as they withdrew.

The twins gave the Shiba siblings parting smiles before getting their bags and running out the door,
calling back "Later!"

The brother and sister reciprocated before Kūkaku let her smile fall, pushing herself to her feet. She glanced at Ganju, who was trying his hardest to look serious, before turning her attention to her uncle, who actually looked the part. They maintained eye contact for awhile before she exhaled and said "Come on, Ganju, it's going to take all day to pull things out of storage and get ready anyway," turning and making for the door herself.

"Right, nee-chan!" he replied, following after her without a look back.

Isshin watched them depart before sighing and rubbing the back of his head. Hopefully it'd all work out, but it was in her hands.

"You wear ties?" Ikumi asked incredulously, looking up as Ichigo and Rukia entered. It wasn't like she knew the former well since she'd only seen him on two previous days, but he really didn't seem like the type to wear one and certainly hadn't before . . .

"School presentation," Ichigo stated with more than a little irritation. He'd been getting the same question all day and it was getting really old.

"He did a pretty good job," Rukia said forthrightly, not betraying a single thing.

He gave her the smallest glare for that although it wound up getting mixed with a smirk.

"... Well, you know what you've gotta do," Ikumi said, gesturing at the stack of work orders.

"Yeah, yeah, we're just dropping off our bags," Ichigo said, taking Rukia's and putting both on the shop's couch while she got their day's assignments.

It was nearing sundown and Renji was in Byakuya's office getting his signature on some paperwork before they adjourned for the day when there was a knock at the door. "Enter," Byakuya said. He was vaguely surprised when it was one of his clan's couriers who entered. "What is it?"

The courier bowed deeply and immediately stated "Sir, please forgive this interruption! Normally we would have waited for your return but your enthusiasm for your duties made it necessary to inform you that there is a guest waiting for you at the manor!"

Renji raised an eyebrow slightly at hearing his taichō's tendency toward being a workaholic described in such a fashion but otherwise knew better than to act like he was there.

Byakuya didn't seem to react much to the news and instead asked "And has this guest been waiting long?"

The courier didn't skip a beat even though it struck him as highly unusual the first question wasn't who the guest was. "No, sir, she had only just arrived before I was dispatched; she appears to have intended to meet with you after your duties for the day were concluded!"

The 6th Division taichō stood at that, mildly curious at the revelation that it was a woman. He was already essentially finished for the day and decided to let her identity and objective remain a small puzzle. "Such consideration must be met in kind. Renji, accompany me. We will finish this discussion as we go and on the manor premises if necessary."

Renji kept his expression controlled before nodding; he'd never been invited to the manor before so
why was the offer finally being extended seemingly as an afterthought? He gathered up the paperwork in question as Byakuya made his way toward the courier and followed after, discerning they'd be going at a leisurely pace.

"Send word that we are on our way and that this guest is to be afforded every convenience," Byakuya stated, dismissing the man. His staff wouldn't disturb him for some frivolous meeting and they clearly regarded this as worthy of his attention but he wasn't compelled to rush.

The man bowed in understanding and took off ahead of them.

Renji did his best not to openly gawk as they made their way onto the grounds of the Kuchiki family manor; it was ridiculously expansive and the thought that Rukia had dealt with it for most of the last fifty years until she'd gotten an apartment as a fukutaichō took him awhile to process. It surely hadn't helped with the sense of alienation and isolation. The contrast between it and Inuzuri in terms of space and cleanliness couldn't have been starker and even compared to the rest of the Seireitei it was lavish. The only limiting factor was that the overall aesthetic and style were still very much the same.

Byakuya noticed his reaction but chose not to comment on it; in a way it was a kind of compliment by itself. He'd decided to bring Renji along as a sort of thank you for his efforts with regard to Rukia and Ichigo—not that he'd admit that he'd wanted him to behave as independently as he had—and it was a small thing. They were being led by a servant to one of the many rooms the estate held for entertaining guests and Byakuya noted that the woman's reiatsu seemed very subdued and not at all familiar. Who was she?

When they finally arrived the servant who attended them stood to one side of the doors. She together with another woman who was already present opened both to permit them entry.

Byakuya walked in, immediately saying in a reserved but still officious way "My apologies for the delay—" only to stop as he saw who it was.

Sitting seiza-style on a tatami mat with studied patience was Kūkaku. She wore a jade-colored furisode kimono that was covered in a variety of patterns—mostly cranes, flowers, and clouds—in turquoise, emerald, blue, gold, and white, with her obi utilizing the latter for contrast. Over it she wore what had been her mother's uwagi, resplendent in gold and subtle workings of color that evoked fireworks—intensely formal dress had seemed de rigueur for such negotiations and it symbolized her status as head of the Shiba clan. She'd put rather more effort into bringing her wild mane of hair into a semblance of order than she had even in the Living World and it was mostly pulled back—other than several strands allowed to frame her face as they normally did—and secured with golden ōgi and kushi style kanzashi ornaments holding it in place. She wore makeup, though it was subdued except for a thin but strikingly dramatic application of eyeliner and dark green eye shadow flecked with gold. Her eyes were closed.

Renji openly stared. He'd never seen her before but she looked like a princess of some sort. He didn't fail to notice her figure either, even in such formal attire—she looked to be around Matsumoto's proportions. He forced himself to glance at Byakuya to keep from looking like a complete idiot. Was this kind of thing normal? Based on the faint scowl on his taichō's face he imagined the answer was no.

"Shiba Kūkaku," he stated after a few moments. It'd been quite a long time since they'd met and for her to be attired so formally . . . "Head of the Shiba clan."

The familial name was familiar enough to Renji and he wound up staring again. Was she the sister of Rukia's former fukutaichō? So she was . . . Ichigo's cousin? That was preposterous; she looked way
"Yo, long time no see, Byakuya," she replied with an ease that was completely at odds with her appearance. With that she opened her eyes, fixing him with a stare that was bright and cool as she let her restraint on her reiatsu ease and a smirk took hold of her lips. "Nice place."

Renji immediately reconsidered his assessment and found he could suddenly believe it.

Byakuya looked back just as coldly and the two stared each other down for a long while before their gazes shifted to Renji. Both said "Leave," simultaneously only for he to add "But do not wander too far."

Without a word of protest Renji turned and walked out, shutting the door behind him before the servants could bother with it. It wasn't that he had no interest in what was going on, given it obviously concerned Ichigo and Rukia, but he knew an irresistible force and an immovable object when he saw them. He let one of the servants lead him off elsewhere to wait.

"Even supposing that I agree with any of the things you've said, you have yet to explain what exactly my clan will be getting from this deal in exchange," Byakuya stated. She hadn't wasted his time with the usual maneuvering, feints, and subtleties of nobles and had instead been direct and to the point as to how she'd come to be there, what she wanted, and why. It was rather refreshing. He could see her point and felt it was compelling—it was clear she had the best interests of Ichigo and particularly Rukia at heart—but although that swayed him as a brother he couldn't sell it as a leader.

"The interests of the Shiba will necessarily be aligned with the interests of the Kuchiki," Kūkaku said like it was obvious. If the Shiba were again restored to prominence then two out of five great noble houses was a better ratio than one out of four; together they could achieve more while still possessing deniability than the Kuchiki could alone.

Some unknown length of silence passed between them after that before the head of the Kuchiki clan asked with vague amusement "Are you familiar with the human concept of 'dating'?

The Shiba clan leader frowned. Her brief tour of the Living World had shown her a lot but it wasn't like she was an expert. Wasn't that what Ichigo and Rukia were supposedly doing? But Rukia had said he wouldn't be interested in her . . . had she been wrong?

"Do not take it as an insult, but you hold no appeal to me," Byakuya said point blank, making eye contact with her. Both his tone and countenance made it plain there was no restraint beneath the statement.

Kūkaku's faint grimace took on a different aspect. She knew that he was still in mourning over Hisana and the declaration was no disappointment to her, but to be so curtly dismissed was galling no matter how it was prefaced or the reasons behind it. She still had her pride and it felt like he was looking down on her when they'd spoken for all of half an hour in the last century. What the hell did he know?

He immediately continued "However, it could be to the benefit of this enterprise for me to give the appearance of being interested in you. Rukia's proposal to appoint an heir would indeed relieve any strains this arrangement might place on me. However that alone would not counterbalance her departure, nor would vague promises of loyalty. If it seemed as though there was even the possibility of the Shiba and Kuchiki bloodlines potentially mingling though . . ."

She crossed her arm over her chest and glanced aside for a moment. A ruse was infinitely more
palatable to her than anything of actual substance, but still..."And what would be expected of me?" she asked, looking back to him dourly.

"Your occasional presence here with some proximity to me; my retainers know to be discrete and that would be sufficient to appear as consorting to outsiders. There may be the occasional social event which you would be expected to attend anyway as the head of Shiba. The illusion need only be maintained until such time as Ichigo and Rukia are married and the matter falls from notice, then we can conveniently fail to have seen eye to eye," Byakuya explained.

He assumed that no matter their official status, Ichigo would propose in his own time and leave the matter of the timing to his sister. From what he knew she would likely want to wait until Ichigo's mandatory education was finished, which was around a year and a half away. On the outside that meant they had to keep up the pretense for a maximum of two to three years, which wasn't much in the grand scheme of things. Even when their 'consorting' 'failed' he would still be seen as having put forth an effort, and by then the dust would have settled which would be sufficient given Rukia was widely undervalued in terms of potential; people would by then be viewing strong ties with the Shiba as the real gain for the Kuchiki, as she'd said.

"Fine," Kūkaku said. Hanging out at the Kuchiki family manor and doing what she pleased during her time there was hardly an exacting demand and having to act for the token party wasn't a terrible burden either. It was a free lunch; many, many free lunches, actually.

"There is a final matter," he said.

"What?"

"Rukia has never been blamed for the death of Shiba Kaien in any official capacity, however, I believe it's time that matter be permanently closed with a joint statement... one absolving both parties of blame and declaring it an unfortunate accident relating to the machinations of Aizen Sōsuke," Byakuya stated.

Kūkaku's expression hardened marginally but she didn't flinch or look away. There was nothing untrue about that and she'd been endeavoring to put the past behind her for the sake of the future, but... she exhaled as she remembered Rukia seeming so carefree at their family dinners and how happy that'd made Karin and Yuzu look. From there her thoughts turned to the Shinigami's apology after the invasion of Soul Society. She knew Byakuya had never liked Kaien, but maybe that would be for the best... not just for Rukia but for all of them. "Fine," she repeated.

"I will have my people begin drawing up the paperwork for you to look over," Byakuya stated, keeping any criticism out of his voice about the fact she didn't—yet—have people of her own to do the same. It would probably take two to three weeks to finalize the agreements before an announcement would be made.

They sat immobile before Kūkaku stretched in a very languid fashion as if relieved of a great tension.

"How about some tea?"

Byakuya gave the smallest of disapproving looks at her obvious lack of interest in maintaining the image of her position before uttering a command which immediately drew the attention of the servant outside.

"Maybe bring that other guy back too," she suggested. They'd been rather rude in sending him away and anybody with their eyebrows tattooed on like that had to be at least a little interesting.

After a pause Byakuya also commanded Renji's retrieval in deference to his supposed peer and
Renji glanced between the Shiba leader and his taichō with barely concealed unease. They'd been drinking tea in deathly silence for several minutes. "So, uh, you've met Ichigo, rig—" he eventually said, trying to break the ice.

"Who do you think got him and the others inside the Seireitei that one time?" she replied.

"That was you?" he asked.

"The Shiba clan's specialization is fireworks," Byakuya duly stated.

Renji let out a short laugh. "Did you strap them all out to a rocket or something?"

"No, I shot them all out of a cannon," she said with a self-satisfied smirk.

He laughed again before discerning she wasn't joking. That combined with her expression gave him pause. From her attitude it was becoming quite clear she wasn't used to taking her status as seriously as her dress at that moment indicated. It kind of reminded him of Yoruichi.

"What's your name, 6th Division fukutaichō?" she asked, suddenly studying him as if for the first time.

"Abarai Renji," he said, meeting her look.

"And you know Ichigo and Rukia?" she continued.

"All too well," he stated with a small smile.

She scrutinized him a bit more at that before giving a sardonic smile back. "Maybe I'll see you around then." After a beat she looked to Byakuya before adding "I think I've taken enough of your time."

"It was no imposition," Byakuya replied, standing. Renji also stood and Kūkaku followed suit before Byakuya led the two of them out of the room and back out to the courtyard, taking a slightly longer route so his servants had enough time to fetch hers.

By the time they arrived in the open Koganehiko and Shiroganehiko were waiting beside a large and relatively ornate palanquin. Kūkaku felt her lips quirk at the ridiculousness of once more being borne about but gave Byakuya a slight, respectful bow to keep up appearances, received similar in turn, and then sauntered down to it, situating herself. "Let's go," she commanded.

"Yes, Kūkaku-sama!" both her retainers replied. They smoothly and easily hoisted the carrying poles up onto their shoulders and bore her off with due speed and efficiency.

Byakuya and Renji watched until she was beyond the gates and out of sight. "I guess it runs in the family," the latter mused.

"What remains to be done with your paperwork?" the former asked, never really in the mood for small talk.

Ichigo was brushing his teeth when Rukia moved up beside him and started getting her own toothbrush ready. She was wearing one of his t-shirts and a pair of his boxers. "What do you think you've got on?" he asked around his own toothbrush
"What does it look like, fool?" she stated, glancing to him with half-lidded eyes as she squeezed out some toothpaste.

"Like you looted some of my clothes," he shot back, continuing to brush in between barbs.

"It's not like you were using them," she declared, waving her toothbrush at him authoritatively.

"That's not the point," he stated.

"Well you're welcome to wear some of my clothes if you think it's unfair," she said primly, giving him an impish smirk before starting to brush her teeth.

He scowled at her and finished before using some mouthwash, considering her as she continued on and then did the same. The clothes fit her rather loosely and the shirt was oversized on her, going more than halfway down the boxers. He knew the pair she had on had drawstrings but he was pretty sure it was mostly her hips that were keeping them up. "Ask next time."

"So you can say no?" Rukia shot back after washing out her mouth.

"So I can give you some that fit better," Ichigo said dryly.

"You're just trying to get me out of them," she said suggestively while giving him a dubious look.

"I don't really need to try, you'll probably lose the bottoms during the night if we move at all," he stated, locking eyes with her.

"Since when have we ever shifted?" she demanded with an air of snide factuality. They never moved when they slept beside each other. With that she placed her hands on her hips and closed her eyes, declaring "The only way these are coming off me is if you pull them off, Ichigo."

He tapped the tip of her nose with an index finger. "Don't tempt me."

"You wouldn't dare," she challenged, opening her eyes and staring him down.

Ichigo stared back for a moment before reaching a hand forward and taking hold of one of the legs, tugging with only modest force. Sure enough the boxers were suddenly on the floor about her ankles.

Rukia flushed a little although the shirt continued to more than fully cover her, going down almost to her mid-thighs. They'd been comfy and she hadn't put on any underwear beneath them.

"Told you," he stated. With that he put a foot between both hers to hold them down and got his arms around her, pulling her feet out of them by picking her up. He kept his hands on the outside of the shirt and carried her back to the bedroom, turning off the lights as he went.

"H—Hey!" she objected. She had to try not to smile as she liked that he was increasingly physically confident with her, even as the same made her blush more.

Given her earlier taunt he almost teased that if she missed them so much she could share the ones he had on but that was a little too far for play. He settled for "You started the day by being kidnapped so ending it the same way is kind of poetic, isn't it?"

"I'm not into rhyming poetry," Rukia stated icily.

"It doesn't rhyme, I'm not groping you," Ichigo said in a pedantic way as he got into bed with her.
She was quiet at that though he felt her cheeks get hotter.

He got them onto their sides and pulled the covers up as she snuggled against him, before yawning and turned his head so his face was against her hair. "Looking forward to tomorrow?" he whispered, redirecting their conversation.

"Don't tease me," she said stiffly, as if he hadn't been already. She got giddy whenever she thought about getting to see a bunny and it'd make it hard to fall asleep. She'd realized after the fact there'd probably been some at the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo but they hadn't explored it very thoroughly before moving on; the next day would be the first time she'd ever gotten to see one in person.

"I'm not," he replied.

Rukia wasn't sure about that even though his tone was clean. She pushed a little closer. "Thought about where you want to go on Friday?"

"It's all already arranged," Ichigo said. He'd scheduled things and made reservations by phone during moments away from her.

"Are you going to tell me about it?" she continued, injecting some annoyance into her tone. He hadn't told her anything other than what he'd offered on Sunday and after the karaoke night she had no doubts at all that he could be crafty if he wanted to be.

"Nope," he stated, kissing the top of her head. It was going to be a surprise treat for her.

She pinched one of his sides. "Have to deal with any inquiring minds during PE?" she taunted.

"No, everybody knows or can guess," he stated.

She thought she heard a note of pride in his voice. As she thought about it the questions she'd been asked the week prior had been more genuinely curious than anything and she didn't know what to make of that. She put it out of mind and closed her eyes, finding it was easier to fall asleep than she thought—it always was when she was next to him.

Chapter End Notes

Kūkaku's formal wear is heavily based upon Yoruichi's from Chapter 159/Episode 57. What she's wearing seems to be the uwagi (or uchiginu, or both) of a jūnihitoe over a kimono, rather than just a full jūnihitoe. Amusingly it seems Yoruichi could've been borne on a palanquin in the manga, but in the anime she's clearly just walking on her own even though Suì-Fēng's father addresses her as "The one on the palanquin."
Beauty's Not Just A Mask

Wednesday, October 2, 2002

The highlight of the day was fated to be Rukia's encounter with her first rabbit, Tycho. They'd been given a key to his owner's house by Ikumi and told further instructions on how to care for him would be found inside.

Ichigo looked around after they entered. The place seemed nice enough and he soon located the directions that'd been left for them.

Meanwhile Rukia immediately set out to investigate and locate the bunny. She didn't have to go far, finding him in a rather large enclosed play area in the living room.

He was a relatively small Holland Lop rabbit with a shaded tan and white pelt and was poking his head out of his hutch, watching her.

Her eyes went wide and she stared before a smile took hold of her mouth. She tried to think like a bunny and knelt down before doing a leopard crawl over to the enclosure, moving slowly and obviously; she didn't want to appear as though she was sneaking and maintained eye contact with him the whole time.

The rabbit was curious and walked out of the hutch, tilting his ears toward her and observing her before gradually hopping over.

Ichigo walked into the room saying "Oi, Rukia," after finishing reading the instructions. He found her on the other side of the enclosure, happily petting and cooing at the bunny. He stopped and blinked, watching. He didn't know much about rabbits except that they were prey animals, so for one to be situated like that . . . well, she was capable of being extremely gentle when she wanted to. The bunny could probably tell.

She looked up at him with a smile and brought a finger to her lips.

He rolled his eyes and quietly went about assessing the food and water status, giving the pair a wide berth to avoid startling the rabbit—not that it seemed to pay him any attention. He had the feeling he was going to be stuck doing all the real work while she played with the bunny but as he stole glances at her expression he decided that was fine.

"Why would someone name a rabbit 'Drum' anyway?" Rukia mused as they were walking to their next job. "Maybe because it thumps its feet?"

Ichigo glanced at her sideways with some incredulity. "His name was 'Tycho' not 'Taiko'."

"I don't hear any difference," she stated, looking back to him with an annoyed expression.

"It's probably a joke about the scientist or something," he said dismissively. He only vaguely remembered the man's name. She gave him a confused look and he waved it off, not willing to start a round of needling when she'd been so happy. "So was it what you'd hoped for?"
She immediately broke into a smile again and looked ahead. "Yeah."

He studied her for a second and couldn't stop from smiling either, so he turned his head and pretended to watch the sunset.

---

**Thursday, October 3, 2002**

"You've got to be kidding," Ichigo muttered.

"Nope. Here," Ikumi said with disinterest, tossing two pairs of elbow-length rubber gloves to him and Rukia. She didn't come up with the jobs, she just accepted them or didn't.

Both caught them and shared a glance before Rukia exhaled. "Fine, but we're doing that last."

Ichigo just grimaced. He wasn't looking forward to sorting trash for an expat. Every municipality in Japan had its own unique rules for garbage collection; almost everywhere required it be sorted into burnable, non-burnable, and recyclable items. From there it could be broken down further and usually was with at least recyclables. Karakura's system was relatively relaxed and only required separating paper, plastic, PET plastic bottles, cans, polystyrene, newspapers, cartons, glass, and batteries. Hopefully the person hadn't really messed up and they wouldn't have to deal with food waste or anything like that.

"As long as it gets done," their boss replied with a smile.

"Let's go then," he said. Given their final assignment he decided it'd probably be wise to take their bags with them rather than having to come back; he retrieved them, returning Rukia's to her as they headed for the door.

---

They were barely back inside the house when Rukia immediately began to undress, quickly and efficiently stripping down to her underwear. She'd demanded they take a route back that would minimize their exposure to other people and wasn't about to walk through the house in her clothes after what they'd been through.

Ichigo caught her drift and did the same. He was in time to follow her as she marched toward the stairs.

"Shower on your own." She wasn't mad at him but didn't particularly want to be around him at that moment—he stunk, but she reeked.

"Don't be stupid," he chided, moving up alongside and then past her, taking one of her wrists in hand as he did so. He didn't particularly care that she smelled and he'd help her just the same. "It's even more important to clean thoroughly considering."

"Ichigo—" she protested, trying to pull her arm away but finding he held it securely. Her thoughts were on Inuzuri. She was used to being dirty—being covered in blood or sweat or grime—but she wasn't used to smelling like a trash bin; like a slum. The stench dredged up all kinds of memories of that place. What accompanied them wasn't shame but a bitter mixture of nostalgia and repulsion—nostalgia for the friends she'd made and lost and repulsion because she never really wanted to return there. She'd grown up there, and maybe she was from there, but she wasn't of there, and smelling like she was... she didn't want Ichigo to think of her in that way or to be around her when she was in such a state and why wouldn't he just let go—

"Being partners means not caring about something like whether you stink or not," he complained
loudly. "Now stop fighting me already."

She frowned at him and let out an irritated hmph but let him pull her along up the stairs with great reluctance. How could he really not care?

Chappy waited until their voices receded and Rukia's bedroom door closed before finally withdrawing the arm she'd clamped over Kon's eyes and releasing him from the headlock she had him in.

He jumped away, shouting "Get off me!"

She just glared at him in response before decisively looking back to the TV. She didn't know Rukia's history or anything like that, but she knew from her body language and tone when she was agitated and the moment had definitely qualified—she wasn't about to let Kon add his craziness onto that by letting him see her walking around in her intimates.

Rukia opened her eyes marginally when the arm Ichigo had around her shoulders drew her slightly closer and his grasp tightened a little. She found him looking at her through the steam that was wafting up from the water's placid surface. "What?"

"What was that all about?"

She blinked at him before narrowing her eyes and turning her head away.

He slid his hand along her shoulder and up her neck to cup her cheek, ever so gently tilting her head back toward him so her eyes met his again.

She stared at him for a second and looked down, sighing slightly.

"To me you're never dirty," Ichigo said with certainty. It didn't matter what happened or what she got on her—that was just some passing detail. She herself would never be sullied by anything.

Rukia let her eyes find his again and studied him for awhile, noting the little smile he wore—he wasn't teasing her.

He brushed her cheek for a second before withdrawing his hand, bringing it around the other side of her and lightly bopping her forehead. "Just like you're never really naked," he added.

Her brows knitted together at that as her expression became suspicious. "I'm naked right now," she asserted with disbelief.

"Nope." He turned his head and crossed his arms. "You're nude, there's a difference." As far as he was concerned she was always cloaked in dignity and nobility, though he wasn't going to say it.

"We don't have any clothes on, that's what being naked means," she continued, peering at him with even greater skepticism.

"Whatever." His smile broadened.

"Tell me what you meant," Rukia demanded. When he said nothing in reply she splashed him with the bath water.

"Hey!" he replied, before splashing her back.

She glowered a bit and started a war that eventually escalated into a playful but still quite serious
tickling match.

After a time Rukia found herself restrained on Ichigo's lap; when she realized how they were positioned she flushed, starting to struggle again for a different reason. "H—Hey, let go—"

He continued to hold onto her securely and brought his forehead down to rest on her hair, shushing her.

She became still as she determined his mood and soon leaned forward against him.

Once she was calm he stopped grappling her and instead only loosely held her to him. They could relax where they were a little longer before bed.

Friday, October 4, 2002

After they'd gotten home from work and showered Ichigo was unceremoniously ushered out of the bathroom in a towel by Rukia. "Hey, come on!" he said, resisting her efforts to push him out of the bedroom.

"Since you've decided to make this a surprise I've got a surprise for you too, so get out," she commanded, although there was no ire in the demand.

He made his final stand at the door to her room, grasping at the frame as she continued to push him. He glared at her for a second before saying "Fine, but try and pick shoes that are sorta comfortable," and letting go, heading to his room and shutting the door behind him.

She raised an eyebrow before closing her own door and getting dressed.

Sometime later Rukia waited for him in the lounging area, wearing the dress Ishida had sewn for her. She had on a silver and diamond necklace that laid over the cutout above her bust, complimentary clip-on earrings, and several looped bangles of silver around her right arm to offset the one from Tokyo on her left. She'd also slipped a new reiatsu limiter around her right ankle where her heels would obscure it and was carrying those in one hand along with a small black purse. She turned her head as his door opened and her eyes widened as she saw him.

Ichigo was wearing a classic single-button black tuxedo with peaked lapels, a white turndown-collar dress shirt, black evening waistcoat, a silk bow tie that he'd apparently tied himself given the subtle imperfections, and onyx cufflinks and shirt-studs. He carried a pair of patent-leather, plain-toed, closed-laced Oxford shoes and his one concession to individuality was his black metal watch, its harsh edges poking out just beyond the rest of the elegant ensemble on his left wrist. He immediately stopped when he saw her and stared, taking in the sight of her.

They surveyed each other for awhile with slowly growing smiles. "Byakuya didn't give you that dress." he said after awhile. Given how conservative everything new in his closet was he couldn't imagine something like that being in hers.

"No, he didn't." She shifted to show it off. It was tighter than a shihakushō and the thong was a little different than the fundoshi that came with one, but it felt more natural to her than a lot of modern clothing did even if it wasn't as comfortable. "Ishida made it."

He blinked before smirking. "Is that so?" He never would have guessed.

"Mmhmm." She beckoned him over with a finger.
Ichigo obliged and moved up so they were at a conversational distance, continuing to look her over despite the sudden drop in range.

Rukia reached a hand up to trace over the silk of one of his lapels before making eye contact with him. "So what's next?"

His eyes lingered on hers for a second before he checked his watch. "Pretty soon there should be a cab here to pick us up." He'd decided they could make it just an evening-long trip if they used taxis; the fare was really pricey but it was a lot more direct than trying to use the trains, and given how they were dressed he didn't want them to have to walk after how their last dancing experience had ended.

"I suppose we better head downstairs then." She smiled at him and took one of his hands.

"Guess so." He smiled back and led the way.

They idled for a bit—drawing the attention of the stuffed animals who were astonished at their appearances—before it became apparent their cab was there and they departed.

Kon shook his head to clear it. Rukia was always pretty but that dress was something else. He turned to say something to Chappy only to find her absent. After a few moments looking around for her he shrugged and headed back to the couch. "Keh, artificial souls are weird."

It was sometime later when he heard the crinkling of plastic on the backrest and turned to look just in time for a bag to land on him. He freaked out for a moment before pulling it away, looking from it to Chappy with confusion. She was holding a pair of scissors, having cut another one up and bound it around her legs with twist ties to form a pair of makeshift booties.

She tossed the scissors and another pair of twist ties down in front of him. "We're leaving, pyon," she declared.

"Why?" He raised an eyebrow.

"You know why, pyon." It was pretty obvious what was going to happen when Ichigo and Rukia returned and the alternative was that they disassemble themselves; of the two she knew which she preferred.

He looked away at that and crossed his arms, scowling. Several long seconds passed. "Where?"

She crossed her arms in turn and stared him down expectantly. The only places they could go she knew the locations of were the Kurosaki household and Urahara Shop; given the distances it wasn't like there was much choice.

Kon sighed and set about fashioning himself a similar pair of ersatz boots but made a show of acting grumpy about the whole thing, complaining the entire time.

Chappy went to write a brief note while he was busy.

Ichigo and Rukia sat opposite one another at a candlelit, window-side table in the Bar & Lounge Majestic, part of the Fish Bank Tokyo restaurant on the 41st floor of one of Shiodome's skyscrapers. She'd started smiling the moment she'd seen Tokyo Tower on their way to their reserved table and hadn't stopped since—it was lit differently than when they'd been there last, bathed in a warm yellow-orange instead of a stark white. They were sipping at wine glasses as they waited for their meals, just enjoying looking at one another and the city.
"I wasn't able to find anywhere like this that also had a dance floor," he eventually offered.

"What a shame." Her lips took on a slight smirk.

"Turns out ballroom dancing is pretty popular though, as are tango milongas; there's a lot of places offering classes," he continued on, lifting an eyebrow a little as he studied her eyes.

"It almost sounds like you're interested," she teased.

"I'm just saying," he asserted, looking out at the cityscape.

"Mmm, but we have such a busy schedule . . ." She followed his gaze.

He glanced to her with a small smirk. "It's possible to have casual hobbies you know."

"Is it?"

He rolled his eyes and flagged down one of the waiters to get them another pair of wine glasses. They'd arrived in time for the two-hour all-you-could-drink plan and he intended to take advantage of it to loosen their inhibitions, though he wasn't going to drink anything stronger until after eating.

---

When they finished their dinner and had their fill of mixed drinks they headed out again for the nightclub Feria in Roppongi. It was just 200 meters or so from the Grand Hyatt Tokyo and both found themselves more than a little nostalgic at seeing the area again. The place itself was four stories tall and included a basement. The first floor was fairly sedate and was mostly a restaurant. They discovered the basement was pretty happening and had an EDM focus but was a bit too raucous, so they went to explore the second floor. "What kind of music is this?" Rukia asked as they got off the elevator.

"Sounds like R&B," Ichigo replied, pleasantly surprised to find they could hold a conversation.

She looked at him with slight disdain at the unhelpful acronym.

"'Contemporary rhythm and blues'," he articulated in response.

She gave him a look that asked whether that was so difficult before pulling him away from the elevator so they could find a place to listen and watch the dance floor for awhile before trying it themselves.

---

Fifteen minutes later they were on the third floor, having decided that although the music was interesting dancing to it wasn't quite their thing. Their new environment was more relaxed and played a rather eclectic mix that seemingly varied at random; there were only a few other couples on the dance floor. "Perfect time to get in some practice," Rukia offered, looking at him with a wry smile.

Ichigo regarded her a little suspiciously before exhaling and taking her hand. "Come on then, teach me a few things."

---

Given the lack of unifying aesthetic to the music being played she decided to keep it fun, taking stylistic cues from the other people dancing and just trying to get him to open up and move with her.

Her carefree attitude was impossible to ignore and infectious, and with his focus entirely upon her he forgot about everything and everyone around them, just trying to complement what she did as best he
Well over an hour and a half later they were practically leaning against one another, moving slowly to a rather subdued song, when she said "Let's get some air." There'd been signs saying the fourth floor had a terrace.

He reluctantly slid his hand off her waist and let her lead him back to the elevators.

They turned in their drink tickets for another pair of cocktails to top up before making their way out under the sky. The terrace faced northeast but it was easy to see the Mori Tower looming over the roof of the fourth floor, although the Grand Hyatt was obscured from view on the other side of it. "Do you miss it?" he asked after noticing they were both looking that way.

"A little." Their eyes met and hers seemed to twinkle as she added "But I never left the most important part of it."

"I had no idea you were such a romantic," he said dryly, sipping at his drink but not looking away.

"You're one to talk," she playfully sniped.

"Want to see something different?"

"Mmm, I suppose." She smiled.

"Up for a short walk?" He'd call for a cab if necessary but their next stop was only about 300 meters away, opposite a parking lot from the Hard Rock Café Tokyo.

She nodded, extending a hand to him.

They were shortly at Salsa Caribe so he could show her the eponymous salsa dancing. Although they got some slightly interesting looks for their attire they weren't too out of place compared to some of the other patrons. They'd apparently missed the lessons but the free dancing session had opened up and they got to watch some of Tokyo's most skilled try the style.

Ichigo ordered water and juice as they watched since both were still rather nicely buzzed from their dinner and the club. He then joined Rukia in really studying the dancing. He didn't have the eye for it that she did but if he thought about it like a combat technique he could start to wrap his head around it.

It was around a quarter of an hour later when she found his hand and looked to him before smiling. "Want to try it?" He already knew the answer.

She just nodded.

He smiled back and stood with her, letting her lead them to the dance floor and the dance itself. He still felt rather loose but appreciated the structure of the style, twirling and shifting with her and reading her cues as best he could.

She did her best to focus on the beat and moving with him, not really directing so much as guiding. After a short time it became natural and automatic, the two simply moving together. They left the dance floor a little under a half hour later to something more than polite applause for first-timers, waving in response as they made their way back to their table. After spending a little longer
watching, chatting, and hydrating, Ichigo ventured outside to call a taxi to get them home.

They found the note soon after returning as it was in the middle of the path that led to the stairwell. Ichigo picked it up and scrutinized it, discerning from the drawings that Chappy had written it, though there was an admonishment from Kon that cut off mid-sentence. He glanced to Rukia, finding she was looking up at him expectantly.

"So what does it say?"

"Apparently they went to my family's place." He handed it to her.

She looked it over before an impish smile crossed her face. "I suppose it's just as well." She set it on the breakfast bar before finding one of his hands. "They'll be fine," she entreated candidly.

He took the hint and went along with her upstairs, turning off lights as he went. When they were in her room he grasped her biceps and pulled her close, lowering his head and kissing her.

She leaned into it and brought her hands up to brace against his chest. After a short time she slid them up further to his collar and started undoing his bow tie.

He let her and continued on until she'd untied it before reaching up to grasp her wrists, at the same time sliding the tie out from under his collar. He smoothly brought them back down to her sides and then around to her back, slipping the tie between them before coiling it around and binding her securely but not tightly. He didn't want the silk to dig into her.

She let out a noise of surprise at her sudden predicament and fidgeted a little, testing the knot he'd made before breaking the kiss and looking up at him with slightly widened eyes. "What—"

He gingerly cupped her cheeks, very deliberately making eye contact to reassure her.

Her eyes searched his for several seconds before she drew her lids down again and her cheeks heated his hands. The look he was giving her . . . she'd been unprepared for the action but her trust in him was absolute.

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips to hers again, returning his hands to her upper arms.

Rukia indulged in the kiss for awhile longer before turning her head so she was cheek to cheek with him. A memory replayed in her mind and after giving it a twist she gave it a voice, quietly demanding "Tying my hands in such a way . . . what dost thou intend of me?"

Ichigo smirked; she hadn't talked in such a weird, old-fashioned way since their first day of school together. Something popped into his head then and he too voiced it, whispering to her "Oh, when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd!/ She was a vixen when she went to school./ And though she be but little, she is fierce./" If ever the Bard had written a passage for her then that was it and it conveyed why he'd done what he had.

She mildly frowned as she puzzled out the exact meaning but immediately knew that he was teasing her even if he was also complimenting her. She tested the bow tie again; the silk was soft and smooth but also strong—it didn't give at all.

He slid his hands down her arms and brought them around her captive ones. "Tonight's about you." He was committed to what he'd decided the prior Sunday: he was going to help her learn how to please herself and discover as much as he could about doing the same in the process.
"Ichigo—" she started.

He cut her off with "I'll untie you if you'll enjoy yourself without worrying about me." He would anyway—he only wanted to make a point, like she had when she'd pinned his wrists while marking him earlier in the week or when he'd captured her the night before.

Rukia's cheeks turned a richer shade of red at that and she closed her eyes again. The only reasonable way of getting loose was to agree. She lightly pecked at him, acquiescing.

Ichigo brought his hands up to the back of her neck, finding and undoing the snaps that anchored the collar of her dress in place.

She pushed her cheek to his as he worked and pressed a little closer as the front of the dress fell forward against him.

He slid down the short concealed zipper below the small of her back and grasped the dress at hip-height, sending it to the floor in a heap. With that he walked her out of it and brought her such that the back of her legs were against her bed, kissing a trail from her lips down the front of her.

She shifted with growing embarrassment as he reached her lower abs and fully blushed as he bit the hem of her thong, pulling it down with his teeth as he used his hands to help her lean against the bed. She cooperated and braced herself with her hands, lifting her legs to help him get it past her knees and ankles.

After dropping her underwear he pushed her back a little on the bed and made a show of undressing for her, though he didn't drag it out.

Rukia was unable to look away no matter how hard she tried to conceal her interest.

Soon Ichigo was on the bed and untied her, though he kept a bit of distance between them.

She brought her freed hands up to run along his chest and tried kissing him only to let out a small gasp as he pulled his head back and started to move her farther onto the bed. "Ichigo . . . I'm not clean—" she whispered in protest. They hadn't showered and . . .

He shushed her. It'd barely been six hours since they'd bathed and he'd already told her that he didn't care about that kind of thing. At the moment she was merely herself and her hair and skin and everything else were just hers, which was more alluring than any amount of soap or perfume would ever be. She didn't stop him and once he got her into a comfortable position he kissed her again while finding her hands, taking his time and endeavoring to put her at ease. It was when she eventually slid her legs around his waist that he resisted her efforts to pull him down and cupped her jaw in both hands, looking at her seriously.

"What?" She locked eyes with him, voice low and husky with a hint of disappointment.

"I told you that tonight's about you," he whispered.

"What does that—" she started with a bit more agitation.

"It's a lot more intense for you, and you don't have to wait between each time," Ichigo explained quietly.

Rukia blinked before flushing. She knew that, but . . .

"You should know how to do things yourself . . . and when you do you can guide me and tell me
what you like most," he continued.

Her blush deepened at that and the focus and verve in his eyes. She'd said it was okay for them to say what they wanted, but to show him and teach him about her like it was training when she didn't even know herself, to let him explore and pleasure her without doing the same to him in kind . . . "I—I—Ichigo—"

"I . . . want to know everything about you." He stroked at her before withdrawing one of his hands to a shoulder of hers and squeezing it reassuringly, getting cheek to cheek with her again and nibbling at her ear as nuzzled her.

She gradually started to reciprocate, getting both arms around him and sliding a hand up into his hair to grasp there.

"I'll take it slow and I'll know if you really don't like something, remember?" He knew how to read her and if it was too much all at once he'd back off for a time rather than scare her.

Rukia pressed her cheek to his in response as she continued mentally preparing herself.

"If it starts to be too much, find my hair and give me a sign, okay? It's alright if you use your hands," Ichigo suggested. He knew she thought of his hair in the same way he thought of hers—as a source of comfort—and maybe having something to focus on would help.

She nodded a little, growing more confident.

He started to gently untangle her limbs from around him, playing at her mouth and around her jaw for a time before finding her hands and starting to kiss his way down her neck again.

She finally stopped trembling and her thoughts started to return to her yet again. He'd kept his hands with hers and alternately guided and been guided by her, showing her where to touch and letting her show him how best to do so. Eventually he'd begun to explore her with his hands and mouth as he had their first time, armed with the new knowledge. She'd only slowly eased into letting him make her climax several times in a row—he'd held her each time she'd been overpowered by it and she was near her limit again. She tugged at his hair to draw his attention away from her thighs. "I—Ichi . . . go . . ." she murmured between shallow breaths.

He was in her field of view in no time at all and immediately took her into his arms. "I'm here, I'm here."

She slowly got her other arm around him, followed by her legs—it was like her body barely responded to her. "I . . . I can't, not again, not without you."

"Rukia . . ." he whispered, pulling her closer.

She tightened her grasp on him, holding him to her. She wouldn't beg or plead or even say 'please', but he'd given her so much already and she felt so incredibly selfish because of it; she still wanted more but she had to give something back.

He kissed her cheek and shifted a little against her as he realized she was guiding him yet again.

Rukia was still clinging to him tightly when she whispered "Shower." She was covered in a sheen of sweat and didn't want to move but she couldn't fall asleep as she was.
Ichigo didn't object and carefully shifted his grip on her before turning and sitting up with her, scooting off the bed and carrying her to the bathroom.

She was slumped against him in the soaking tub as he massaged her shoulders. They'd been sitting together for some time and she'd finally calmed the tempest of feelings that had roared inside her. He'd doted upon her in the shower, constantly whispering assurances to her throughout, while she'd stayed silent the whole time, overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience. Finally she whispered "How do you know so much?" He'd known her every weak point before she had. He abruptly shut up at that and his hands stopped for a moment. Several seconds passed before he mumbled "Don't assume I don't know anything about this sort of thing."

She could tell from his voice that he'd tilted his head away and lifted her own to peer up at him. His gaze drifted back toward hers at the motion and she found him looking at her in wonder. It made her stare for a beat—anytime she'd had a moment of clarity and he hadn't been preoccupied he'd been looking at her like she was the most precious thing on the planet. She deliberately narrowed her eyes into a critical expression. "How?"

"Not important," he muttered, glancing away again. His cheeks turned red.

Rukia frowned mildly. She would've teased him before but . . . she wasn't going to taunt him about how good he'd made her feel, not when it was still all so new. "Don't be embarrassed if you've looked at dirty manga or something. What do you think Yoruichi-san was giving me to read?" she lectured. Something the woman had said was at the forefront of her mind then, regardless of what he'd seen: Don't worry so much, it was clear he only really had eyes for somebody else.

Ichigo looked back at her with more than a little shock only to find her regarding him seriously. They studied each other for a time, holding a conversation with their eyes. "Sex-ed starts late in elementary school," he said with annoyance, trying to deflect.

"You expect me to believe you learned all that in class?" She crossed her arms and regarded him with half-lidded eyes and a disbelieving smirk.

He furrowed his brow and turned his head, still blushing. He eventually quietly conceded "... One of the Visored is really into josei manga and kept leaving it around for me to find," just to get her to drop it. The way he'd really learned female anatomy, the nervous system, and about the lack of a female refractory period was from his dad's medical books. He'd learned about the g-spot and some other things through sundry means as any young man might.

She evaluated him for a moment longer before smirking a little more. "It wasn't Sarugaki, was it?"

He abruptly started laughing at the idea of Hiyori doing such a thing.

After a moment she joined in with him, eventually pressing closer again. "The sheets need to be washed, so let's sleep on your bed after we finish."

He kissed the top of her head and made ready to stand with her.

She was sitting on his bed with a towel around her torso and trying to keep from yawning as he rummaged in a dresser, only to be surprised as she was suddenly almost hit by a t-shirt and a pair of boxers being tossed to her.

"Try those." He continued on with finding another set for himself.
She regarded him dubiously for a second before standing and unfolding the boxers, sliding them on and trying to cinch the drawstrings. It was easier to get them snug around her waist than the previous pair and she tied the strings in a simple knot before turning away and discarding the towel, unfurling the shirt. "What's 'Iron Maiden'?" It was written on the front of the shirt in a rather angular font.

"It's a band." One shirt was as good as another but he thought it suited her as a label in a literal way.

Rukia glanced over a shoulder at him, knowing they hadn't come up in the music he'd shared with her, but finally just slid the shirt on, finding it was sufficiently large to feel more like a short nightgown. As she was testing moving in it she felt his arms slide around her waist from behind.

"Now don't these fit better?" Ichigo asked.

"I suppose." She pressed back against him.

He pulled her with him onto the bed and moved with her so they were face to face on the pillows.

She reached a hand up and stroked at one of his cheeks, unable to resist smiling at him.

He smiled back and got a hand into her hair again.

After a moment she closed her eyes and slid her hand around to the back of his head, bringing him forward as she leaned in herself. Once their foreheads were touching she let go of everything and promptly fell asleep, exhausted.

He soon joined her.

"What is it?"

"Kurosaki is active," the voice on the other end of the line said.

"Yeah?"

"There's a Shinigami with him."

Ginjō exhaled and adjusted his sunglasses, digging his toes into the sand beneath his feet. He was in the outdoor seating area of the Back on the Beach Café on Santa Monica Beach with a plate of steak and eggs in front of him and a glass of orange juice in hand. He glanced to Jackie, who seemed to be ignoring him entirely as she ate her own breakfast. "Just one?" he asked with condescension.

"She doesn't seem that strong," Yukio stated.

"So you're telling me I don't have to get new plane tickets," Ginjō continued.

Jackie's head moved to indicate he suddenly had her attention even if he couldn't see her eyes because of her own shades.

"I doubt that's necessary," the boy replied.

"Then we'll be back next week as planned. Isn't it past your bedtime anyway?"

"Very funny," Yukio said without humor. "We'll make sure the base in Naruki is ready." With that he hung up.
Traditional Japanese women's clothing doesn't have underwear beyond a *nagajuban* robe; given the *shihakushō* is supposed to be a functional military uniform I'm deciding the women's set comes with *fundoshi* like the men's.

I wasn't able to verify the opening dates of the Bar & Lounge Majestic/Fish Bank Tokyo, Feria, or Salsa Caribe (the last may have opened in 2005), but they seem to all go back several years; meanwhile Back on the Beach Café advertizes it's been around since 1989. I figure nobody cares much but thought I'd note it.

Ichigo quotes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Helena, Act III, Scene ii).
Friday, September 7, 2001

Chappy did her best to try and keep Rukia alert and focused as competing waves of *reiatsu* rolled over them from the battle that was raging above. She knew it was difficult to kill a Shinigami by any means short of decapitation but she didn't have any real medical training and had no idea how bad Rukia's wound was or whether anything she did would make it worse. Her face was wet although she had no idea why, there was a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach, and Rukia wasn't responding to her. "Rukia-sama, stay with me!"

Her superior's pupils dilated slightly before her eyes shifted over a fraction. "Ch—Chappy . . ." she wheezed.

"I'm here, don't move, *pyon,*" the artificial soul mewled, gently cradling Rukia's head. She'd seen her commander injured before but never so badly. It was hard to see—were her eyes leaking? Was that why her face was wet?

"It's . . . okay . . ."

"Please save your strength, *pyon,*" Chappy pleaded.

"Ichigo will . . ." Rukia trailed off as her eyes unfocused again and she lost consciousness.

The artificial soul stared at her before remembering to check her vitals. She rechecked them obsessively until another wave of *reiatsu* washed over her and she turned her attention skyward to the clash of Ichigo and Grimmjow.

Saturday, July 27, 2002

Chappy blinked as she abruptly found herself standing in an unfamiliar room. After a moment her eyes located Rukia, who was already looking down at a soul pager—it was a different model than the ones she was familiar with.

"It's the first day of deployment," the petite Shinigami stated absent-mindedly.

"What's the mission, *pyon?*" She wasn't immediately sure how long it'd been since the last time she'd been deployed, but it looked like they were already in the Living World. The last time they'd actually been on assignment Rukia had briefed her in advance on what to expect—to be briefed on site was unusual and suggested an emergency situation.

"Ichigo's gone missing; we're here to find him," Rukia stated. Her tone was striking in how plain and detached it was. "We were only dispatched around nine hours ago and there wasn't much time to prepare. It shouldn't take long—maybe five or six days—so there shouldn't be anything for you to do, but . . . I thought you should know what was going on."

Chappy blinked again before nodding. "What if something happens and I have no further orders, *pyon?*"
Rukia looked up from the soul pager for a moment. "Use your initiative to assist or complete the mission." There was no way of predicting what might cause that sort of thing in advance and she'd always endeavor to give Chappy basic instructions.

"Yes, Rukia-sama!"

The 13th Division fukutaichō watched her for a second before nodding and taking the gigai back.

**Saturday, October 5, 2002**

Chappy sat on the Kurosaki family's couch and watched the sunrise through the dining room window. She technically didn't have to sleep and often hadn't since she'd gained a body that didn't require it; doing so reminded her of being stored and although that was sometimes comforting being liberated from it was still new and she reveled in it as much as she could. She'd been top of the Soul Candy stack and just by the luck of that position had, over several years externally, become Rukia's personal Chappy. That wasn't to say the rest weren't, but she had the sense she'd had far and away the greatest deployment time and knew Rukia best of all of them.

Her apparent excusal from gigai duty had been confusing at first—her commander still took the Soul Candy dispenser but left her at home. She hadn't been issued new orders and although Rukia had previously explained their mission was to watch and protect Ichigo she seemed entirely preoccupied with that in her own way. Chappy had surmised that her intended role was to assist Rukia with that and keep Kon in check, which was why she'd been increasingly operating of her own volition. Plus . . .

"Don't you ever sleep?" Kon groused.

"Some of us have better things to do, pyon," she replied in a tetchy but distant way.

"Like brooding?" he pressed. Over the past few weeks he'd often caught her seemingly lost in contemplation or watching rather mundane events as if they were miraculous. It wasn't hard to figure out what was going on even if they didn't really talk much.

She turned her head slightly and regarded him with contempt before looking back toward the sunrise.

He exhaled in annoyance before standing and walking over to sit beside her. A long interval passed. "Nē-san saved me from being destroyed and Ichigo . . . well, he gave me a place to stay and at least tried to bring me back here after Soul Society found me."

Chappy blinked before glancing sideways to him. She knew about the standing directive to liquidate mod-souls and Rukia had spoken of him when talking about the Living World, but had never mentioned she'd been the one to spare him.

"I bet you're probably surprised that they treat you more like a person than anything! And not just them, but their friends and his family too! But that's just how they are, it's what they do." He explained like doing so was a burden.

She stared for a second before deliberately looking back toward the window. She'd always known Rukia treated her differently than most Shinigami treated artificial souls but . . . she crossed her arms over herself, suddenly beset by a feeling she couldn't identify.

Kon glanced sideways to her before looking away, just resting a paw on one of her shoulders.
Rukia opened her eyes a little as she became conscious, finding she was against Ichigo exactly the way she'd fallen asleep. She could feel tiny puffs of air against her chin every time he exhaled and closed her eyes again, just basking in his proximity. If she focused a little she could feel his reiatsu within the currents of her own—although hers was restricted and most of it flowed into one of Urahara's limiters the differential was enough for it to completely encapsulate his. It was reassuring to be able to easily sense his signature again, slight though it was, and as her attention fixated upon it she felt like the two of them were in their own little world together.

She drew her head back and watched him while lightly brushing his hair, her mind wandering as her feelings for him played out. In that moment they were like still waters rather than a cresting wave but ran no less deep for it. After some unknown time passed she made a decision about something and slowly pulled away, tucking him in so he wouldn't stir while she was absent for a moment.

Ichigo was gently roused by a hand brushing his face. He knew from the sensation alone that it was Rukia's long before he was really consciously aware of her reiatsu or heft or anything else, and only gradually woke. As he shifted and opened his eyes fractionally he became aware something was off. He tried moving his arms and found his wrists had been brought up between the bars of his bed's headboard and bound together around one of them. He looked up at her as he realized it was his bow tie from the night before.

She was sitting on his stomach with most of her weight on her legs and smiled down at him with just a touch of mischief, lit by incidental sunlight entering through the curtains. She shifted her balance to his belly to anchor him and cupped his jaw in both hands, lovingly stroking at his cheekbones with her thumbs.

He didn't know what to say and wound up staring at the look she was giving him; it was warm and just the slightest bit naughty.

After a time she leaned down while closing her eyes to kiss him, softly at first.

He was a bit slow to reciprocate, not sure what she intended but in neither the position nor the mood to resist her advances.

While he was distracted she lifted herself a little and slowly pulled his shirt up such that the hem of it rested on his chest. She then undid the knot she'd tied in the drawstrings of her boxers, sliding them off before pressing herself back down against his hard abs, her shirt bunched about her hips.

Ichigo's cheeks became hot at the feeling of her and he muttered something against her lips.

Rukia took the opportunity to kiss him deeply, using her hands to hold his head still. After gaining his cooperation she kept it up until she had to break for air, resting her forehead against his as they panted together. Once her breathing was regular again she quoted him back at himself: "I'll untie you if you'll enjoy yourself without worrying about me." Although she might not be able to give him as much bliss as he'd brought her that wouldn't stop her from trying, and she could still learn about him.

He murmured her name.

She whispered his name affectionately in turn before sitting upright, caressing him again before reaching forward and unbinding him. She took his hands into hers and brought them to the bottom of her shirt—she didn't want to risk getting it dirty after he'd gone to the effort of picking it out for her. "Guide me," she requested confidently.
They ate a late brunch sitting beside one another at a *chabudai* table in one of the traditional rooms, not having particularly felt like using the breakfast bar or the dining room table. She'd helped with preparation as best she could as it felt unfair to make him cook after everything. She'd taken her time becoming familiar with him just as he had with her until he'd tried to reciprocate—she'd then gently denied him, suggesting they clean and eat. She needed some more time to recharge before she was willing to commit herself to any amorous activities.

He covertly monitored the rate at which she ate and drank to keep pace and betrayed the fact only by refilling her water and tea for her when they ran low. He'd been a little disappointed that they'd concluded when they had but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out her adventurousness wasn't just a response to his own the night prior but meant to keep him satisfied until she was ready again.

Rukia noticed but didn't say anything about it and kept quiet, eating in comfortable silence.

Ichigo did the same. They finished at the same time and rather than bother with the dishes he waited until she finished with her drinks before lightly pulling her to him.

She went along with it freely, discerning through his touch that he wasn't making a pass at her, and was soon tugged away from the table to a beam of sunlight that was entering the room through a window they'd opened.

He sprawled out on the floor and drew her so she lay against him, just relaxing. It wasn't the most comfortable surface, but that was alright as it was pleasantly warm for the time of year and the light and breeze felt nice.

"Finally learned to ignore the dishes, hmm?" she taunted.

He didn't have it in him to spar with her right then and started lightly scratching the back of her neck to indicate she should shut up and enjoy it.

She shrugged her shoulders at the sensation before burying her face against his neck.

He kept it up and rubbed her back with the other. They stayed cozy together for almost an hour before she suggested they start on homework to get it out of the way. After a moment of ambivalent consideration he hummed an assent and let her get up before following suit, taking care of the dishes while she retrieved their bags and stole away to her room for a moment to get something.

Ichigo was yet again reading a play when Rukia finished the English essay she was working on and slid her notebook back into her bag, withdrawing a book of her own. Once she had it in hand she reached out with the other to touch one of his wrists. "Put that down."

Although he was confused by the request something about her tone told him to go along with it. He did as she asked, setting it on the nearby shelf.

She then scooted onto his lap, facing away from him and bracing her book against her chest to conceal it from sight. Once she was situated she brought his arms around her waist and tilted her head a little so he could easily look over one of her shoulders.

"What are you doing?" he asked with growing suspicion.

She pulled the book away from herself such that he could see the cover. "I thought we could read something together."

He blinked and blushed a bit as he saw the cover, immediately discerning from the art and title that it
was some of the erotic manga she'd mentioned Yoruichi having given her. "Rukia—"

She turned her head to regard him, giving him an alluring half-lidded look. Her cheeks were slightly flushed but she put on an amused expression. It was modestly embarrassing, but even though he was passionate in making love to her he handled her rather solemnly—it was clear that just like on a dance floor she'd need to get him to loosen up . . . and maybe if he was more playful it'd be less overwhelming for her too. There was a time for marathon sessions and deeply affirmative sex but it didn't always have to be physically and emotionally draining. She wanted them to be able to just have fun and enjoy themselves too—she wanted it to be another normal part of how they interacted, like touching and kissing had become. "It's not like it's the first time you've seen this kind of thing, Ichigo."

They watched each other for long moments before he tightened his arms around her waist to keep her from moving in any provocative ways and brought his head down so his cheek was pressed to hers.


By late afternoon they were curled up in the tub together. Ichigo was leaning back such that his chin was just above the water while Rukia was lying against him, her face to the side of his head. She had her arms around his neck; he was running one hand along her back underwater and was lightly grasping her rear with the other. They'd eventually gone upstairs and kept things limited without ever really discussing the matter, just becoming more familiar being together and experimenting a little with some of what they knew.

They'd been soaking for almost an hour when she lightly bit his earlobe to draw his attention. "We should get everything washing and visit your family." They had to retrieve the stuffed animals before they overstayed their welcome and their presence became too noticeable, plus she still didn't want to make him cook and it'd been a few days since they'd seen his sisters—going neatly solved all their problems.

"Want to go out for a run afterwards?" He had no objections but he also wanted to try and get back on a regular schedule since things were settling down.

"I guess," she murmured. At least if her legs cramped again they'd be home afterwards.

"You can finally try out that CD player I bought you."

"Who says I haven't used it already, fool?" she rebuked. She'd listened to some of their songs the night they'd learned of their first real mission together and he'd so easily committed himself to being a substitute Shinigami again, having been lonely. Admittedly she hadn't had much time to use it since then . . .

"Well, maybe I'll have to bribe you some other way," he mused.

"Oh?"

He absentmindedly pulled her a little closer as he thought about it. "Mmm."

Rukia shifted as his hand lightly squeezed her butt, coolly stating "I think you'll find that I'm above such crude incentives." She wasn't about to admit to being swayed by them at any rate.

"I've got no idea what you're talking about. I was going to offer to make you a CD with your favorite songs on it," Ichigo replied with annoyance.

She paused. "You can do that?" The nature of the rainbow-hued discs was quite beyond her.
"Yeah, it's no problem," he said with more than a little arrogance, amused at how surprised she seemed by the notion. His dad's work computer had a CD burner and the necessary software; he could do it after dinner if they brought the discs along in a travel case.

She brushed a hand along the back of his neck. "Then let's get dressed."

"I'll call while you figure out what songs you want, okay?"

She hummed an agreement, pulling away to stand.

Rukia had to punt Kon away as they entered the Kurosaki household as Chappy was in no position to restrain him, already hugging her other leg by the time Karin, Yuzu, and Isshin greeted her and Ichigo.

Ichigo was trying to figure out what was going on with the stuffed animals and replying to the greeting when he realized something was different about one of the living room walls: next to the giant idol-style portrait of his mom was an even larger landscape. As his eyes fixated on it he saw that it was one of the photos of him and Rukia printed at such a monstrous scale that they were practically life-size—it looked to be the same as one of the two on their own wall, particularly the one where they were looking at each other serenely. For a split second he was frozen by shock and nostalgia before he frowned heavily at it. "What... is that?"

"Come on, it's one of the photos of you two!" Isshin called from the dining table with genuine happiness and pride. He stopped playing with the film canister he had in hand and pitched it at Ichigo. "Think fast!"

The son caught it reflexively. "What the hell! Be more careful!"

"Now it's like you're both always here," the father stated with satisfaction, leaning back in his chair and tilting it onto its rear legs.

Karin rolled her eyes before casually using a foot to push the chair back, sending him crashing to the floor. It was a nice photo but making it that large and being so unabashed about it was weird.

"Dinner will be ready in just a minute!" Yuzu cheerily exclaimed, ignoring the calamity unfolding behind her.

Ichigo pocketed the film canister and turned to Rukia, who was ignoring everything to fuss with Chappy after having picked her up.

"What's wrong?" the petite Shinigami quietly repeated, trying to get the artificial soul to look at her.

Chappy silently refused to do so and stayed pressed to Rukia as best she could.

Ichigo glanced to Kon, who'd finally returned to their vicinity and was dusting himself off. "Did you say something to her?" The demand for an answer was obvious and only barely less so was the threat of some token punishment based on what it might be.

The lion immediately lifted a paw in counter-accusation. "Don't automatically try and pin the blame for something like that on me just because I'm here!"

While they bickered Rukia stroked Chappy reassuringly and warmly whispered "Thank you for being so considerate."
The rabbit just clung to her tighter.

"And done!" Yuzu called.

Not seeing much alternative, Rukia took Chappy with her to the dinner table, setting the plushy on her lap so she wouldn't be alone until she was ready to speak her mind.

After dinner Ichigo got his dad's permission to use the computer and went to make Rukia's mix CD, accompanied by Kon. He had the feeling that she'd need a moment with Chappy anyway.

"What are you doing?" the lion asked.

"Putting together a CD for Rukia. Why?"

Kon waved it off and clambered onto Isshin's desk, just watching Ichigo navigate through menus and start to work the drives.

"So what was all that about?" the teenager asked.

The mod-soul crossed his arms. "Who knows."

Ichigo frowned moderately at the lion's suddenly taciturn nature and looked over at him, trying to puzzle it out, only to find Kon refused to meet his gaze. After a few seconds he returned to the work at hand.

Rukia just brushed at Chappy as they sat together, giving her as much time as she needed. She ultimately didn't have to wait long.

"Rukia-sama?"

"Yes?"

"Are we . . . friends?" There was a strong hesitancy in the way Chappy said the word.

Rukia blinked at the question before a small smile formed on her lips. She gently ruffled the plushy's ears. "Of course we are."

Chappy looked up at her with surprise only for it to instantly turn to delight. She jumped up and hugged her as warmly as she could.

Rukia laughed a little and hugged back before standing with her. "Were you really so worried over that?" When Chappy said nothing in response she decided to bear her along. "Come on, let's see what the boys are up to."

Sometime later they were back home and just finishing changing into their exercise clothes. Ichigo waited until Rukia had her CD player in hand before holding out the new disc to her.

She looked it over again. The bottom was the usual mirrored rainbow while the top was white and simply had the characters for 'mix' written on it. She opened the CD player and put it in.

He checked her over as she did so. "Have I ever told you that outfit looks good on you?"

"What have I told you about flattery?" She regarded him with a look of critical appraisal as she
closed the lid of the player.

"And I've told you before that it's not flattery if it's true," he insisted, taking on an only mildly arrogant look.

She walked past him, playfully punching him in the arm as she went. "Let's go."

He lightly slapped her rear in response as she went by. "After you."

She looked back at him with a mask of disapproval that was betrayed by her smirk and the glimmer in her eyes. "How dare you?"

He pushed her out of the room. "Make up your mind already about whether you're impatient or not!"

Shirayuki sat with Zangetsu under a snow-covered pine tree beside the babbling stream that coursed through Rukia's inner world. He was lying against her with his head on her lap and his arms behind his head, while she absent-mindedly brushed at his hair. "It would seem that Ichigo's [reiatsu] is increasing steadily."

"Wonder why."

She messed with his hair a little at his crassness before continuing to brush at it. "Perhaps I will be able to visit you soon instead."

"I wouldn't count on it," he said with a note of irritation. His . . . roommate . . . was hardly the type to receive visitors, especially not other [zanpakutō] spirits. "I like it more here anyway." It was a nice change of scenery.

"Oh?" She moved a hand away at that and gathered up some snow.

"Mmm." He wasn't prepared for a small snowball being dropped on his face and after a moment brushed it away, opening his eyes to look at her.

She looked happy and gave a small giggle. "It is hard to tell anything is different about your face."

"That's not funny," he retorted, scooping up a handful of snow and playfully tossing it over her.

They were soon dumping snow on each other by turns and it naturally escalated from there until they got up and started a snowball fight.

Ichigo lightly massaged Rukia's neck as he soaped it. "Sore?"

"Hmph, you're just a fount of impudence tonight—as if such a trivial challenge would cause me issue."

He chose not to remind her of what'd happened the last time they'd gone for a run.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. From how he'd been looking at her and acting before they'd left she'd halfway expected him to get his hands under her outfit the moment they'd turned the bathroom fan on—instead he'd just seen to himself and been behaving rather normally. After a moment she turned to face him fully. "Are you alright?"

He smiled lazily. "Just tired. I think I'll turn in after we get the beds made. You really did a number on me this morning."
Rukia blushed a little at that and looked sideways. It was probably for the best but she was unwilling to let him get away with such sass. "Maybe I'll join you. I don't think I'm fully recovered from last night."

Ichigo lightly pulled her to him in response.

She braced a hand above his heart and let her fingers play there.

He brought his head down beside hers and whispered just loud enough to be heard over the falling water "No promises after tomorrow's run though." He started to stand up straight again only to stop as their eyes met. She was giving him a very interesting look.

"That won't do," she said primly, curling up all the fingers she had against him but one and then letting it trace down to his navel. After a beat she added a whisper of "I think I want a promise."

He blinked before giving her a slightly devilish smile, though he had a faint blush.

She gave him an impish smirk in response. They both knew by then that there was no need for shame or modesty between them and the only reason to even pretend otherwise was for the sake of fun. They'd gone from blushing at the thought of one another nude, to massaging each other in almost pitch darkness, to making love in the sunlight—about the only way they could show more comfort with each other would be something risqué and she was no exhibitionist. She pushed that train of thought aside.

"Promise."

She quirked her mouth and gave him a judgmental look to indicate she'd hold him to it before pulling away slightly and turning around again so he could continue soaping her.

They were snuggled together in bed when Ichigo asked "Everything okay with Chappy?"

Rukia resumed idly brushing his hair, having started to drift off. "I think so."

"What was bothering her?"

"She didn't tell me, but . . . I think she felt lost. She asked if we were friends and I said of course we were."

He paused at that before smiling and pulling her just a little closer.

"What?"

"Nothing, go to sleep."

Chappy herself was already in a deep slumber.

Kon watched over her until he was sure she was out before uttering a "Tch," and flopping over nearby to get some rest himself.

Chapter End Notes
Based on how Chappy readily removes Ichigo from the fight without orders in Chapter 201, how much she knows about Sode no Shirayuki and Rukia's status in Chapter 202, and how she fawns and cries over Rukia in Chapter 209 and 214, my sense is she's not just Rukia's personal Chappy but one she'd spent some time with, rather than a never-deployed-before-that-scene stock one. From that perspective, Chappy talking about Rukia's *zanpakutō* to Ichigo might be seen as a reflection of a more serious personality beneath the surface.
Sunday, October 6, 2002

Urahara was sitting at a workbench in front of a magnifying work light, finely manipulating the inner workings of the hilt of the reiatsu transference sword, when Yoruichi walked into the room.

"There you are." She paused to yawn and stretch, shifting in the yukata she'd pulled on. "I was wondering where you were."

"I thought I should actually get some work done," he said neutrally, not looking up from what he was doing.

"Well, it's about time." She crossed her arms over her chest righteously at the de facto admission that he'd been slacking off.

There was a long pause before he asked "Can't you tell?" in a subdued voice.

She blinked at the question before catching his meaning and reaching out with her senses, checking for anything unusual. Among all the usual beacons of activity in Karakura—finally including Ichigo's again, faint though it was—there were a few new ones on the outer periphery; four in the direction of Naruki to be exact. To her mind they tasted human but with a metallic tang somewhere between seaweed and blood—just like Ichigo did at the moment and Chad always had. She narrowed her eyes.

"I could really do with those limiters that Kuchiki-san has been building up." Urahara adjusted something with a set of tweezers.

"Right." She turned to leave.

"They might be watching the place so . . . try and be inconspicuous."

"Hmph," was all Yoruichi said in response before departing. As if she hadn't been commander of the Onmitsukidō!

______________________________

Chappy and Kon were watching TV when they heard the distinctive sound of scratching on wood at one of the doors in the traditional rooms that lead out to the garden. After exchanging a glance both got up to investigate, the sound continuing as they made their way toward its source. Once they got to the door they shared another look before sliding the door open. They were confronted by a black cat with yellow eyes wearing a black silk collar adorned with a silver bell—it'd been wrapped around twice as if it was meant for a much larger neck.

It meowed at them.

Kon blinked. "A cat? What does it want?"

Chappy tilted her head while focusing on the cat's eyes and its faint reiatsu. "Yoruichi-san?"

The stuffed lion immediately laughed. "Don't be stupid! Yoruichi is a beautiful woman with a great
rack, not some stray pet!" He gestured with his paws in front of his chest for emphasis.

"I'll choose to take that as a compliment," Yoruichi replied, giving him a small glare.

Kon immediately recoiled as if she'd placed a curse on him.

The stuffed rabbit blinked. "Why are you here and like that?"

The cat woman sauntered inside, past the stuffed animals. "I have to talk to Ichigo and Rukia." She was otherwise under no obligation to explain herself to them.

"They're not awake yet," Chappy replied, shutting the door.

Kon was studying the Flash Goddess's feline form with newfound curiosity.

"I can wait," Yoruichi stated.

Ichigo opened his eyes to the faint and distant sounds of tiny thumps on wood, the jingle of a bell, Chappy laughing, and Kon screaming. He was greeted, however, by the sight of Rukia sleeping peacefully, which made him pause as it always did. After watching her for a few seconds he brushed her hair into place and set about slowly and carefully extracting himself from her grasp and tucking her in, not wanting to wake her for whatever shenanigans were occurring and intending to return. After giving her a final glance he opened the door to her room and walked outside, shutting it behind him again.

There were no immediate signs of a disturbance in the lounging area so he headed downstairs, the noise growing louder as he went. What welcomed him when he arrived in the main space was the sight of Kon pinned down by a black cat, which was menacing his face with a paw, claws extended. Chappy was on the cat's back as if she'd been riding it like a horse. He frowned at the scene.

Right as he spotted the choker it spoke, saying "And if you ever touch my tail again—"

"Yoruichi-san?" Ichigo asked in the spirit of inquiring as to her the purpose of her presence, especially in such a state, rather than to confirm her identity; he only knew one cat that talked.

All three animals, real and stuffed alike, turned to face him, finding he looked rather disgruntled at having been awoken by such nonsense.

Yoruichi withdrew her paw from Kon while he backpedaled away and Chappy slid off her back. "Took you long enough to wake up." The cheeky way she said it was mostly concealed by the baritone nature of her voice at that moment.

He caught it regardless and frowned at the suggestion. "How'd you get in anyway?"

"How do you think?" She rolled her eyes toward Chappy and Kon before strutting over to one of the stools at the breakfast bar and hopping up onto it.

"So why are you naked in our house?" he demanded, crossing his arms as he considered her. After her first two transformations he wouldn't fall for it again.

"It was prudent to avoid attention," she said with sudden gravity, ignoring the incongruity of the two statements.

"Eh?"
"We need to talk." Yoruichi's stare became rather intense at that.

"About what?" Rukia asked, rubbing at her eyes sleepily as she entered from the stairwell.

They both turned to look at her and Ichigo blinked.

Rukia gave him a tiny glare but moved to stand beside him, stretching. It was strange to see Yoruichi as a kitty but honestly not the weirdest thing that'd ever happened and she'd heard about the ability from Inoue and Byakuya.

Yoruichi let out a sigh. "You haven't noticed?" She hadn't immediately noticed it either but in their case it was predictable given how wrapped up in one another they were.

"Noticed what?" Rukia muttered drowsily. She was in no mood for guessing games after having woken up alone and immediately waved a hand in dismissal. "Never mind, you're not really going to talk to us like that, are you?"

"And what's wrong with being like this?" the Flash Goddess replied, letting a critical note into her voice.

"It's hardly sociable," Rukia stated, moving toward the kitchen to get some refreshments for everyone. "We can probably come up with a combination of our night clothes that would fit you."

"Our—don't just invite another woman to wear my clothing!" Ichigo immediately started, following after her.

"Would you prefer she discuss whatever she intends to while naked?" Rukia replied in a critical deadpan, giving him a disapproving look.

Chappy noticed the expression on Kon's face as they listened in on the proceedings and preemptively smacked him before he could say anything.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Yoruichi chimed in from the breakfast bar, her voice a sing-song. Both Kon and Chappy blinked at that.

"You stay out of this!" the future substitute snapped.

Rukia, for her part, displayed no overt trace of jealousy—she wasn't going to rise to the woman's obviously friendly teasing. After she'd poured out three glasses of water she left the kitchen, stating "You handle the rest while I get her some clothes."

"You expect me to just let you two rifle through my stuff!?" he protested.

"I'd like some milk," Yoruichi said blithely, hopping off the bar and scampering after her friend. "Nice shirt, by the way," she added as they ascended the stairs.

"Well, these should fit decently well," Rukia said, setting the assembled stack of clothes on a corner of her bed. Yoruichi was notably taller than her but still significantly shorter than Ichigo, so she'd put together one of his shirts with some of her underwear and a loose set of pajama bottoms. "I'll wait outside while you—"

"Help me take off this choker," Yoruichi interjected, hopping up onto the bed and angling to make it easy. She'd had Tessai wrap it around twice to fit and it'd break if she didn't take it off first. Rukia obliged her and unfastened it, setting it on the clothes while Yoruichi hopped off the bed and got a
The petite Shinigami was caught by surprise and waved away the resultant steam only to blush a bit as she caught sight of the woman. It was difficult not to look her over—she was exceedingly fit but still had more than her fair share of smooth curves and seemed completely unblemished in any capacity; it was as if she'd been chiseled out of stone as an idealized figure and then brought to life.

The Flash Goddess didn't fail to notice the look of appraisal and flashed a winning grin as she moved up to take hold of the clothes, putting the choker back on first—she had no care for modesty and odds were they'd probably wind up in an onsen together at some point anyway. "Not jealous, are you?" she lightly teased.

"No," Rukia said, finally looking away. She really wasn't, it was just impossible not to admire the woman's form. Still . . . "Did he . . . did he really not want to look at you?" She'd watched Ichigo at least trying not to sneak a peek at Matsumoto the past fall but for him to look away from someone like Yoruichi . . . She started as she felt the woman's arms slide over her shoulders and she was suddenly being embraced from behind. She looked sideways to find the older noble leaning against her and giving her a conspiratorial smile.

Yoruichi whispered "The first time he just kind of stammered and stared in disbelief for a bit while pointing, like this." She gestured in front of them appropriately before continuing "Then once I started explaining how I'd carried him to where he was he turned really red and roared 'Put on some clothes!'" She acted out the rest of their exchange, giving her best impersonation of Ichigo for his lines. After a short pause she relayed the second time in the hot spring under Sōkyoku Hill in similar detail.

Rukia watched Yoruichi's expressions as she told the tales, finding no hint of untruth or shame in them—nothing was being withheld or embellished for her benefit and she could easily imagine the scenes unfolding as they were described. She blinked as she realized her friend's golden eyes were locked onto hers above a small smirk.

"See? I told you he really had eyes for somebody else. It wasn't that he didn't look at all, or that he kept his head turned the entire time or anything, but he clearly didn't really want to let his eyes linger despite being a young man," she asserted, letting her smirk become a warm smile.

Rukia gave a small smile in response.

Yoruichi brought her arms in to give the younger noble a light hug around the shoulders, not breaking eye contact. "So . . . it's fun, right?" she asked, much more softly than when she'd queried similar of Ichigo.

The petite Shinigami's cheeks turned pink and her gaze slid away but her smile involuntarily grew bigger. Several moments passed. "Yeah."

The Flash Goddess assessed for a moment before closing her eyes and grinning a little. "Good."

"There's just one thing," Rukia said quietly, deciding to let down her guard.

Yoruichi opened her eyes fractionally again and waited.

"He—He won't let himself go entirely," Rukia murmured.

After several long seconds Yoruichi glanced down before surveying Rukia again. "Why didn't you request to stay when he lost his powers?" Her tone remained soft.
Rukia's eyes abruptly widened as she met the woman's gaze again. "What—"

The Flash Goddess reached a hand up and gently shut her junior's mouth. "I bet you didn't think to try—it probably never consciously occurred to you. And the reason is you simply didn't think it was possible. You don't ask for things, and certainly not for impossible things, so you just had to go back, right?"

The younger noble stared.

Yoruichi continued on with "Everybody has their wants and desires, Rukia. You've got yours and Ichigo has his. You know some of his because Zangetsu told you, but getting him to open up will take time, and you have to open up too. You have to let him know what you want as well, and that'll also take time, but the important thing is to try."

Rukia regarded her for several long seconds before giving a small but resolute nod.

The older noble flashed a smile again and gave her cheek a pat before releasing her and standing up fully. "You've been rotating out the reiatsu limiters, right?"

"Yes," Rukia stated.

Yoruichi nodded with satisfaction. "Get the spent ones then. We should get back downstairs before he starts to think we're plotting against him or something."

After descending to the first floor they found Ichigo cooking an early lunch and took up spots at the dining room table to chat while they waited for him to finish—Yoruichi wasn't about to turn down free food and Rukia ascertained from the minuscule glare he'd given her that he was fine with no help.

It was after they'd all finished eating that Ichigo wiped his mouth one last time and asked "So why are you here anyway, Yoruichi-san?"

"A girl can't hang out?" she chided, before pointing a finger at the pile of 'expended' reiatsu limiters. "Half of it's to collect those."

Rukia blinked. "Aren't they expired?" She'd been told to rotate through them at set intervals and had assumed they had a set lifespan.

"No, it's more like they're full," the Flash Goddess replied, picking one up and considering it. "They're sort of like Zaraki's eye patch but not as weird; the difference is they can only hold so much."

"You've had me collecting my reiatsu the entire time?" Rukia demanded.

"He didn't tell you?" Yoruichi asked, looking to her. A single glance at the short Shinigami's expression told her everything she needed to know and she exhaled. "Of course he didn't. He figured there wouldn't really be time to have you carry that thing around so it'd be easier to top it up from a ready-made stockpile. With these we've got five weeks worth of your excess reiatsu to use as a bridge."

"So he's nearly done with the sword then?" Rukia's annoyance was immediately replaced with restrained but unmistakable excitement.

"You know how it is with him." Yoruichi lightly tossed the limiter back onto the pile with rest.
"What happens if one of those things breaks?" Ichigo asked, considering them.

"Probably all the reiatsu comes pouring out." The Flash Goddess shrugged; she had no idea really.

"That sounds dangerous." Ichigo's tone was dark.

"Welcome to every day of my life," Yoruichi replied. She drew in a breath and considered the couple for a few moments. "The other reason I'm here is to make sure you know things are in motion; they are going to turn up soon."

Rukia blinked before her expression became serious. "How do you know that?"

The Flash Goddess gestured at Ichigo. "His reiatsu is noticeable now and to anybody not ... highly familiar ... with it, it kind of ... tastes weird?—it's easy for someone who knows what a Fullbringer is to figure out he is one. They probably had someone keeping tabs on him and Chad that noticed. However, the same thing gives them away too; a few of them are in Naruki as we speak, presumably to set up shop."

Ichigo frowned as much at the idea that their apparent enemies were in the next town over and they hadn't noticed as he did at being told his soul tasted funny. "We should be getting ready then."

"No, you should trust us. The whole reason I showed up as a cat—and the reason I'm suppressing my reiatsu right now, I'll have you know—was to avoid rousing any suspicion in case this place was being watched. They won't know what's going on and we'll have the element of surprise, which means you two should just take it easy and act normal. We'll make sure nothing gets out of hand until the stage is set." Yoruichi's tone was firm in a way that made it clear that wasn't really a recommendation.

Ichigo and Rukia shared a lengthy look at that before turning back to her and nodding at the same time.

Yoruichi picked up her glass of milk and took a long sip, leaning back in her chair. The odd mixture of clothes she'd been provisioned with were surprisingly comfortable and she didn't really want to go just yet—it wasn't like Urahara had said he needed the limiters immediately anyway. "How about ... you invite your sisters over and we have a nice afternoon in?" She threw one of her best smiles onto the suggestion—it'd let her stay until sundown, give his family more time with him, be difficult for either of them to refuse, and it'd help put the two at ease after hearing the news, so it was a win for everyone.

The couple glanced at each other again before smiling.

The three of them wound up playing games with Karin and Yuzu for several hours until Isshin showed up to join them for dinner. They all stayed together for a short time after before the Kurosaki family departed and Yoruichi once more took on her feline form, carrying off the limiters in a plastic bag between her teeth.

Ichigo and Rukia were left watching one another before they went to change into their exercise clothes for their evening jog.

They were scarcely back inside the bathroom and had just gotten the lights and fan on and the door closed when Ichigo found one of Rukia's wrists and forcefully pulled her to him. She let out a noise of surprise and brought her free hand up to rest on his damp shirt while he got his other into her hair and gently tugged her head back, kissing her deeply.
She took in a handful of his shirt and quietly moaned against his tongue, her own playing at it as she pressed to him.

He kept it up for a time before moving with her so he could lean back against the vanity, using his grasp to turn her around before getting his arms around her waist and lowering his head down beside hers.

She put up some resistance to being maneuvered in such a way but was swayed by how assertive he was being, choosing to let go of his shirt before reaching her arms up to anchor them around his neck. She tried to turn her head toward his, panting a little and fidgeting as he licked the sweat off her neck and cheek, muttering his name.

Ichigo turned his head at that and kissed her again. Everything about her felt and smelled and tasted great and it was making his head spin. At the same time he slid his hands under her shirt, brushing them across her well-defined abs for a moment before they parted ways, one going further up and the other tracing down into her shorts.

Rukia's cheeks heated up as she leaned her head into the kiss and pulled her hips backwards from the hand that was brushing across her panties, starting to slowly grind against him and pressing toward the hand on her sports bra.

He moved a little slower then, lightly caressing her intimates until he felt her arousal through both and slipped his hands under them, grasping her up top and tangling his fingers in her short tuft of hair down below.

She pressed against him hard at that and pulled back from the kiss while she still had a chance, needing to see him and finding him looking back at her. Despite how aggressive he was being the expression in his eyes was soft, though it burned with desire, and she bit her lip at the sight of it. She wanted him to keep on just like he had been with every fiber of her being but he had to know it explicitly. She wouldn't be able to naturally encourage him to the fullest since the stuffed animals were still downstairs. "I—Ichigo . . ."

From her gaze alone he knew she didn't want to stop and he began to lean in to kiss her again.

It was so tempting to give in and it was a challenge to think clearly but Rukia gripped at him, her eyes searching his. He was still holding back. She wanted him to be confident, to be comfortable expressing his desires to her, to lose himself with her without worrying that he'd hurt her, to truly be her partner in every way—but she didn't know how to ask. She didn't know the words.

In that instant she decided to trust him as she did with so much else in understanding her meaning. The first thing her mind lighted upon were some of Zangetsu's words and before she could stop and reconsider she blurted "When will you fuck me like how you used to fight?" It came out not as a request, a demand, or an accusation, but merely a question, and one that wasn't really what she'd wanted to ask at all.

Ichigo blinked at her statement for its crudity before he placed it; when she'd whispered something like it before they'd been trying to acclimate to the very idea of intimacy and it'd been Was it maybe something like . . . wanting to fuck me like you fight? With that his train of thought derailed and cars of memories tumbled through his mind. From among them his thoughts fixated upon their discussion of fighting in Tokyo. He'd understood her point of view and his enlightenment regarding the nature of events above Las Noches changed things between him and Zangetsu, but . . . the bedroom wasn't a battlefield and no matter how much she insisted otherwise, no matter how much she tried to present herself as someone who had no need for his concern, he knew he could hurt her, both through action and inaction. Just because the former had never happened from something he'd done physically
didn't mean it couldn't. It was the same impossible bind he'd confronted before and although he'd figured out what she'd been trying to do the day before he wanted to move gradually and methodically, as though traversing a minefield.

She was momentarily lost in the memory of Zangetsu having betrayed *He wants to fuck you like how he used to fight*, before she watched as something in Ichigo's eyes changed and he looked away; his cheeks took on a different character of blush and his expression hardened. Her attention was immediately upon it and she realized she'd seen the look before.

Ichigo forcibly disengaged himself from his memories. He knew she wasn't teasing him or mocking him but he was trying to work on it and the remark smarted. Before he could really think it through he irritably declared "I'm not the kind of trash who'd treat you like that!" When he'd become a substitute Shinigami he'd fought with reckless arrogance and selfishness—the idea of imposing himself on her like that set him on edge. She deserved better than that!

Rukia blinked before looking away and tensing slightly, slackening her grip and moving so she was only loosely against him. She felt an odd kind of weightlessness in her stomach—not the lightness of floating but the sensation of plummeting—as she began putting together many of the same memories in a similar way. She instinctively started to batten down hatches even as she had no idea what had really clipped her wings.

His gaze shifted back to her as a mask of concern descended over his face. He could immediately tell that’d been the wrong way to react and promptly withdrew his hands from her underwear. "Rukia . . ."

"It's okay." Her tone was flat and quiet.

He shook his head with increasing emphasis at that and got his arms around her torso again, thought the nature of his touch was entirely different than it'd been moments prior. He gently pulled her closer again while instinctively keeping his hips away from her. An immense wave of self-loathing rolled over him and he found himself crushed and drowning beneath it—he wanted to get out of her sight but he knew by then that to make any move away from her would only deepen his mistake. "Hey, Rukia . . ."

"It's okay," she repeated.

"No. Look at me."

She refused to at first, already knowing from his voice what she'd find and feeling worse for it. She couldn't even precisely articulate why she'd responded the way she had so to try and explain would be . . .

"Please."

Rukia let her eyes find his at that, confirming exactly what she'd feared. He looked incredibly guilty and it made her instantly stop.

Ichigo saw something similar in her eyes and stared. She really wasn't mad but he was entirely unsure what to make of that. "I'm sorry."

After a moment of watching each other she looked away again and brought her arms down over his while lightly pressing back against him, just letting him hold her and wanting to be held.

He likewise looked away, quickly losing himself in thought again to keep from screwing up further as much as to figure out what'd just happened.
They stayed like that for quite some time before she said "We should shower and get ready for bed."

Ichigo watched over Rukia, letting his mind wander until he was absolutely certain she was deep asleep and wouldn't wake. They'd mostly kept to themselves in the time in between, though she'd pressed close to him once they were between the sheets. He'd held her without hesitation, although it was an automatic response as he was still far away, poking through the recesses of his mind. Once she'd been breathing slowly and peacefully for a half hour he began very carefully moving away from her, stroking at her reassuringly as he went to make sure she stayed settled. After several minutes of watching her he got up and quietly left the bedroom, needing to clear his head.

He sat on a chair on the deck, looking at the stars without really seeing them; the moon wasn't visible. He'd had enough time to recall all the relevant memories he needed, as if he'd been plucking books from a shelf and opening them up to familiar passages. He mentally replayed what'd happened yet again. What she'd said hadn't been her words. It wasn't hard to figure out they were Zangetsu's, who'd probably been ratting out all his deepest desires while visiting her in her dreams the month prior—she'd been quoting what she knew he wanted at him. For the first time he understood she'd known what he wanted for quite some time. She'd been willing to pursue it and say it when he wouldn't even admit it to himself and had jumped in the certainty that he'd catch her, only he hadn't. He'd hadn't just let her fall, he'd shot her down, and he'd broken a promise to her in the process.

_When will you fuck me . . . _He wrapped the idea of being with her in the flowery language of 'making love' and only grudgingly conceded to euphemisms like 'sleeping together' or directly acknowledging it as 'having sex' because to him it meant a lot more than the action. It wasn't about power or control, it was about their partnership, it was about being as close to her as he could be, it was about showing her what she meant to him, it was about making her feel good and feeling good himself and feeling good because she felt good. To reduce it down to something so base and transactional instantly put him off, but it wasn't _wrong_—he wanted to lose himself with her, but to just totally let go of everything was . . .

. . . _like how you used to fight?_ The addition of 'used to' gave away so much. He could rerun his battles with the various Hollows and Renji, Byakuya, Ikkaku, Kenpachi, and the old man. They'd been different from those in Hueco Mundo, all the way up until that final fight with Byakuya. He'd been stupid and cocky but he'd also been supremely confident, and although his morale had occasionally flagged it'd seen him all the way up to his first encounter with Aizen. Then it'd been shredded in truly confronting Zangetsu and he'd never really been the same since; he'd only ever regained that steely determination in fits and starts.

When she'd been talking about fighting to kill in Tokyo . . . she really just needed him to be certain of victory. If he didn't have it within his will, then he needed to have it in his intent; he had the sense she'd been expressing frustration at how he'd almost thrown his life away more than once but she'd really been trying to shock him back into how he'd used to be. That was why she'd criticized him for what'd happened in Hueco Mundo but also part of why she'd been so taken aback when he'd brought up Grand Fisher.

She'd been trying to address another facet of the same thing she'd been speaking to back then. All along she'd just been trying to get him to feel confident and at ease, no matter where he was or what he was doing. Just like always she'd been trying to help him be true to who he was . . . trying to help him improve and be the man in her heart.

She never really asked things of him and so he should've known. He should've taken a moment and really listened—instead he'd again hurt her out of fear of hurting her. He felt another pang of self-
loathing but brushed it aside to review it all again and try and come up with some sort of solution beyond just 'do better'. He was stopped by the sound of the nearest door sliding open but didn't bother to look toward it, knowing it wasn't her.

"What are you doing out here all by yourself?" Kon asked.

"Getting some air," Ichigo replied dismissively.

"Where's nē-san?" the lion continued with suspicion.

"Sleeping." A beat passed before the teenager added his own question: "Where's Chappy?"

"Same," the plushy replied, before walking over. He hazarded a glance at Ichigo and found he looked melancholic and brooding in a way very reminiscent of the prior year, though there was something about the set of his features that was slightly more mature. Something had clearly happened. After a moment he sat down. A comfortless silence stretched between them before he piped up with "I guess it's a good thing the weather's nice!"

Ichigo glanced toward him in confusion at the odd assertion but said nothing, soon looking back toward the sky.

"Nē-san's sword is an ice-type, right? Chappy won't shut up about it and how pretty it's supposed to be. Well that'd explain why she shackled up with an oaf like you; you're basically a space heater! So it's good that it's unseasonably warm or you'd be a real selfish jerk for letting her get cold in order to stargaze!" Kon declared, gesturing for emphasis.

As he processed the words Ichigo slowly looked back toward the lion with wider eyes than usual.

"What?" Kon demanded.

The teenager closed his eyes and gave the tiniest smile as the words clicked, pushing himself to his feet with a sigh of resignation. After stretching and yawning he made for the door.

"Oi, where do you think you're going so suddenly?" the plushy continued.

"Don't stay up too late," Ichigo replied with the slightest note of humor.

The lion blinked and raised an eyebrow before looking up at the stars to try and discern if there was something he'd missed. After a time he headed back inside himself, shutting the door behind him.

Ichigo was carefully getting back into bed when he felt the mattress shift.

"Ichigo . . . ?" Rukia mumbled sleepily.

"I'm here." He moved to get situated with her the way he had been.

She naturally pressed to him, finding his clothes and skin seemed much cooler to the touch than they should've been. She wasn't awake enough to process it other than to murmur "Did you get up?"

"Shhh," he whispered, taking her into his arms. He got a hand into her hair and slipped the other under her shirt to lightly rub at her back, moving her head into the crook of his neck so he could bury his face in her silken locks.

She didn't resist and quieted at the sudden contact, taking in his scent and warmth and quickly being lulled to sleep again by them and his touch.
That time he only monitored her for a minute or two before drifting off himself. *I will do better.*

Chapter End Notes

It's been alluded to previously but I'm deciding Yoruichi transformed in front of Ichigo to tease him after the events in the hot spring in Chapter 130, much as she did in Episode 47, but the particulars aren't important.

Yumichika in particular characterizes the *reiatsu* of things by smell (Arrancar in Chapter 198 and, infamously, Giselle in Chapter 588) but I figure parsing *reiatsu* is sort of synesthetic and that isn't universal; in Yoruichi's case I'm deciding it's taste (whereas for others, e.g., Karin, it's been described as visual).
Rukia was soaping herself when she felt Ichigo’s hands lightly come to rest on her shoulders. She naturally shrugged them as he gripped her and paused before turning her head to glance at him questioningly.

He met her look and held it for a time before he gently pulled with one while pushing with the other to indicate she should turn, not using enough force to move her.

She blinked but cooperated, rotating to face him.

After grasping her shoulders again he took a knee in front of her and got down onto the other so they were roughly at eye level.

She continued to watch him and brought her hands up onto his shoulders in a similar way, uncertain as to his intent but knowing he was behaving more than a little unusually. He’d only ever taken such a stance with her once before.

Ichigo brought his forehead to rest against hers and slid his hands around to her armpits, stroking the sensitive skin there before running them along her sides and around her waist, drawing her against him.

Rukia stared at him for a second before closing her eyes and rubbing her forehead against his, slipping her arms around his neck.

Some time passed before he started to lean back, moving from a kneeling position into a *seiza* sitting position and taking her onto his lap as he went so that they were both under the falling water.

She brought her legs alongside his before lifting each sequentially to get them around his backside, using all four limbs to stay securely to him.

He rubbed her back soothingly with one hand and brought the other up to massage her neck, getting a cheek to one of hers and just keeping her close.

She exhaled and slumped against him, bringing her head down and pressing her face to his neck as the water cascaded over her and his hands kneaded at her. She murmured "Ichigo, we're going to be late . . ." at a volume just barely audible above the patter of the rainfall shower. He still had to make them breakfast and lunch and . . .

"It's alright to be late for one day, Rukia." It was infinitely more important to him to spend time with her after the previous night than it was to maintain his record of not having been late for months.

She let go of her reservations and relaxed, unable to muster any resistance to staying with him and suddenly feeling a great relief at being able to do so.

Ichigo just held her for a long time before reaching to get one of their washcloths and starting to gently scrub her.

Rukia let him for a time before taking it and doing the same to him, forcing him to get the other one to continue on.
She wound up eating at a pace to match his once it became clear that he wasn't going to rush through breakfast and doing so would gain her nothing, although that didn't stop her from occasionally giving him small guilty glares. She could see a clock from where she was seated and it was halfway through first period by the time he finally put his chopsticks down and finished off his cup of tea.

He picked up all their dishes and took them to the sink, getting them soaking before washing off his hands and joining her near the door.

"You're not going to suggest we take a leisurely stroll too, are you?" she critiqued.

He shrugged and got his bag before taking one of her hands as he slipped on his shoes. "I don't see why not, we might as well show up right before second period starts." There wasn't much to be gained by showing up for the last ten minutes of a class except a reprimand.

Rukia let out a "Hmph," and led him out the door. She didn't at all mind him wanting to spend time with her and appreciated the sentiment but she couldn't have him getting into trouble because of it.

Ichigo went along, a faintly amused expression playing on his face since he was out of her sight, and shut the door behind him.

Kon poked his head up from where he'd been covertly watching at the back of the couch, mentally reviewing what he'd caught of their banter. His black-haired goddess didn't seem unduly upset by whatever her idiot would-be fiancé had done the night before.

"What do you think you're doing, pyon?" Chappy asked with annoyance, also lifting her head further down the length of the couch.

"Don't act like you weren't listening too!"

"I have a duty to Rukia-sama," the rabbit said with distinction, touching a paw to her chest.

"So do I!" the lion asserted, glaring at her before blinking as he realized what he'd just said out loud.

Chappy likewise blinked before turning to regard him with suspicion.

They stared each other down for a time until Kon averted his gaze and turned his head, letting go and sliding down the back cushion and bouncing on the seat before crossing his arms over his chest when he came to rest.

She watched him for a few moments before likewise skidding down onto the couch. She made her way to him and sat down. It had become clear to her that there was more to him than the obnoxious show he put on for the world—his apparent perception of having a mission like she did was just more proof of that. "What happened to you in Soul Society, pyon?" It had never made a lot of sense to her that he'd been found by the Gotei 13 but hadn't been destroyed—Rukia's benevolence was one thing, but Soul Society wasn't remotely so lenient.

"Does it bother you that nē-san leaves you here with me?" He didn't want to talk about it but he knew if he ignored her she'd probably decide violence was the answer, so redirecting the conversation back at her seemed like the best bet.

"No. What happened to you, pyon?"

He furtively glanced at her.

After a few moments of consideration Chappy scooted so she wasn't beside him but was back to
back with him instead; it kept them within conversational distance but gave him some privacy.

Kon took his time but eventually said "They did some kind of weird kidō to swap this town out with a replica they'd built, but the battle eventually wound up in the real one, which was in Soul Society. . . anyway, in the aftermath, the 12th Division found me. Their leader was this creepy guy with black and white face paint who kept going on about how I was the last mod-soul and how that made me an 'interesting research sample and test subject'."

"Kurotsuchi Mayuri?" Chappy asked, her eyes going a bit wide. His behavior was rather infamous—she'd heard multiple horror stories second-hand from Rukia over time.

"Yeah, real great guy," Kon replied with dripping sarcasm. He wouldn't exactly call what he'd endured torture, per se, but he certainly had been experimented upon and it hadn't been fun. Being back with Rukia and Ichigo was like paradise in comparison, even if it was one marred by the knowledge she'd fallen for him, and even then . . . well, she'd certainly never seemed quite so happy previously. He mentally recalled the looks she'd flashed on the night when her marriage to Ichigo had been worked out at the dinner table with Kūkaku, Yoruichi, and Isshin. "It gave me some perspective so . . . whatever helps them along," he muttered in conclusion. He felt some continuity with how things had been before did that, which was why he'd continued in the same vein . . . and, well, he was still himself.

She looked sideways in consideration for a second and then relaxed slightly such that her back came to rest against his. Maybe they didn't need to fight so much after all.

He tensed up somewhat at the sudden contact before making an effort to similarly relax.

"We should figure out how to not be in their way when they need privacy, pyon," Chappy eventually suggested.


Rukia and Ichigo arrived in time for the start of second period, drawing interesting looks from many of their classmates for their timing.

He escorted her to her desk as usual—Ms. Ochi had already left the room and he felt no need to explain himself to his peers.

She bore herself with grace and sat down before looking diagonally up the aisle to Tatsuki, who was the closest of their friends. "Arisawa, the water was out at our house and we had to go to Ichigo's family's place to get ready—could I see your notes for Ochi-sensei's lesson?" It was plausible enough to draw the focus away from them and if they at least had notes there was no great harm in missing a single class period.

More than a few people noticed the phrasing 'our house' but it wasn't like their status was unknown by then so attention started to drift elsewhere.

"Yeah, sure," Tatsuki replied, momentarily glancing between her and Ichigo before turning over her notebook.

Rukia immediately set about transcribing the salient points without further comment before returning it and handing her own notes to Ichigo right as the next class started.

He quickly copied down the basics before switching to the relevant notebook for the following lesson.
Tatsuki turned and asked "Hey, Kuchiki, wanna have lunch together?" as fourth period came to an end, giving a friendly smile and deliberately not including Ichigo in her gaze to indicate the offer was strictly one-on-one.

Rukia blinked before glancing sidewards to him for a fraction of a second. She wanted to make sure the idea of splitting up didn't distress him.

He just rolled his eyes in response and fished his bentō box out of his bag before standing and heading for the door, letting his fingertips casually brush her shoulder as he left. Nothing would happen while they were at school. He wasn't going to interfere in whatever friendships she might be trying to establish and it was important she have some time to herself—besides, he had no interest in getting into the machinations of the girls.

"Sure thing," Rukia replied as he departed, smiling back and getting her own box of lunch.

They'd found a nice spot beneath a tree on the school's grounds that was dappled with sunlight and had been chatting about pop culture and some other things while eating before their conversation drifted into a natural lull. Tatsuki broke it with "Uh, this is sort of awkward, but . . . Orihime told me about what happened last year and what you did for her, and . . . well, thanks. Thank you."

Rukia glanced to the fighter at that as her tone seemed unusually sincere and earnest. Meanwhile her mind rapidly flashed through a variety of scenes: talking on the roof of the school with Inoue until Hiyori crashed down onto it; practicing with Inoue on the 13th Division's training ground; Ichigo's simmering anger at the sōtaichō for refusing to sanction a rescue effort; her own determination to continue on to rescue Inoue as she'd crawled, broken and bleeding, away from the fight with Aaroniero . . .

Tatsuki blinked at the change that came over her peer's face and the darkening of her eyes before they closed. Several moments passed before the petite Shinigami looked at her again with a little smile, although her eyes still betrayed echoes of pain and something even less pleasant. She suddenly found she regretted having brought the matter up.

"Orihime is my friend and she was there for me when I needed help, so of course I was there for her too."

". . . Yeah," the fighter said neutrally, looking away.

It was Rukia's turn to blink as she put it together: Tatsuki was also Inoue's friend and she hadn't been able to be there, which was why . . .

"It was really bad, huh?" Tatsuki asked quietly.

". . . Yes."

"Sorry."

There was nothing Rukia could really say which wasn't condescending in some way or another and she wouldn't fault the girl for showing her sympathy, so she instead let another less comfortable silence develop between them.

After a time Tatsuki broke it again: "Are you and Ichigo doing okay?"

Rukia looked to her with some surprise and a little confusion. "Why wouldn't we be?"
The fighter's eyes seemed to search in the distance for a second before she took on a faint blush and shut her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. "I've been helping crack down on the rumors floating around about you two, you know? But I've known Ichigo long enough to be able to tell that more than a few of them are true." Her voice carried the heat of annoyance at having to be even so oblique.

The petite Shinigami stared for a second before also flushing slightly. She'd only ever really discussed the matter with Yoruichi and given their . . . difficulty . . . the previous evening she felt a bit sensitive about the subject, even if she still couldn't identify exactly why. "H—How do you—"

"He's good at hiding when he's happy about something but I know his tells, so when you two walked in last week . . . and then there was the look on Orihime's face, so it wasn't hard to put it together." She decided not to mention the eye-sex thing.

Rukia felt a pang of concern for Inoue at that, although she felt no guilt.

Tatsuki noticed out of the corner of her eyes and exhaled, turning her head and making eye contact. "I already talked to her and she's happy for you. I think . . . I think we're the only people who know and it's not like we're gonna tell anybody."

The young woman surveyed the teenager for a time, not sure what to say.

"What you two have is pretty special," Tatsuki eventually added with a little smile. She knew of a few instances within her acquaintances of people hooking up, but no one in her circle of friends had done so and she also didn't know anyone who was in a really serious relationship well; she certainly didn't know anybody as clearly committed to one as Ichigo and Rukia were. The two weren't necessarily connected, but it was easy to learn things about sex if one wanted to, while having a chance to observe a deeply romantic couple around her own age—at least partially anyway—in real life was highly unusual and hard to ignore.

Rukia could only smile back in confirmation before her gaze slid aside in thought.

"Anyway, Ichigo is my friend . . . and so are you . . . so, I just wanted to make sure you were both okay," Tatsuki continued, not looking away as her voice took on the same earnestness as before.

The petite Shinigami let her eyes find the teenager's again—it seemed clear the girl had no more experience than she'd had two weeks prior and although she knew Ichigo well, there was probably nothing to be learned she didn't already know. Commiserating would be awkward and unproductive for both of them, but she seemed genuine enough in her concern. She chose to try and lighten the mood. "You're not trying to learn something to hold over him in case you ever tussle again, are you . . . Tatsuki?"

The fighter blinked at the friendly, teasing nature of her tone, the casual revelation that she knew they'd sparred, and the sudden switch to her given name. After a beat she crossed her arms and adopted a put out expression, declaring "Like I'd want to hear about that kind of thing, Rukia!"

Rukia's smile naturally broadened at the tacit advancement of their friendship and she pressed just a little more, taking on a somewhat sly mien. She was technically the teen's senior, even if they treated each other as equals. "Then could it be you're paying so much attention because you're interested in somebody . . . ?"

Tatsuki paused for a few seconds before deliberately taking on a miffed appearance. "Don't be stupid."
Rukia lifted an eyebrow slightly before letting the matter go and glancing to her bentō box, plucking out the last of her orange slices and finishing it as their conversation went through another quiet phase.

“So you know they’re in Naruki, right?” Ishida said in a blasé fashion.

Chad’s eyes swung to Ichigo at that.

“Yeah,” the future substitute replied. His tone was somewhere between contemplative and resigned, though there was a hard undercurrent to it.

Keigo looked confused.

“What’s in Naruki?” Mizuiro asked for both of them—they lived there after all.

Ichigo, Chad, and Ishida all glanced at him and then at Keigo in a way that was full of meaning.

After a moment the two of them recalled the meeting they’d been present for three weeks prior and instantly adopted serious looks, going quiet.

“Yoruichi-san came by yesterday and said that we should continue to act normally—she and Urahara-san think it’ll take uh . . . what are they called, Extinction?” Ichigo began.

“Xcution,” Chad corrected.

“Right, whatever—they think it’ll take them awhile to get into position to make their move, and apparently they have a plan so that we’ll have the element of surprise, so . . . they want us to trust them and sit tight until then.” He didn’t really like it but he did trust them, so he’d do as they asked yet again.

“We should let Arisawa and Inoue-san know as well,” Ishida said.

“Mmm,” Chad agreed.

“Yeah.” Ichigo stared at his lunch in thought for a second before finishing what was left of it. “Could you guys do that after school?”

Inoue was yet again looking between the roof where Ichigo and the boys were and the tree in the distance where Rukia and Tatsuki sat, once more trying to puzzle out what was going on. She had an idea what it could be and knew it wasn’t anything she could really help with, but it still made her empathize—they’d inevitably work it out in time but she felt bad for them.

“So when are you going to ask him out?” Mahana queried impatiently.

Inoue blinked as her attention was drawn back to her own lunch group, turning her head at the strange question only to find that it’d been directed at Ryō.

“Like that’s really any of your business,” she replied, not even bothering to look up from the manga she was reading.

“You did choose to tell us about it,” Chizuru offered—Ryō had only ever responded to her efforts with a blank stare and the total lack of reaction had led her to give up even trying long ago.

“That’s not the same thing as giving you every detail,” Michiru piped up.
"At least she said something; you still deny having a crush on Ishida," Mahana said dismissively.

Chizuru made a face that conveyed 'Really?' as she looked at Michiru judgmentally.

"I do not have a crush on Ishida!" Michiru protested.

"Ishida-kun may act distant, but he really is nice once you get to know him," Inoue said with a smile. She blinked as all the girls turned to look at her at that. "He sewed Rukia a really nice date night dress to surprise Kurosaki-kun with! Um, but . . . Ryō, who is it that you're going to ask out?"

Everyone else seemed momentarily taken aback by the fact she'd just dropped on them but Mahana put it aside quickest, asking "Weren't you listening at all?!"

"Orihime, are you feeling okay? You've been acting pretty spacey all lunch . . ." Chizuru inquired with overwrought concern.

"It's nothing!" Inoue splayed her hands in front of her in reassurance. "So—" she began, only for the lunch bell to ring.

Ichigo and Rukia entered the Unagiya Shop at the usual time, heading toward the couch to drop off their bags before picking up the day's allotment of odd jobs.

Ikumi surreptitiously studied them as they entered and decided to go ahead with her plan. "Oi, Rukia-chan, I know what you said about how Ichigo-chan is supposed to look out for you all the time and everything, but we've got a lot of work today—apparently word gets around. I'd prefer not to keep you late, so would you mind splitting up?" She figured if she threw a compliment in it'd make them more amenable and it wasn't entirely a lie; business had picked up since they'd started working for her.

Both blinked before they turned to look at one another. Knowledge of the lurking Fullbringers had lingered in the back of their minds all day and neither was fully comfortable with the idea of being separated from the other by any real distance. They had a short but intense conversation with their eyes before finally giving each other curt little nods.

Their boss easily noticed and lifted her eyebrows slightly at the brief exchange.

"Fine, whatever," he said with pedestrian annoyance, rubbing the back of his head and going to get one of the two stacks of orders that'd clearly been laid out for them.

"The other one," Ikumi said, pointing at it.

Ichigo looked at her suspiciously but took the other stack and looked through it for a time. It didn't take him long to realize he'd been given a lot of physical labor and he scowled.

Rukia moved up alongside him and began reviewing the other stack, trying to puzzle out why they'd been delegated the sets they had. She likewise soon figured it out, noticing she'd been given a lot of indoor work.

He sighed before glancing to her. "I'll just meet you back home afterwards, okay?"

She nodded with a little smile. "Text or call if you'll be late."

"You too," he replied. His eyes lingered on her for a second before he left with his bag.

She reviewed her own jobs for awhile longer before starting to head for the shop door.
Just as she was about to reach it Ikumi casually said "Hey, Rukia-chan, you don't have to keep me in the dark, you know."

Rukia blinked and turned to face her.

"I don't know if any of that stuff about your brother is true, but I know that Ichigo-chan isn't just your roommate, and I know that teenagers don't normally look at one another like that. Whatever the real story is about why you're so set on not leaving each others' sights, and whatever you're mixed up in, I don't need you worrying about me or trying to protect me from it. Whatever it is, you can come right out and say it! Kids like you . . . are meant to be able to rely on us adults!"

The petite Shinigami wound up staring, partly for the candor and directness and partly because of how ridiculous it was—she was at least five times the woman's age.

Ikumi interpreted it differently and walked up to stand opposite her, reaching out to touch one of her shoulders reassuringly. "This is only the second week but I already know you're smart and he's a good guy, so I'm not worried about how he treats you or anything like that. You don't have to worry about me looking down on you either, whether you're dating or . . . whatever. You don't have to pretend it's not happening." She wasn't one to cast aspersions, particularly given her own lot in life.

Rukia searched the woman's expression for a moment before looking away. Why were so many people concerned with her well-being all of a sudden . . . ?

Her boss gave her a serious look. "It's okay! You don't have to say anything! But if you want to talk, you can say whatever you like! Doesn't matter to me, you know! You can ask for advice . . . you can talk about your problems . . . or even just say what's on your mind! It's not like I haven't been there myself or I'll get embarrassed! I have a kid you know!"

Rukia took on just the faintest blush at how easily particular people seemed to key in on where she was in things with Ichigo before locking eyes with Ikumi again. The more she looked the more she saw things that reminded her of the way Yoruichi looked at her. "I'll . . . keep that in mind."

Ikumi's expression eased into a smile and she gave her employee a pat on the shoulder before letting go and turning away.

Rukia watched for a second before heading out the door.

"I'm home," Rukia called as she walked in, slipping off her shoes and dropping her bag on the floor. Something smelled delicious and she realized she was starving. As she made her way further inside she found Ichigo working in the kitchen and was surprised to find Chappy and Kon with him; the former was tending to a pot of *miso* soup and the latter was watching a rice cooker. "How long have you been back?"

"Not all that long. I picked up a lot of *gyoza* on the way home and we're just making some stuff to go with them," he replied over one shoulder.

She blinked and spotted the bags that held the food in question before moving around to the dining room to make her way into the kitchen. She paused when she saw flowers on the table—there was a small vase holding a pink rose and a violet. She read it as *trust and confidence in honesty* and smiled a little as she understood what was meant—she recalled both Yoruichi's advice and saying herself that the sensible thing to do is to work toward it together steadily rather than just hoping we'll eventually become alright with it . . . isn't it? before she continued on to help with preparations.
After dinner they settled in to get their homework done before changing for their evening jog, letting their minds wander as they ran beside one another.

Sometime after returning they were seated together in the tub. They'd kept close but to themselves in the shower. Rukia had her head against Ichigo's chest and was idly brushing her fingers over the scar above his heart, looking at it without seeing it. Most of his scars were on his spirit body—his physical one had but a scant few and it was far and away the most prominent one . . . the one she'd given him and the one that had led to all the others. Her guilt about it all had taken on a kind of wistful quality—she just wished there'd been some other way.

He was holding her to him, one hand in her hair and the other on her rear. He remained unsure how to really make up for what'd happened the night before—part of him wanted to try again to make it right, but another part of him knew he had to regain her trust and make her comfortable again first. In the meantime he had to just be present and mindful and keep her close—he could only make things right by continuing to let her know she was wanted and loved. He was uneasy at their current situation and the one on the horizon, but her presence calmed him and let him chip away at his own issues with trusting himself.

Her thoughts turned to the fact he'd probably soon be picking up a few more scars. "Do you have bad dreams?" she asked quietly. She'd never known him to during any of the time they'd spent together.

He looked down at the top of her head in surprise at the question before looking askance. "Not really." He'd had a few since the end of the war that he only vaguely remembered, but nothing like the ones he'd learned she had, not for a long time. The only recurring ones he'd ever had were about his mom and those had tapered off with age and finally ended when . . . when . . . He'd never fully put it together before.

"I don't either much, other than . . . you know."

Ichigo blinked.

Rukia continued to trace a finger over the scar, absentmindedly turning it into a spiral over his heart. "That's strange, isn't it?" For a long time she'd wondered if it was because waking life was nightmarish enough; lately she'd begun to ponder if zanpakutō suppressed them but couldn't stop feelings of guilt, or something else entirely. She didn't know, but she was relieved that the worries that sometimes haunted her during the day didn't follow her beyond, and that his didn't either.

"Even if it is, I'm glad."

She glanced up at him only to be captivated by the look he was giving her.

After a moment he got his hand out of her hair and brought it around to lightly tap her forehead with his index finger before running it down along the curve of her nose and onto her lips, caressing them.

Her eyes tracked it before she eventually closed them and softly kissed it.

He smiled faintly and cupped her cheek in his hand.

She brushed the other against his chest, letting him ward off the future.

They stayed together like that for a time before he eventually said "Hey, um . . ."

"Don't." She didn't want him to apologize for the previous night—if he did then she'd have to
apologize for it as well and for getting Zangetsu to tell her things, and then he'd fret about how she
didn't need to, and then . . .

"I wasn't going to . . . you don't even know what I was going to say!" Ichigo looked down at her
with a frown.

"Yes, I do." Rukia looked up at him and their eyes met again.

He stared at her for awhile before gently running his thumb along her cheekbone and closing his
eyes for a second. "You heard that from Zangetsu, right?"

"Yes."

"What else did you hear?"

She blinked and blushed before looking down.

He gently tilted her head back so they were looking at each other again. "You don't have to tell me
right now—or at all, if you don't want to."

"I do, but . . . not right now."

Ichigo smiled a little. "What he said didn't put you off?"

Rukia's eyelids lowered slightly as a smirk took hold of her lips, but she chose to say nothing.

"It's not fair you know." She had him at quite a disadvantage.

"You could try and get my zanpakutō to do the same," she retorted without any sympathy, ignoring
Shirayuki's commentary of As if I would ever . . . !

His smile broadened. "I think maybe I'll have to try and find another way."

She gave him a disapproving look for his impudence that was also very coy and inviting before she
closed her eyes and tilted her head back down. After a few seconds she exhaled. "We should finish."

"Not just yet." He stroked at her idly and shifted to lean back more against the edge of the tub. It
wasn't all that late. After a time he requested "Tell me about the Shinigami school."

"Why the sudden interest?"

He shrugged. "Won't ever wind up going there, might as well hear about it from someone who did."

"How presumptuous."

He could tell she was smiling just from the way the words sounded, although he could also feel it
from the hand on her face, and it made him smile in turn.

"Well . . . it's properly called the Shin'ō Academy, and it was founded by Yamamoto-sōtaichō
around 2,100 years ago," she began.

"Gramps is that old?" Ichigo found that hard to believe.

Rukia shushed him and continued on.
Byakuya was having his morning tea and approving a series of ration acquisitions when he heard his soul pager ping. He knew who it was from the tone and removed the device from his shihakushō, finding it was a text message rather than a call.

It was from Urahara, had also been sent to Ukitake and Shinji, and read merely 'They're here.'

The 6th Division taichō narrowed his eyes and turned off the screen before finishing the paperwork without further delay. He retrieved a paper from his desk and rose. Preparations had been underway ever since Ukitake had briefed Ichigo, Rukia, and their human friends some three weeks prior and it seemed the time had finally come to begin implementing them. He made his way next door to Renji's office and knocked only out of a sense of decorum.

"Yeah?" Renji called.

Byakuya slid the door open.

Only then did Renji look up from his own stack of paperwork and see who it was. "Kuchiki-taichō?" Byakuya rarely came by his office and given their routine proximity it was difficult to tell that his reiatsu had moved a half-dozen meters.

Byakuya held out a folded piece of paper. "Cease whatever you're doing and execute this immediately."

Byakuya had already turned and stopped only to state "You will also be deployed to the Living World in two days as an advance liaison. Due to the circumstances you will initially be staying with Urahara Kisuke and company. Have your affairs in order and be ready to leave by this time Thursday."

Renji's eyes tracked his departure before he resumed reading the order, scratching his chin.

"Whatever's going on they're really serious about it . . ."

Shirayuki watched as Zangetsu's eyes narrowed down to slits. She could still see the glow of his irises through the intermittent sparks that flickered between them as their blades ground against one another. He grinned and she noticed his teeth were somehow even whiter than his skin or the surrounding snow. She put up a feint of pushing him back only to end the stalemate by pirouetting away, putting him off balance as he abruptly toppled forward. He was forceful and had a natural economy of movement, but force was possessed of inertia and that meant it could be redirected.

He immediately regained his footing and swung at her again.

Her blade smoothly slid along the surface of his while pushing down just enough to cause it to plow through the snow, sending up a spray of powder.

He blinked. She was nowhere to be seen when the whiteout ended. He whirled around as he figured
out what must've happened, bringing up his sword only to be caught in the face by a snowball.

She genuinely laughed at his expression.

He wiped the snow off with one hand and smoothly cleaved a second snowball in half before
pursuing her once more, determined to learn more about her through their latest style of exchange.

Renji rubbed the back of his head in frustration. "I don't know any more than you do about what's
going on."

Matsumoto snatched the order from him so she could study it more thoroughly. "It seems that
Hitsugaya-taichō and I are going because Naruki is our Division's responsibility." Other zones
surrounding Karakura were likewise being tasked to their Divisions' respective senior officers—
Shinji and Momo, Kensei and Mashiro, and Rose and Kira. Furthermore, Byakuya, Kenpachi,
Yachiru, Ikkaku, Yumichika, and both Yasochika and Hanatarō from the 4th Division were
stipulated as comprising a reserve assault and support force. It seemed evident that some sort of
cordon was going to be established that could be immediately reinforced, but why and when weren't
articulated. The orders stated everyone listed was to be on standby effective immediately, and that all
other officers were to be on heightened alert given the personnel commitment.

Yachiru cheered "Living World!" to no one in particular.

Hisagi crossed his arms. "Why does Kuna get to go and not me?"

"Because I'm a super-fukutaichō and that means I outrank you!" Mashiro replied, striking a confident
pose.

He just frowned at her.

Nanao adjusted her glasses. "It seems notable that all the Visored are being deployed, and that most
of the people being tasked have some familiarity with Kurosaki and Kuchiki."

"It looks like we're the jaws of some kind of trap," Kira observed.

"Yeah," Renji muttered as the discussion started to break up into individual conversations. It also
looked like Ichigo and Rukia were the bait and he was going to be the trigger.

The pair of them were on their way to work under a single umbrella when Rukia turned her head to
glance at Ichigo. "Hey."

"Hmm?" His eyes swiveled over to her curiously.

"You should know our boss is probably going to try and give you a serious talk."

"Huh? Did she say something to you after I left?"

"She seems to have figured out we're not just roommates and wanted me to know that we didn't have
to pretend nothing was going on between us . . . and that I could ask her for advice," she replied with
an odd mix of amusement and resignation.

He blinked before furrowing his brow. On the one hand it made him glad that she was making more
associations with people, but on the other Ikumi was probably one of the last people he hoped she'd
take advice from. "So the whole splitting up thing was a ruse?"
"Perhaps not entirely." She smiled slightly—they'd gotten a lot done by splitting up.

Ichigo groused at that and looked away into the light rain that was coming down around them.

Rukia squeezed his hand and continued on with him, her smile widening as she did the same.

Chad was heading for the school’s gate after having finished talking with Inoue and Ishida when he was stopped by a familiar but unexpected voice.

"Sado-san."

He turned to find Ryō about two meters away beneath a rather elegant umbrella. Her stance was assertive and she had a keen look on her face. For once the omnipresent book in her hand was by her side—it was one of the few times he could recall her not looking disinterested in her surroundings. He looked around for a moment and discerned they seemed to be alone. "Kunieda-san."

A silence followed that was punctuated by the drizzle.

"What can I—" he started, deciding to break the impasse.

She closed the gap between them so their umbrellas touched and looked up at him seriously. "Would you like to go on a date?"

He blinked. It wasn't that he was an expert but to his knowledge she'd never shown an interest in anybody. "Why me?"

"You're not annoying and I want to get to know you better." It was true enough—she'd been near him long enough to know he was smart, mature, quiet, loyal, laid-back, and had an air of mystery about him that he took no pains to cultivate. He was very different from all the other boys in their year, even accounting for other anomalies like Ishida and Ichigo.

"You don't have to ask me on a date to do that."

Ryō continued to watch him expectantly.

Several seconds passed before Chad said "Yes."

"When are you free?"

His gaze slid aside in evaluation. She didn't know anything about what they tended to wind up doing in their spare time and he didn't want her getting caught up in the impending showdown with Xcution somehow. He didn't know when that business might be resolved either. He looked back to her. "I'm kind of busy with work and some projects . . . I can try and be free Friday of next week."

"Friday the 18th then."

"I'll let you know in advance if I have to reschedule." He didn't want to stand her up either.

Ryō assessed him for a moment further before nodding curtly and walking around him, heading out the gates.

Chad watched her go before walking out the gate himself, heading to work.

When Ichigo and Rukia entered the Unagiya Shop they were still holding hands, mostly because she
wouldn't let go of him. She only conceded when it became clear he couldn't otherwise close the umbrella.

Ikumi looked amused. "I see you two talked."

"You can spare us the runaround in the future," Ichigo shot back, finally getting the umbrella shut and leaving it by the door.

Their boss leaned back against the desk behind her, taking on a sardonic grin. "Ichigo-chan, I'm hurt! Business is booming because of you two! That I just happened to have a talk with one of my employees—"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, lady." He rubbed the back of his head as he made his way toward her to get their work orders.

Ikumi's expression became annoyed. "I keep telling you to call me Ikumi-san."

Rukia followed after him and cleared her throat. "Are there a sufficient number of tasks that we should split up today as well?"

Ikumi looked toward her, to Ichigo, and back again. "It would help."

The couple glanced to each other. Rukia moved forward first. "Okay. What do you have for us?"

Ikumi handed her a collection of jobs before holding out another stack to Ichigo.

Both checked through them. She finished first, not just because she was eager to see Tycho the bunny again but because she felt like humoring the woman. She got one of their small umbrellas from Tokyo out of her bag and headed for the door. "I'll see you back at home, Ichigo!"

"Yeah," he called after her, surreptitiously watching as she left before continuing to look through the work orders. At least he hadn't been delegated a lot of heavy manual labor again. When he pocketed them and looked up he found Ikumi studying him and stared her down in response for a few seconds. Finally he looked away. "If you're worried about how I treat her—"

"I'm not." Her tone was perfectly frank. She stood and squared herself up opposite him at a conversational distance.

He was taller than she was and she had to look up at him to make eye contact, but he found her oddly imposing despite that.

"You're a good kid and I can tell you defer to her a lot."

He blinked before closing his eyes, adopting an annoyed expression and raising a hand in dismissal. "I do not—"

"Save the act for her, it's wasted on me."

He opened his eyes again and looked at her curiously. She seemed to be scrutinizing him and smirked.

"I'm sure she told you some of what I said so I'll just reiterate that if you need somebody to talk to, you can talk to me. Now go on, I'm not paying you for nothing." With that she shoved a hand hard against his chest, pushing him toward the door.

He stumbled and almost fell flat on his ass, only just recovering. "Don't just push people like that, my
shoes are still wet! What would you do if I fell and broke a leg or something?"

"Get to work!" Ikumi commanded, scowling and crossing her arms.

Ichigo furrowed his brow in response before turning and heading for the door, snatching up the umbrella as he went. He pulled out his cell phone as he exited, calling Yuzu to see if she could make extra for dinner that he could pick up.

Kūkaku had spent the day leisurely looking through the various documents that one of Byakuya's couriers had delivered the prior morning. She took a sip of tea as she considered an extended clause relating to the purchase of property in the Seireitei—given the express aim of the enterprise was to reconstitute the Shiba as a great noble house they were going to need a manor of their own and Byakuya was apparently arranging to restore their old holdings to them as part of a dowry. They’d sat unused the entire time. She was reminiscing about the place when she suddenly became aware of the pressure of the man's reiatsu somewhere up above. She quirked an eyebrow at that but continued on, figuring he'd be down soon enough.

Less than a minute later Shioganehiko announced " Kūkaku-sama, Kuchiki-taichō of the—"

"Enter." If nothing else at least Byakuya seemed to secretly share her disdain for ceremony.

The door slid open and he walked a few meters inside, silently surveying the space.

"I didn't figure you to be one to visit; did your people forget something?" Her tone was wry and she didn't look up from the documentation.

"I assume during your time in the Living World that Urahara Kisuke, Shihōin Yoruichi, or . . . Kurosaki Isshin . . . informed you as to the other set of circumstances that are unfolding."

She looked up at him at that, her gaze cold.

"It seemed appropriate that you know that situation is beginning to progress toward its conclusion." Byakuya made steady eye-contact with her. "Of course, every effort is being made to make sure that the matter is contained and does not take an unexpected turn . . ."

She stared at him, her expression asking for her.

"You surely remember Renji—he'll be our forward reconnaissance. Once these rabble make their move four taichō and fukutaichō will be deployed to Karakura and the surrounding environs. I and several other senior officers will be on standby. The intention of the sōtaichō is to let Ichigo and Rukia deal with the problem as they see fit but to make sure they're not distracted and have support within immediate reach." There had been some concerns as to the nature of the abilities of Tsukishima and Yamamoto had, perhaps predictably, decided to simply force the issue while simultaneously resolving the question of how to ensure the Fullbringers didn't get away yet again. It was a rather heavy-handed approach but seemed likely to prove effective.

Kūkaku glanced aside in consideration. Including Rukia, that meant that at least eight taichō-level combatants would be there. Her presence would in theory make little difference. She looked back to him before setting the documents aside and reaching under one of her throw pillows, retrieving the soul pager Yoruichi had tossed to her before she'd left the Living World. She quickly hammered out a text message to the same before looking at the phonebook, finding an entry labeled 'Isshin/Work'. She selected it and brought the device to her ear as it dialed.

"Moshi moshi?"
"Uncle, Ganju and I are going to be there tonight. We can each stay in one of the twins' rooms. We'll be there for . . . awhile. I want it to be a surprise." It was a statement and not a proposal.

"Ehhh, Kūkaku? Isn't that sort of sudden—"

She never heard the rest, ending the call and tucking the soul pager into the wrap around her head for want of somewhere else on her person to put it. She took up the documents again and stood, making her way up to Byakuya. "Thanks. Sadly my hospitality is limited since I'm leaving."

Byakuya gave a small smirk and turned, heading for the door. "I was just leaving myself." It opened just before he reached it and he walked out without missing a beat.

She waited until he'd begun ascending the stairs, escorted by Shiroganehiko, before demanding "Koganehiko! Where's Ganju gone off to?!

Ichigo glanced sideways to Rukia. She'd demanded she be allowed to help with the dishes so he was washing them while she dried them. He looked back to the sink. "So how's Tycho?"

"Still cute," she said, beaming reflexively. After a moment she looked his way and her lips formed a small sprightly smirk instead. "Kurosaki Ichigo, are you jealous?"

"Yeah, you figured me out, I'm green with envy because of a rabbit." As deadpans went it was flatter than a placid pond.

She grinned and her look became impish. "You are, aren't you? Is it because I called him cute?"

"First you deliberately left me in the clutches of that woman and now you're trying to provoke me." He glanced askew at her judgmentally.

"I did not!" she huffed. "Besides, how bad could it have been? She means well."

"What are you doing? Don't deny you did it and then immediately admit you did!"

She leaned in toward him, her stance growing defiant. "I didn't admit anything! It's not like she tortured you or something! You're just trying to avoid acknowledging the fact that you're jealous!"

He likewise leaned in so they were practically nose to nose, lowering his voice. "Who'd get jealous over being called cute anyway? I'd rather be called sexy and I already know which of us wins on that score."

Rukia blushed a shade before frowning at him, unwilling to break eye contact first.

Ichigo stared back at her with a scowl. It'd be so easy to lean just a little farther forward. "So do you still want to go for a run?"

"It's raining, fool."

"It's a light rain and it's cooling, plus we've still got those windbreakers."

She studied him closely before standing up straight, resuming drying off the plate she was holding. "Fine."

"Fine!" he replied, doing the same and returning to scrubbing.

Kon and Chappy were on the couch and couldn't help but hear the exchange. They shared a look.
Tatsuki was lying on her stomach with her history notebook in front of her. She glanced up from it to where Inoue sat a half meter away.

She was humming cheerily and idly munching on some weirdly-flavored edamame as she highlighted sections of her notes.

Tatsuki watched her for a moment before looking down at her own notebook again and sighing, closing it. "Hey, Orihime?"

"Hmm, Tatsuki-chan?" she replied, looking over with a smile.

"You can feel it too, right? This atmosphere . . . ?" It felt like there was a storm on the horizon that was about to break over them, and it wasn't the slow rain outside. Ever since she'd been told what was going on the prior day the feeling had lingered.

Inoue blinked and her smile only faltered slightly. "Yeah, but . . . it's okay! Everything will turn out fine!"

Tatsuki's gaze swung back to her. She didn't have to ask why she was so confident—she believed in their friends and always had. "When the time comes you're going to go fight with them again, aren't you?"

The princess's expression sobered up at that and she looked away. "Yes." It wasn't going to be like the last time. She was going to pull her weight for all their sakes.

The fighter studied the look of resolve that suddenly came over her face. She'd seen it before on rare occasion but it was familiar to her through other means anyway—it was a look she'd seen a lot on competitors at the tournaments she'd been to. After a time she looked away. The silence seemed heavy all of a sudden. "Um . . ."

Inoue looked back to Tatsuki, unused to hearing her sound so pensive.

". . . Forget it." Tatsuki flipped her notebook open again, picking up where she'd left off.

Inoue was about to ask what was bothering her when there was a knock on the door. She didn't feel any reiatsu coming from the other side and tilted her head. "I wonder who that could be." She got up and went over to it, taking a moment to look through the peephole.

Tatsuki warily pushed herself up and followed along.

Inoue became visibly animated at whoever it was she saw and briskly unlocked the door.

"Hi." Kūkaku's greeting was neutral.

Ganju leaned against the wall beside the door, keeping a lookout with their bags.

"Kūkaku-san? Ganju?" Tatsuki asked with confusion.

Inoue repeated the same but as an exclamation and gave the nearer Shiba a friendly hug, practically pulling her inside. "You're back really soon! Can I get you anything? Why'd you come to my place anyway?"

Tatsuki glanced to Ganju before discerning he wasn't going anywhere. She shut the door but didn't lock it.
Kūkaku waited until the princess calmed down. When she spoke her tone was cool. "Sorry, but I'm in a bit of a rush, so I'll have to make this short: I've been told you can fix things nobody else can?"

Inoue blinked.

Ichigo was getting ready to shave after their evening shower and soak.

Rukia had already gone to the bedroom and returned wearing another one of his t-shirts as a nightgown, walking up beside him. He was only wearing boxers and she looked him over in the mirror for a second before turning, pushing herself up to sit on vanity counter's edge.

He blinked and looked at her suspiciously. "What do you think you're doing?"

She took on a small knowing smile and shimmied so she was between him and the mirror. She reached her hands up, lightly resting one against his throat and gingerly taking the handle of his razor from him with the other. She'd watched him shave a few times with some curiosity—he didn't have much in the way of facial hair and could easily get away with only doing it every few days without it feeling itchy on her skin. "Wouldn't it be easier for someone else to do that?"

He blinked but didn't resist, letting her take the razor before looking aside and scowling. From having watched how she handled her zanpakutō and worked with knives in the kitchen he knew she wouldn't make mistakes and even if she did she'd heal him up right away. "I better not have to go to school covered in bandages tomorrow."

Her lips twitched into a smirk and she pulled her left hand away from his throat, lightly pinching the tip of his nose and using her grasp there to tilt his head back before she started to shave the underside of his jaw.

Ichigo's gaze slowly wandered back to her, finding her eyes, and he began to turn his head and shift his jaw and facial muscles to make it easier for her.

Rukia soon let go of his nose but ignored his stare and took her time, moving with the grain as she'd seen him do and frequently rewetting the blades with hot water. It wasn't long until she'd finished to her satisfaction and ran her fingers along his jaw line, chin, and upper lip to check her work before getting her hands wet and washing off the remaining shaving cream, finally letting her eyes meet his. "So did I cut you even once?"

He brought his hands to rest on the counter on either side of her legs and leaned down as if to kiss her only to slide one of his cheeks alongside hers, testing her efforts on rather more sensitive skin than her fingertips.

She whispered "Mmm, that's what I thought," into his ear and pressed her cheek against his, rubbing against him. The cool feeling and scent of the aftershave combined with the heat of his skin was an intriguing combination.

He grasped her hips before sliding his hands up to her sides, noting the resistance of some underwear under the shirt, and brought his head down as he turned it, kissing her neck. At the same time he leaned against the counter and lightly drew her to him. It wasn't hard to figure out she'd been showing off how comfortable she felt in handling him but he couldn't reciprocate in the same way—she didn't shave, almost all of her body hair was far too fine to bother with anyway, and he had no interest in trying to change the state of affairs.
She un-crossed her arms and likewise grasped his sides, bringing her face against his neck as she got her legs around his waist.

Ichigo stayed with her like that for a time before returning his hands to her hips and standing up straight as he pulled back from the counter, picking her up. He got a forearm under her rear to carry her and plucked up his t-shirt with his free hand before bearing her back to the bedroom, turning off the bathroom lights as he left.

Rukia held onto him until he sat down on their bed. After he'd gotten his legs onto it and scooted toward its center she lightly pushed him backwards and maneuvered with him to get situated, denying him the opportunity to get his shirt on.

"Hey, what if I get cold?"

She scoffed, getting comfortable with him. "Don't be ridiculous." It continued to average around room temperature and he was as radiant as ever.

"I'm just saying that it's a double standard."

"Ichigo, if you want me to take my shirt off you can just ask or do it yourself."

"That's my shirt and that's not the reason—" He promptly fell silent as she pulled back sufficiently to slip the shirt off before pressing back to him. The heat of her skin was impossibly mollifying and it was all he could do to remember to pull the covers up before wrapping his arms around her.

She basked in his warmth and stayed hushed as they lay entwined together, listening to his breathing and the steady beat of rain on the roof and windows.

"Rukia."

"What?"

There was a long pause before he exhaled, coming to a decision. "If there's anything you want to ask me . . . anything . . . I'll answer it." He could show his confidence in his own way, even if it was uncomfortable. She knew a lot more than she let on so it wasn't that he could really claim to be embarrassed or humiliated.

Rukia tilted her head back to look at him in the darkness, considering. She knew better than to imagine it was some kind of ploy but decided to only gradually test his resolve. "Who left the josei manga lying around at the Visored base?"

Ichigo's response was instant: "Yadōmaru."

"How did you really know so much?"

There was a pause. "Dad forced me to read certain sections of his medical reference texts when I turned 14 and endlessly grilled me on them. What they didn't cover I learned . . . the way you imagined."

Her cheeks flushed somewhat and she was quiet, caressing at one of his shoulder blades reassuringly in appreciation of how forthright he was being. She wouldn't rehash that last point given their experiences together. After a few moments she pushed closer to him. "Was what Zangetsu said accurate?"

He pressed his face down into her hair and inhaled deeply as his cheeks grew hot. "Yeah." His voice
She let her hands rove to places she could more firmly grasp, halting one on his side and sliding the other up the back of his neck into his hair before taking him between her fingers and pulling him tight to her. "Don't be ashamed of that."

He said nothing and stayed still.

Rukia put aside her other questions and used her purchase on him to turn with him so he was on his back, straddling his waist and pressing her head up to push his back. With that she looked up, meeting his gaze and bringing her hands up to cup his burning cheeks. She gave him a small but genuine smile. "It's okay."

Ichigo’s eyes searched hers uncertainly.

She drew her lids down into an alluring look. "I want that too." Her voice was the softest breeze and she closed her eyes, leaning down to tenderly lock lips with him while stroking along his sideburns.

He leaned into the kiss and eventually got his hands onto her sides, squeezing and kneading there.

She arched her back to press herself up against him and increased the pressure of the kiss, starting to encourage rather than comfort.

An unintelligible murmur escaped from him at the feeling of her chest brushing against his and he turned his head, licking her lips.

Rukia parted them and let him explore her mouth, releasing his cheeks and leaning against him as she brought her hands onto his, guiding them toward her hips. She moved his digits with hers to hook them under the sides of her panties while nipping at his tongue.

Ichigo took the hint and slid them down, assisting as she threaded her legs out of them only to find her hands pulling down his boxers. He lifted his rear off the bed to help.

She tugged them down as far as she could and then used her feet to help push them along as he kicked his legs, playing with his tongue suggestively. She let out an objection as he withdrew it before gasping as he rolled, putting her on her back.

His face hovered just above hers, their noses touching as he reached up to stroke at her. "You sure?"

"Shut up already, fool." Her tone was impatient and she tried pulling him down to her.

He resisted and brought a finger to her lips. "You get really noisy—you know I like that but—"

She frowned a little at the fact he was still talking.

After a second Ichigo just smirked and brought his other hand up.

Rukia blinked as his finger was replaced with what felt like cotton. She refocused on him, discerning he still had hold of her underwear.

He kept his eyes on hers, wanting her cooperation.

She didn't hesitate and opened her mouth to let him gag her, murmuring his name as he gently stuffed the garment between her lips and tangled it around her tongue.

Once he'd finished he lowered his head to kiss at the underside of her jaw and along her neck. "Tug
on my hair twice if you need me to stop, okay?"

She gave a muffled assent.

Rukia released Ichigo's shoulders and gradually slumped against him, unable to hold herself up any longer. Her head was spinning. Her limbs felt weak and trembled as though she'd been holding up a heavy weight and climbing stairs for hours. She found herself in a close embrace as her head lolled against his heaving chest.

He traced his fingers across her exposed cheek to caress her lips.

She parted them and let him remove her makeshift gag, panting loudly as she listened to his racing heartbeat. With effort she got her arms around his neck and buried her face against him. He'd always given to her—often so much she couldn't stand it—but he'd only truly taken her before toward the end of their first time together and then he hadn't been so insistent on—on *celebrating* her . . .

He absentmindedly heaved her underwear away and pulled her tight, turning so they were on their sides. He'd needed her to know that it wasn't just about having her; it was also about her wanting him to have her. With time he could do anything if he had her encouragement and desire . . .

It was long after their harsh breaths and pulses had abated that she looked up at him, finding him already looking back. They stared into each other until staying conscious was a struggle, surrendering together.

The Kurosaki family was watching *Kiki's Delivery Service* together when the door bell rang.

Isshin got up, not bothering to pause the film. "Who could that be at this hour?" he muttered.

Yuzu shushed him before returning her attention to the film.

He smirked to himself and took his time only to exclaim "Oh, well, this is a surprise! I didn't expect you back so soon!" once he finally got the door open.

"We're actually late," Kūkaku said around a smile.

"The commute is kind of a hassle," Ganju added.

Both Karin and Yuzu whipped their heads around at the voices in disbelief before clambering over the back of the couch, calling out the names of their cousins.

"Are you sure you want to share the bed with me?" Kūkaku wanted Karin to be certain of the matter—it was her room after all.

Karin nodded seriously.

Kūkaku sat down on the edge of it before flashing a smile. "You were right, by the way."

". . . About what?"

The older Shiba sibling lifted her right arm and lightly tapped the stoic twin on the nose with her index finger.

Karin's eyes widened a bit. She was about to ask why they were really back already when there was
a knock on the door and it opened.

Yuzu poked her head in. "Um, is it okay if me and Ganju-itoko sleep in here?"

Karin blinked before gesturing for her to come in already. "Don't be stupid."

Yuzu opened the door fully and walked in, followed by Ganju who carried a rolled up futon. She noticed Kūkaku's futon was likewise still rolled up. "I can use that if you're going to—"

Kūkaku just patted a spot beside her opposite Karin. Once Yuzu made her way over and sat down she got an arm securely around each of them and looked to both. "Stay close, okay?"

The twins nodded and pressed near before their cousin shifted to lay back with them. They pulled the covers up since her hands were full.

Ganju gave every appearance of paying them no mind as he spread his futon out and got comfortable on it, finding he couldn't help but smile.

Isshin listened from the stairs until all was quiet before likewise departing with a smile.
Monday, September 2, 2002

Rukia held up a hand to quiet Shirayuki as a light blush took hold of her cheeks. She crossed her arms and fixed Zangetsu with a serious look. "Then surely you know that he and I share a mutual interest in that. Your objective is to protect him, is it not? So are you just going to make crude remarks at me or are you going to tell me something of value?"

That time he was the one who blinked. Long seconds passed before his expression grew cold. He marched up to her until he had to look down to see her, ignoring Shirayuki for the moment.

Her eyes narrowed as she made her own assessments.

Rukia met his gaze steadily, not flinching in the slightest.

An unknown time passed before Zangetsu abruptly kneeled before her. He ever so gently took one of her wrists and guided her hand to his lips, keeping his head down and brushing them against the back of her fingers.

She blinked and openly stared with widened eyes, not sure what to make of the gesture and not having the presence of mind to pull her hand away. "W . . . What—"

He released her but made no move to stand. "You're the Queen."

His voice was oddly soft compared to the harsh mockery she was used to and she continued to peer at him with disbelief before eventually glancing to her own zanpakutō.

Shirayuki had turned and seemed to be studiously ignoring what was happening behind her.

Rukia looked back to Zangetsu uncertainly before crossing her arms and looking askew. "Well . . . stop that." Before she could even blink his face was suddenly in front of hers. They were almost nose to nose.

"So you want me to tell you 'something of value'?"

Her eyes searched his before she nodded slightly.

Zangetsu's eyes glinted at that and he smirked before leaning in.

Rukia was about to pull away when his face slid past hers so his lips were by her ear. She was suddenly aware that he smelled just like Ichigo did.

"He wants you."

"I—"

"Shhh, listen. He wants you." In a single smooth motion he reached one hand forward to touch his fingertips below the obi at her waist before tracing them around her flank and across where her hakama rested on curve of her rear. The other brushed along her opposite cheek, gliding down her throat to the neckline of her shitagi. "He wants you to want him. He wants to fuck you like how he used to fight." It was a whisper.

Rukia turned red. By the time she thought to move away from his ephemeral touch his hands were
already gone and he was in her face again, wearing that snide grin.

"Sometimes he thinks about being alone in that classroom with you, about pushing you over that desk and hoisting up that tiny skirt of yours. You're right to be proud of your legs, you know . . ."

Her cheeks felt like they were on fire but she couldn't look away.

"Sometimes he thinks about wearing a tie just so he could bind your wrists with it, or pulling off your ribbon and doing the same. But most of the time he thinks about you in your old black and white get-up or your new one—you have no idea how much he loves how they look on you and how much he'd enjoy pulling them off you . . . I bet you think I'm making him sound perverted, but you need to understand these are the last few pieces of a puzzle and they're all of one kind to him."

Rukia blinked.

Zangetsu brought his nose so it was almost touching hers again. "Being away from you, being beside you, being in you—all of that is just being with you to him, because you're his everything. Everything. That's why he thinks about you in bed, in the shower, at breakfast, on the way to school, at his desk, on the roof, at lunch, at dinner. It's why he thinks of you moaning his name on your hands and knees one moment and safely curled up in his arms the next. He needs to give you everything back. He wants you to have it all, and he can give you so much already but there's still so much more you need to have . . ."

Her jaw was slack and she found she didn't know what to say.

"And the reason is you're the one who makes him the King. You're the Queen." He finally gave her a smile that looked genuinely warm before standing up straight and stepping back from her, turning away. He lifted a hand nonchalantly. "So was that 'of value'?"

She looked down as she tried her best to still her thoughts.

Wednesday, October 9, 2002

Kūkaku's eyes fluttered open as she was awoken by strangely cacophonous music. She was immediately aware it was sometime after dawn from the light and couldn't remember having dreamed or stirred. Her attention was soon drawn to motion to her left.

Karin reached over to shut her alarm clock off before groggily pushing herself up from against her cousin's side. She was rubbing her eyes when she noticed Kūkaku was awake. "Sorry, we have to get up. You can—"

"I'm up." She could hardly watch out for them by sleeping in. "Seems like Yuzu-chan is being stubborn though." She cradled the twin in question with her still oddly whole right arm and slowly sat up, gently shaking her to rouse her.

Karin watched for a second before reaching forward and lightly tweaking Yuzu's nose. "Hey, come on, we gotta go!"

Yuzu shook her head at the sensation and blinked her eyes open. "Huh . . . ? Karin-chan, don't wake me up so rudely! Wait, what . . . ?" She glanced around before looking up at Kūkaku.

The older Shiba sibling smiled and couldn't stop from laughing a little at her expression. "Good morning."
Yuzu beamed back in response before Karin was suddenly pulling her out of bed.

"We're gonna be late!" She wasn't going to look irresponsible in front of their clan leader.

Yuzu let herself be dragged along, protesting her treatment vociferously.

Kūkaku watched and then listened with amusement until she heard them get to the bathroom. "Oi, Ganju, you better be up. We're going to have to watch over them while they're at school."

"Right, nē-chan," he murmured sleepily. He pushed himself up and put his regrets over not being a morning person aside.

Tatsuki tilted her head over her shoulder once Ichigo and Rukia had taken their seats. "Hey, Ichigo, you know your cousins are here again?"

"Eh?" He initially had no idea why they might have already returned. After a second he'd put together a theory and glanced toward Rukia, who was already looking his way. He could tell from her expression that she couldn't feel their reiatsu either.

"The valkyrie is back?!" Keigo demanded.

More than a few glances were cast their way at that. Since when did Ichigo have cousins and what the hell was a valkyrie?

Ichigo shot Keigo a look that cordially invited him to shut up before focusing on Rukia again. "I guess we should see about stopping in to get dinner after work."

She nodded resolutely.

Tatsuki glanced between the two of them before turning forward again, mulling over her own thoughts.

The Shiba and Kurosaki siblings, sans Ichigo, were watching Iron Chef together after school—Karin had grudgingly conceded to joining in—when the doorbell rang. Kūkaku made sure she was the first one up to answer it and was perplexed at who she could already tell was on the other side. Opening it only confirmed her suspicions. "Tatsuki?" She glanced around—nobody else of importance was nearby. "What's up?"

The teenager waffled before clenching her fists. ". . . Do you have a moment to talk?"

Kūkaku mulled it over for a half second before nodding and moving aside to let her enter. The others were engrossed in the show enough that they wouldn't mind and it wasn't like she was really going anywhere.

Tatsuki walked past her and got her shoes off before letting the woman guide her to the small porch and yard. She was more than familiar with the space and took a seat on the deck.

Kūkaku did the same and waited, quietly surveying her.

"When we first learned this was going to happen, I and some of Ichigo's other friends tried to see if there was anything we could do to help. Urahara-san and Yoruichi-san said there wasn't really and we'd likely be liabilities if we tried. I'm not going to go behind their backs, but . . ." She turned and looked Kūkaku in the eyes before her gaze flickered to the door. "You're here to protect them,
"right?"

A beat passed before Kūkaku gave a steady nod.

"There's someone I have to try and protect too. Maybe I can't do a lot but I have to try. You're not a Shinigami or something like everyone else, right? But if you can do it, then . . ."

"You want me to teach you?"

"Please."

Kūkaku studied the needful look in Tatsuki's eyes for awhile before smirking a bit. "Okay. Let's see what we can do."

---

"I'm here!" Ichigo called after unlocking the door and stepping inside.

After the usual replies of "Ichi-nii!" and "Onii-chan!" from Karin and Yuzu, Ganju added his voice to the chorus: "Figures you'd turn up for dinner, dandelion!"

Ichigo got his shoes off and stepped further inside, spying him in the kitchen helping Yuzu finish dinner—it looked like she was putting together a multi-course meal with teriyaki and soba at the very least. " Eh, so you two really are back here already?"

"That's right," Kūkaku stated, appearing on the opposite side of him.

He looked her way and finally noticed Tatsuki standing behind her near the entryway to the yard—he'd been too distracted with the idea of getting dinner and getting home to sense her until then. She stood out as usual, which made the complete absence of Kūkaku and Ganju despite being in the same room as them all the more curious. "Uh—"

Tatsuki started heading for the door. "I should go."

Kūkaku extended her right arm to block her path. "We already discussed this and you're staying for dinner." She then fixed Ichigo with a look before nodding her head toward the way they'd come from.

Tatsuki didn't object and went to sit with Karin while Ichigo followed along after his cousin.

Once they were far enough for low voices not to carry she stopped. "We'll be keeping watch here regardless of what else is going on, so don't worry."

Her resolve made it clear to Ichigo that following up would be perceived as an insult. "Okay. What's with the gigai?"

"Some stealthy thing Urahara cooked up, suppresses reiatsu." She turned and crossed her arms, looking at him.

He noticed she led with her right arm first and put that together with the earlier gesture, raising an eyebrow. "Did you . . ."

Her expression became flinty.

". . . Forget it. I feel better knowing you're here, Kūkaku-san." He gave a small smile.

After a moment she gave a smirk in response before both their heads turned preemptively.
Rukia was very nearly there and within seconds was opening the door herself. "I'm here!"

Ichigo and Rukia stayed for dinner before heading home and changing for their evening workout. He noticed something different once they'd assembled in the upstairs sitting area—she seemed to be deep in contemplation. "What's with the face?"

She blinked and turned his way, his voice shaking her from her thoughts. "It's nothing."

He closed the distance between them and grasped her shoulders. "Hey."

She looked down before meeting his gaze. They watched each other for a moment. "I was thinking . . . maybe it'd be smart to review some hand-to-hand techniques instead of going out for a run." She deliberately didn't add Just in case. After discussing the presence of Kūkaku and Ganju on the way home she couldn't just pretend that nothing was going to happen. She had to do something to help get ready.

He blinked before smirking. He could see right through her but decided to make the best of it. "Want to get a head start on teaching me how to be a proper Shinigami by showing me some hakuda?"

After a second she decided to play along and looked aside, furrowing her brows and crossing her arms. "Who knows how long it'll take to instruct a Quincy in proper technique?"

Ichigo's smirk became a smug grin. "We could disassemble the downstairs rooms—the dividing walls are supposed to be removable, yeah? Once it's opened up there'd be enough to practice technique and spar."

Rukia let her gaze drift up so their eyes met again.

"Besides, beating me up is your prerogative, right?"

She mirrored the smirk he'd worn. "Don't say things you might regret, Ichigo."

They made their way downstairs together and set about deconstructing their traditional rooms. He worked with the furniture while she got the walls down, being more familiar with the type of construction—it was very similar to that in the Kuchiki manor. Within a few minutes they'd turned the multitude of rooms into a single large one and covered the floor in tatami mats as best they could.

They stood opposite one another, looking around—the place was a lot larger than it initially looked and with its relatively high ceilings and the way it fed into living room it suddenly seemed cavernous.

After assessing the space Rukia nodded with satisfaction and looked to him. "Show me your best fighting stance."

Ichigo quirked his mouth and thought about it for a second before smoothly moving into a kōkutsu-dachi low sideways stance with his feet apart and perpendicular and his knees flexed.

She raised an eyebrow and looked him over. "That's not bad but it's a little different from what I'm used to. Here, let me show you." She walked him through the basic hakuda stances and talked him through their purposes.

He thought he saw a lot of different styles in them and they reminded him more of what he knew of shorinji kempō and Shaolin kung fu than karate, but it was easy enough to adapt so she wouldn't keep harping on something so elementary.

Rukia smiled a little at how easily he copied her. "Well it seems you've got the basics of how to
stand, at least."

Ichigo rolled his eyes. She was clearly enjoying lecturing him.

"Okay, the main thing to keep in mind—"

"Oi, Rukia, I'm not some novice, you know—let's just go and you can tell me what I messed up later."

She frowned at him before a wicked little smirk cracked across the side of her mouth. Her expression became arrogant. "Fine." She immediately crossed the distance between them and snapped a clenched fist toward his jaw as she had in Hueco Mundo.

He easily knocked it aside and drew back, readying himself again.

She followed, testing his defenses methodically at first. Her reaction time was slowed by her body but she was more than able to keep him on his toes and it gave her a lot of time to think about her next movements.

He kept pace as her rate of attack built.

"Are you just going to defend forever?"

He frowned a little in concentration. She wouldn't take him going easy on her any better than Tatsuki had—if anything it'd be a lot worse. After deflecting her next strike he twisted and kicked toward her.

Rukia somehow managed to hop onto his leg as it rose and continued with it as though perched, striking directly toward his face as the addition of her weight threw him off balance.

Ichigo jerked his head aside but tumbled backwards, flipping upright only to have to block and redirect a flurry of punches.

They moved up and down the length of the room, testing each other. Their eyes burned and sparked as they clashed—each had to show the other what they could do.

The back and forth seemed to go on forever until a memory of something Renji had said played out in Ichigo's mind: She doesn't fight fair either, sometimes you've got to grapple to win. As he knocked aside her next jab his hand turned and grasped her wrist before he used her momentum to wrench her around, pulling the arm behind her back.

Rukia immediately moved to twirl the other way only for him to get her other arm in hand just below the elbow and hook one of her feet with his, tripping her while simultaneously pushing her down toward the floor.

He followed her as she landed on her stomach, kneeling over her backside as he pinned her to stop her from writhing too much.

She kept trying to flip herself around to get her arms free. "Let go!"

"Just admit you lost!"

Rukia abruptly ceased fighting him, laying still. "Alright."

Ichigo blinked at the sudden cessation and silence and after a moment's consideration let her go.
She promptly used one of his legs as a brace to spin in place so she was on her back and brought the other one up to kick him in the stomach, knocking him back before vaulting to her feet. "I can't believe you fell for that!" She tried to follow it up with a heel stomp only for him to roll aside and sweep her off her feet with a kick. She'd just hit the floor when he was on top of her, holding her wrists above her head. "Stop pinning me down . . . !"

"I'll stop when you give up!" His face was a few centimeters from hers and he could feel the heat of her breath. Something about it was distracting.

Her eyes locked onto his and she redoubled her efforts to free her wrists, bringing a knee up and pressing her shin against the inside of his groin, intending to push him up and over her.

He used his own legs to spread and secure hers, denying her as he shifted at the contact.

She continued to struggle regardless. Both of them were panting and sweaty—he was dripping down onto her and she found herself keeping track of the beads on his face.

Seeing no other recourse he spun her so she was on her stomach again, using his weight to help keep her down.

Rukia jammed her hips back against him, trying to propel herself backwards, but he was too firmly planted and she wound up just grinding against him.

Ichigo turned a bit red at the sensation and pushed back, bringing her wrists together. The sound she let out was different from those that had punctuated their commotion and it made him stop. He turned a deeper shade of crimson as he realized how they were positioned—she was on her shoulders and knees and he was . . .

She didn't stop trying to liberate her wrists but when she pressed back against him again it was different too.

His thoughts were suddenly foggy and he tested moving similarly.

The sound of a throat being cleared made both their heads snap to one side, eyes wide, to find Chappy and Kon watching them.

Chappy quickly looked away, glaring at Kon.

He marched back toward the couch without a second glance.

Ichigo and Rukia were apart in an instant and she immediately jumped to her feet, stalking away to the stairs.

He got up and briskly followed, glowering in Kon's direction as he went.

Rukia irritably swatted at the switches for the lights and fan as she entered the bathroom. She was about to turn and say something when she heard the door close and felt Ichigo's hands securely clasp her biceps. She immediately tested his grip by shrugging her shoulders and shifting. When he didn't move she reached her hands back slightly to his hips, pushing back to him.

He brought his face down into her hair, breathing deeply as he lightly squeezed her arms.

She shivered and muttered his name at the sensation of his breath wending through her hair and across the back of her neck. Something about it made her feel so alive . . .
After a few seconds he pulled back from her and released her.

She immediately pivoted and took in handfuls of his shirt, pressing against him. She was about to bury her face against it when his hands came to rest on her butt. A gasp escaped her lips as he squeezed and picked her up, lifting her until her feet wiggled free. She tilted her head back just in time for his lips to crash into hers.

He leaned against the door so the friction of their clothes helped keep her up, kneading her.

She moaned against his mouth and her cheeks blazed as he took it as an invitation to make the kiss deep. She tugged at his shirt before slipping her arms around him and trying to lift her legs. With how powerfully he was massaging her it took her two tries and she only managed to get them up around the back of his thighs.

Ichigo grasped her firmly with one hand and lifted the other to cradle the back of her head so it was cushioned, pushing off the door and turning to press her against it instead.

Rukia drew her legs up higher so they were around his waist and brought her hands to the back of his head and neck. She played with his tongue until she was completely out of breath, turning her head and gulping for air. "Ichigo... go..."

He slid his cheek against hers and tilted her head a bit further, licking at her neck and earlobe as her skin burned against his, starting to squeeze her again at the same time. She was salty but that just made her more enticing.

She was left gasping next to his ear and got her fingers in his hair. Her mind raced and she was heating up again—her clothes were suddenly very constrictive. "Don't tease . . ."

He gave her neck a light smooch and pulled her away from the door, carrying her to the vanity counter and setting her down on it. He tenderly kissed her. They'd made love since but this was the real second chance he'd wanted—he wasn't going to mess it up.

She tilted her head and licked his lips as a prelude to French kissing him when his fingers tangled in her hair. It made her pause for an instant and she let out a noise when he pulled her head back. The motion was smooth and not too fast—his assertiveness was making her really... she blinked her eyes open as his hands went missing, only for them to come to rest on her legs.

Ichigo got them free from around him and brought them up so she was entirely on the counter, grasping her sides.

Rukia let him maneuver her until it was clear he was going to turn her before putting up token resistance. She was easily overpowered and finally just turned her hands upside-down so she could keep them at the back of his neck. She caught sight of motion as he pulled her back against him and looked up, realizing what was in front of her as she met her own eyes. Her cheeks flared again as she saw the expression on her face. It looked so... naughty... She looked away and started to squirm against him.

He lowered his head, kissing and nibbling at her neck and the back of one of her ears while holding her still. He nipped the latter, letting his eyes find hers in their reflections. "You're beautiful."

"I told you not to tease..." Her voice was husky and she was breathing hard. She was torn between leaning into his attention and trying to pull away—she really liked it but... She instinctively drew her legs together. Having to watch herself was embarrassing and...

"Who's teasing?" He kissed her neck again and took hold of her shirt, pulling it up.
She couldn't see for a moment. He only bothered to get it over her head, leaving it bunched up around the back of her neck as her arms kept it on. She was going to bring them down to get it off when he tugged the front of her sports bra up to her clavicles and took her into his hands. She fidgeted as he stroked at her, trying hard not to make any noises as she started to soak through her clothes, and watched his hands trace down her ribs and stomach. She cooperated as he took the hems of her shorts and briefs in both and slid them down. She'd barely heard them hit the floor when he got his arms under her knees and drew her legs up so it was easier to touch her. Her back arched involuntarily and she pressed her cheek to his as her thoughts fuzzed, doing her best to hold in the sounds trying to escape her. He was true to his word and went directly for her weak points.

"Don't stifle yourself."

"T—They'll hear . . ."

"Let them." He wasn't going to make her stay quiet twice in a row.

"H—Hypocrite . . ." The word wavered and dragged out as it left her lips, becoming lost in a series of moans. She gripped at the back of his neck. "I'm—if you keep—I'm going to . . . !"

"It's okay, Rukia."

"Ichigo!" Her mind blanked. When her thoughts returned to her she was still shuddering. It was hard to lift her head from where it rested against his chest.

"I told you that you're beautiful." There was absolutely nothing like the expression she had when she was overcome with bliss or basking in the afterglow of it.

Rukia stubbornly looked away once she saw the state she was in, opening her mouth to chastise him only for two of his fingers to push past her lips. Her lingering blush intensified again at the taste of herself. She lightly bit him in protest—he'd never let her live it down if she revealed she liked it.

Ichigo withdrew his hand and unceremoniously pulled his own shorts and boxers down, stepping out of them and kicking them aside. He got both hands under her knees and lifted them up so they were fully bent before pulling her back so her rear slid off the counter, holding her up by them.

She tightened her grasp on his neck and wiggled, trying to get her feet onto the vanity. "Ichigo—"

Her voice abruptly caught in her throat.

"I love you."

She whispered his name again only to drag out the last syllable as her muscles tensed and her fingers and toes clenched. He let her catch her breath but she was soon reduced to murmuring his name.

"And I love hearing you say my name every which way . . . but the Rukia I know always speaks her mind."

She reddened further and tried to see him, having to do so in the mirror. He was watching her with such a gentle expression yet . . . she bit her lip. She'd never said anything like that before, not in her own words. " . . . Please . . ."

Ichigo kissed the nape of her neck and rubbed his face against her hair. "Shhh, no, no . . ." He never wanted to hear her beg. She'd led off with him so many times and although he knew thinking about such things was new for her he also knew she had an inner fire for them as she did with everything else. He wanted her to find her voice rather than just giving him looks or repeating his name. He hooked an arm under one of her legs so it rested at his elbow and grasped under her other knee.
before lifting his newly freed hand to turn her head to one side, craning his neck forward over her shoulder so he could see her directly.

Rukia's eyes locked onto his the moment she caught sight of him.

"The Rukia I know . . . is brave and beautiful and bold. She dances through life. She has moments of stillness and quiet and elegance, but at heart she's vibrant and loud and confident. She never lets anyone question her ability, even when she might be uncertain of herself. She's small, but she's fierce. That . . . is the kind of woman you've always been in my heart, Rukia."

Her expression became soft as she came to fully understand what he was doing. It was just like the previous night—he was exalting her. She shut her eyes.

"So please . . . tell me what you want . . ."

She soon opened them again, searching deep in him.

He watched as her gaze firmed up and her resolve built.

Rukia withdrew one of her hands from the back of his neck to cup his cheek, her fingers brushing him. "You . . . You're my lover so stop just . . . servicing me . . . and take me, fool . . ."

A small smile took hold of Ichigo's lips. He kissed her temple and stroked her cheek before putting his hand back under her knee and getting her feet on the counter so she could help.

Sometime later he was sitting on it with her on his lap, facing the other way. He had his head down over her shoulder while she'd leaned hers back against his so they were cheek to cheek. After their third time he'd finally let go of her legs—she'd tucked them along either side of his and he'd gotten his arms around her chest and her waist.

She absentmindedly nuzzled at him. "We're going to have to clean this counter."

He reddened and hugged her before sitting up straight. "Can you turn?"

With effort she sat up fully and did so, accepting his help in keeping her stable. She slid her shirt and sports bra off before hastily pulling off his shirt, pressing to him. "We'll have to wash those too."

Ichigo shushed her and pulled her tight.

Rukia buried her face against his chest and held onto him.

A long time passed before he kissed the top of her head and got a hand under her rear. "Let's clean ourselves up first."

She pecked above his heart and put her legs around him.

He carefully took on her weight before sliding off the counter, carrying her to the shower. They took their time bathing each other. When they'd finished he tried to guide her to the tub and found his wrist caught in her hand.

Rukia kept him under the water with her and got her hands up onto his shoulders as she considered him. Moments passed. "Sit down." She made sure it sounded like a request.

He blinked but did so, keeping his eyes on her.
She did the same and went with him, getting onto his lap much as she’d been on the counter and resting her head against his chest.

He brought his head down against her hair. "We could do this in the tub—"

Rukia hushed him. She kept quiet for a time, listening to his heartbeat, before tilting her head back to look up at him.

Ichigo noticed the movement and likewise looked down so their foreheads touched and they were nose to nose, chocolate and ultramarine looking into each other as the water cascaded around them.

She brought her hands up to cup his jaw and closed her eyes, just breathing with him.

He got his arms around her a little more securely and shut his eyes too.

Awhile passed before she whispered "Ichigo."

"Yeah?"

"You wanted to know about some of the other things I heard?" She felt his cheeks warm her hands at that.

"... Yeah."

She caressed him soothingly and rubbed her forehead against his. When he began to stroke at her similarly she decided he was ready for her to start. She wasn't going to cover everything she'd heard and it wasn't an interrogation—she wanted him to have an idea of what she knew and clear the air between them. "Do you think about tying me up?"

Ichigo fidgeted and shifted. "Rukia..."

Rukia pressed closer, keeping his head still. "It's okay. Talk to me."

He started to burn against her hands. "Yes."

She gave him a light pat for his honesty and continued to brush at him, giving him some time before continuing. "And you think about having your way with me on my desk?"

His fingers pressed into her a little. Eventually he just nodded against her.

She tilted her head back to lightly kiss him before returning to how she had been, staying quiet for a time and keeping close. "Would you like to hear a fantasy of mine...?"

All he could manage to say was "Please."

Most of her imaginings of him revolved around him being back in a shihakushō—she wouldn't burden him by reminding him that he still wasn't. "Sometimes when I'm in the shower after PE, I think about you sneaking in and using my reiatsu to find my stall. I know it's you before you get your arms around my waist and eventually you press me up against one of the walls. You get a hand over my mouth and..." she trailed off as she became aware of his growing arousal, opening her eyes just a little to glance down and confirm the matter before looking up at him. She took on a small devilish smile. "That's not an invitation to infiltrate the girl's locker room."

He opened his eyes and watched her for a second. "Did Renji ever tell you about the place Urahara-san built under Sōkyoku Hill?"
She smiled a little more. "Yes. That's where I learned my bankai too."

He blinked and reflexively smiled back. "Occasionally I think about the two of us training down there and . . . well, I'm not surprised how our sparring ended up tonight."

Rukia blushed slightly at the look he was giving her all of a sudden and at the fact his fantasies extended to Soul Society like hers did.

"Sometimes I imagine shredding your shihakushō one cut at a time, never ever touching you, until it's in tatters and you have to use both hands just to try and keep it on. Then when you're distracted just enough—" He noticed how coy she suddenly looked.

"I think you'd be the one getting distracted if I was fighting you in the nude."

"Oh yeah?"

"Uh huh. Besides, you seem to be forgetting I don't need fabric to bind you . . ." 

"I can break your kidō."

"You've only ever endured the absolute weakest kind, fool." She wore a sly smirk.

"Mmm. Hey, did you know the hot spring down there heals whatever ails you?"

"No, I can't say that I did . . ." Rukia's voice became innocent as though she had no idea what he might be implying.

Ichigo turned his head and kissed her.

She held it for a time before bringing her forehead back to his and going quiet for a little while. She didn't really want to stop but it was a school night and they'd have to get up early to get their homework done considering how the evening had gone. "I'll tell you more later if you'll do the same."

"I'd like that."

She stroked his cheeks one last time before moving so she could stand. "Let's skip the tub for tonight."

He didn't object and let her get up before following suit. Sometime later they were curled up together in bed. He had a hand under her ersatz t-shirt nightgown and was rubbing her back, brushing her hair with the other.

She had both arms securely around his neck and was breathing quietly.

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

"When this is all over we'll do something fun, okay?"

She discerned he was talking about the likely fighting on the horizon and focused very intently on his body language and his word choice. He hadn't tensed at all and there was no room for doubt or uncertainty in his question. Despite herself she smiled a little. "Did you finally find a local dancing club?"
"I said something fun."

She couldn't see him rolling his eyes but giggled a little since she could hear it in his voice. "I'd like that."

The sound made his heart flutter and gave him pause before he pulled her a little closer, redoubling his efforts to put her at ease.
The Fire's In Their Eyes

Thursday, October 10, 2002

Rukia dug her fingers into Ichigo's shirt and murmured in response to some unknown noise, only reluctantly opening her eyes. From the lighting she gauged that the sun had just risen.

He silenced his phone's alarm and turned his attention to her, moving her hair into place and smiling at how sleepy she looked.

She met his gaze before sighing and closing her eyes again.

His smile widened and he ran his fingers down the curve of her nose before sliding them sideways to cup her cheek. Watching her pout was something of a treat by itself. She wasn't really a morning person—comparing and contrasting with her chipper attitude during their first two months together made it clear what an act that'd been.

She looked at him again, her eyes half-closed and her mouth quirked sourly.

"You can sleep in until breakfast is ready."

She blinked and pressed her cheek to his hand before shaking her head. "I'll help." They could cook, eat, and do homework before getting dressed.

He gave her a gentle pat before sitting up, gingerly taking her with him.

Rukia pulled back from him and stretched before crawling off the bed, getting a pair of boxers she'd claimed and sliding them on over her underwear in case Kon happened to be wandering around. Ichigo's shirts weren't long enough to work against such a low angle.

He got up and waited for her by the door, pretending not to watch.

Kūkaku absentmindedly slapped at Karin's alarm until it stopped making sound before getting her arm back around her and Yuzu—the latter was against her but faced toward the former, the pair of them curled up together in her embrace.

The twins shifted as they woke.

She drew in a breath and looked down, gently brushing at the hair of both. "Hey. Hey, Karin-chan, Yuzu-chan, it's time to get up."

Yuzu opened her eyes open first, peaking at Karin before tilting her head back to look up at her cousin. She smiled broadly as they made eye contact.

Kūkaku smiled back before noticing Karin watching the two of them. After a second she took on an amused expression and sat up so they could scoot past her. "Go get clean."

They hesitated and shared a look before sitting up. Yuzu turned to her. "Um, Kūkaku-ītoko . . . would you like to get ready with us?"

She blinked, glancing between the twins before scratching at a temple. It was a sweet gesture and it wasn't that she was embarrassed, even if it'd been a very long time since she'd bathed with anyone else. "Eh? I don't know . . . that tub is kind of small to fit all of us."
"Please?" Karin beseeched.

There was a beat before she smirked. ". . . Okay, we'll give it a try." She slid her legs off the bed and stood, getting her clothes for the day.

Both her cousins scrambled to do the same and followed in her wake as she led the way to the bathroom.

Ganju waited until he couldn't really hear them anymore before sitting up, rubbing at his eyes. "Ehhh, onii-san, I think meeting our cousins has been good for nē-chan . . ."

Renji blew out a breath and rubbed the back of his head, once again regretting having only had a light breakfast to get ready in time. It wasn't like Urahara was going to have anything to share. He put the matter aside as the senkaimon opened in front of him and started forward. He'd barely made his way through it into the Urahara Shop's training room when he stopped at the sight that confronted him and blinked.

Urahara was waiting some meters away. It was his attire and demeanor that were arresting: his gaze was cold and he wore both a shihakushō and the haori of a taichō. A naked sword which seemed to glow a faint azure rested upon his right shoulder.

Renji stared, mouth ajar.

The image was shattered as Urahara yawned mightily and smiled, ruffling his hair with his free hand. "Oh, right on time as usual, Abarai-san! What a fortunate characteristic it is to be punctual!" There was a flicker of motion to his side and he was sent sprawling by a high kick to the face.

Yoruichi brought her leg down and smoothed out her haori.

Renji blinked again at the sight of her in uniform as well. She wore it with a poise that was somewhere between regal grace and casual elegance. "Yoruichi-san, you too?"

"This idiot insisted we dress up and wouldn't stop harassing me about it! Not that I'm going anyway!"

Urahara sat up and rubbed his jaw. "Why would you have gotten dressed that way if you weren't going?"

She used a foot to push him over again before turning and crossing her arms under her chest. She wasn't convinced the whole idea behind this aspect of the trip wasn't some sort of fetishistic ploy.

Renji fell into step with the pair. "Tessai! Please assist in situating Abarai-san in our absence. Be back later!"

The man in question had appeared from somewhere carrying a gigai. "Right, boss!"
Urahara stopped at the threshold and looked over his shoulder at Yoruichi with a small smile. "So?"

She glared before stalking after him.

Renji moved out of her way and watched as she practically shoved Urahara through the senkaimon. With that it closed and disappeared. He looked toward Tessai. "Was that normal?"

Tessai simply adjusted his glasses with his free hand before setting the gigai down.

Both Yoruichi and Urahara stopped only a few steps into the senkaimon's courtyard, surveying the space before them.

The latter smiled apologetically. "It seems like their response time has slowed down, especially for an alert."

Yoruichi smirked. "No."

Dozens upon dozens of Onmitsukidō suddenly appeared before them with their weapons held ready. There was a small clearing between the pair and the front of their ranks and it played host to the briefest of blurs before Suì-Fēng occupied it.

She blinked at the sight of the pair in their shihakushō before very deliberately controlling her expression and focusing exclusively upon Urahara. ". . . You of all people should know usage of the senkaimon without prior authorization is a serious crime . . . especially for an exile."

He lightly tapped the sword against his shoulder and released his hold on his reiatsu since it was clear the jig was up.

Yoruichi crossed her arms and likewise abandoned any pretense of stealth, looking aside and deciding to let him run the show.

He tried out a smile. "Unfortunately, we're kind of in a rush, so we asked Abarai-san if we could borrow his exit."

"I think Yamamoto-sōtaichō will be amenable to overlooking the particulars given the nature of our visit here."

Suì-Fēng twitched a corner of her mouth and narrowed her gaze, glancing to Yoruichi before the arrival of a presence to her side made her outright grimace. "No one requested your intervention."

Byakuya's reply was just as cold: "My orders are to be on alert for any developments."

Yoruichi looked between the pair of taichō with an irritable expression before laughing. "This is turning into a reunion."

Urahara casually walked forward across the distance, waving his free hand as he went and maneuvering to pass between Byakuya and Suì-Fēng. "It'll probably be easiest to go by Division and —" He halted a few steps beyond the pair as a bristle of swords suddenly blocked his path. ". . . My."

". . . Let him pass," Suì-Fēng commanded. She didn't bother to turn or hide the bitterness in her tone.

Yoruichi glared daggers at his back. "Hey, don't think that you can drag me along on this trip and then just leave me by the door!"

Urahara gave her a winsome smile. "It's not exactly hard work—maybe you three can catch up while
I start to take care of things!" With that he continued on through the path the Onmitsukidō cleared for him, flash stepping away once he was beyond them.

Yoruichi clenched her fists before sighing, letting her eyes drift to meet Sui-Fēng's before she glanced at Byakuya.

The former made a subtle hand gesture and as if by magic the soldiers disappeared.

The latter appeared to intently study some piece of architecture off to one side before he too vanished.

A long silence fell over the mostly-empty courtyard. Eventually a small smile formed on Yoruichi's lips. "It's been awhile."

Sui-Fēng looked aside. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"Would you believe it was his idea?"

"... I'm not surprised, but you went along with it."

"Maybe I was feeling a little nostalgic—seems like you were too with that haircut."

Sui-Fēng looked at her again before scoffing and allowing herself just the smallest smile.

Yoruichi scratched at an ear and looked aside. "So... have you had breakfast yet?"

Ichigo let out a yawn as fourth period ended, slumping back in his seat.

Rukia had to suppress an urge to do the same. "None of that."

He rolled his eyes. "Sorry, it's just that time travel really tires me out." He couldn't decide if he'd been sitting in his chair for the blink of an eye or a geologic era but neither was comforting.

She blinked at the expression, raising an eyebrow as she struggled to figure out what he meant by it. Before she could say anything she was aware of motion to one side.

Chad moved to within conversational distance, looking at Rukia first. "Sorry to interrupt." With that his attention shifted. "Ichigo, could we eat lunch today?"

"Eh?" His gaze instinctively slid toward Rukia as he understood the meaning.

She met it before giving a tiny smile and retrieving her lunch box, getting up and going over to Tatsuki and Inoue.

"Yeah, of course," he replied, getting his own bentō. Within a few minutes they were out on the school grounds, eating quietly under a tree together. Ichigo found himself repeatedly glancing to where Rukia and the other girls were as he ate and deliberately shifted his focus away. "So, what's up?"

Chad seemed to ponder the question for a moment. "Kunieda-san asked me out on a date."

Ichigo almost dropped his chopsticks. "Huh!? Really?"

"Mmm."
"That . . . That's great! I'm, uh, I'm happy for you!"

Chad took another bite of his own lunch and there was a brief pause as he chewed. "Isn't it strange?"

Ichigo looked aside and took on an uncertain expression. "Um, well, I mean . . . I don't think it's that weird for a girl to ask a guy out . . ." It wasn't that he was some kind of expert but he was pretty sure it wasn't uncommon . . .

"That's not what I meant."

". . . Hey now, Chad! Don't sell yourself short—"

"When I asked why, she said that I 'wasn't annoying'."

Ichigo paused as his expression became incredulous and a bead of sweat formed at one of his temples. He scanned his friend's face to see if that was some sort of newfound sense of humor. After determining it wasn't he glanced askew again and mouthed 'yikes'. He decided to try and be diplomatic. "I . . . don't think she's asked anyone out before."

"It just seems unusual." Chad paused again as he reviewed what he knew of things. Nobody had ever really seemed interested in him before. The only girl he'd really hung out with much had been Inoue—he'd never thought of her in that way, and given her prior fixation upon Ichigo he was sure that was mutual. He'd also never really observed couples interact much other than in media, from a distance, and what he'd seen of Ichigo and Rukia. When he thought of someone like Ryō, he didn't imagine her asking someone like him out. "You'd think that she'd have asked someone like—"

"Sorry to interrupt," Ishida said from one side.

Both Chad and Ichigo turned their heads to him.

He pushed his glasses up. "Would you mind if I ate with you? The atmosphere with just Asano-san and Kojima-san is . . . disagreeable."

The seated pair shared a look. "No problem," Ichigo ventured after a second.

Ishida sat down and opened his own lunch. "Feel free to continue with whatever it was you were discussing."

"Uh—" Ichigo began. *How much did he hear?*

Chad only waited a moment before returning to the matter. He didn't mind if Ishida knew too. "So, I told her that we could try Friday of next week, given what's going on."

Ichigo raised an eyebrow. "You think this'll be over by then?"

Ishida pursed his lips for a moment as he figured out what was meant by that. "Even invading Soul Society took less than a week. But . . . who are you meeting then and why?"

Chad repeated "Kunieda-san asked me out on a date," without skipping a beat.

The Quincy did a double-take and sputtered. "*Her?*

Ichigo couldn't help but roll his eyes. It wasn't like Ishida was in a position to throw shade like that. Chad's hum was an octave deeper than previously.
After a second Ishida adjusted his glasses and considered his lunch.

Silence reigned and they all took to eating. It was sometime later when Chad spoke up again. "It doesn't seem right not to tell her."

Ichigo frowned as he suddenly remembered Tatsuki's reaction to Inoue's abduction.

"... There wouldn't be much point if it didn't go anywhere, but if it did, I think you would have to," Ishida conceded.

"Yeah," Ichigo added.

Chad looked into the distance for awhile before continuing to eat.

Yoruichi flopped back onto the grass behind her. "I missed the weather here."

Suì-Fēng blinked before glancing about. To her it seemed to be just another ordinary sunny day. "What's so different about it?"

"It's less dramatic. There are fewer clouds and it rains less."

The 2nd Division taichō contemplated the matter for a second before glancing at her empty bentō box. After a moment she reclined so she lay parallel to her former superior.

Yoruichi eventually broke the silence that spiraled out between them with a laugh. "The expression on that service clerk's face when she realized we had the same haori was priceless!"

Suì-Fēng said nothing but smiled. It had been amusing.

After a time Yoruichi let her gaze drift to the side. "Hey. It's been fun, right?"

Only a moment passed before Suì-Fēng returned the look and nodded.

Yoruichi smirked before pushing herself up to a seated position. "Seems like Kisuke is on his way here, and after he's finished I really should go talk to Byakuya-bo." She absolutely had to tease him in person over the arrangement with Kūkaku while she had a chance, even if just a little. "But... maybe after this is over they'll loosen up about letting us back here occasionally."

Suì-Fēng sat up as well. ". . . I've never personally toured any of the Division's districts in the Living World. Perhaps I should look into doing so in order to expand my understanding of our responsibilities."

Yoruichi looked at her with amusement. "Perhaps." She was aware of Urahara stopping some distance away and lingering for a time before finally closing in.

He promptly appeared in front of them. "Oh, sorry to interrupt lunch, but uh—"

"We were just finishing," Suì-Fēng said coolly. She stood.

Yoruichi followed suit, brushing herself off. "Do we need to get anyone else other than Ōmaeda?"

Urahara shook his head. "Not really, though it might be handy if you come along for the next set."

She raised an eyebrow. "Eh?"
"I have a feeling Kurosuki-taichō might be a bit difficult despite his orders."

Yoruichi rolled her eyes. "Tch."

"You always were good at winning friends and influencing people." Suì-Fēng's tone was more dry than caustic and she inhaled before adding "Maybe I'll help with that, I could do with a stretch."

Rukia shuffled through her work orders one last time after Ichigo headed off to start on his, using the time to finalize what she wanted to say. On their way to work they'd briefly discussed letting Ikumi know they might not be available for the next week and he'd asked her to do it since she was better with such things. She straightened the papers and put them in her bag. "Ikumi-san?"

"What?"

"I wanted to let you know that our availability next week might be limited."

That drew Ikumi's attention and she fully turned Rukia's way.

Rukia met her gaze steadily. "We'll probably know better by Monday and can call ahead."

A rueful smile crossed her boss's mouth. "...I don't imagine you'd tell me why."

Rukia glanced down before making eye contact again. "I'd also request that we not split up until further notice."

Ikumi crossed her arms under her chest and cocked her head to one side. "I told you that you don't have to deal with whatever's going on alone."

"We're not. It's not that I don't appreciate your desire to help, it's just that you can't. Even if I was to tell you, even if you believed me, it isn't something you could assist with. The best way for you to help us is to be understanding of a temporary imposition on our ability to help you."

Ikumi blinked at the resolve and earnestness in the young woman's voice. She suddenly seemed to have an unusual authority about her. Having the matter of who was really helping who turned around on her like that was also just a little unexpected. After a beat she smirked and looked away. "Wow."

It was the petite Shinigami's turn to blink.

After a second Ikumi took on an amused expression and her gaze returned. "No wonder Ichigo-chan defers to you so much. I'd ask if there was anything else you needed help or advice with, but it seems like you have it all well in hand."

Rukia's cheeks went slightly pink and she looked away. She'd been trying to keep her mind off the events of the previous evening given everything else they had to deal with but something about hearing her relationship with Ichigo phrased in such a way drew her thoughts to it. She only really had Yoruichi to talk to about such things, and she'd begun to wonder if the woman wasn't exactly typical in how she viewed such matters. Was it really so wrong to let Ikumi try and help with something? After a moment of indecision she crossed the distance to the other end of the desk her boss was leaning against and sat on its edge herself.

Ikumi tracked her with a raised eyebrow but said nothing. She eventually glanced askew, waiting.

Some time passed before Rukia ventured "... You said I could ask for advice."
"I did."

"And you said that you wouldn't judge or get embarrassed."

Ikumi uncrossed her arms and planted her hands on the edge of the desk, letting out a short but warm laugh. "I don't think someone like you could make me blush, Rukia-chan, and I like you. I'd never look down on you." She hazarded a glance toward her and did her best to appear comforting.

Rukia hesitantly met her eyes before looking forward again. There was another long pause. "He doesn't always . . . defer . . . to me. And I don't mean . . ." After trailing off she exhaled and decided to stop being quite so delicate. She was slow to start but quickly picked up speed. "We're . . . very serious. We were each other's firsts and it took time to get him to open up. He's always good to me and I always enjoy it, but sometimes . . . sometimes I feel like it's too good. He's been trying to get me to open up too and it's so easy to get lost in it. I don't know if that even makes sense . . ."

". . . If only everyone could have that kind of problem." Ikumi's tone made it clear it wasn't intended as mockery but more just wistful commentary. She cleared her throat before scooting along the desk so she was next to Rukia, finding her hands and taking them into her own before giving her a meaningful look. "There's nothing wrong with wanting him to make you feel good. That he wants you to feel good and express yourself is great—that's the way it should be. And if that's overwhelming sometimes, that's normal. Entrusting yourself to someone is hard."

Rukia blushed but found she couldn't quite look away.

Ikumi gave a genuine smile. "If he's encouraging you, it sounds like he wants to entrust himself to you too, and for both of you to find a balance. You shouldn't be afraid to take the lead and show or tell him what you want. It's okay to lose control, but it's also okay to take control. Just . . . treat it like you seem to everything else and do what feels right in the moment."

After a moment Rukia turned her head askance. She was unused to seeing Ikumi so invested and it was strange. It was also surprising how in agreement with Yoruichi she'd turned out to be.

Ikumi gave her hands a squeeze before releasing them. "Don't ever be ashamed about finding out or showing who you are."

Rukia looked her way again before nodding.

Ikumi clasped her on the shoulder and gave her a pat. She would've added something about protection too but for someone as sharp as Rukia it felt patronizing.

"I . . . should probably get going then." Rukia pushed herself off the desk and stood.

"Fridays tend to be slower anyway, so the two of you staying together is no problem. We'll figure out next week as it comes, okay?"

Rukia nodded more seriously, taking her meaning. "Yes." With that she headed for the door.

Ikumi couldn't help but whisper "Stay safe," under her breath.

Tatsuki kept her gaze intently upon the pinpoint of light that burned above her outstretched index finger. Sweat was starting to trickle from her temples and she felt short of breath but it was hardly the worst thing she'd ever endured. She just had to stay focused and . . .

"That's enough."
Something about Kūkaku's tone cut straight through her concentration and the point popped like a soap bubble. Her eyes swung to the woman—she looked contemplative, which was weird. "But—"

"How long do you think you were holding that for?"

Tatsuki blinked.

"By my count you did it for about 50 minutes."

It'd barely felt like a minute or two. "But . . . even so, it wasn't very impressive . . ."

Kūkaku rubbed the back of her head and sat up straight before leaning forward and smirking. "It's your second day, don't get any delusions. Besides, it'd probably be bad if you did anything too noteworthy."

The teenager scowled a little at that and looked away. Could something like what they were doing really be detected easily from a distance by people more attuned to such things? She'd been around her new mentor long enough to know when not to ask follow-up questions and she kept it to herself.

Kūkaku frowned slightly at that herself. "You can ask whatever's on your mind, you know." Her patience only tended to be tested by particular men.

Tatsuki made eye contact with her before the patio door opening drew the attention of both.

Karin stepped outside with a glass of water in each hand and a small towel draped over one of her wrists, shutting the door with a foot. She extended the drinks to both and once they'd taken them she handed Tatsuki the towel.

"Thanks." She dabbed at her face with it and started to quaff the water. Why am I so thirsty all of a sudden . . . ? Is making a stupid little dot of light really that tiring?

"Yeah, thanks." Kūkaku leisurely sipped at her glass before glancing to Karin.

Karin held her gaze steadily but said nothing. The pair hadn't exactly been concealing that they were training.

After a few seconds Kūkaku set the glass down and closed her eyes, exhaling. "I guess I should tell you what's going on. You've wanted to ask, haven't you?"

Karin didn't hesitate. "Yeah."

"Have a seat then."

Rukia rubbed her eyes before surreptitiously glancing from her notebook to Ichigo, finding he was yet again reading one of Shakespeare's plays. He always seemed to finish before her. She watched him for a second before looking back at her notes. She could barely focus on English words anymore but she still needed to put more time into studying them. After a moment's thought she came to a decision and closed her notebook, putting it back in her bag. "You've read that before, haven't you?"

"Huh? Yeah, a couple times, it's just been awhile. Why?"

"It's pretty boring to just go over these notes again and again, and all things considered we should probably stay in, so . . . could I read it with you?"

He blinked and lowered the book, turning to study her. He found she was already watching him.
She looked away with mild annoyance.

The corners of his mouth quirked up at that and he set the book aside for a second. "Sure. Come here."

She peered at him suspiciously but discerned his meaning, pushing herself up onto his lap and getting situated.

Ichigo got an arm around her waist and took up the book again, bringing one of his cheeks to rest against her hair and lifting it so they could both see. He opened it up to the first page.

Rukia brought an arm to rest against his and laid the corresponding hand atop his, helping to hold the book with the other so he could turn the pages.

"How about we read it out loud? We can each do different characters."

"I don't know that I would pronounce a lot of the words correctly."

"I'm the only one listening and making mistakes is part of learning, right?"

She went quiet at that.

He tilted the hand at her side back so his knuckles brushed her palm. "I know you like acting."

She scrunched up her face a little even as she splayed her fingers and pushed them down between his.

"I'll start." Ichigo focused on the book and lightly cleared his throat before beginning to read Duke Orsino's opening lines from *Twelfth Night*: "If music be the food of love, play on:/ Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,/ The appetite may sicken, and so die./ . . ."

Rukia listened with interest and faintly squeezed his hand as he drew near the conclusion of the monologue. When he reached the end of it she voiced Curio's line with due inquiry: "Will you go hunt, my lord?"

"What, Curio?"

"The hart."

"Why, so I do, the noblest that I have:/ . . ." he continued.

Chappy poked her head past the doorway as their conversation continued, confused as to the exaggerated tones of voice they'd taken on and the language they were speaking.

Kon did the same just above her.

"What are they doing, pyon?" she whispered.

"They're reading dramatically."

". . . What, pyon?"

"Like people playing characters on TV."

She blinked before very slowly and carefully moving around the edge of the door and quietly sitting by the wall, watching them and listening.
Kon's eyes widened as she entered the room and he tried to find the words to object but it was too late. After a time furtively considering the couple he snuck in after her.

Renji shoved yet another box into place with barely restrained aggression. "Remind me again why I'm helping you with your shop inventory."

Tessai held up three fingers. "Well... First, you're staying here for the time being and you need to eat, which means you need to work. Second, you promised the boss you'd do chores for three months last year, but you only actually did them for seven weeks, so you still owe him. Third, we can't have you wandering around and possibly drawing attention since everything is supposed to look normal, which is also the reason for the first item." Kūkaku and Ganju at least looked plausibly typical from a distance.

Renji clenched his jaw and felt an eyebrow twitch. That bastard Urahara, remembering something like that!? He didn't even answer my questions! It occurred to him suddenly that his questions hadn't ever been answered... mostly because the sōtaichō had recalled them so suddenly and he'd never had a chance to reiterate them, not that Urahara had been likely to answer them before the three months had elapsed.

"That's exactly right!" Urahara smiled as he walked into the storage room.

Renji did a double-take, still not used to seeing him in the attire of the Gotei 13. He scowled heavily at the object of his ire suddenly being present.

"However, I think your duties for the day are over." Urahara tapped the now vastly brighter sword he was carrying on his shoulder. "It seems appropriate, Abarai-san, that since filling this began with Kuchiki-san, it should end with you."

After a second of considering the sword and Urahara, Renji stood and pushed the box he'd been maneuvering into place with a foot, walking over to the shopkeeper.

Yuzu glanced sideways to where her cousin was seated at the dinner table. There was a stack of paperwork in front of her that dwarfed the couple sheets of that she and Karin had. "Kūkaku-ītōko, why do you have homework too? Are you going to school?"

Kūkaku looked up from the paperwork she was reading—something about staff expenses—with puzzlement before chuckling. "No, this has to do with family business."

"Eh?"

Karin piped up with "What kind of business?"

Kūkaku looked between the two of them. Was it possible that Isshin had actually kept his mouth shut about something for once? She was suddenly acutely aware of the massive picture of Ichigo and Rukia on the wall opposite her. Probably not. She decided to try and be circumspect even so. "Most of it has to do with property."

Yuzu blinked.

Karin made the connection to when Rukia had pulled them aside after dinner several weeks prior. She'd been disinterested in particulars at the time and Rukia had never actually stated what had been discussed the night before when Ganju had seen them home. For a stack of papers like that though, whatever it was had to be very serious. "Does it have anything to do with Ichi-nii and Rukia-nē?"
Kūkaku glanced aside in thought. She really hadn't expected to be the one to have to break the news. A few instants passed before she crossed her arms on the stack and leaned forward against them, looking between Karin and Yuzu conspiratorially. "Nobody told you, huh?" Her volume was low but not quite a whisper.

The twins shared a confused look before shaking their heads.

"Well, I guess I could, but . . . you'll have to promise to keep it a secret and to not get too excited, okay?"

Both girls nodded seriously.

Kūkaku smirked at their reactions. "The timing is completely up to them and I'm pretty sure it won't happen anytime soon, but these are about some things that'll occur between Rukia's family and ours as a result of them getting married someday."

Karin just stared blankly for a second before giving a big lazy smile.

Yuzu's eyes immediately went wide as a grin took hold of her face. It looked like it was all she could do to hold in a squeal.

Kūkaku couldn't help herself and gave them both a smile in return, extending one hand to each.

Ichigo idly brushed Rukia's hair. They were snuggled in bed together after having showered and bathed and had been quiet for a time, but neither was drifting off.

She lazily spun a finger across the fabric over the scar above his heart. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

". . . Don't."

He furrowed his brow in the darkness. "Don't what?"

She pushed herself up and back a little so they were face to face on the pillows. "Don't close yourself off from me that way."

He could tell she was searching his gaze from the reflections in her eyes and did the same for a time. "I wasn't really thinking about anything . . ."

She inhaled.

"I'm scared."

Rukia let the breath go, the lecture she'd started to prepare wiped away by those two whispered words. Her expression became gentle and she brought a hand up to cup his exposed cheek. " . . . Of what?"

Ichigo brought his head forward so the tip of his nose touched hers before tilting it down, her lips brushing his forehead as he pressed his face to her neck. He didn't want to give his fears a voice and he didn't even really know the words for them to begin with.

She blinked as he moved and brought her eyelids down, cradling the back of his head. A short time passed before she shifted in turn, guiding him down to her bosom so he could hear her heartbeat and
curling up with him, nuzzling his hair. "Fool . . ."

"I don't doubt you . . ." he murmured.

"I know."

"It's just—"

"Shhh. It's okay." She started to gently massage his neck. She knew exactly what he was trying to say because it was how she felt too. "It's normal."

Ichigo quieted at that and grasped her sides.

Rukia continued to soothe him for a long time until his breathing slowed and his grip slackened. She drew him close and stilled her hands, pressing her nose into his locks and focusing on his warmth. It took her a few minutes to calm her own mind and fall away with him.

Friday, October 11, 2002

Ichigo lightly squeezed at Rukia's hand in appreciation of her humming. She'd started doing it every so often when they were out walking to or from somewhere and it always seemed to put his mind at ease.

She stealthily glanced his way and found he was looking elsewhere. After a moment she squeezed back. "Thought about dinner?"

"Not really. I guess we should probably pick something up." He made a show of looking around at some of the restaurants that dotted Karakura's shopping district. They'd wandered off their usual route home from work since it was the start of the weekend.

Her expression became critical. "You always forget what nii-sama said!"

His turned self-righteous. "It's hardly living opulently to pick up food a couple times a week, and we're defraying the costs!"

They both abruptly tensed as an unknown and unusual reiatsu signature arrived not all that far behind them. It was subtle but it was definitely there. Their widened eyes immediately snapped to each other as there was only one thing that could mean. Rukia peripherally assessed the number of people around them—there were a sufficient number that it was unlikely someone would try and cause a scene, and they still theoretically had the element of surprise.

Ichigo came to a similar conclusion. He'd trust that Urahara and Yoruichi hadn't led them astray. He quickly composed himself. "Act natural." It was a whisper just for her.

She gave a brisk nod and did the same. "So are you offering to foot the bill from your paycheck then?"

"Maybe." The word held all the promise of a lead balloon. The source of the reiatsu was drawing nearer, as if at a walking pace.

"Make up your mind about whether you're being stingy or not! What do you have in mind then?"

"I picked up stuff last time," he complained. "What are you in the mood for?"

An unknown voice made itself heard to them: "Sorry for interrupting, but are you two from around
here?"

The pair stopped and turned their heads in unison.

Standing at a conversational distance behind them was Ginjō Kūgo, looking more or less the same as he had in Soul Society’s surveillance photo—possibly slightly more tanned, it was hard to say. "I'm visiting some relatives and I can't seem to figure out where the neighborhood I'm looking for is!"

Ichigo glanced to Rukia for a split second.

Her eyes found his in kind and in an instant a brief conversation played out between them.

Trust me, he asked.

Always, she replied.

I'm going to try something.

Go on then.

When Ichigo's eyes swung back to Ginjō they were hard as iron. "Stop."

The man instantly looked confused. "Uh, I'm sorry?"

"Just stop." He drew the hand holding Rukia's back to move her behind him before letting go of her and turning fully. It was less to shield her and more to give her the space and time to remove her limiter and get her soul candy dispenser if what he intended failed.

"I don't know—" Ginjō continued.

"Your name is Ginjō Kūgo, and you're here for me." Ichigo voiced it with the weight of a dead fact.

After a moment the act fell away from Ginjō's face to reveal a sneer. His eyes flickered to Rukia. "Huh! Did she tell you that... Kurosaki?"

Ichigo's tone grew cold. "Not important. Look at me."

The leader of Xcution let his eyes drift to the teenager's.

"I don't really care what your problem with Soul Society is. You haven't hurt me or mine. So walk. Piss off. We can forget this ever happened."

A long silence passed before Ginjō smirked. "Is that some kind of joke?"

"This is your one and only chance." The way Ichigo said it let it be known it was more than a promise.

"You don't really think he's gonna listen, do you, Ichigo?" Renji suddenly critiqued from behind him.

Rukia stole a glance behind her to confirm what she'd just heard. "Renji?!" She found him standing behind her plain as day in a varsity jacket, t-shirt, and jeans. Why can't I— Her train of thought stopped as she recalled the gigai that Kūkaku and Ganju had and her eyes took in his hard expression.

Ichigo didn't dare turn.
Ginjō likewise didn't move his eyes a millimeter. "And who's this clown?"

Renji took on a lethal smirk before withdrawing his soul pager. "Like I said, I don't think it's gonna work."

Rukia held silent for the moment, trusting in Ichigo.

"Yeah," the teenager admitted.

Renji lifted his brows at Ginjō before using a thumb to tap a button on the device's screen. "Too bad."

For a moment, nothing happened. Then sudden bursts of reiatsu rolled over them from each cardinal direction as Soul Society's blockade force arrived around the town.
Friday, October 11, 2002

Rukia’s eyes widened as she processed all the *reiatsu* signatures that flowed by her. She quickly identified them as Hitsugaya, Matsumoto, Shinji, Momo, Kensei, Mashiro, Rose, and Kira. A second passed before she felt another set burst into life—she wasn’t as familiar with them but interpreted them as belonging to Hiyori, Lisa, Love, and Hachigen. "Wha—"

Ichigo’s surprise was muted as he kept his focus squarely on Ginjō.

Renji took on a deadly serious affectation. "Seems like you should've considered the offer more carefully."

Ginjō’s shock broke as he turned to face the Shinigami and a cold fury settled over his face.

Ichigo turned his head slightly so he could look over a shoulder and see Rukia.

Her eyes met his and a moment that stretched toward eternity passed as she took in his resolve. She matched it with her own and no time at all passed before she nodded at him.

Ginjō was just starting to reach for his pendant when his attention shot back to Ichigo as a hand of the same closed around his windpipe.

Ichigo’s eyes were clear as glass and his grin was tinged with a lethal energy. "Why don't we take this somewhere else?!!"

In an instant they were gone, only the faint glow of Fullbringer light marking their departure.

Rukia stared for a long second before resolutely pulling out her soul candy dispenser and popping one of the pills into her mouth.

The Chappy that took her *gigai* immediately stood alert for orders.

Rukia was already withdrawing Sode no Shirayuki and smoothly commanded "Return home and report to your sister. Tell her to come here with Kon—we may have need of him."

The artificial soul nodded and took off. "Yes, Rukia-sama, pyon!"

Rukia turned. "Dance, Sode no Shirayuki!"

Renji had likewise already transferred control of his own *gigai* to a Ginnosuke and dispatched it after Rukia’s when he felt the cold flow of air that marked her *shikai*. He inhaled before striking his own stance. "Howl, Zabimaru!"

She scarcely waited until he’d finished before flash stepping along under the ballistic trajectory Ichigo was following. "Let's go, Renji!"

He set off after her. "What about everyone else?"

"They'll figure it out!"
Ichigo came down with Ginjō over a deserted industrial park in Naruki, smashing him through a roof and two floors only to be kicked out of the ensuing dust plume. He spun as he tumbled and landed on his feet, withdrawing his substitute badge as he skidded backwards to summon his Fullbring. He'd just come to a halt when it finished materializing and he brought his sword to the ready.

The Cross of Scaffold slowly swung out of the cloud of particles before Ginjō stepped forward. He absentmindedly wiped at a trickle of blood from his mouth and sneered before assuming a double-handed grip. "Not bad, not bad..." He swung the sword and pointed the business end toward his opponent. "But somebody sure is overconfident!"

Ichigo narrowed his eyes and launched forward without a moment's hesitation.

Inoue's head snapped up from her homework at the sudden waves of reiatsu that were screaming across town.

Tatsuki blinked, looking around. "This is—!"

Inoue had already gotten to her feet and was running for the door.

"Orihime!"

"Tatsuki-chan, please stay here! It's going to be dangerous!" Like that she was gone, the door slamming shut behind her.

Tatsuki stared in the direction she'd gone before furrowing her brow and looking down at her hands. She clenched her jaw and pushed herself up before following after, keeping her pace deliberately measured. She still wasn't strong and was going to have to pick how and when she chose to intervene very carefully.

Inoue turned her head as Chad came up alongside her. "Sado-kun!"

He just grunted in acknowledgement before sparing a look toward her. "It seems like... Ishida is already almost there."

She nodded, speeding her pace to try and keep up with his long strides.

He slowed slightly. "Inoue-san, we'll get there faster if I carry you."

She blinked before nodding again seriously, coming to a halt.

He did the same and turned, taking a knee and presenting his back to her so she could get her arms around his neck and shoulders and he could get his hands under her knees.

They were soon hurtling toward the battleground, she riding piggyback.

Hitsugaya scratched at his hair before he closed his eyes and exhaled, tracking what was going on at the boundary of Karakura and Naruki from atop a multistory building on the westernmost edge of the latter. "It seems you decided not to waste any time, Kurosaki..."

Matsumoto was already studying her soul pager's map. "You act like you've never met him before," she idly chastised. Their forces were neatly arrayed around the area. A few moments passed before several new markers appeared on the map, indicating Ichigo, Rukia, Renji, their friends, and
Xcution. She found it more notable what didn't appear, including Urahara, Yoruichi . . . and Isshin.

He let out a scoff and opened his eyes fractionally. "Yamamoto-sōtaichō will be pleased by his enthusiasm." His tone was chill.

She narrowed her eyes and stayed quiet for a moment. "Maybe we didn't leave him much choice."

"Maybe that's for the better."

"Maybe so!" a familiar new voice intruded.

Both spun around in surprise.

Isshin uncrossed his arms and crossed the distance, coming to rest between them.

"S—Shiba . . . taichō . . ." Matsumoto muttered. They'd avoided him in the aftermath of the battle in Karakura when the 4th Division had seen to him and Ichigo. She'd obviously seen the footage and photos of him so she knew what to expect, but actually seeing how he'd aged in person was something else entirely.

Hitsugaya quickly fixed his expression and faced forward again to comport himself nonchalantly. "Tch! Shouldn't you be off looking after your kids or something?"

"Kūkaku will manage fine."

Matsumoto looked over the state of his shihakushō. The pauldron was new. "You … kept the haori?"

He closed his eyes and rubbed the back of his head. "If I'm honest, I actually haven't been able to figure out how to get it off!"

She blinked, then twitched an eyebrow and punched one of his arms before crossing hers under her chest.

He ignored it other than to smirk.

They stood together in silence for a time. Finally Hitsugaya spoke up: "What are you really doing here?"

"I didn't feel like sitting at home," Isshin said soberly.

"You know that we're not going to—" Hitsugaya continued irritably.

"I know. It was my idea."

Matsumoto widened her eyes at that and turned to consider Isshin—he looked like he was carved out of stone. It hit her fully for the first time then: he'd known all along what his son was doing, and yet he'd stood by and . . . "What . . . what really happened to you back then when you disappeared?" she demanded.

Hitsugaya said nothing but looked aside.

Isshin rubbed the back of his head again and sighed. "Well . . ."
and Ginjō had crashed into. His eyes narrowed critically as he assessed the clash of their reiatsu in the distance—Ichigo's was increasing at an observable pace as they struggled. "Kurosaki . . ."

"Don't you think you should be more worried about yourself?"

Ishida's eyes widened and he spun about to find the five other members of Xcution arrayed some meters behind him. *Shit, was I that focused on Ichigo? . . .*

Tsukishima stood in front of the others with a sword idly in hand and the coldest smile—he was clearly the one who'd spoken.

Ishida squared up and adjusted his glasses so that the weak moonlight shone off them. "Five versus one, hmm?"

Tsukishima's eyes narrowed slightly as his smile widened and his eyes gleamed. "Is that a problem?"

A sudden bellow from above drew all their eyes upward. Xcution only just managed to scatter before Zabimaru's extended blade smashed into the rooftop.

When the dust and debris cleared, Rukia and Renji stood on either side of the tear that'd been gouged out.

"You probably could've hit him if you'd kept quiet," she critiqued, curling her fingers about Sode no Shirayuki's hilt.

"Probably!? Where's the fun in that anyway?" He smiled as he hoisted Zabimaru onto one shoulder.

Ishida moved to form a triangle with them, beset by a pentagram of the Fullbringers. "I could have handled it, you know." He left his thanks in his tone.

"This isn't going to be another 'Pride of the Quincy' speech, is it?" Renji's smirk only added to the amusement in his voice.

Rukia's eyes narrowed. "Who wants to take who?"

Tsukishima's unfazed smile was already in place again. "Just as cocky as your boyfriend, hmm?"

Her eyes locked onto his and hardened. "You'll do."

Riruka blinked and put her hands on her hips. "Wait, what? She's seeing that Ichigo guy?" Yukio had seen fit to show them some surveillance photos of them but she hadn't heard anything about that.

Yukio rolled his eyes sideways to her. "Don't say it like I'm the only one who didn't!"

She became animated at that. "Don't say it like I'm the only one who didn't!"

His reply of "Well, you were," was lost as she went off.

"Hey, you, short stuff!" Riruka continued, "What's somebody like you doing with that hottie?!"

Rukia blinked at how non-threatening the girl suddenly seemed and regarded her suspiciously. "Huh?"

Giriko sighed. "This is hardly the time to be—"

They all stumbled as the building shook, and only just regained their footing before an explosion.
rocked it violently. It began to lean to one side amidst the screech of metal supports coming undone and everyone jumped away as it tumbled down.

When the smoke cleared Rukia, Renji, Ishida, Chad, and Inoue stood opposite Tsukishima, Jackie, Yukio, Giriko, and Riruka.

Renji had a little grin. "You sure know how to make an entrance."

Chad just let out a hmph and cracked his knuckles by clenching both fists.

A dark silence spiraled out before an explosion in the distance punctuated Ichigo and Ginjō's skirmish.

Tsukishima inclined his head sympathetically. "Seems like the numbers are even now."

Rukia lifted Sode no Shirayuki and flickered forward to cross swords with him in a spray of sparks, her eyes narrowed to slits. "Everybody . . . !"

He pushed her back and disappeared, taking flight.

". . . Come back alive!" She followed after him.

All the rest quickly paired off as the focus of each of them narrowed down and they moved off into their own individual battles.

Urahara considered the faraway battle from the top of one of Naruki's taller buildings. "Oh, seems everything's going much quicker than anticipated!"

Yoruichi let out a "Tch" and pushed off the ledge she was leaning against. "What choice did they have? This kind of show of force put them in a corner."

There was a pause. "Isn't that better than a stalemate?"

"I don't know, is it?" Her irritation dripped into every word. After a moment she turned to face him, considering the glowing sword he held on his shoulder. The whole way the situation had been organized was vile, from letting Ichigo and company settle the fight while the rest of them looked on, to not returning his powers from the outset so he could do so quickly. It was a recipe for suffering. "Explain to me again why we didn't use that last night or this morning."

He tilted his head down so his hat hid his eyes. The prior evening he'd told Renji the sword required further calibration and he'd accepted that, but that hadn't really been true. "You know why." All cheer had fled his voice.

"I want to hear it."

His voice became hushed. "You've already heard it before." They'd gone over it so many times through the years, especially over the last one. She'd always objected before storming off, but she'd also always followed along with whatever he asked.

"Then tell me again!"

He said nothing.

She scowled and marched over to him, seizing him by the collar and shaking him. "Tell me as many times as I need to hear it to accept it!"
Urahara tilted his head back so they were eye to eye.

Yoruichi's anger fell as she saw how coldly he looked at her.

"It has to be natural, and it has to be them." Everything they'd done had been for the sake of making Ichigo and Rukia stronger. They had to be ready for what lay ahead of them; eventually nobody was going to be able to help either of them but the other.

Disgust took its place. "How long are you going to keep them twisting in the wind?! They're just kids, Kisuke!" They had a duty and an obligation to step in to help them along if and when they could. Ichigo had treated them as if they were his godparents for goodness sakes, and Rukia was—

He closed his eyes and lowered his head again. "So were we." None of it was fair, and none of it was right. But that was why this had to be done to begin with.

She abruptly let go of him at that.

He lifted his free hand to adjust his hat. "That's why they've got to be ready to do what we couldn't."

Yoruichi spun away from him and slammed her hands on the rooftop ledge, the impact sending shards of the facing spinning off. She very deliberately focused on her breathing and followed the reiatsu signatures flitting about in the distance. Ichigo . . . Rukia . . . everyone, I'm sorry. I'm really . . .

Urahara slowly walked up so he stood beside her, but knew better than to reach out to her when she was as pissed off as she was. "They'll win," he said quietly.

Her fingers dug into the facing and she got out through clenched teeth "That's not what I'm worried about."

He stayed quiet at that.

Rukia dropped out of flash step and slid to a halt on the finely manicured and dewy grass of one of the golf courses that dotted the Tama Hills area around Naruki. The sprinklers had apparently just shut off and the green sparkled under the distant glare of lights illuminating the still-open driving range. They hadn't gone too far from the industrial area, given it was on the city's outskirts, but they were still comfortably separated from it.

Tsukishima stood at ease and considered her smugly.

She brought Sode no Shirayuki ready with both hands.

He did nothing.

There was a moment of silence. She shattered it: "You're not the type to care about collateral damage."

The corner of his mouth flickered up. "That's true."

Her eyes narrowed. "So why here?"

"Oh, that's easy." He swung his own sword up, skimming the earth as he did so. "Kurosaki can't possibly reach you here."

She stared impassively. "Don't underestimate me."
He chuckled and took an open stance. "Impress me then!"

Yukio shifted his weight. "No pithy remark?"

Ishida only pushed up his glasses in response.

"You sure seemed confident of yourself earlier." He gestured with his off-hand as he pulled his handheld console out of his coat. "Sure must be annoying, being stuck fighting a kid."

Ishida formed his bow in his right hand. "It's unwise to think lowly of any opponent, no matter their age or disposition."

Yukio frowned at how sincere the words sounded. "Is that right?"

The Quincy calmly raised his bow to a firing position. *Soul Society had the least information on his ability out of all of them . . . what could it be?*

A moment passed and Yukio smirked. "I like your attitude, so I think I won't just delete you right off the bat!"

Renji crossed his arms behind his head and leaned back against a rather large metal tank, getting one ankle over the other.

"Not going to attack?" Jackie asked.

"Nah."

"What do you think you're doing?" Her voice took on a note of anger.

He opened his eyes fractionally, though his attention was wholly upon Ichigo and Rukia's *reiatsu*. "I'm taking a break until this gets serious."

"Unbelievable. This is a battlefield! You have to think of me as an enemy!"

He snorted. "Like I'd attack a woman first."

She gave a short, ugly laugh. "My, what a gentleman. But maybe your world's a bit small? Have you ever met a woman stronger than you?"

"Plenty." Renji's thoughts traced over memories of Yoruichi, Unohana, Suì-Fēng, and Rukia, among others, as his eyes slowly came to focus on her. Hell, Momo could probably still give him a run for his money if he didn't use his *bankai*. "But it doesn't matter if you're stronger or weaker. I won't attack first."

"Really? Then it's not your world that's small, it's your understanding of it."

He let out a "Tch," and looked away again.

"If that's how you are then I guess I don't have a choice. I guess I'll get this started." Jackie lifted a foot, summoning her Fullbring as she brought it back down in a stomp. "Dirty Boots!"

Renji looked back in time to catch sight of what seemed like some kind of old-school motorcycle outfit before she disappeared.
Ichigo stabbed his sword into the sheet metal that sped by him and twisted, using it to arrest his fall and spin as he used Fullbring to slow himself further. He swung his sword up and out to deflect Ginjō's as the man landed in front of him.

Ginjō brought it back round as if to chop him in half only for them to meet again in a hail of sparks. He smirked. "Just exactly what are you fighting for anyway, Kurosaki?"

"What's it look like, jackass!?"

Ginjō broke the stalemate by kicking him back along the warehouse's bay. "Don't give me some bullshit about the heat of the moment! Why are you even here with them to begin with?"

Ichigo flipped up off his back and got ready again.

"... No answer, huh? Then I'll tell you something else. It's a little story about the enemy you should really be fighting."

"Screw you," Ichigo stated. "You want to tell me about the badge? I already heard all about it... from Ukitake-taichō himself!" He gripped his sword with both hands and swung forward. "Getsuga Tenshō!

Ginjō's eyes widened and he only just barely managed to avoid the blue beam that cleaved the warehouse in two and exploded as it slammed into the far end.

Both Chad and Giriko stopped at the explosion that lit the sky from across the industrial estate.

"My, seems things are really getting out of hand." The latter turned back to former and lifted his one visible eyebrow. "Kurosaki seems quite impetuous."

Chad simply scowled and brought both fists up again. He'd only manifested Brazo Derecha de Gigante given his opponent had yet to pose a significant threat.

Giriko assessed him critically. "Hmph, not one for words, are you? Could it be that you're an imbecile with brawn for brains? Surely you must at least be wondering about this circle that surrounds us?"

Chad looked to either side. They were both within a rather large ring of baleful green light and he'd been keeping a mindful eye on it as they'd felt out each others' fighting styles, but it hadn't seemed to have had any effect.

"I suppose I might as well tell you: my Time Tells No Lies lets me make 'contracts,' with whatever conditions I so choose as long as they involve a 'timer.' Right now, the 'contract' is quite simple: if either of us leaves this circle before thirty minutes is up, it shall constitute a 'breach of conditions' and whoever departs shall receive the wrath of the 'god of time.'"

"Wrath...?" Chad muttered.

"In the event someone commits a 'breach of conditions' of a 'timer' that I have installed, then the target of the effects of that 'timer' will be incinerated without a trace by the flames of time."

Chad stared him down and clenched his fists. "... That's just a threat."

Giriko looked on unperturbed. "You may take it however you like."

"So... you're saying I just need to keep you preoccupied for thirty minutes."
A cold laugh emanated from the older man. "You think I'm not going to force you outside in that
time? Such impudence!"

Riruka shook her free hand as she fired another giant plushie from her Love Gun. "I know you're the
healer, but is this really all you can do?!"

Inoue watched without flinching from behind Santen Kesshun as the stuffed animal bounced
harmlessly away.

Riruka scowled and stomped a foot. "This isn't funny or cute, you know!"

After a moment Inoue's gaze firmed up and she dropped the shield, starting forward at a walking
pace.

The younger girl's eyes widened and she immediately brought the gun up to shoot, taking aim.
"Don't take me lightly just because I have a thing for stuffed animals." With that she fired a bulky
armoire with heart-shaped doors.

Inoue waved a hand, calling "Koten Zanshun!" There was a flashing beam before the piece of
furniture split clean in two and tumbled past on either side of her, sending up rooster tails of dirt.

Riruka's eyes opened wide at that and she tried again.

The bed frame that shot forward fared no better, easily cleaved in two as Inoue came to a halt some
meters in front of her.

A look of confusion crossed Riruka's face as she studied what was in her eyes. A sardonic smirk
replaced it. "Do you think you can finally kill me?"

Inoue blinked. "I don't want to fight you."

"Hah!? That's not what I'm asking! Be a little smarter! Do you think that if you fought me you'd be
able to kill me!? Let me tell you! That's self-conceit!" She smoothly squeezed the trigger again. She
then swung the gun down to one side and fired again, producing a dollhouse.

The dresser that came out was cleanly bisected by Tsubaki just like the last two objects had been, but
Inoue wasn't prepared for the little pink heart that came fluttering after it and affixed itself to her
dress. "Huh?—"

"I 'permit you!'"

Inoue didn't even have time to express surprise before she found herself in a very strange parody of a
home. She looked around. Even though it was dark and hard to see, she could tell the proportions
and textures of everything were wrong somehow. She'd just taken her first steps when Riruka's face
suddenly filled one of the windows and gave her a start.

She ignored her opponent freaking out and waving her arms around at her appearance. "Hah! My
Fullbring is called Dollhouse! It allows me to freely move people and things into or out of anything
that I adore or think is cute."

Inoue abruptly stopped. "Wait, you're saying that I'm tiny right now?"

"What?" Riruka squinted, finding her hard to hear at such a scale.

"Um . . . I like your dollhouse?"
"What?!" Riruka demanded.

Inoue slapped her hands over her ears at her volume.

"Hmph!" Riruka clasped a hand on top of the toy house and lifted the roof off, pushing herself up a kneeling position so she could peer down at the woman. "It doesn't matter. Let me tell you something. If you ask a human or an animal the rules everyone has to abide by in this world, most of them will reply that it's the 'law of the jungle'. Of course, there are strong and weak people, and the difference between them is clear. But it's not as simple as who kills and who gets killed. You've probably realized yourself, haven't you? The real 'law of the jungle' . . . is not that simple of a concept. I'll explain to you how our 'law of the jungle' works."

Inoue blinked and stared up at her as she monologued.

"The weak are meat; the strong eat.' That saying is just an illusion to delude the weak into believing if they work hard, they can become the hunters. They don't get eaten because they're weak, but because they're too few. The predators end up being the ones with greater numbers, but all they have is their incompetence and loud voices."

Inoue looked down and rechecked her surroundings, trying to think of a way out of her situation.

"We were scraps of 'weak meat.' People who couldn't figure out what the worth of their own power was, people who couldn't even protect their own family. Cast away. Our hearts and ways of using our power twisted. Fooling ourselves into thinking we were the personifications of god. With our stupid methods, we isolated ourselves completely. When he appeared before us, Ginjō said 'So the minority is supposed to just sit quietly and die? That's absolutely ridiculous. Look at history! Whether it be royalty or warriors, whoever had fewer numbers was defeated! It's not your fault. You've endured too much of this foolish world. It's got to be turned around. This time, it's our turn to bite back.' We—" Riruka sensed the change before anything else and realized she'd been looking off into the distance. She focused on the light streaming from the dollhouse.

"Sōten Kisshun! I reject thee!" Inoue called emphatically.

"Wha—" Riruka began, only to be sent staggering as a full-sized Inoue slapped her across the cheek backhanded. She spun from the force of the blow and stumbled forward two meters before whirling around in surprise.

Inoue took a decisive stance as the Shun Shun Rikka formed a lazy but tight visible spiral of dust about her. "I can understand your feelings, but they're no excuse for hurting people!"

The younger woman stood up straight and rubbed at the stinging sensation on her cheek. "Hah! Weren't you listening!? What are you going to do about it?!!"

Inoue's voice was hard as she finalized her decision regarding how to use Tsubaki in a non-lethal fashion—she didn't have to aim center-mass and if she went for a limb, then . . . she could fix it later. "I don't have to kill you to stop you."

Riruka's expression hardened. "That right there is the arrogance I was talking about!" She started forward—only to look to one side in surprise at the sound of footfalls coming from some nearby cover.

Inoue's gaze shot toward the source.

Tatsuki was already an arcing thunderbolt mid-strike, her face a mask of cold fury as she lunged with her right arm cocked all the way back, her fist aglow in white.
Riruka tried to swing her gun to track the new target, but she was simply too slow.

In an instant Tatsuki's fist snapped forward and twisted to meet Riruka's jaw with a jarring crack. Her momentum carried her forward along with it until she brought a knee home into the girl’s gut, using a modest kick as leverage to push herself backwards.

Riruka toppled sideways in a heap, out cold.

Tatsuki landed smartly on both feet some steps back, all angles. She’d fought enough that she didn’t shake from the adrenaline but the sweat beading at her temples gave away her rush in committing to the attack.

A beat passed before Inoue called "Tatsuki-chan?" What on earth was she doing there? And . . .

Tatsuki flicked her fingers open, dispersing the light. She took a second to loosen up and breathe, regaining her bearings and centering herself. She didn't dare look toward Inoue at that moment. A glance down at Riruka was enough to confirm her chest was still rising and falling regularly—she was out of commission but not critically injured or anything, yet it wouldn't do to trust she’d be down for the duration. She knelt and quickly undid the canvas belt she had on, having no great practical need for it, and set about securely tying Riruka's hands behind her back.

Inoue crossed the distance. "What—"

Tatsuki pushed herself up and spared her a look she desperately hoped was authoritative and reassuring.

Both their heads snapped to one side as the steady beacon of Rukia's reiatsu erupted into a supernova. It was soon followed by a much more modest spike in Ichigo's.

Tatsuki looked between the two and made a snap decision. "You can heal her later! We've got to help Ichigo, come on!" She immediately turned and started to make haste toward where she knew he was.

Inoue watched for a split second in confusion before taking off after her. "Right!"

Rukia tossed the broken remnant of the reiatsu limiter aside, her pent up power and the extra that it'd been collecting billowing outwards to create a gust possessed of a palpable chill.

"Scary," Tsukishima deadpanned. That eternally aggravating smirk intensified. "Do you really think that's going to help?"

"I've had enough of this," she declared. She was beside him in a flash and they clashed in another shower of sparks. She deflected and made to stab him, but he was already gone.

He stood some meters behind.

She spun to face him.

"I told you, your blade won't be able to cut me again."

She stared coldly.

He laughed. "You already know that my Book of the End allows me to insert myself in the past of the people I cut, which is why you've been so careful to avoid being hit. But surely you know by now that's not all that it can do."
Rukia squinted as she considered it. The traps that'd sprung out of the ground had made it clear his powers worked on inorganic material. When had he cut Sode no Shirayuki and how long had he been toying with her?

"Your sword's techniques . . . I've already seen them over and over."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. She swung Sode no Shirayuki upside down and was beside him in an instant, swinging but not at him. "Some no Mai: Tsukishiro!" The white circle was just forming when she saw a blade sticking out from just below left shoulder. She had no other sense of it being there. What—

By the time she'd turned he was a short distance away again.

She ignored the pillar of ice that formed behind her as she subtly tested her left arm. There was no pain, no wound, no impediment to moving it of any kind.

"I told you, I've seen your techniques before. Some no Mai: Tsukishiro, Tsugi no Mai: Hakuren, San no Mai: Shirafune . . . none of them will work on me."

Her expression hardened as she considered how he knew the names of her attacks before surmising it was because he'd just stabbed her.

"Well, come then, Rukia. Any technique you have devised so far is useless against me. Because I was the one who helped you develop them . . . along with Kaien."

"Don't say his name," she hissed, her vehemence surprising her.

He ignored it. "You're ever resourceful, so perhaps you're thinking that you might use kidô? I'll tell you so you won't despair later: I know the specific counters to each and every one of your kidô. Why don't you try one out, just to see if I'm lying? Maybe you'd like to try a twofold incantation like you did on poor Kaien?"

Her jaw clenched as he invoked that name again. Why did she feel such an intense loathing every time he—

"Or maybe . . ." he tilted his head back to look down his nose at her as he gave a sinister grin, "Maybe you're thinking about trying your bankai for the first time?"

Rukia's eyes widened at that before she composed herself. He didn't know its name—of course he didn't know its name! She hadn't told that to anyone but Ichigo—

Tsukishima twirled his sword idly. "That is, if you think you can even keep on against me! You know who I am by now, don't you, Rukia?"

She blinked and looked down as all the memories started to churn through her mind.

He smiled sadistically.

"Yes," she said softly, "I do."

---

The eruption of Rukia's reiatsu to its natural peak had sent Ichigo on the offensive and he'd pushed Ginjō back through sheer force of will. *I can end this right here, I can do it!* He finally felt like he was starting to get a read on his movements. Their swords came together in a mightily clash yet again. *Just give up already!*
"Don't get distracted, Kurosaki!" Ginjō's tone was a mockery. He'd had enough time to figure out the kid's attack patterns: he was strong, and he'd been cautious, but he was also uncreative—as he became more aggressive that was causing him to overextend more and more. It was the perfect opportunity to switch gears and change up his own style. Once he saw an opening he forced Ichigo's sword aside and used the moment to kick one of his legs aside hard enough to knock him down.

Ichigo abruptly fell to one knee and tried to bring his sword back around.

Ginjō brought the same foot he'd kicked with up to brace against the back of Ichigo's blade, while swinging his own down to crunch into his left shoulder.

There was a spray of crimson and Ichigo sharply inhaled at the heft of the impact.

"It leaves your defense sloppy and full of holes!" Ginjō kicked him onto his back and withdrew his own substitute Shinigami badge from a pocket. He bore a wicked smile. "Don't take it personally! You just lack the experience!" He affixed the badge to the guard of the Cross of Scaffold and a change came over it, the hilt morphing and acquiring a skull with a red X on its forehead.

Ichigo began to try and crawl backwards and free his sword from under Ginjō's boot.

"Tch! You're pathetic. Stop struggling." Ginjō grasped the upper grip of his sword in his off-hand and turned it downward before plunging it into Ichigo's chest. "I'm taking your Fullbring."

Chapter End Notes

Riruka's phrase "The weak are meat; the strong eat," is actually a common Japanese proverb, "弱肉強食".

The rest of this note will be disappearing in a few weeks. First of all, it's been awhile! I owe at least a small explanation: I knew where I wanted to go with these fights but not how to get there, so it took me awhile to decide on that. If you want to (sort of) follow along with my progress, I have a Tumblr with the pertinent part of the URL being "gunnerpalace".

Anyway, I'll be updating through the ending of fight with Xcution before embarking on another revision pass! This time I'm putting the changes up for public scrutiny. If you want to discuss your feelings on these in the comments or via private messages, feel free to do so!

- Format Change, Ellipses: Eliminate spaces between them (i.e., " ... " but beware the automatic single-character " … ")
- Format Change, Poems/Lyrics: Add a space ("[word]" → "[word] /")
- Dialogue Change, Urahara: "Tessai" → "Tessai-san"
- Dialogue Change, Yachiru: "Kia-chan" → "Rukki"
- Terminology Fix: All kotatsu should be chabudai given it's Summer/Fall
- Scene Change: The senkaimon only has one entry/exit in Soul Society, rework associated scenes (Rukia's investigation team departure, return of Ichigo and Rukia to Soul Society)
- Scene Change: Yoruichi is canonically a complete lightweight, so she nurses one drink very slowly while interrogating Rukia at the bar and mostly makes them for the
• Scene Change: Why the hell is Ichigo eating given he was knocked out of his body when Ukitake shows up to talk about Xcution?
• Scene Change: Expand a bit on Isshin's description of Ichigo's powers when he sits down to talk with Ichigo and Rukia
• Scene Change: Adjust Rukia's story of how she knew who Isshin was; everybody had left/been evacuated from Karakura in preparation for it being swapped out again when she and the others arrived in the aftermath of the Aizen fight
• Scene Addition: Renji's birthday party (the Wednesday of Rukia's return to Soul Society)
• Scene Expansion: The theme parks and onsen as well as shopping trips during Tokyo should be expanded to show, rather than tell
• Framework Change: Eliminate almost all instances of Ichigo and Rukia using nicknames (if they were going to have adopted them, they would've in canon)
• Framework Change: Eliminate most instances of titles (e.g., "the petitie Shinigami") in favor of names
• Framework Change: Reduce exposition on transportation in Tokyo (i.e., generalize subway routes/changes/stations in certain dialogue)
• Framework Change: Drastically reduce comma-qualified dialogue, let it stand on its own far more
• Framework Change: Consider removing instances of Ichigo and Rukia saying "I love you," outside of their confession and intimate scenes, they're not really the types for that
• Framework Change: Eliminate a few really in-your-face narrative statements and let things speak for themselves more
• Framework Change: streamline some of the narration regarding their feelings toward intimacy, it's a bit ham-fisted and final considering their progression is anything but
Friday, October 11, 2002

Tsukishima twirled his sword idly. "That is, if you think you can even keep on against me! You know who I am by now, don't you, Rukia?"

She looked down as all the memories started to churn through her mind.

He smiled sadistically.

"Yes," she said softly, "I do."

He was about to say something when her _reiatsu_ swelled tremendously. The air was thick and heavy with the pressure of it and . . . it was different somehow. He was distracted by a sharp snapping sound from above. He looked up at the pillar of ice behind her, finding a hairline crack had split its surface. There was a pause before fractures spread with a terrible screeching crunch to cover it in an instant, and then a low rumbling groan filled his ears as it began to calve apart.

He could feel her power begin to flow by him, almost imperceptibly at first—not just blowing past but starting to push against him from the left. He realized it was starting to spiral clockwise as huge chunks of ice started to crash down. His eyes returned to Rukia.

The grass around her mostly seemed dry all of a sudden. She was visibly sweating and he became aware that as flecks of ice came close to her they melted. He didn’t have time to consider the matter before the grass around her _waraji_ caught flame.

His eyes narrowed down. He _knew_ she’d never done anything like that before. _What the hell is—_

"You're . . ." Her head rose, her eyes unseeing of anything in the present.

He stared at the flickering flames that were reflected in that raw, grim expression.

". . . The one who stood by when I killed Kaien-_dono_ . . ."

What was left of the ice pillar exploded in a shower of particles that glimmered from the moon, the distant lights, and the flames below. Her _reiatsu_ began to whip around him, alternately lashing him with piercing cold and searing heat. _What—_

". . . The one who did nothing when I was lost . . . The one who did nothing to save me . . . The one who did nothing to help Ichigo . . . The one who did nothing when I killed Kaien-_dono_ again . . ."

He scowled in growing disbelief. _Her powers have to do with ice!_ The flames began to spread and the shattered ice came down as a kind of rain but did nothing to douse them, until they were abruptly snuffed out. Her _reiatsu_ ebbed for a moment and the grass was once more dewy. It abruptly erupted forth again with the seeping chill of a winter’s gale, turning all the droplets to diamonds.

". . . I can forgive all that. I can forgive you for hurting me. What I cannot forgive . . . is that you are here to do harm to Ichigo!" She lifted Sode no Shirayuki and took it in both hands, drawing it to her right side as she pointed it forward.
Tsukishima's eyes went wide as he saw her gaze clear and focus upon him. He realized he didn't even have time to try and adjust her history. What was her bankai? He had no choice but to get clear and—

Rukia's eyelids came down in judgment. "Bankai! Hakka no Togame!"

Ginjō watched with disinterest as Ichigo's armor disintegrated and his Fullbring was absorbed into the Cross of Scaffold to be traded with his own. He didn't bother to study the look at the kid's face—what was one more?—but his eye caught the clatter of the substitute badge onto the warehouse floor. When the last traces of it were gone he promptly turned and hefted the sword over one shoulder. "Hmph. Time to clean up the rest of this mess."

He'd only made it about four meters away when Ichigo's voice halted him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Ginjō's eyes widened in surprise at the fact of the utterance, then the words themselves, and finally the tone behind them—they were laced with a latent menace. He abruptly frowned. **Even if the absorption attack didn't actually injure him, there's no way he should still be able to fight!** He slowly turned.

Ichigo was standing, albeit only just. His head was bowed so his face wasn't visible and he was clutching at the gash in his left shoulder with his right hand, which somehow wasn't bleeding nearly as much as it should. There was some kind of weird pattern around it under his skin and he was breathing hard, visibly shaking, and awash in a blue glow.

After a moment of incredulity Ginjō looked down, tracing the shimmer to something that looked ridiculously similar to a lightsaber, albeit flattened and with a pointed end. "What . . . ? You're joking."

Another shudder rippled through Ichigo from the rush of blut vene before he withdrew his hand from the wound and brought it onto the seele schneider, taking it up into a proper defensive position. It took a conscious exertion to stand up straight but at last he lifted his head to face his opponent again.

Ginjō glared at the resolve he saw. "What the fuck is this?"

Ichigo steadied his breathing and smirked. "I'm swimming in Rukia's reiatsu . . . even at this kind of distance." She was a brilliant full moon lighting the darkness of the world and basking in her light filled him with the greatest pride he could ever recall. "You really think . . . I'm going to disappoint her . . . by letting something like this stop me?"

Ginjō stared before his brows furrowed and he brought his Cross of Scaffold ready. "I was gonna spare you and your friends' lives, but if this is the kinda thanks I get . . ."

Ichigo's smirk disappeared beneath an ugly and deadly placidity. ". . . Nothing's gonna stand in my way." He crossed the distance between them in a blink.

Tsukishima groaned and extended his right arm, slamming the pommel of his Book of the End through the ice-encrusted grass and using it to drag himself forward. His legs had frozen solid up to the middle of his thighs and shattered off when he'd tried to move. Most of his left arm was gone too. All of him would've been in the same state if he hadn't almost cleared the lethal radius.

He could see Rukia standing perfectly still and if he could just get close enough then he could make her pay. His wounds were too extensive to use high speed movement so he'd settled for crawling.
He stopped mid-thought as a geta sandal came down over his wrist with a decisive clack, pinning it to the ground. He watched as a woman in black and orange carrying something glowing suddenly appeared before Rukia in the distance and began to fret over her. Another geta smashed into his hand, kicking the Book of the End away to skid across the ground. He tried to look up at the owner of the pair of legs in front of him.

"My, you're not very bright, are you?" Urahara's tone was as frigid as the frozen wasteland that surrounded them.

"What's it to you?"

"Your first mistake was simply taking for granted that her powers had to do with ice, rather than wondering whether that might be the product of some other process. Then again, you can probably be forgiven that considering you lack any formal education . . ."

Tsukishima's expression darkened. How did he know that?

"Your second mistake was assuming she had no other friends nearby who would help and that it was prudent to try and seek revenge in your condition. Even considering the inaction of the Shinigami, that was stupid."

Tsukishima tried to look up again as he realized his sight was getting blurry.

"You should be aware of your third and final mistake right about now. Going to all that effort to struggle here elevated your heart rate and raised your core body temperature, but your wounds are . . . messy. Perhaps you feel light-headed and cold? Maybe your vision has already started to narrow?"

Tsukishima weakly tried to free his wrist as his sight constricted around the image of Rukia in the distance. Shit . . .

Urahara's voice was distant. "You don't have long now."

Rukia heard a sharp crack as she began to thaw but didn't have time to consider it before Yoruichi appeared in front of her.

Yoruichi's eyes snapped down to her hands and she immediately took the right into her own as she began to work a healing kidō. It was impossibly cold and stung like nothing else—she was going to have to fix herself afterwards. She took in a labored breath and put it aside as best she could while her eyes found Rukia's. "You just don't listen. Haven't I told you before that you have to take it slow your first time?"

Rukia wasn't able to blush at the innuendo and couldn't move her eyes yet. She was left to consider the pained expression on the woman's face.

She could see herself in the reflections of Rukia's eyes and forced a smile as the nerves in her right hand went dead. "It's beautiful. I'm sorry more people couldn't be here to see it. They'd be very proud of you." Despite the pain her smile widened. She couldn't quite bring herself to say it.

Rukia's eyes moved, only a little at first, and searched her expression, before finding Urahara in the distance—Urahara and . . . What had she done? For a third time she'd . . .

Yoruichi moved in closer so she took up the entirety of Rukia's field of view. "Hey, hey, just focus
on me. Take it slow. You've got to take it slow. It's gorgeous but it takes a lot of discipline and control. Rukia? Rukia, look at me."

Her head suddenly felt so fuzzy and strange, like it was being scrambled—or unscrambled?—but her eyes returned to Yoruichi's at the command. They looked so warm. She was too distracted to really process the sounds of the opening and closing of the gates of Hell, and never saw them.

"I'm very proud of you, Rukia."

The layer of frost on Rukia's cheeks started to sublime as the ornaments on her hair and clothing shattered off. She let out a breath that billowed from the chill she still radiated.

Yoruichi gave a mild grin and began to focus her kidō upon herself. Her hand was frostbitten at the very least. She'd managed to restore most of her range of motion and feeling by the time the rest of the frost was flaking off of Rukia and finally let go, standing up straight and stepping back. She brought up the reiatsu sword in her left hand and spun it about the hilt to present it to her junior. "I'm sorry we only just got here, but I know you're ready to go. Ichigo needs you."

Rukia brought her left hand from Sode no Shirayuki to it without delay, nodding seriously and only maintaining eye contact for a further second before flash stepping away.

Yoruichi stood still for a time before sighing and returning her attention to her right hand. She didn't move as she heard Urahara approach. ". . . So did you put him out of his misery or did you just let him bleed out?"

He said nothing.

She finally finished and turned, finding him standing there with his head down such that his hat hid his eyes. She furrowed her brow. "Are you sure the effects of a Fullbring really end completely when the user dies?"

He tilted his head back just enough that they could look each other in the eyes at that. The truth of that should've been obvious in Rukia's affect.

Yoruichi studied him for a moment further before walking up to him and slipping her arms around his torso. She wouldn't vocalize her thanks and knew she didn't have to.

Urahara closed his eyes. He didn't like how plainly she saw through him. "We had to give her the sword at some point."

"Shut up."

He went quiet. A few seconds passed before he got his arms around her waist.

Inoue and Tatsuki rounded the last corner to the warehouse that Ichigo and Ginjō were in when they stopped at the sight of the state of it. It wasn't a small building and half of it was on fire, while the rest was scarred with all kinds of horrendous damage. Neither had an opportunity to comment as one of the nearer walls was blown apart by Ichigo being sent flying through it. They ran over to him calling "Kurosaki-kun!" and "Ichigo!"

He pushed himself to his feet, seemingly no worse for wear—his clothes were torn and slashed in several places but he still only had the one injury. "Inoue—Tatsuki!? What are you guys doing here? It's dangerous!"
"We're here to help!" Inoue declared.

Tatsuki settled for just nodding.

Before Ichigo could say anything his head automatically turned toward the breach he'd made.

Ginjō casually stepped through it, clad in armor that looked like bone, and paused before casually swinging his sword sideways in a half arc, obliterating what remained of the warehouse with a Getsuga Tenshō. He'd taken his time in following up, having elected to dispense some of Ichigo's powers to Jackie, Yukio, and Giriko. He continued onward slowly as the building collapsed into a burning wreck behind him. "Whatever you did, Kurosaki, I'll admit you're one tough son of a bitch now—but you hit like a girl."

Ichigo brought the seele schneider up again. Ginjō hadn't managed to injure him, but he'd likewise only been able to nick his armor. If he switched to blut arterie he could probably win, but any damage he took was going to be a big problem . . . "I'll take that as a compliment, and don't talk about my mom."

Ginjō scoffed before finally noticing the two girls. "Hmm? What's this?"

Tatsuki's eyes went wide and she grabbed at one of Inoue's arms to pull her away.

Inoue stood firm despite the insistence behind Tatsuki's grasp and withdrew her hairpins, holding them out in front of her.

Ichigo started forward right as Ginjō did.

Before they could meet a convex triangular shield appeared in front of Ginjō's sword. As he hit it his blade instantly came to a halt in a burst of air while a beam shot from the center of it, lancing right through him. He staggered backwards, clutching at the wound.

"Shiten Kōshun," Inoue grimly stated.

Ichigo's eyes widened as he jumped back. "Inoue, when did you—"

"It's been eleven months since you lost your powers, Kurosaki-kun. Sado-kun and I haven't just been standing still for all that time. We believed all along that one day, you would regain the power to fight. That's why we swore to ourselves, both me and Sado-kun, that when that time came . . . we would be strong enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with you."

Ichigo blinked but didn't take his eyes off Ginjō.

The man in question stood up straight and smirked. "Heh. How cute. I guess we really are going to have to step things up." He hefted up the Cross of Scaffold and brought it ready as it started to glow.

Inoue formed up the bubble of Santen Kesshun around them but Ichigo was already gone, having shot beyond its confines.

Just as he was about to bring his sword forward to strike Ginjō's he became aware of the most important reiatsu in all the world streaking toward them. Before he could even fully process the idea she flickered into existence between them. Rukia—

She was facing away from him and had brought up Sode no Shirayuki to block Ginjō one-handed.

Ichigo immediately arrested his motion at the sight of her raven-black hair and the sensation of
radiant power that flowed off of her. The speed of everything seemed to slow down tremendously. Right as he felt a sharp pain in his chest he became aware that there was far more blue backscatter lighting everything than there should've been from just the seele schneider alone. His gaze drifted down from the back of her head.

Held backwards in her off-hand was a glowing blue sword, blade down. Steam lazily spiraled away from where her hand rested upon its hilt. His eyes traced along its length to find it extended right through his chest. His shirt had been torn enough for him to see where it pierced him and there were no signs of the telltale pattern of blut vene. His vision wavered for a moment as a memory filled him: It's just like . . . that night . . . His eyes tracked up toward her again.

"Tsukishima sends his regards." Her tone was colder than a grave.

Ginjō sneered, although the man's death wasn't exactly news to him.

"Rukia . . ." Ichigo whispered. He watched as she smartly turned her head to one side and for just the briefest moment he caught sight of her eyes. They were aglow with pride.

There was a flash and the world disappeared.

Renji watched the cloud of steam that enveloped Jackie with disinterest, rubbing at the back of his head. Am I supposed to just knock her out, or what? This is such a pain in the ass . . . He blinked as it finally started to disperse. Her outfit had changed somewhat—the fur collar around her neck had grown longer and extended down her arms. There was also . . . He raised an eyebrow. "What's that motorcycle engine doing on you?"

She tapped at it. "This? I'm surprised, Shinigami know what bikes are?"

"Hisagi-senpai brought one over from the Living World awhile ago. Made a ruckus in the Seireitei and got his ass whooped by the taichō. So? What's it there for?"

She smirked and the engine abruptly revved, beginning to disgorge sludge over her. "The boots are only a part of it now . . . all of the filth that covers my Fullbring shroud becomes part of my power!"

Renji narrowed his eyes.

Jackie stomped a foot again and shattered the ground into gigantic eruptions of dirt and rock before blinking toward him, pirouetting over top of him and kicking as she landed behind him.

He moved around the kick, watching her.

"You have good reflexes! But that isn't enough!" She pivoted and redirected, slamming her foot square into his solar plexus, pushing off with her other foot to make it a flying kick. I finally got him. It's over.

He slid back a meter or so and then abruptly stopped.

Her eyes went wide. Impossible. There's no way . . . even with all this extra power, that's all I could move him with my attack?

"Alright, I've had enough." He sounded serious for the first time and stood up straight again, gesturing toward himself with a hand. "Hit me with your best shot. Come on."

She considered him in open disbelief before her face contorted with fury. "That's the kind of attitude
"you're going to regret!" She swung up a leg and spun, slicing through the air with a roundhouse kick aimed square at his head.

He blocked her leg effortlessly with the wrist of his off-hand and didn't even move as the shockwave tore apart the building off to one side of them.

She was frozen in shock.

He nonchalantly grasped the hilt of Zabimaru with his other hand and smashed the pommel of it forward into her gut.

Her eyes went wide as she doubled over, all the air knocked out of her. Her vision was narrowing and she could scarcely hear him over the roar of her heartbeat in her ears.

"Sorry, but these past eleven months I've been training to be able to fight *Aizen*. Man or woman, you lot just don't cut it."

Jackie fell to the ground. *Who the hell . . . is Aizen? . . .* 

Renji studied her for a moment before turning his head to follow Rukia's approach. There was only a few seconds' delay before Ichigo's minimal *reiatsu* exploded into a massive skyward-soaring column. He smirked. "Heh. Well, it's about time." He cast another glance at Jackie before picking her up and getting her over one shoulder, heading toward the new beacon.

Chad considered the cloud of steam Giriko had disappeared into. He hadn't been able to make much headway against the man despite the differences in their builds. He was unnaturally strong for his frame. It hadn't taken much insight to determine that was a result of one of his 'contracts.' He frowned slightly as the vapor began to dissipate and he could see the change that had come over his opponent's outfit. *Are those . . . floating clocks?*

Giriko looked down at his hands with awe. "This is the power of Ichigo- *san*'s Fullbring . . . ! It feels as though youth is overflowing from within my body!"

Chad's eyes widened. "Ichigo's . . . ?" He'd been distracted by his own fight and turned his head toward where the battle with Ginjō had been raging, contemplating what he could sense from that direction. Inoue and Tatsuki were there and something was indeed different with Ichigo, but—

"Now, prepare yourself! You yourself shall experience the wonders of your friend's powers with your very body!" Giriko declared, extending a hand in challenge with his palm upturned.

Chad's expression became dour as he conjured Brazo Izquierda del Diablo. "Someone like you couldn't possibly harness Ichigo's powers."

"What . . . did you say? Surely you can't think whatever that is could possibly make much more of a —" He stopped as Rukia's *reiatsu* rolled over them.

Chad automatically followed her progress until she came to a halt amongst the others. He once more glanced to Giriko before his focus was pulled back again by the bloom of Ichigo's *reiatsu*.

*Kūkaku* was standing on the back porch of the Kurosaki residence following the echoes of *reiatsu* in the distance when Karin opened the door and stepped outside. She glanced toward her cousin and felt something like a smile tug at her lips before reaching out a hand and turning away again.
Karin moved up beside her such that the hand rested on her opposite shoulder, leaning against her side.

She patted there before squeezing reassuringly. They stood together in silence for a time. It proved hard to track the fine course of events from such a distance but there was no mistaking smoke from fires and the blossoming of Rukia's pearlescent white reiatsu, let alone its subsequent changes in character.

Karin tensed and quietly took in a handful of Kūkaku's skirt at those.

It was when Rukia's signature stabilized and rocketed back toward the others that Kūkaku narrowed her eyes.

Soon thereafter a beam of golden yellow reiatsu shot into the sky.

Karin audibly gasped at the sight. "Ichinii..."

The scattered clouds began to curl about it before it burst outwards into a column, blowing them away. Black electrical arcs jittered along it at random.

The door slid open again as Ganju and Yuzu stepped out to join them. The latter stammered "Is—is that onii-chan?" She hadn't been able to sense much of anything else but it had been impossible not to notice the glare of that.

Ganju grinned. It felt nostalgic. "Oi, oi, that's the Ichigo I know!"

Kūkaku smirked and nodded, brushing Karin's shoulder. "Yeah. Reckless as usual."

The flare of energy sank and resolved itself into a brilliant point of light that burned steadily for a time before it disappeared completely.

Kūkaku raised an eyebrow and pulled Karin close as she felt her tense again.

Ishida slapped a hand on the ground and forced himself up into a kneeling position. The gravity of the game world had gone up yet again—he couldn't be sure by how much but he estimated it to be around six times normal. He'd had to start using ransōtengai to move at anything like normal speed, and even it did nothing to help with the burning sensation in his chest. He braced his dominant hand with the other and lifted it to take aim, destroying another few dozen of the digital apparitions that were closing in on him.

"It's really not fair. No matter what I do to the environment you're blatantly overpowered," Yukio complained.

The details of the game dissolved and Ishida craned his neck back to search for the boy's image above. The projection that greeted him gave him pause—he looked different... what were the things over his ears?

Yukio smiled coldly. "Anyway, I need this storage space back. Luckily for you, loading save data takes less power than deleting it."

Ishida blinked before squinting. Before he could do anything he abruptly found himself on the ground outside. With his lungs no longer being crushed he sucked in several deep breaths before vaulting to his feet, immediately scanning for Yukio and opening fire.
His arrows struck home but the target in question merely dissolved into pixels.

A tut-tut from behind made him whirl about.

"Digital Radial Invaders. Thanks to Kurosaki Ichigo, my Invaders Must Die has now invaded the world outside the screen!"

A grim look took hold of Ishida's features as he began to calculate. His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden blast of reiatsu off to one side and after noting that Yukio was captivated by it he turned, considering it. It was so very obviously Ichigo. His focus shifted from the massive whirlwind of energy to the various signatures at its base. The situation had clearly evolved while he'd been confined. It was shortly after the outburst had collapsed and condensed back around Ichigo that he returned his attention to Yukio and promptly began firing again without any preamble.

The same thing happened as before. "I was admiring the show, you know! You really are rude," a voice behind him declared.

He turned again, his irritation starting to show in his motions.

Yukio adopted an ambivalent expression and lifted one of his gauntlets, tapping at it. "Whatever, let's go to our 'chatrooms' and put an end to this."

Ishida looked from side to side as that pixelated effect began to creep skyward around the two of them.

Ichigo opened his eyes to find the situation much changed. The fire that had consumed the warehouse before him had died to embers and Ginjō stood atop the rubble, significantly further away than he had been—that made him irrelevant for the moment. He knew instinctively from Rukia's reiatsu that she had moved behind him and he turned to face her, swinging Zangetsu off his shoulder and stabbing it into the ground as he unconsciously reached toward the wound on his chest. It perfectly overlapped the old scar. Some part of him noted his body by her feet. "Rukia," he repeated, finding she was looking right into him.

Her little smile widened as she briefly looked him up and down. Basking in his reiatsu properly again had given her goose bumps and seeing him a shihakushō just sent another frisson across her. It's so good to see you like this again—she considered the collar and the odd straps for a moment—no matter what strange ornaments you might be adorned with. Her eyes returned to meet his. "It has been awhile, hasn't it, Ichigo?" Her tone was proper but pleased.

Their eyes lingered on one another for long moments before a creeping pattern of black pixels rose up between them.

She blinked as she noticed the box that was forming up over the remains of the warehouse and began to start forward. "Ichigo?"

"Rukia!" he called, only for the wall to abruptly complete itself.

She stared at the black plane, momentarily lost for words at the sudden total absence of his reiatsu.

Inoue hesitantly dropped her shield, studying the giant cube in front of them before forcing her attention away. "Ruki!" She jogged across the short distance between them. "Are you okay!?"

Rukia blinked before looking to her and nodding, uncertainly at first. "I'm fine." Whatever injuries she'd sustained from her bankai weren't notable—Yoruichi had seen to that. She looked about,
spotting two other cubes. "What—"

She stopped mid-sentence as Renji dropped out of flash step nearby, hollering "What the hell are these things!?"

"Yukio," Jackie muttered.

He blinked and looked sideways to her. "You're awake already? You're a tough woman."

"Who could stay unconscious with that kind of racket? I'm awake, but I won't be able to move for awhile."

He scoffed and shifted her off his shoulder, laying her out on the ground. "So talk."

Rukia calmly and deliberately walked up to them. "Yes. Please do."

She was followed by Inoue and Tatsuki.

Jackie considered the assemblage before looking up at the sky. "I don't really know more myself; we only just received these powers from Kurosaki Ichigo, but that effect like something on a screen . . . it must surely be Yukio's doing." She glanced to Renji before turning her focus to Rukia. "You should finish me off now."

". . . I've had enough of that for one day," Rukia said frostily. She didn't want to think about that at the moment—there'd be time for it later.

". . . Why aren't the two of you in one of these?" Tatsuki asked, pointing at Renji and Jackie with two fingers.

Jackie sighed. "Yukio is really proud, he probably decided from my reiatsu and Riruka's that we'd already lost. He's never liked either of us anyway."

Inoue blinked as she abruptly remembered that Riruka was still tied up. "Um—"

Rukia turned to consider the cube that Ichigo was in. "How do we break these?"

"You likely can't," Urahara stated, having appeared from somewhere.

She blinked and looked sideways at him before her eyes settled uneasily on the pocket dimension again.

"Excuse me, but the girl I fought—" Inoue began again.

"Don't worry about her," Urahara said cheerily.

Everyone gave him a dubious look at that.

"What?" He produced a fan and covered his face with it.

Riruka opened her eyes with a wince. She tried flexing her jaw before deciding that was a bad idea. Her eyes widened as she realized her wrists were bound. Everything that'd happened came rushing back right as she noticed an unfamiliar pair of boots in front of her.

A woman's voice greeted her: "Having a little trouble? I'd say that girls these days are all talk and no muscle, but that wouldn't really be fair to Tatsuki."
"Who—" Riruka tried to look up but was thwarted in both speech and motion as she was hoisted into a fireman's carry. She immediately began to wriggle. "H—Hey! Put me down!

Yoruichi rolled her eyes and tightened her grasp. "That skirt's really short, you know. You should stop thrashing so much unless you want to flash everyone in creation."

Riruka flushed and instinctively drew her legs together as she ceased to struggle.

A smirk took hold of Yoruichi's mouth. "I bet they're striped." Someone dressed the way she was probably couldn't help but be so predictable.

"Like it's any of your—" Riruka began indignantly, only to clamp her mouth shut as she was borne off at tremendous speed.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Tatsuki muttered.

Yoruichi tilted her head back slightly. "They won't be a problem."

"Don't look down on us!" Riruka demanded.

Jackie said nothing and just kept her gaze on the sky.

"Please try not to move," Inoue insisted, focusing on using Sōten Kisshun.

Riruka grumbled but lay still.

Rukia continued to stare at the huge box before turning about, taking in the other two. Honestly, I should be more worried about Ishida and Chad . . .

Renji caught her expression out of the corner of his eyes. "They're both tough too, you know."

She looked to him before glancing toward Urahara, who appeared to be studying the surface of the edifice, and back again. She sighed and closed her eyes. "Shouldn't we be in communication with the reserve force?"

"They're under strict orders not to interfere unless it becomes absolutely necessary."

She opened her eyes to slits and considered saying something before the patter of running drew her attention.

Chappy bolted up to her in her gigai, one fist clenched. "Rukia-sama! I got here as quickly as I could with Kon, pyon!"

Rukia forced a smile and extended a hand. "I knew I could count on you. Thank you for hurrying."

Chappy nodded seriously and dropped the mod-soul into her hand.

Rukia made her way over to Inoue, suddenly glad for a distraction. "Sorry to interrupt, but is Ichigo's body fully healed?"

She nodded. "It's okay. I'm just finishing with all of them now." Only another moment passed before the light of Sōten Kisshun dissipated.

Rukia waited for a second further before kneeling down and opening Ichigo's mouth, dropping Kon into it before tilting his head back.
Riruka covertly watched.

Kon bolted upright, stopping as he realized he was face to face with Rukia. "Nē-saaan!" He immediately went for a hug.

She frowned and simply stood again so he grasped nothing but air. "Chappy, please take Kon to the Kurosaki household to eat if possible, afterwards return home with him."

Chappy was beside her in an instant, hauling Kon to his feet. "Yes, Rukia-sama!"

"Hey, unhand me you—" Kon protested, only to stop and grasp his stomach. "Why am I so hungry?"

Rukia watched them go before exhaling and making her way back to the jet black wall of the pocket dimension, placing a hand on its surface. Ichigo . . . She stood there for some time before a hand came to rest on her shoulder. She turned her head halfway to find Yoruichi considering her.

They shared a look before Yoruichi patted her and let go, making her way over to their two new 'prisoners.'

Chapter End Notes

In canon, Tsukishima managed to successfully overwrite Sora and Oscar in Orihime and Chad's memories, which is pretty substantial. However, I don't think he could overwrite Ichigo, Renji, Byakuya, or Kaien in Rukia's memories—the first three have (tremendous) ongoing roles in her life that would make them hard to usurp, two of them are actively present, and the role of the fourth was so tragic and so final (I mean, she killed him twice) that it seems ridiculous he take that position. Much like he was apparently some generic partner or mentor to Byakuya, he becomes the same for Rukia. But, her past is also such that everyone but Ichigo deserted her at some point, so that doesn't work out so hot for him on the loyalty scale. (It also seems to take awhile for his alterations to take full effect.)

It's never specified that Hell is for souls that committed grievous crimes in the real world, only Hollows, but it only makes sense and if anybody would know a way to expedite (or avoid) that process, it's Urahara. (It's strongly implied Tsukishima has killed before.)

My theory regarding Ginjō is that he didn't just take Ichigo's Fullbring in canon, but mostly swapped with him. The reason is if Ichigo didn't still have one, there'd be no reason for his shihakushō to be as different as it is. Ginjō also mentions that Ichigo is physically stronger because of the Fullbring he "gave him," which doesn't make sense if he no longer has one. I surmise that Ichigo, both in canon and here, has Ginjō's old Fullbring. (And could theoretically still summon it using the substitute badge; their object affinities don't change.)

Although in canon Ginjō appears to cut other members of Xcution to transfer powers to them, I'm assuming this isn't necessary and there's a moderate range to it for narrative purposes. (Since there are a bunch of fights already in progress.) Same with Yukio's chatrooms.
The Jackie-Renji fight is relatively canonical, and Renji is still quoting names to Jackie she'd never recognize because that's just Renji.
The Forces I've No Pity

Chapter Notes

I have no excuses for taking so long to get another chapter posted.

Friday, October 11, 2002

Ichigo stood within a realm of infinite gloom and considered Ginjō at a remove, a scowl set on his face and Zangetsu held ready at his side.

His opponent wore a smug sneer.

Some brief time had passed when the inky black began to peel away in strips and streams of pixels to reveal a familiar daytime cityscape.

Ichigo glanced to either side, keeping Ginjō in his sight, and finally looked around properly once it seemed clear he had no intention of moving. They were floating in the air above the place. "This looks like... Karakura?"

"Interesting, isn't it?"

Ichigo returned his focus to Ginjō.

"I thought this would be a comfortable scenario for you to play in. Aren't you happy? We can fight one versus one."

Ichigo grimaced, even as he became aware of a cackle echoing from somewhere deep in the recesses of his mind.

This stupid bastard thinks he's alone in here with you... Ah, but we both know that's not true at all, don't we—King? Zangetsu grated.

A corner of Ichigo's mouth twitched. Yeah, uh... Nice to see you again too, but this isn't really the time...

That simply prompted a cruel grin from the apparition. I think it's the perfect time, partner! How about you shut the fuck up and we kick this guy's ass so we can get back to the Queen!? Ichigo tried to look deeper within himself to find the other entity he had called Zangetsu—the old man—but the only sense of him he had was his presence. His eyes abruptly fixated on Ginjō. Oi.

What?! Zangetsu snapped.

Rukia told me you helped her.

... So!?

Thank you, Ichigo finished sincerely.

Within Ichigo's inner world, Zangetsu hissed out a dismissive Tch! only to widen his eyes for a
second in recognition as Ichigo's narrowed.

Even the old man's attention perked up.

In that instant, Ichigo was already in motion. He'd taken a step back with his left foot and turned that way, crossing his right arm over his chest to wind up a swing, although he kept his left hand free.

The whole movement was fast—too fast—and by the time Ginjō processed what was happening, the blade had already careened down and up again, like a pendulum completing a stroke. He didn't have time to see that it was the flat back of the blade that was leading, and was transfixed for a moment by the steel and resolve in Ichigo's gaze, until a wave of blue fire roared to life between them.

Ginjō barely had time to grow wide-eyed before it crossed the distance and enveloped him. He was caught up in the wash of it and dragged along for some distance before he managed to jump out, landing on a rooftop.

His armor was smoldering as he looked up and called out "Hah! Yeah, your Getsuga Tenshō is more powerful now... but that's it! This isn't enough! You can't kill me with this, Kurosaki!"

"Idiot," Ichigo said quietly.

Ginjō's eyes snapped open again as he realized the voice originated from behind him. He jerked his head to one side to look over a shoulder in disbelief.

Ichigo continued: "That wasn't Getsuga Tenshō. It was just the sword pressure." He'd simply swung the blunt side of the sword through the air so fast that the latter was compressed and friction-heated into plasma, like what happened during a spacecraft reentry.

Ginjō's pupils shrank as he turned to face Ichigo.

Taking in a breath, Ichigo brought his feet shoulder width apart and crossed Zangetsu over toward his left, grasping his right wrist. His irises flashed electric blue before an identically colored aura bloomed from the sword and began to billow skyward, licking at the heavens like a flame. There was also something else in the air: a metallic howl.

"What—What is... What is this reiatsu!?” Ginjō demanded, backing up and gaining both altitude and distance.

"... Getsuga Tenshō," Ichigo stated, his face a mask of lethal calm. He drew Zangetsu to the right, and swung. So much had happened over the past few months, and he had known such joy, but today—tonight—he had stared down the possibility of losing it all again, and that could simply never be allowed to happen.

The long suppressed and ignored feelings had started to surface slowly, like oil percolating from beneath the sea to its surface, and the stream of them had only grown. He let them free at last, and they flowed through him in a great surge of darkness. He seized hold of it—all the pain, all the hate, all the loneliness—and he poured it all into that one swing.

The air shimmered, then rippled, and finally roared as across three-quarters of a full arc electric blue light burst into blinding life and surged forward like a solar flare.

Ginjō watched with disbelief as the sweep of energy approached him, until his face contorted into a mask of gleeful hate.

Ichigo's eyes snapped wide as the attack was suddenly cut in twain, flying off beyond Ginjō on
Ginjō held his sword aloft a moment longer, before himself husking out "Getsuga... Tenshō!"

The attack whipped down at Ichigo just as quickly as his own had gone out, and he only flash stepped out of the way at the last moment.

As the ground below exploded, Ichigo flickered back into his previous position, the right sleeve of his shihakushō singed and smoking. "Yeah, you used that on the warehouse... makes sense you know how to cancel it too. Let me guess: you can do everything I can."

Ginjō's brows furrowed as he narrowed his eyes in reply.

Ishida ran through corridor after corridor, utilizing hirenkyaku to flicker out of the way of lasers and occasionally spinning to snipe missiles that tracked after him. Though he passed door after door, it was clear to him that Yukio was behind none of them.

He'd had enough time to observe the environment fully: its reishi concentration was higher than previously, and Yukio hadn't been altering physical constants... It seemed that, as they were enclosed within a pocket of reality rather than a digital creation, either his control was lessened or he wouldn't change things that would impact him too. It also seemed that the constructs he made were manifested via reishi, perhaps from outside. In any event... I have a decisive advantage.

A monitor featuring Yukio's smug face soon appeared, following alongside him. "Ahahaha! Are you even looking for me properly? Or do you need some stupid line like 'I'll kill that woman!' so you can power up with the strength of love?"

Ishida simply frowned in reply and looked ahead, continuing on with his effort to triangulate the boy's position. He couldn't afford to dally in this dimension for much longer. Who knew what was going on with Ichigo and the others?

Chad lifted his left hand in front of him and clenched it into a fist, his knuckles audibly cracking. He held it for a second before flexing them out again, keeping Giriko's leering visage in his line of sight beyond the blood and bone tone of Brazo Izquierda del Diablo. Just trying to run out the clock... isn't cutting it... Beyond his opponent, that strange darkness hadn't much changed.

Giriko's snide grin widened. "It seems I was right about you after all: just an imbecile with brawn for brains. Look at you, wondering why your abilities have no effect! Since dispatching you will take no time at all, shall I tell you about my power?"

Chad's frown deepened, but he said nothing.

Giriko took the silence as Chad's acquiescence in order to live a little longer and began in earnest: "In the Kutsuzawa family, there is a 'Good Luck Watch.' My grandfather and my great grandfather kept this watch with them at all times. Because of that, seemingly, they were able to pass through their lives without any ill fortune. Neither of them was touched by the flames of war that ravaged this country, and nothing was able to bring down the Kutsuzawa house. My father, however, died of sickness early on. He passed that watch on to me at a young age."

As the man droned on, Chad reviewed his options, but they were slim. He was going to have to use La Muerte, but what if Giriko's assertion was true? He could try to leap and fire it downward, but...

Without any concern whatsoever, Giriko continued on. "Holding it, I thought to myself 'When I'm in
times of trouble, if I just put my hopes into this watch, things will work out. To me, there is no god other than this watch. 'As you might guess, being a Fullbringer, it did rather more for me than my predecessors! 'As ten, then twenty years passed... I mistook the power of the watch for my own power... I wanted to test just how far its power could go. So, a long story made short, I deduced its real power was to 'kill someone without touching them.' I tested it out by trying to kill my wife—just by looking at her. And it worked.'

Chad was snapped from his thoughts by the admission, both for its nature and its frankness. "What...?" How could someone... possibly even think to try something like that...?

"Yes, for seemingly no reason, my wife collapsed and lost her life. Oh, yes, as she was dying, I lost my commitment and for a moment I thought 'I want to stop this.' In that instant I lost an eye." Giriko gestured at his strange band of an eyepatch, his expression suddenly solemn. "And I knew then... that this ability of mine isn't a prayer to God, it's a contract with God."

Chad stared at him in disbelief.

Giriko cocked his head to one side and produced that ugly grin again. "Enough! Time's up! The only way to teach an individual like you... is to destroy you with brute force!" A knob simply labeled "3" emerged from his left clavicle, and he reached up to turn it with his right hand.

In the time it would have taken Chad to blink, Giriko grew into a huge, hulking monstrosity, his muscular bulk ripping his clothes apart and his skin taking on a strange green hue. Chad's eyes narrowed as he settled on a choice.

Giriko gave a sinister grin, flexing his biceps up in the air like a bodybuilder. "Behold! My Time Tells No Lies allows me to do even this! My contract with the God of Time gives me greater strength the simpler our clauses become! My current contract is for the simplest, most brutal 'strengthening of power!' I am now unmatched by any in the field of pow—"

Chad had already lunged forward during the speech, his left arm swung back and disks of energy forming at each of the fingertips on his left hand. He was expressionless as he clenched them into a fist and struck forward, his arm naturally rotating as it went, like a rifled bullet. He struck home against Giriko's solar plexus and sneered as he stated "La Muerte."

For the briefest instant, nothing happened. And then Giriko was flying backwards. A skull of sickly green fire flared into life along the perimeter that had been set at the start of their fight right before the man sailed through and past it.

Giriko hit the ground in a daze and had just enough time to begin "This is impossible, what—" before flames of the same color enveloped him utterly.

Chad flinched at the sight, and saw him toss and flail helplessly amid the blaze for but a moment, then decisively turned his head to one side. Even if he didn't watch, he had to listen to the screaming, which went on and on while the blackness dissolved back to the industrial estate.

Suddenly, the green light consuming Giriko shot skyward, and the gates of Hell rose from the ground behind him.

Chad turned away entirely and squeezed his fists until he heard the screaming abruptly stop, and the gates slam shut and break apart. Left at last with silence, he looked down at his hands. Ah, Abuello...

"We don't have to tell you anything more!" Riruka said. She crossed her arms under her chest and turned her head to one side as if that was all there was to it.
Renji twitched an eyebrow as a vein pulsed on his forehead. "You—"

"Forget it," Yoruichi suggested. Neither Riruka nor Jackie had tried to fight or escape—not that they'd get anywhere with so many Shinigami around—and that was good enough for her. She glanced over at Rukia, who was continuing to watch the box Ichigo was in, and then focused her attention on Urahara. "Have you got anything?"

He turned his head and gave her one of those looks from beneath his hat that told her no, and that it vexed him.

She quirked her lips in annoyance and frowned, then looked to Inoue. "Hey."

Inoue quickly realized Yoruichi was talking to her. "Hmm?"

"Do you think it might—" Yoruichi began, only to stop as she detected Chad's reiatsu again all of a sudden. Of the other man, there was only the faintest trace...

"Sado-kun!" Inoue gasped. She bolted upright and took off toward that box.

Yoruichi turned to see it dissolving, along with the weird light of... Shit...

"Hey, Orihime, wait!" Tatsuki called, chasing after her.

"Renji, go with them," Yoruichi instructed, keeping her voice controlled. Of the people outside, he probably knew Chad best, excepting maybe Inoue.

He opened his mouth to protest but, given her expression and tone, decided not to argue. Urahara, Yoruichi, and Rukia could deal with the prisoners rather easily by themselves, and it wasn't hard to figure out Yoruichi's train of thought. He took off with flash step in the same direction as the girls, deciding it was likely better that he got there first.

Riruka frowned and leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees and hiding her face against them.

"I guess Giriko didn't make it either," Jackie remarked. She shut her eyes and tilted her head to one side. "He always was kind of an asshole, but..."

Yoruichi crossed her arms too, looking toward Chad's reiatsu. "...But he was still your comrade?"

"Yeah," Jackie muttered. They hadn't been close, and she hadn't liked him any more than Tsukishima, but... two dead in one night was still a lot to process. It wasn't easy to feel the deaths of people you interacted with all the time, friends or not. She imagined it was more confusing for Riruka—she was always putting on that snotty act, but...

Rukia watched the three and looked between them, where she knew Chad was, and the box Ichigo was stuck in several times. Her eyes narrowed as they lingered on the last, and she turned away, using flash step to make her way toward Chad as Renji had. Ichigo would be fine without her there, and she had a responsibility to be present for Chad too. That was what a friend would do.

Urahara silently noted her departure, and gave up on his pretense of studying the surface of the pocket dimension to move alongside Yoruichi. It was pretty clear what would actually cause the barriers to drop at that point. "We should go too."

Yoruichi said nothing and started to walk in the direction all the others had gone.

Urahara stayed where he was until Jackie got up and helped Riruka to her feet, and followed behind
as the former led the latter along.

Renji arrived at the site of Chad's battle first simply because he was faster than Inoue and Tatsuki. A quick scan of the scene revealed nothing out of the ordinary, which was perplexing in and of itself—there were really no signs of conflict whatsoever.

He focused on Chad himself, who was standing there rather rigidly, looking down at his hands. He... definitely killed that guy. Even without all the evidence, it was written all over his affect, although it was different from what Renji was used to having seen—most people got the shakes and threw up afterwards. Was he still in shock?

Renji approached slowly and stopped at a respectable but conversational distance, trying to think of the right thing to say. Their time training together at the Urahara Shop to fight Aizen's forces came to mind, but he cast the words rather differently—mildly. "What's the matter, done already, Sado?"

Chad balled his hands into fists and looked up, facing away from Renji. There was a long pause. "He told me that the way he learned the true nature of his power was by killing his wife with it." He didn't bother adding that it had been a fight to the death—he wasn't in the mindset of excusing himself, and it seemed obvious.

Renji's mouth started to drop and he produced a grim scowl to keep control of his features. He was struck, for a second time that evening, by memories of the night he and Byakuya had taken Rukia back to Soul Society. He swallowed the thoughts and focused. That explained the gates at least. "... Tch... A man who kills a woman is scum. Living as scum... one might as well die."

Right then, Rukia dropped out of flash step about where Renji had initially. "Chad! Are you alright?"

Chad said nothing at first, but slowly relaxed his hands. The circumstances had been what they were... but since when did two wrongs make a right? Still, Rukia had also... and yet there she was, worried about him. He forced himself to state "I'm fine," and looked around, noting the other two pocket dimensions. He couldn't feel the reiatsu of Ichigo or Ishida and frowned. "So they're—"

"Sado-kun!" Inoue called, rounding a corner onto the scene, Tatsuki right behind her. They ran up beside Rukia and drew to a halt. "Are you injured!?" Inoue asked.

Chad took a second to shake his head. "Ichigo and Ishida are in those?"

"Yes," Rukia affirmed. She could guess what he was feeling from how flat his normally rich voice sounded, and maneuvered closer, past Renji, to stand beside him. It was hardly the first time they'd stood together on a battlefield, and she reflected on that for a moment.

She then placed a hand on his nearer wrist, just touching it, and pitched her voice low. "I know you, Chad. And I know how hard this is. Believe me, I do. But I also know that whatever happened, it happened because you had no choice. You did what you had to do. I know you're a good person. Please remember that."

Chad clenched his jaw for a long while. "You too," he finally said.

Rukia gave a slow, grave nod in reply, patting his arm and withdrawing her hand. A few words wouldn't solve anything, but hearing them early enough might still... make things less bad. She took in a slow breath. It'd turned into an ugly night, and it'd probably only get worse. Would Ichigo and Ishida also...
The five of them stood with their own thoughts even after Yoruichi, Urahara, Riruka, and Jackie arrived.

Yukio's attention shifted to one of the monitors detailing the other pocket dimensions, drawn by the sudden shift of its readout. He scanned its static dispassionately. "Oh. Ah, he died. You always were such a geezer, Giriko—no imagination, and you never shut up. Well, it's not a surprise that you died as you lived."

He'd just turned off the monitor's feed when the sound of an explosion filled the room and a piece of the door embedded itself in the wall above his console.

Yukio looked over one shoulder to find Ishida standing in the ragged scar that had once been the entrance to the room, his glasses gleaming as though they were silvered. "Ah. Welcome."

He got up from the chair casually. "So you were finally able to get here. I was starting to think you'd never find me. Were you able to power up because of all the traps I left around?"

Ishida said nothing, contemplating his next move.

"You don't look tired in the least. That's not heroic at all," Yukio chastised.

Ishida simply lifted his bow. This kid was talkative, but he'd already long since decided to follow Ichigo's one-time advice of 'If you're going to shoot, shoot; don't talk,' for this battle.

When the dust cleared from the hail of arrows he launched, a shield was in front of Yukio, whereas everything behind him, including the console, was completely obliterated.

"That's rough. What if I'd hidden a bomb in the next room? Both you and I would be blown away."

"You don't have the nerve to do something like that, and my rate of fire would tear any bomb apart before it could explode," Ishida rebuked.

"Rapid fire, cool," Yukio taunted, dragging out the last word.

"I have little interest in talking to you," Ishida replied, cold as a winter's day.

Yukio brought his hands to his sides, starting to make the confines of the room disintegrate. "I don't want to force you either."

Ishida watched without taking his eyes off the boy. The space they were in seemed large enough to encompass the entire area he'd run through, if not more. "Redecorating? A useful power."

Yukio sneered and pointed a finger at him. "Didn't you notice? This whole place is my power. I'm like a god here."

With a small adjustment of his glasses, Ishida said only "I see."

"I'm not sure you do. You know, gods can do anything. For example." In an instant a giant beast of some kind had materialized behind Yukio. "Something like this."

Ishida looked on passively. "What does god need with a monster?"

Finally, Yukio's expression soured. He began to work at his control gauntlets furiously. "Why... do you keep on making fun of me!? You brat!"
Ishida was gone before the monster's fist slammed into the spot he'd been standing on.

"Don't just dodge it!" Yukio called, "Are you scared!?

"Then make it impossible to dodge. Are you restraining your power?" Ishida countered. It was abundantly clear that his opponent was easy to provoke—he might as well exploit it.

Yukio lifted one gauntlet as if to control a marionette. "I am! Do you want to see what happens... when I go all out!?!"

In an instant, Ishida was aware of the manifestation of many more reishi constructs. The space was suddenly filled with them.

"You can't escape," Yukio gloated, "Even if you leave this room, the other rooms and walls and ceilings and floors are all my power! They're set up to chase you wherever you go and crush you!"

He tracked Ishida around as the latter flitted about between the oversized enemies. "Come on, attack! I'll kill you! You're just some spoiled brat who grew up pampered in a nice and warm environment! Someone like you can't win against me!"

Ishida made a calculation, at the same time noting the limit of Xcution's intelligence on him. "I see. You must have been abandoned." The impact on Yukio's demeanor was immediately obvious, he saw it in the boy's eyes.

"No! I wasn't abandoned! I was the one who abandoned those stupid parents! I chose it myself! You have no right to criticize me! I transferred all of my father's money to my own accounts and destroyed his company! Children can develop amazing abilities if you neglect them. They were idiots for not realizing it! When I heard on the news that he committed suicide, I felt so—" Yukio's rant abruptly ended as he realized Ishida was right behind him because of a hand on his shoulder. He jerked his head to one side to look over it.

"Thanks for the power up," Ishida stated, shoving Yukio away.

The boy stumbled right into the middle of a sprenger formation, his legs being bound up in reishi. He was sufficiently short that it kept snaring his hands too. He couldn't reliably reach for his gauntlets. "Shit... !"

Ishida stayed behind him, just outside the snares, calm as ever. "Aren't you forgetting about the things set up to find and destroy me? Shouldn't you cancel that command?"

At that, Yukio looked up and around in horror. They were converging from all sides. His eyes bulged and he screamed in terror as all his erstwhile minions closed in for the kill.

The amount of ambient reishi meant Ishida required virtually nothing in the way of time to prepare. He called out "Licht Regen!" and leapt into the air, showering the space all around Yukio with arrows.

By the time he landed again on the other side of Yukio, nothing stirred except for the two of them.

Yukio's screaming had ended. His eyes wide, he let out a short "Hah?" before beginning to laugh hysterically. "What's that!? You're saving me in the end!? Yeah, right, I see! You're pitying—" He broke off as Ishida just suddenly shifted, going from directly in front of him to some meters away in no time at all.

Ishida knelt down next to one of the seele schneider that outlined his sprenger, producing
gintō from his uniform. "Pity? No, this is expediency. I need these dimensions to disappear. So, let's make a deal."

"Eh...?" Yukio mumbled. What was he doing? "Wa—Wait! Just wait!"

Ishida was direct: "Draw up your arms quickly. If you make this dimension vanish, I won't activate this."

Yukio visibly trembled. He didn't know what the formation did, but it couldn't be anything good. "Shit... I'm... I'm... I'm not scared!"

The main group all noticed the failure of the pocket dimension Ishida was in at the same time, their heads tracking over to it. It was immediately apparent that both he and Yukio were still alive, and they all began heading that way with haste.

On their collective arrival, they found Yukio still restrained within the sprenger, and Ishida still standing at its periphery. The former was clearly agitated. "I've done enough! Let me go!"

The group as a whole decided to hold commentary, seeing that Ishida was uninjured and had control of the situation.

Ishida pushed his glasses up his nose. "Not yet."

"Why!?!" Yukio demanded, noticing the new arrivals. He frowned upon seeing Riruka and Jackie with them.

Ishida turned to his friends. "Urahara-san, could you perhaps restrain our new guest in a more compact fashion?"

Urahara obliged him and pointed an index finger at Yukio, yellow light shining off it. "Rikujōkōrō."

As Yukio found himself trapped by the six rods of light, Ishida withdrew the seele schneider, deactivating the sprenger formation. He began to move around in a circle to gather up the others while everyone else moved in, and finally stopped beside Yukio. He tipped his head back, the box Ichigo and Ginjō were in reflected in his lenses.

Yukio glared at him before tracking his gaze and frowning. "Oh. Can't undo that one."

Rukia had also followed Ishida's focus, and glanced at Yukio out of the corner of her eyes. That didn't escape Renji's notice, and after a second considering the matter, he very deliberately unsheathed Zabimaru in a slow and audible fashion.

"W... What!? I'm not lying!" Yukio protested. Did you know? Fullbringers and Substitute Shinigami can trade and share their powers. When we signed up with Kūgo, as a sign of our new comradeship, we all shared our power, and he shared his with us. And we all made a small promise that can't be broken. My promise with Kūgo is... 'As long as Kūgo is within my ability's range, dispelling it is impossible without his explicit order.'"

Glances flickered back and forth among those assembled, before they all turned to look at the box.

Rukia grimaced as she considered it. It's impossible... Even if all of us here now prepared a big attack, or even if we called in the reserve force as well, we still couldn't destroy that dimension? I can't believe it. I don't believe that such a power exists...
She looked at Urahara for a split second, only for an electric tearing sound to drag her attention back. Her eyes widened as she saw a split form in the side of the dimension, blue light shining out from within it.

Yet again, Yukio went bug-eyed. "Wait! What... What's happening!? No way... It can't be destroyed! What the heck... is happening inside!?!"

Rukia stared in recognition as, with a sudden roar, the box blew itself apart in a tremendous explosion. Pixelated debris rained down about her and the others amidst a gust of *reiatsu* so overwhelming as to be made physically manifest, her hair and *shihakushō* blown back and whipped about by it. Still, she stood steadfast. *This is... !*
Friday, October 11, 2002

Ichigo flung another Getsuga Tenshō at Ginjō, sensing the same attack being thrown toward him at the same time. He'd gradually started to pick up on the fact that the ones Ginjō fired had his own reiatsu associated with them, and had found he could track them on that basis. He'd figured it out at the exact same time that Zangetsu had criticized him for not getting it yet.

He was already moving before the two waves of energy smashed into one another and cancelled out. He burst through the resultant conflagration with flash step, only for his pupils to contract as he found a blade centimeters from his face and closing fast.

In an instant, Ichigo spun a meter to the side, the tip of the Cross of Scaffold scraping across his cheek as he went and adding a crimson ribbon to his corkscrewing motion. He swung Zangetsu underhanded as he whirled, cleaving through the armor covering Ginjō's left clavicle with a satisfying, bone-crushing crunch.

As Ginjō flinched and adjusted his guard, Ichigo skidded to a halt in midair, clawing through the atmosphere to slow himself.

Nary a moment passed before they leapt at one another again, crossing blades in a shower of sparks as they put their weight behind them, glowering and grimacing at each other.

Ichigo frowned at what he saw in Ginjō's eyes—the emotions on display in them. As he'd told Gin long ago, he had never been able to really discern an enemy's mind in the heat of battle, and yet...

"You're fighting well," Ginjō said, apparently intending it as an earnest compliment given his tone. His expression, however, was rather mocking. "It's like you don't care what happens to you at all though."

"You're wrong," Ichigo countered.

"Sure. You're just fighting to the best of your ability, that's all. So let me ask you again: right now... what are you fighting for?"

Ichigo's brows furrowed in puzzlement. "What do you..."

"We're the only ones still fighting," Ginjō stated with certainty.
For a moment, Ichigo lost his focus, his eyes widening.

It was enough of an opening for Ginjō to end the stalemate, breaking Ichigo's guard and forcing him back. Although this seemed to create something of an opening, he didn't follow up on it, standing openly and easily. "Tsukishima was already dead before we entered this place, and Riruka and Jackie had been defeated as well. Since then, Giriko's died and Yukio's lost too. It's just us. Also: when a Fullbringer dies... all traces of their ability will disappear."

Ichigo's confusion became mixed with an undercurrent of shock.

Ginjō went on speaking without a care in the world. "Presumably, everything any of them managed to achieve, other than this pocket dimension, has already immediately gone back to normal. Even your girlfriend's likely edited past that Tsukishima 'slipped' his presence into will have reverted to its original timeline. And so that brings me back to my question: just exactly... what are you fighting for, Kurosaki?"

Gradually, Ichigo's gaze hardened again.

"Still no answer! You think that you got the whole story from Ukitake!"

Ichigo glanced down as he reflected on that meeting in Urahara's training room.

For his part, Ginjō continued his speech. "What did he tell you? Do you think he told you out of the goodness of his heart, or because he didn't need to keep it a secret anymore since you're fucking his subordinate?! Do you think a honeypot isn't the oldest trick in the book?!"

*Let's just kill him for that,* Zangetsu hissed in the recesses of Ichigo's mind.

"We were both conned! By the most peaceful man in the Gotei 13 himself! Ichigo! He wanted to observe us, to control us, and to use us as Soul Society's pawns! And above all, to execute us should we rebel!"

Ichigo noticed the sudden shift to using his given name instead of his surname, but didn't immediately know what to make of it.

*Crome on, partner! Imagine how this bastard would look with his throat slit, the sudden shock on his face!* Zangetsu continued.

"This truth is known by everybody in Soul Society except you! You think they showed up as your backup?! Ichigo—they're leaving you to die!"

*Or better yet, let's tear his throat out! Think about how all his blood splashing everywhere would smell, how it'd taste—*

"Shut up!" Ichigo suddenly bellowed.

Ginjō's eyes focused on him expectantly.

A beat passed. For what seemed like minutes—but was in truth merely a fraction of a second—everything was still. Ichigo abruptly drew up Zangetsu, flares of reiatsu coursing from its blade to form a sudden, heavy rain of pressure. His gaze was cold and flickered icy blue again. "*Ban... kai!*

Rukia stared in recognition as, with a sudden roar, the box blew itself apart in a tremendous explosion. Pixelated debris rained down about her and the others amidst a gust of reiatsu so
overwhelming as to be made physically manifest, her hair and shihakushō blown back and whipped about by it. Still, she stood steadfast. This is... definitely Ichigo!

The gazes of everyone were squarely upon the cyclone of reiatsu that lashed out from the shattered remnants of the pocket dimension, whether it was all those gathered at the former site of Chad’s battle, the various elements of the reserve force at a distance, or the Kurosaki and Shiba watching from even farther afield.

As the wind died down and the dust cleared, two figures could be seen standing in mid-air where the box had been. One was clearly Ginjō, not looking much worse for wear, and the other was obviously Ichigo, but his outfit had changed again. At once it clearly resembled his old bankai outfit yet also had new additions similar to those of his latest shikai. Tensa Zangetsu was also different, with a strange, serrated back, as though the clipped tip of its shikai form had been multiplied along its length.

Ichigo’s reiatsu shone like the sun; from that alone, all who perceived him had the same thought: Bankai...

A few of those around Rukia cast glances at her, finding her eyes seemed to shimmer.

Those in the reserve force had a different immediate reaction.

"Tch, this is really gettin’ outta hand..." Shinji muttered.

"Is it really okay for there to have been two bankai releases in the Living World...?" Momo asked, looking his way.

"What’re we gonna do, write Ichigo and Rukia demerits?" he replied dismissively. If they really wanted to, they could probably do exactly that—or worse—but who would ever bother when the Gotei 13 itself had foisted this situation upon the two of them? Even Yamamoto-sōtaichō would probably be uncharacteristically likely to overlook such a matter at this junction, were he to be present.

Momo seemed to ponder this seriously, while Shinji rubbed his chin.

Technically speaking, their mission was already over; Xcution had been successfully contained. Whatever happened next was up to Ichigo. Still...

In his opinion, leaving at this point felt wrong. Ichigo had honored his word and validated their materiel support of him, and was still technically cleaning up their mess, so to Shinji, at least, it seemed the minimum they could do was to stay in order to show the flag and provide moral support. He glanced at where he knew the other three reserve elements were as he made up his mind.

Isshin abruptly stopped speaking mid-word as the pocket dimension in the distance exploded. He focused on it and narrowed his eyes, studying the reiatsu signatures that flowed out from it.

Both Hitsugaya and Matsumoto instantly turned their gazes toward it as well, their surprise showing all over their faces.

Hitsugaya quickly recovered his composure, glancing at where the rest of Soul Society's forces were. Nobody else showed any signs of moving as far as he could tell. He frowned a little, making the same calculation as Shinji was regarding the status of their mission. Even so... was just standing around sufficient?
The other three had all been taichō long before him, and so they technically had more seniority than he did—and yet, he was the ranking officer of those present who had been aligned with Soul Society during the time Ichigo and Rukia had come to prominence. Was it perhaps his responsibility to step forward now, on behalf of Soul Society?

His focus shifted back to Ichigo's reiatsu signature in the distance, before drifting onto Rukia's, and his expression came to mirror Isshin's without any effort on his part to do so.

Hitsugaya made a sudden snap decision and flash stepped toward the battlefield. In terms of their mission parameters, with Isshin standing there, things would ultimately be the same as if he'd never left.

Matsumoto called "Ah, taichō!" after him in surprise. She reached forward, but he was already long gone. She frowned, trying to think of what had made him take off so suddenly.

"He's become more impulsive. That's probably a good thing, in his case," Isshin observed.

She frowned at the remark, looking to him. The parallel between this and when he had suddenly disappeared to investigate the cases in Naruki back then stood out to her like a neon sign, as his recollection of what had happened had made the circumstances fresh in her mind. Even so, she was already sure that Hitsugaya wasn't going to interfere in Ichigo's fight—his trajectory was off-center from there, and she was confident he was going to the other bright cluster of reiatsu.

Isshin noticed Matsumoto's expression and his own became far less serious as he glanced at her, turning into a look of innocent confusion. "What?"

She studied his eyes for a few seconds, then crossed her arms and returned her attention to the battle. "You should trust your own son more, Shiba-taichō," she finally said, rendering judgment on his behavior.

His eyes lingered on her for awhile before he just grunted and followed her example.

Rukia was sufficiently moony over Ichigo that she didn't notice Hitsugaya's approach; it was only when the others started to physically turn to receive him that she suddenly realized he was almost there, and did the same.

Hitsugaya abruptly decelerated, ending his last step in a perfectly normal fashion as he surveyed the assembled group. He frowned briefly at the presence of Yoruichi and Urahara; he hadn't been able to detect them at a distance, and even standing there he couldn't feel them, just like with Isshin.

He scanned over the group and noted Riruka, Jackie, and the still restrained Yukio, but ignored them, his eyes settling on Rukia. "Kuchiki," he began.

Her expression firmed up. Why had he approached them? "Yes, Hitsugaya-taichō?"

Hitsugaya glanced up meaningfully at Ichigo and Ginjō in the distance, then returned his focus to her. "In Soul Society... we knew that if a new substitute Shinigami appeared, that sooner or later, Ginjō would turn his attention toward them. And... when that happened, we were always going to use that substitute Shinigami as bait to lure Ginjō out. In due time, we would erase both of them. At least, that was what we taichō had agreed to do. But... when we came into contact with that substitute Shinigami... Soul Society itself changed. We shared our very power with the substitute we were going to kill. We sent our taichō to watch over him, rather than to kill him, and to protect his family and acquaintances who could not protect themselves."
Rukia's pupils contracted at the revelation, but she quickly brought her features under control, watching Hitsugaya as he continued on.

"You were originally ordered to 'keep watch over Kurosaki Ichigo', but you acted on your own initiative due to your faith in him." He closed his eyes for a moment. "You were right. Kurosaki Ichigo learned the truth and chose. That choice... was truthful to both the Kurosaki Ichigo we knew, and also... to the Kurosaki Ichigo that you... believed in. Our forces' role here is over, and from now on he has to settle the matter by himself, but we will remain to show our gratitude. I'm glad... that he was the substitute Shinigami to follow after Ginjō."

Having issued what he felt was an official statement on behalf of Soul Society, Hitsugaya fell silent, and turned his attention to the two figures standing in the air.

Rukia's eyes were wide at the conclusion of his speech, as she had a moment of realization. She reflected upon everything that had happened since they were reunited, and even before, since their first meeting, her mind filling up with memory after memory of Ichigo. "Yes, sir..." she said absentmindedly. That's right. From the very beginning, he has never changed. Just by that one man's unchanging resolve... my own... everyone's... thousands of years of Soul Society's unchanging rigidity... all of it was wiped clean!

She turned around, facing the same way as Hitsugaya did, looking up at Ichigo and Ginjō. They still had yet to move, and she focused on Ichigo intently. Ichigo...!

Everyone else tracked her as she turned. The other ladies present all noticed the way her eyes glimmered and the way her pupils were dilated; even Jackie and Riruka, who had scarcely interacted with her before, could tell she wore an expression of pure love, gratitude, and pride. The men could also tell, but didn't let their eyes linger on her mien for long.

Only a few moments passed before the Ichigo and Ginjō were suddenly obscured by a burst of reiatsu, and it became clear that Ginjō had also activated his bankai.

Rukia squinted as a look of determination crossed her face. She immediately flash stepped forward, heading for the pair in the sky.

The surprise that had overtaken everyone at the sudden development was only reinforced by Rukia's sudden departure.

The only one who seemed nonplussed was Yukio. Having overcome his shock at how events had proceeded, he protested, "Hey, what happened to our deal!? You said you'd let me go if I undid my ability!" at Ishida and Urahara.

Ginjō was rather passive and unimpressed in the face of Ichigo's display of power. "'Shut up'? Why should I? Are you going to shut me up by killing me in one shot with your bankai? And then what? Will you run away from the truth again?" he taunted. He took note of the fact that the pocket dimension had shattered—day had turned to night and they were again above the ruined industrial park in Naruki rather than Karakura—but he wasn't fussed.

"Shut up," Ichigo repeated. His tone and volume were much more casual and normal. He had also noticed the change, along with the sudden reappearance of so many familiar reiatsu signatures; however, other than confirming Ginjō's statement that they were the only ones still fighting, he didn't pay much attention to that fact either—not even to the proximity of Hitsugaya. Even so, the return of the full moon glow of Rukia's reiatsu buoyed his spirits.
Ginjō scowled faintly in confusion.

"This time I'm saying it to you. But the first time was for someone else. It was meant for this guy," Ichigo explained, shaking Tensa Zangetsu. He shut his eyes and lifted a hand in exasperation.

"Think about how all his blood splashing everywhere would smell, how it'd taste... my ass! Shut up! Don't make me think that quip to Yoruichi-san about being part vampire or werewolf might have merit!"

He had the sense of Zangetsu glaring at him. Within Ichigo's inner world, he was attired in a color-inverted variant of Ichigo's new bankai form, although certain elements of it were different. He had the black fur collar and cuffs that he'd had when Ichigo had last seen him in his Tensa Zangetsu form, but unlike then he lacked the mask and his hair was normal-length.

If Ginjō was at all disturbed by the words, he gave no overt indication of it.

Ichigo pointedly ignored both of them. "It's not like I never wondered if there was something off about what Ukitake-san had told me."

Ginjō narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What?"

Ichigo pressed on, recalling memories of the time he'd first left Soul Society as he spoke. "But I didn't want to believe it. I didn't want to doubt Ukitake-san. That's why I always pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind. But eventually, I realized the reason why I was suspicious of him. Ukitake-san is a lot smarter than me. If he really wanted to deceive me about something, he'd definitely have done it in a way where I never would have even noticed. But he gave me his explanation and handed over the substitute badge. I figured out early on that it didn't do what it was supposed to do. I'm guessing Ukitake-san purposely allowed me to realize that. He let me come to that realization and make my own choice."

"What do you mean, choice? Once you'd figured it out, you had no choice in the matter." Ginjō's haughty, condescending expression conveyed all his feelings on the matter.

Ichigo stared him down levelly, and replied, "I did make a choice. I chose to protect people of my own free will. I wanted power. I've always wanted the power to protect all sorts of people. When I lost my powers, I remembered how, when I sought power, Rukia gave me the power to protect. When I lost my powers, everyone gave them back to me. So I'm fighting you in order to protect them all."

As he talked, even as he sternly regarded his foe, his thoughts alighted upon recollections of his life before Rukia's appearance, and especially on the night they had first met.

The memory that his mind finally settled upon though, was of the night when Ukitake himself had told him of all this—of Rukia's reaction when they'd gone home afterward. He had told her then 'If people are coming to harm me and the people I care about, I'll just get stronger. If Soul Society's rules are harsh, I'll get stronger until I can change them. If they refuse to change then I'll just get stronger still. That's the kind of man I am in your heart, right?'

Her 'Yes, you are,' rang through him again as clearly as the tolling of a bell. Xcution had made its appearance to strike at him, personally, and threatened all he held dear. Knowing what it was to be powerless after having tasted power, he would never again allow himself to live that way. He would protect Rukia, and his family, and hers, and Soul Society, and everyone else with his powers. That was what Rukia wanted and would do, and it was what he wanted and would do! Ginjō wasn't wrong... but he had made a choice to only protect himself!
There was a lingering silence as Ginjō glared at Ichigo with impassive evaluation.

Ichigo watched him determinedly, feeling another sudden tug in his mind at what he saw in the other man's eyes. Was this... recognition?

Finally, Ginjō let out a "Tsk," and brought his sword to the ready again. "Looks like our negotiations have broken down. What a shame! I really did want to avoid killing you."

As the Cross of Scaffold came up, Ginjō called out "Bankai!" and was obscured in a raging, cyclonic tower of magenta reiatsu.

Ichigo's grimace was stoic in the face of the gusts whipping past him, his face set as though his features had been carved.

When the haze of Ginjō's transformation finally began to dissipate, the man himself appeared from the steam in a sinister fashion. His hair had turned shock white, a crimson-colored cross-shape had appeared on his face centered between his eyes, and his eyes themselves had gone red, with his irises turning white. His armor and sword were more skeletal in appearance, and the fur collar of his armor had turned a bloody red too. A set of strange magenta vanes extended from his back in a cross-shape, like the one on his face.

In response, Ichigo squinted. Both Ginjō's eyes and his long, dangling bangs instantly reminded him of the way Aizen had appeared in his third fusion form, after shedding his chrysalis appearance. Aizen's sclera had been purple instead, just like parts of his outfit, but... For a moment he found himself wondering what the consistency of the colors meant, before he discarded the thought. He gave no other reaction. "Right. I forgot... that you're a substitute Shinigami too."

The little grin that twisted Ginjō's mouth was baleful in nature. "Sure am. But you're also forgetting something else. Weren't you told? All our parents were attacked by Hollows before we were born. So inside me... I have a Hollow's power as well, in addition to yours."

Zangetsu's grin was no less eerie and deranged in comparison. His lips twitched, and in the physical world, Tensa Zangetsu started to emit a barely perceptible hum, akin to that of a high-voltage power line interspersed with an almost static undercurrent. This almost instantly resolved itself into subtle but chilling roar, like the scouring winds of a desolate plain of tundra. Aren't you forgetting something...? Hollows eat each other to grow stronger...

Suddenly the other Tensa Zangetsu was also there, as if from nowhere, as if he'd always been there to begin with. The Old Man (who wasn't) looked entirely disinterested with this matter. Something about his expression reminded Ichigo of the way Byakuya had considered him before he'd revealed his bankai for the first time. Why would you eat something so inferior?

Ichigo's eyes narrowed another fraction of a degree. So, you're finally here too, huh? All he said aloud was, "Is that so?"

Rukia's somewhat raised voice suddenly interrupted them. "... Ginjō, was it?"

Ichigo blinked at the sound of her voice and turned his head in surprise. When had she closed the distance with them?

Ginjō likewise shifted his focus, scowling. He could see that she was standing a decent distance away, behind and to the right of Ichigo. His immediate impression was that she didn't intend to interfere, so why was she here?

"I overhead what you said just now," Rukia continued, looking right at Ginjō. "All that you stole
from Ichigo was the very surface layer of his power, the part that had merged with this new Fullbring ability of his. The power of a Shinigami wells from deep within him. It could hardly be removed so easily by the likes of someone like you!"

She turned her attention to Ichigo, locking eyes with him, her eyelids drooping meaningfully as she did so. "Ichigo! Ichigo, this fool does not realize... that it will take far more than this farce to drive you to despair! He does not understand... how many times you have faced certain despair and emerged victorious! Show him, Ichigo! Make him see... that despair holds no power over you!"

Ichigo studied Rukia's eyes for a second before turning his head to face Ginjō again. He drew up Tensa Zangetsu over his left shoulder, then swung it down to the right in challenge. All the lingering steam that Ginjō's transformation had created was instantly dispersed by the shockwave it produced. "Sure. Bring it on, Ginjō. We're ending this."

A knowing smile crossed Rukia's face, and she flickered away from them.

Ginjō seemed no less satisfied. "Hah, you've sure got a mouth on you... you brat!" He lunged forward as he spoke, letting out a battle cry once he'd finished talking.

Ichigo did the same, albeit silently.

They met with a titanic clash, their crossed swords setting off another tremendous burst of reiatsu that bubbled forth through the industrial estate's skies.

Their subsequent strikes produced winds that gusted across the landscape below, almost threatening to blow over some of those watching them.

Ichigo began to use the high speed his bankai afforded him, and in the flurry of blows that followed, Ginjō quickly found himself at something of a disadvantage, receiving token wounds. When his right cheek was slashed with the tip of Tensa Zangetsu, splashing him and Ichigo alike with blood, he redoubled his efforts, taking in the set of his opponent's features as they exchanged another pair of Getsuga Tenshō attacks.

Ginjō found himself thinking, _I... will crush the Shinigami who betrayed me!_ It had been his raison d'ètre ever since the time he and Soul Society had parted ways. Nothing he had said was wrong! They had betrayed him—decided to use him in their cool and calculating way—and when he had learned of their deceit and duplicity, he had done the same in kind to them, true! But so what!? What choice had he had?! They would have killed him like a dog in the street had he stood and fought! Of course he had become like a guerrilla, scheming and plotting against them in kind, acquiring power to fight back at them and save himself!

It was this fact that grated upon Ginjō, and the more he reflected upon it, the more agitated he became. His fighting style grew increasingly erratic. Were they not the same, yet on opposite sides? His cause was just! Ichigo was the one fighting on behalf of those tyrants, and yet he said nothing! Where was the speech? Where was the self-righteousness? Where was the moralizing? Where was the justification? Was Ichigo not doing their dirty work here? Why wouldn't he even try to defend his actions? You... were supposed to tell me that that was wrong. Won't you... even give me that? Why not!?

For a split-second, his gaze darted to that collection of reiatsu signatures in the distance down below. Was it because of them? Were they the leverage that Soul Society held over him? It didn't seem like it. Was it that girl who had spoken to Ichigo? Was it really so simple as that they'd baited Ichigo with her? He narrowed his eyes as they clashed again. No! The truth was written all over Ichigo's face and contained within his earlier words. _Those eyes... are the eyes of someone who is trying to_
understand me! Like you’re trying to put yourself in my place and see things from my perspective. Have you come to truly understand me... and then still chosen to reject everything that I am and have done?!

Ginjō withdrew and howled out "Ichigo!?" with rage, as though making an accusation to complete his thoughts. He swung the Cross of Scaffold up to point it at Ichigo, grasping the handle that ran through the hollow in its blade to hold it like it was a cannon. A brilliant sphere of magenta energy formed at its tip, strobes of energy lancing out from it, before it burst forth as an enormous beam attack.

Ichigo made no effort to move, and merely extended his left hand before the beam utterly engulfed him.

The eyes of most of those watching went wide, but... something was strange about this!

Rukia's expression, however, didn't change.

Ichigo's thoughts were simple in that moment. It's not that I don't understand you, Ginjō... Like I said... it's simply that I made a choice, and we chose differently.

Both forms of Tensa Zangetsu within his inner world were silent, watching intently.

Ginjō's beam abruptly contracted and then dissipated, revealing Ichigo with his hand still outstretched. The attack seemed to almost be absorbed into it, ending as a flare contained within Ichigo's fingers that was suddenly reduced into sparks.

The two of them stared each other down for a second. Ginjō's eyes became like slits, while Ichigo's stayed clear and resolved.

Ichigo raised Tensa Zangetsu, a shine of killing intent gleaming across its length, just as Urahara had once shown him. Everything about the blade announced his determination—everything about it said 'I am going to cut you in half'.

It wasn't Urahara's voice that was in his mind then, though—it was Rukia's, loud and clear: "You always... think there must be some kind of better solution! If you're going to fight, you have to be ready to kill! You have to fight as if to kill, even if you don't in the end! It's not a game! There's no place for sympathy!"

In an instant, Ichigo flickered forward, from one place at one moment to another in the next as though he'd simply shifted positions within the frame rate of time. His slash from Ginjō's left shoulder to his right hip was already completed, and a great arc of blood sprayed between them, splattering his face and uniform.

They plummeted to earth together from their aerial battle, cratering the ground with their landings, and pounced forward at each other again, their swords meeting in yet another spray of sparks. The expression on Ginjō's face was hateful and desperate, while Ichigo's was grim but composed.

Yet again, Ginjō soon broke Ichigo's guard, as before. He had no intention of not following up on this opportunity, bringing his Cross of Scaffold down to chop Ichigo in twain.

This time, however, Ichigo was ready. Intent continued to shine across Tensa Zangetsu as he brought it up and stabbed forward, cleanly cutting off the upper half of Ginjō's sword.

Off-balance, Ginjō gurgled and sputtered in anger, toppling forward onto a knee as his vision wavered. His eyes were on Ichigo the whole time.
The end of his sword clattered across the ground behind him as he collapsed. He narrowed his eyes and clenched his hands into fists, struggling to push himself up again, but failed. The wound across his chest oozed blood copiously, and he could taste it.

Ichigo watched as the cross-shape disappeared from Ginjō’s face and the man's eyes returned to normal. Yes, he had to watch. He could not look away from this—from what he had done.

Ginjō looked up at Ichigo. The boy looked... what? Sad? Yes, that was it. He looked sad. Ichigo, if you’d been first, and I second, would our roles be reversed right now? Would you have become... like me? What do you think, Ichigo? If it had been the other way around, would we have... He coughed and spat out the blood in his mouth, drew in a last trembling breath, and threw the thought aside.

Grimacing, he met Ichigo’s eyes again. As his mouth started to once more fill with blood, he focused with all his remaining will, and haltingly rasped out, "I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence: / Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference. /"

Ginjō’s recounting of the lines ended in a burble, his vision constricting and going dark before he finished, and then there was nothing.

Ichigo stood still, some distance away from him, regarding him silently, his eyes undeviating. Even when Ginjō’s wound began to glow that unmistakable sickly green, he kept his focus where it was.

Light shot forth from Ginjō’s body, as it had from Tsukishima’s and Giriko’s, and with it followed the gates of Hell, towering above the two of them.

Ichigo finally closed his eyes. He heard the cleaver of whatever demon guarded that gate stab into Ginjō, heard him scream as his soul was dragged away, heard the laughter, and heard the gates shut and crack apart into nothing.

When he finally opened his eyes again, he was once again left to look at the body before him.

Chapter End Notes

I've always found the way that Byakuya, Kenpachi, Ikkaku, and Hitsugaya just turned and left after Ginjō activated his bankai in Chapter 476 to be incredibly shitty. I get that the idea was that it was them going "Ichigo’s made his choice and we know he's got this," but then Hitsugaya delivers this speech about how Soul Society was bad and was changed by Ichigo... as they're foisting their problem (i.e., Ginjō) on him to clean up while they peace out. It feels incredibly disingenuous and, to me, actually reaffirms that rather little has changed. So I changed it.

Ginjō recites the final stanza from Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken."

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