The Moon's Tears
by Arowen12

Summary

Ichigo stranded in a future of death and rubble, pushes forward. In doing so he is warped to a time long past where faces are familiar and strange all at once. Will the sorrow and anguish at seeing such life once again, overcome him.
Matutine

Chapter Notes

Matutine (adj)
Before the dawn.

Hello everyone here is the first chapter of the rewrite of the Moon's Tears which was originally posted on Fanfiction.Net. I’m sorry it took so long but I’m still adjusting to my busy schedule (sheepishly rubs back of head and grins apologetically). Any way I hope you all enjoy this chapter!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Kneeling on the harsh ground below him his head hung; fiery bangs shading his eyes from view, Ichigo closed his eyes and took a deep breath letting the smell of fire and smoke assault his nose as his hands clenched into fists. Slowly he opened his eyes taking in the devastating scenery in front of his eyes. The world was in pieces. Rubble and debris littered the ground as far as the eye could see, the broken shells of buildings stood alone in the early morning sun light glinting a harsh white colour that seemed to drain the world. Ichigo let out a sigh as he slowly rose from his kneeling position reaching out in front of him to firmly grasp Zangetsu’s longer blade, the white cloth that wrapped around the handle a familiar comfort in his calloused hands. It steadied him as he swayed on his feet.

Ichigo let out a bitter laugh as he rose to a straightened position his muscles protesting the action. Ichigo surveyed the scenery once again, his face as impassive as stone, the thought slowly trickled into his head.

What if…?

No there was no way to change the past, too much had happened he thought bitterly recalling what had torn his life away with no fondness.

Soul Society had already been weakened by the full out war Aizen had raged on them which lasted three years. Three years full of torture, suffering and loss. Perhaps the causalities in the higher ranks hadn’t been as bad, but souls had died by the dozen as Aizen’s Espada rampaged throughout the three worlds, leaving chaos in their wake. It had only ended when Ichigo had finally defeated the mad man but only at the cost of his powers leaving him stranded in a sea of isolation as the world around him faded; the wold his friends and family were apart of and yet he was left to deal with the pain on his own; he was strong after all. Right?

Peace had reigned for a year before his life was thrown once again back into chaos by the arrival of Kugo Ginjo. Bringing yet again a new hope and at the same time the knowledge that this was a gamble, a risk he wasn’t sure he was ready to take. It had all come to fruition and somehow Ichigo knew it would all turn out like this with the Full Bringers betraying him and Soul Society finding a way to give him back his powers. He had basked in the rush and presence of Zangetsu as his power exploded around him in a brilliant torrent of ebony, ivory, crimson and midnight blue. He may or
may not have laughed a tinge crazily in feeling the power swell inside him. That was not the first night he had taken a life nor would it be his last indeed his hands were stained with the blood of far too many.

The Quincy invaded and brought with them only death and catastrophe. The first causality was the Head Captain’s lieutenant; Chōjirō Sasakibe. The Head Captain was struck down when he confronted his age old enemy the Quincy king Juha Bach. Ichigo had raced there in an attempt to stop Juha but he too had been defeated and Zangetsu broken in his Bankai state. The world had come to a startling halt as Zangetsu’s presence once again disappeared almost completely muted. Ichigo had almost collapsed at the feeling that once again overtook him; the overwhelming loneliness that left him gasping in fear and pain.

Everything seemed to rush forward from that point, the Zero squad arrived taking Renji, Rukia, Byakuya, and Ichigo to the Soul King’s Palace where Ichigo struggled for days trying to understand how to regain Zangetsu. Finally he was sent home where he confronted Oyaji, it was all finally revealed and everything seemed to click into place. How one born of four races ended up in the storm that was Soul Society only made perfect sense; Aizen had seen it, and it seems that Soul Society had an inkling that power of that magnitude wasn’t normal. From there Ichigo ascended to the Soul Palace and with the knowledge of his powers he forged Zangetsu anew. The ebony blades glinting in the light of the forge as steam rose up around them.

He had little time to train as the war below was already reaching a critical state, so like the “naïve” hero he was he rushed down only to be confronted with countless enemies and Uryuu’s betrayal (which truly wasn’t a betrayal). Juha had used Ichigo’s decent from the Palace to journey above where he confronted the Soul King and proceeded to thrust his sword through the Soul King’s center. Thus the three worlds began to crumble as the being who held them together faded. It was only with Jushiro’s sacrifice that they were able to stop the destruction of all three worlds, though they could not stop all of the effects. Juha was sent hurtling down into Soul Society as Ukitake took his final breath letting the world’s be saved if only temporarily.

Kisuke and Mayuri in a moment of foresight had installed a barrier to stop access to the human world; it was activated but not without the cost of Ururu, Jinta and Tessai’s life. The gates between Hueco Mundo and Soul Society were permanently opened and Hollows as well as Arrancar came and went as they pleased causing even further chaos. The war raged for years Ichigo knew the final count was close to ten years, and yet still they kept fighting. They were overpowered in a two to one situation every time they seemed to take a step forward; infusing their Bankai with Hollow reaisuto or resurrecting the captains that had fallen. They were beaten down once again. In a moment of desperation Aizen was released from his prison cell in Mugen though it was confusing which side his loyalties truly laid on, he aided them as Ichigo continued to grow in power trying desperately to accumulate enough power to defeat Juha Bach.

Finally he had reached a point where he was in complete harmony with his powers, he knew who he was, what he stood for and there was no bond deeper than the bond between Zangetsu and Ichigo. He had stormed forward speeding over a land of desolation and destruction ready to put an end to the war that lasted far longer than a thousand years. Juha had laughed at Ichigo when he confronted him and continued to laugh as Ichigo sliced his sword clean through the Quincy King in a sideways arc. His power began to disperse into the atmosphere as he coughed up blood with a grisly smile upon his face as he lectured Ichigo about how he could have destroyed the world of fear, taunting Ichigo stating that Ichigo was the one who had lost in the end. Finally the light had dimmed in his eyes and the last of the Quincy vanished from existence.

That’s when Aizen had seen the golden opportunity to kill Ichigo and assume his rightful position as King. Where once Aizen’s power had transcended that of the Gods, Ichigo felt no challenge as he
looked into Aizen’s caramel brown eyes. Ichigo saw the attack for the farce it was, the man had no desire to see the dawn. The wind had echoed hollowly throughout the streets as they charged forward, it was over within a minute as Aizen took a step and faltered before turning to face Ichigo an eerie smile on his face. Maniacal laughter echoed throughout the silence as Aizen’s body seemed to bubble and shift before lavender reaitsu gathered around the once Shinigami, Aizen fell backwards laughter still bubbling from his red stained lips. Leaving Ichigo to kneel in the dirt as the reality of the situation dawned on him.

His thoughts had always been on defeating Juha and saving his family and friends. While he may have succeeded in the first respect he had failed where it truly mattered. He was utterly alone, all the souls in Soul Society had been killed, some had fallen to the Hollows and some were never to rejoin the circle of Rebirth; their very souls had been destroyed. The Arrancar who had aided them during the war were all gone as well leaving only a few mindless Hollows who wandered confused throughout the ruins. The humans were safe but he had no life there anymore. He was far older both in mind and spirit than any human could understand much less help him. There was no place for him there.

No this world was a lost cause he had failed.

“Ichigo! You did not fail you gave it your all you are not at fault for the devastation that has befallen you.” Old man Zangetsu spoke in a calm and soothing voice as his blissfully cool presence washed over him and he felt his body relax after being on guard for time too long.

“King why do ya always take the guilt on your shoulders Old man here is right if ya can believe in nothing else believe in us.” Shiro spoke in his dual tone voice as his fiery aura gently surrounded Ichigo leaving his tired body feeling rejuvenated.

Ichigo gave a small nod of his head acknowledging what they had said and yet… he had failed, he couldn’t protect them! The world was broken it would soon crumble without the Shinigami to maintain the balance. Why? Why couldn’t he do anything to stop this? Why did they all have to die and leave him alone? What did he do to deserve this broken and tumultuous life filled with despair and sorrow?

Suddenly Ichigo felt wetness in the corners of his eyes. Hesitantly he reached up to wipe away the liquid only to find tears. No! He promised them he wouldn’t cry! How could he shed tears for his family and friends when he had well and truly failed them; he had promised Oyaji that he would be strong for the rest of them. BUT THEY WERE GONE!! WHAT DID HE HAVE TO BE STRONG FOR WHEN HIS REASONS FOR LIVING WERE ALL DEAD EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM!

Ichigo’s power exploded out from him swirling in a rapid mixture of steel blue, scarlet, raven and alabaster that could only be likened to an atom bomb. The vary ground evaporated under his feet as he sunk to the earth the wind blowing fiercely, his long orange hair whipping in all directions as Ichigo’s very body began to glow his eyes becoming two pools of vibrant light as the landscape began to disappear. The very moment Ichigo was living (if it could be called that) was being erased, the very laws of space and time ripped apart by Ichigo’s own sheer loss, will and power. Ichigo let out a soul piercing cry as every single drop of his power exploded out from him like a supernova the size of the sun.

And then Ichigo knew no more as his conscious slowly faded to black the concerned voices of his Zanpaktou becoming distant in his mind as he thought of his family and friends one last time before succumbing to the darkness.
His whole body ached. What happened? The last thing Ichigo remembered was…

Suddenly Ichigo’s eyes flew open as he recalled what had happened…what little he could understand? He had lost control of his power and his emotions; he remembered thinking about his family and friends with Zangetsu’s distant voice in the background as his vision faded to black. Zangetsu! Ichigo’s mind recalled his two Zanpaktou desperately searching his inner world for his two trusted companions.

“Relax Ichigo we are here though I’m not sure where “here” is.” Ichigo felt his shoulders sag in relief knowing that his Zanpaktou were with him. He never wanted to feel that crushing loneliness again. His very world had tunneled in around him, and yet when they were together Ichigo felt like he had a wall of iron behind him silently supporting him and keeping him upright.

“Aw King don’t get so sappy on us you know we’ll always be here for ya.” Ichigo could only nod his head trusting in their words whole heartedly as he surveyed the room he was resting in. Warm oak wood paneling made up the walls and provided a small sense of comfort to Ichigo compared to the white of cold stone walls. On the far side of the room a pair of shoji doors stood slightly open letting a flash of green seep in and a gentle breeze travel through the large room. The bed had soft blankets of cotton which took away the chill of the light breeze and left only a cozy warmth. Beside the bed resting against the wooden walls was Zangetsu in his sealed state, the ebony blade glowed softly in the mid-afternoon light which peaked through the shoji doors.

Ichigo’s long flame coloured hair swirled lightly in the breeze his lengthy bangs shadowed his eyes as Ichigo took a deep breath tentatively trying to feel his reaitsu. Closing his eyes Ichigo let his reaitsu surround him; it was largely depleted leaving a set wariness in his bones as he slowly let small tendrils stretch out to feel the area around him. He needed to know where he was and what was happening.

He let out a quiet sigh of relief when he felt the presence of Soul Society rather than the empty nothingness he had come to know. Granted this Soul Society was…different it felt younger if he could describe it as anything. Suddenly the soft sound of footsteps appeared outside the other set of shoji doors.

Ichigo’s eyes snapped open as he held his breath in tense anticipation. Slowly the shoji doors slid open inch by inch to reveal the person behind the light wooden frame. Ichigo let out a sharp breath at the visage that greeted him. Spiky raven hair stuck up untameably highlighting the wise grey eyes and carefree smile below. An ebony shihaksho swirled lightly in the breeze the lieutenant badge of the thirteenth glowing brightly in the gentle sunlight. The Shiba clan crest stood out boldly in black on his left arm as he finished opening the door.

“Oh you’re awake Captain Unohana said you probably wouldn’t be awake for a few more days what with your reaitsu being almost completely depleted.”

Kaien Shiba spoke in a fast voice his eyes alight with sudden energy like a puppy released to run free. Ichigo stared at the Shiba head with mute shock as his mind tried to process what he was seeing. Kaien Shiba had died long ago killed by Aizen’s treachery and yet here he stood in front of him alive and as exuberant as ever. There were very few explanations that seemed plausible ranging from it all being a dream to time travel and yet what other explanation was there?

Gently Ichigo reached out his reaitsu in the barest of caresses to feel for certain if this was really the Kaien Shiba and not an illusion like Kyoka Suigetsu was capable of producing. Ichigo’s shoulders visibly relaxed once he had affirmed that this was indeed the thirteenth division’s lieutenant; though Kaien showed no signs of feeling Ichigo’s soft prodding.
Kaien quirked his eyebrow at Ichigo’s peculiar actions but shrugged it off before studying the young man in front of him. Fiery orange hair cascaded down his back and his bangs gently shadowed soft chocolate eyes that were filled with sorrow, pain and a wisdom beyond years. His face (much like Kaien’s own. They could be twins!) rested in an emotionless frown as he looked at Kaien with something akin to confusion. Pale skin seemed to glow unhealthily in the quiet sunlight as the man moved to sit up revealing a heavily scarred chest as the blankets slid down to pile at his waist. A visible shiver wracked the young man’s frame and Kaien quickly sprung to action.

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

Kaien spoke in a soothing voice as he moved closer to the orangette who flinched slightly at the mention of Unohana and not being up to full strength. Reluctant and tense he let Kaien help him move into a more comfortable position where he could see through the crack in the shoji doors. It led into a small garden full of lush greenery in the afternoon sun with a warm brown tiled path leading off into the distance. Kaien sheepishly rubbed the back of his head as he looked into the deep pools of chocolate before saying, “I never got your name?”

“Ichigo”

The swift reply in a deep voice with soft undertones that spoke of patience and strength, it was the voice one would perhaps expect from the leader of an army. One who could command men with only a single word, more powerful than yelling at the soldier; it reminded him of the Head Captain. Kaien smiled at Ichigo’s name frowning for second as he acknowledged that the orangette had not given a last name. Kaien put his hand out in front of Ichigo and with a brilliant smile said, “I’m Kaien Shiba head of the Shiba Clan but you can call me Kaien or Lord Awesomeness.”

A ghost of a smile danced across Ichigo’s face as he reached out and gave Kaien’s hand a firm shake before he said in pleasant tone of voice, “It is nice to meet you Kaien-san.”

“I did not say Kaien-san was acceptable!”

Kaien said his voice rising slightly as a small flicker of light entered Ichigo’s sorrowful eyes and Kaien smiled before looking around in fear hoping Kukkaku had not heard him. As she would surly hurt him for disturbing their guest or worse!

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone enjoyed the first chapter of the re-write! Did anyone catch the many subtext hint I left in there :) PM or leave a review if you found any. I hope everyone enjoyed! Please leave a review and I will see you all in the next update!! Onyx!!
Quatervois

Chapter Summary

Ichigo struggles to make a critical choice and Kaien and Kukkaku talk.

Chapter Notes

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

Here is the second chapter! Yay! I’ve found that through the week the best times for me to write are on Mon, Tue sometimes Fri and the weekend. I’m trying to write more it’s just getting the time and inspiration. I hope you all like this chapter it’s over 4000K! I’m hoping to make the chapters longer at least 3000K but we will have to see. Enjoy and read on.

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo
X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

As the day seemed to draw to an end lush reds and yellows fading into midnight blue Kaien stayed beside Ichigo on the comfortable bed as they talked of Soul Society. Ichigo’s eyes remained curious as Kaien rambled on about his daily life in Soul Society and its eccentric captains and lieutenants; with Ichigo jumping in every few minutes to ask a question about a certain captain or why Kaien believed it was a good idea to drink three bottles of sake before an important ceremony commenced (in hindsight it was definitely not one of his proudest moments.)

As Kaien turned to face Ichigo prepared to ask him a few questions the orangette let out a small yawn his hand daintily reaching up to cover his mouth as eyes shuddered close for a moment before blinking awake once again. Kaien let out a small laugh at the sight before slowly standing up wincing at his popping joints and said, “Ah I’m keeping you awake I’ll let you get to sleep now, you must be tired and your body still needs to replenish your reaitsu. If you need anything I’ll be in the room at the end of the hall on your left. We can talk more tomorrow; figure out what you want do and where we go from here.”

With those parting words Kaien sauntered from the room lightly closing the shoji door and padding down the hallway; coming to a stop he turned to the left and knocked lightly on the door waiting for the occupant to answer. A female voice called out a light “come in” and Kaien slid the door open stepping into the warm room. His eyes glanced over the crimson walls and sparsely placed furniture that littered the room before landing on his sister, who was sitting cross legged on her bed staring out the open window, the evening breeze rustling her ebony locks.

Kukkaku shifted slightly turning to face Kaien as a small smile settled on her face at the sight of her older brother. Her pale skin seemed to glow in the candlelight of the room as Kaien took a few steps
inside the room gently pushing the door shut.

“I talked to him. His name is Ichigo. Kami Kukkaku he could be my twin! And his eyes…they’re so haunted, full of pain, sorrow and yet determination still shines through them even as he talks he carries himself with a quiet strength.”

X

Kukkaku listened to Kaien’s words carefully taking in the expression on her brother’s face, she had yet to meet Ichigo but already she could see that this wasn’t some Rungokai brat. Carefully she regarded Kaien taking in the slight bags under his eyes and his relaxed posture (a change from the tense shoulders he had paraded around with the last few days) before saying, “What do you want to do Kaien? We don’t know him yet we can’t help him until we know how to.”

Kaien seemed to grimace at her sharp tone of voice before turning to look out the window at the crescent moon rising in its slow ascent.

“I-I don’t know Kukkaku the look in his eyes there’s so much pain and I want to help him in any way I can even if it’s just getting Ichigo back on his feet.”

Kukkaku only nodded slightly before saying, “Give him a few days then we can talk and see what our course of action will be.”

Kaien nodded padding over to his sister to place a feather light kiss on her forehead before slowly gliding towards the door and leaving the room with a soft ‘click’.

Kukkaku turned once more to stare at the coming darkness as the fireflies slowly flickered into existence, quietly she decided to go and meet Ichigo the next day.

X

Kaien rested slightly against the wall his head tilted upwards as his eyelids fluttered close. What Kukkaku said was true and yet Kaien truly pondered on her words wondering what he knew about Ichigo which was next to nothing.

X Flashback X

Kaien slowly ambled along under the eaves of ancient giants, enjoying the calm stroll throughout Rungokai (one of the more pleasant districts with lovely scenery) as the night seemed to steal away the fading light. His mind leisurely went over the day’s events. It had been relatively normal (by the definition of normal Soul Society set otherwise it was just crazy) day although Ukitake had suffered from another attack. They were lucky it was only a light attack and Ukitake was able to get back to work after resting for a little while.

The air seemed to pick up in speed as the leaves above him rustled like the growling of a creature lost in myth. Startled Kaien looked up from where his gaze had drifted to the horizon; the sky once dark seemed to glow immensely as if the sun had risen and was expanding. A soft hum seemed to fill the air in slow pulses and the ground began to shake under his feet as if a Kami walked among them. Suddenly the light began to grow so bright that Kaien hastily brought up his arm to shield his eyes. The pulsing reached its peak crashing upon his ears like a tsunami bringing Kaien to his knees.

As the echo of a bell that has been rung fades the noise began to die down and the bright light faded into inky darkness once again. Hesitantly Kaien removed his hands from where they had rested over his eyes. Ringing still echoed in his ears as he surveyed the area looking for any indication as to what had happened. Not far away a vaguely human shaped blob appeared in the distance. Apprehensively
Kaien carefully padded towards the still figure splayed on the soft grass.

A shock of orange became visible against the outline of night, hurrying his steps Kaien quickly crouched down beside the prone figure. Remnants of clothing barely covered the young man as his chest rose and fell ever so slightly as if the slightest pressure could crush the breath out of him. The young man looked fragile, an expression of pain twisted onto his face as thick raven lashes twitched and pale pink lips formed a small frown. Slowly Kaien brought his hand up to rest on the young man’s neck checking for a pulse. Patiently Kaien waited until he felt it light and barely there like a butterfly on a windy day trying to out fly the wind only to fall.

Kaien’s worry rocketed and he carefully picked up the orangette wincing at the light form in his arms, he moved as fast as his legs could carry him heading towards the Shiba compound. Once inside he hurried towards one of the guest rooms and gently set the orangette on the soft cotton sheets.

“Shiba-dono!”

One of the servants exclaimed as they paused in the doorway seeing the flash of orange resting on the simple bed and Kaien’s flustered state. Kaien turned to the young woman and in an urgent tone said, “I need you to contact Unohana-Taicho and tell her to come here immediately it’s an emergency.”

The servant nodded and scurried away in a rush as Kaien returned his focus to the orangette whose breath was becoming loud and laboured, broken gasps and moans echoed throughout the small wooden room as Kaien studied the young man in concern. Trying to help in any way possible Kaien shifted his reaitsu to that of calming and peace letting the negative emotions he felt be buried behind a barricade. Slowly the orangette stopped shifting and he quieted once more with a soft sigh.

At that moment the doors behind him slid open and Unohana-Taicho’s powerful reaitsu saturated the small room. Unohana-Taicho quickly strolled to the young man’s side her reaitsu in an instant providing a comforting aura as she ran a diagnostic over the orangette.

X

Kaien shook his head partially in anger and partially in sadness at what he had seen. The young man was covered in scars far too many intricate ivory lines danced across his body and too often had the skin healed incorrectly. It made him shudder thinking about how those scars came to be. Shaking himself from his musing he loosened his clenched fists and turned to face Unohana-Taicho who was looking at him expectantly. Letting out a soft breath he nodded ready to hear what the ebony haired captain had to say.

“He has suffered multiple laceration all over his body though most are old and very few have happened recently, he is suffering from severe reaitsu depletion. With any less reaitsu he would be dead. When he wakes up make sure he stays in bed and does not stress himself too much I will come to check on him soon after he wakes.”

Kaien nodded his thanks as the fearsome captain swept through the door pitch black hair flying out behind her. Turning to the orangette Kaien rubbed a tired hand over his face before making his way out shutting the door with a soft click as he turned to face his younger sister who stood with her arms crossed staring at the door with a pensive expression.

X Flashback End X

Pushing himself off the wall Kaien slowly padded towards his room feeling like the weight of the
world rested on his already weighed down shoulders. The mystery Ichigo presented plagued his mind as he slipped into bed waiting for sleep to overtake him.

X

Ichigo slowly pushed himself into a sitting position his shoulders shaking, breath coming out in short broken gasps. Running his hands through silky long locks Ichigo tried to calm his breathing, basking in the calming feel of his Zanpaktou as the last dredges of the nightmare faded into the back of his mind. Raising his hand in front of his face Ichigo studied the slightly shaking appendage before letting out a soft sigh.

Slumping against the wall at his back Ichigo starred at the soft sunlight peaking in through the partially opened shoji doors the peaceful atmosphere settled over Ichigo and unbidden a small smile crept onto his face as he stared at the flashes of emerald green and sapphire blue skies. Once more footsteps sounded outside the door disrupting the once peaceful atmosphere as Ichigo schooled his expression into one of impassiveness.

The tensing of his shoulders was the only indication of the grief he felt at the visage that greeted him. Raven hair and youthful grey eyes greeted him as bright red stood in harsh contrast to her pale skin. Slowly Ichigo raked his eyes over Kukkaku taking in both of her arms whole and in the flesh, the stress lines that had once creased her forehead gone and eyes full of laughter and light.

Kukkaku strode into the room until she was standing directly in front of Ichigo arms crossed over her chest to display dominance and yet the soft smile on her face betrayed her intentions. Her melodious voice soon filled the small room as she said, “The name is Kukkaku Shiba but you can call me Kukkaku, Shiba is too damn polite.”

Ichigo nodded his head hiding the barest of smiles splayed across his face before in a soft voice he said, “It is very nice to meet you Kukkaku-san, as you likely already know I am Ichigo.”

She let out a small grumble at the affixation mumbling about “damn brats” before looking at Ichigo curiously.

“Ichigo as in strawberry?”

Though her question seemed to be laced with innocence a playful light danced in her eyes, eyebrow raised as if to challenge him. Ichigo let out a quiet scoff no matter where he went they could never get his name right….and yet perhaps he did not deserve his name anymore he had failed at the title given to him by his mother. A small cough shook him from depressing thoughts and Ichigo turned to look into Kukkaku’s silver eyes and said, “It means number one protector though I doubt I am worthy of the name now.”

A concerned look passed over Kukkaku’s face but she did not push him for answers and he gave none. A tense silence filled the room as the two occupants waited for the other to make the first move. Finally Kukkaku let out a heavy sigh and plopped beside Ichigo on the comfy bed. Scrubbing a hand over her face she leaned back on the palms of her hands and stared at the wooden ceiling above.

“Ichigo do you remember how you got here?” Kukkaku asked. Ichigo tensed beside her, his mind running a mile a minute debating over the truth or a lie which would lead to many more lies. That and the truth of his arrival was obscured and uncertain. Ichigo let out a soft sigh a half truth was better than a lie and Kisuke always said he couldn’t lie anyways.

“It’s blurry some things seem clearer than others. I can remember my family but I have no clue as to
how I got here it’s like an empty void.”

Kukkaku nodded slightly turning to look at Ichigo with a calculating look in her eyes before she nodded once again and said, “Your family will they be looking for you?”

Pain flashed briefly though Ichigo’s eyes before his impassive expression rested on his face once more. Ichigo turned his head slightly to look out through the shoji doors at the lush garden outside before with a soft sigh he said, “Once, but they have all passed away.”

An undercurrent of emotion hid in Ichigo’s voice but Kukkaku did not catch it. Her eyes flashed briefly to the door, a small frown resting upon her face before she decided to change the topic.

“Unohana-Taicho is coming today to check up on you and she recommends that you stay here for at least three weeks before you get back on your feet. Hopefully we can give you a tour of the compound soon but Unohana-Taicho can be pretty strict.”

X

She laughed slightly at the end of her sentence before her eyes darted to look at Ichigo trying to catch his reaction however miniscule. To her surprise he let out a small groan his head dipping forward like an emotional teen at the prospect of Unohana-Taicho coming to give him a check-up. Kukkaku couldn’t help the giggle that escaped her at the sight of the stoic man hunched over like the world was ending. A sharp movement of his head and small glare was directed her way before he shook his head and a small smile that spoke of longing settled on his face. As Kukkaku prepared to speak once more the light shoji door slid open with a soft hiss as Unohana-Taicho stepped through the door snowy robes flowing behind her and ebony hair settled on her shoulders.

Ichigo tensed slightly beside Kukkaku as Unohana-Taicho’s fearsome presence filled the room and her charcoal eyes settled on Ichigo. Kukkaku swiftly stood padding towards the door and passing Unohana-Taicho not wanting to get in the way of her check-up or the fearsome women herself. Turning slightly and locking eyes with Ichigo’s chocolate one Kukkaku said, “Remember Ichigo if you ever need anything don’t be afraid to ask.”

With those parting words Kukkaku swirled from the room and turned left, intent on finding Ganju and convincing him to cook dinner tonight after all his food was always great comfort food.

X

Ichigo shuddered slightly as Kukkaku left him alone in the small room with Unohana who pinned him down with an icy stare as if daring him to try and flee the room. Ichigo let his tense shoulders slump slightly in defeat and Unohana’s tense aura disappeared replaced with one that spoke of comfort and healing.

“May I ask what your name is?”

Unohana’s melodious voice flowed throughout the room as she took another step inside the small room casting small shadows on the far wall. Ichigo watched her movements with a trained eye before replying, “Ichigo.”

The captain of the Fourth’s eyes drifted over Ichigo sending shivers down his spine as she observed the deep violet bags under his eyes and his pale skin. Unohana nodded to herself and took in a soft breath as the captain spoke again.

“Ichigo I’m going to be checking your reaitsu levels and your overall physical health. Please remain calm I do not wish to hurt you whatever happens in this room stays in this room.”
Unohana’s honeyed voice faintly lilted through the room and Ichigo let his head dip in a slight nod as the healer stepped closer casting shadows over Ichigo as the view of the garden disappeared behind folds of ebony and ivory.

X

Kukkaku leaned against the smooth wall behind her trying to hear the soft words that trailed through the wall unclearly. The Shiba princess wished and both dreaded to hear the news Kaien would bring once he was finished conferencing with Unohana-Taicho. Kaien was correct in the sense that Ichigo definitely needed some help, she was unsure though of the help they could provide. Ichigo seemed to hide himself behind a wall of iron letting only the barest glimpses of his true self peak out. The grief and loneliness that plagued his voice when he talked about his family echoed softly in the back of her mind as her fingers impatiently drummed upon the wall behind her.

Finally after an eternity of waiting the doors beside her slowly slid open at an agonizing pace. Unohana-Taicho glided out of the room raven hair cascading behind her. She nodded briefly to Kukkaku before in a flash of shunpo she was gone leaving only a slight breeze in the wake of her presence. Turning slightly Kukkaku peered through the door frame into the dark room where a sparse few candles illuminated the shadowed study. Kaien was hunched in his large chair, elbows resting on the desk covered with paperwork as his hands held up his head.

“Kaien?”

Kukkaku called out into the silence of the room as the candles flickered sending shadows dancing across the walls. Kaien slowly lifted his head from his hands blinking rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the sudden influx of light. Kukkaku watched as her brother slowly heaved himself out of his chair before padding over to Kukkaku and pulling her into a tight hug. Kaien lightly shook in Kukkaku’s arms burying his face in her neck as Kukkaku was quick to wrap her arms around him holding him tighter.

After a few minutes of silence Kaien pulled away taking a few steps towards the door before turning to Kukkaku and in a quiet voice he said, “Walk with me?”

Kukkaku nodded and followed her brother as he led her to the backyard and followed the small path of silver rocks till he was standing beside a small pond of clear water which reflected the luminous moon hanging in the sky as the stars surrounded it twinkling ever so slightly.

Kaien perched on a small bench beside the pond with grass tangling around the legs and moss enshrined in the stone. He made a swift gesture for her to join him with her hands and she plodded over and joined him on the bench shivering slightly at the feel of cold stone below.

“I want to help him so bad. But dammit Kukkaku I don’t know what to do! How can I help him?”

Kaien’s sudden outburst shocked her slightly as her head whipped around to stare at her brother whose head was bowed once more and his hands clenched into fist in his lap. Kukkaku sighed trying to think of and answer as her petit hands covered Kaien’s own larger ones, gray eyes turning to meet charcoal ones.

“We can’t help him if he’s in district fifty-seven of Rungokai living on the street, but you could offer to adopt him into the clan, he no longer has any family left as they have all passed away. He obviously has some Shiba blood with the way he looks exactly like you. If he lived with us you could keep an eye on him and he could even go to the Shinigami Academy. I think the best way for you to help him Kaien is to be yourself, Ichigo has such pain and darkness in his eyes he needs someone to brighten his life and keep his mind away from depressing thoughts.”
Kaien starred into Kukkaku’s eyes in shock before pulling her in for another hug. This time of happiness, soft laughter emitting from Kaien’s lips before he pulled away a relieved smile on his face and light dancing in his eyes.

“You should probably be getting to bed, I’ll come inside shortly.”

Kaien said as he turned tilting his head up to look at the ethereal moon above. Kukkaku giggled softly before standing up and shaking the cold from her bones. She padded softly over to Kaien and pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead whispering a soft “goodnight” before turning away and heading inside to the warmth of the house. A soft yawn alerted her of her need for sleep as she strode towards her room intent on getting some rest.

X

Kaien paced slightly outside Ichigo’s door, his shoulders tense with anticipation as the question he wanted to ask circled through his mind constantly begging to be asked. Taking a deep breath Kaien pulled himself up and stepped forward sliding open the light wooden frame with ease, coffee coloured eyes swung to meet his own as Ichigo shifted slightly into a sitting position facing Kaien. Letting out a soft sigh Kaien padded further into the room and slumped into one of the chairs beside the bed. Concern flashed in Ichigo’s eyes at Kaien’s actions and the small but sincere expression hardened Kaien’s resolve.

“Ichigo, Kukkaku tells me that your family has passed away, I’m sorry for your loss. I would like to offer to adopt you into the Shiba clan. This not obligatory and don’t feel like you have to as a favour or to pay a debt. If you already have friends you stay with or if you live alone then please when you are ready, go back to that place. But if you do not the option is here. We won’t pressure you into anything you don’t want to, we simply want to help you. Plus with the way you look like my twin it’s hard to say you don’t have Shiba blood.”

Ichigo’s eyes widened in shock as Kaien spoke his mouth opening and closing comically for a few seconds before it snapped shut and he turned a serious expression on Kaien a thoughtful expression etched on his face as orange locks fell to cover chocolate orbs from sight. His soft baritone voice filled the room as he asked, “Can I have some time to think, this is a huge decision.”

Kaien nodded standing up and brushing imaginary dust from his robes before he paused at the door turning to Ichigo who was looking once more into the garden and said, “Take as much time as you need when you are ready tell me.”

With those words Kaien swirled from the room the slight tension releasing from his shoulders in the knowledge that Ichigo was at least considering it. His feet echoed softly on the wooden floors as sunlight streamed through a nearby window giving the pale wood a golden glow. It was all up to Ichigo now whatever he decided shaped their futures from this moment forward there were two winding paths he could choose from.

X

Ichigo starred at the ceiling enshrouded in darkness his mind overcrowded with thoughts that swirled around each other in a constant whirlwind that plagued his mind withholding sleep from him. Not that sleep ever came easy to Ichigo now; always his sleep was plagued with nightmares and memories of the past. The question was whether he was to join the Shiba clan and accept their offer of adoption or find another way in one of the Rungokai districts.

If he left after he finished healing he would be an unknown, a mysterious man who stayed in the Shiba household for only a time before disappearing; barely of notice to Aizen and his plans. Ichigo
would be able to work from the shadows like a puppet master moving the pawns on the chest board into the perfect position (and didn’t that idea disgust him slightly and go against everything he’s ever stood for). He could train in private not having to worry about nosy older brothers breathing down his neck, questioning his every move. Zangetsu would be free to materialize often without causing great alarm.

But he would be alone except for his zanpaktou if he was injured gravely it would be unlikely that he could heal it; he could heal basic to minor injuries but he was nothing like Hanataro who was born with a healing touch. He would not be able to keep track of Aizen from such a difference without looking suspicious and it would be troublesome to sneak in and out of Soul Society repeatedly. Ichigo would not be familiar with everyone, in a moment of indecision they would choose Aizen who they knew and respected over Ichigo a mystery any day.

If he accepted Kaien’s gracious offer he would have the rights of a noble and be able to have the perks that came with the title. Ichigo would be able to go through the Shinigami academy and rise through the ranks naturally in the process learning some things he never knew (while the rest would be undoubtedly boring). Gaining trust would be an easier matter if he knew the occupants of Soul Society as Ichigo Shiba. Though having Unohana breathing down his neck seemed slightly troublesome it would also be beneficial in the sense that if Ichigo was ever injured she would make sure he healed no matter what.

The slight problem with that was the fact that Isshin still resided in Soul Society from what Kaien said and there was the chance that he might meet his Oyaji. Not to mention the various other captains and lieutenants he fought with during the course of the war. Plus the fact that Kaien seemed to already mother hen him and the matter would only grow worse if he was adopted and under Kaien’s so called wing.

“Isn’t it obvious which one is the better option king? Listen to what ya heart is tellin ya.”

Shiro’s dual tones voice rasped throughout his head while Ichigo closed his eyes letting his conscious sink into his inner world. Shiro was sitting on one of the many skyscrapers that lined his inner world. Now though they were cracked with many of the clear glass windows gone exposing the shells of the buildings standing ominously in the soft pattering of the rain. Other buildings were gone completely, the debris and rubble where they once stood a large pile. The sky flashed violet as lightning streaked across the heavy clouds swollen with rain. Ichigo took a deep breath to calm his emotions before turning to Old Man Zangetsu who was standing in the distance on his usual lightning rod.

“Ichigo you know what the answer you seek is stop denying yourself this opportunity. When have you hesitated knowing it will lead only to death and sorrow? Move forward and let your resolve strength you.”

The Quincy portion of his powers deep baritone rumbled throughout the city and Ichigo nodded laying down on the cool metal below and looking at the tempestuous sky above, coloured in flashes of midnight blue, lilac, gold and charcoal. His mind made up Ichigo let himself sink into the presence of his inner world as tired eyes slid shut and a soft exhale left his lips.

“I would like to accept your gracious offer to adopt me into the Shiba clan Kaien-san.”
Hope you all enjoyed and everyone had a Happy Thanksgiving or will have a Happy Thanksgiving. Please leave a review and I will see you all in the next chapter. Moose!!
Ichigo sighed as he surveyed the large building in front of him which cast an imposing shadow on the lush grounds below. He wondered why he even agreed to take the exam in the first place, knowing the boredom that haunted a school; Kukkaku came to mind. At least he would only be here for two years at most as his marks were quite high and his reaitsu had left the captains astounded. Shiro chuckled in the back of Ichigo’s mind mumbling something along the lines of holding almost all his powers back. Ichigo shook his head turning slightly to look behind where Kaien had once stood in the early morning light eagerly waving farewell to his “little brother” as Kaien had dubbed him with glee.

With a small slump of Ichigo’s broad shoulders he took a step forward through the heavy iron wrought gates. A petit shudder passed through Ichigo almost unnoticeably as the image of those once strong gates laying dented on the torn ground drifted to the fore front of his mind. Ichigo closed his eyes taking a quiet moment to center himself before stepping forward once more there was no use in procrastinating. To hesitate was to only delay the inevitable and he didn’t doubt Kukkaku would make good on her threats of blackmail.

Ichigo strode through the busy halls ignoring pointing, staring, and the heavy eyes of the ladies which bore into his back as he passed them. A wince struck his wiry frame at the thought of dealing with hordes of woman chasing after him. When the casualties hadn’t yet been countless and hope still lingered in the air, their eyes would follow his every step, his every breath was sacred, and lucky was the woman to talk to him. Or so Yourichi told him with a coy smile on her cocoa coloured face, mirth dancing in her honeyed orbs.

Ichigo let the memory fade like the fall as he focused on the endless sea of students in front of him, it would do himself no good to think of the past when few rays shone through the torrent of pain and misery. Pausing briefly to look at the small piece of parchment in his hand where elegant ebony lines
danced across the page showing the school, Ichigo looked up his head swerving from side to side as he tried to locate where he stood. It seemed the day might be in Ichigo’s favour as he spotted his first class of the day the door swung open slightly and the number glinting on the door. Ichigo ran his hand through his hair, took a small breath, and stepped forward.

X

Byakuya shifted irritably in his seat his gaze roving around the room with the slightest hint of boredom and a faint trace of caution hidden in charcoal eyes. The dull chatter of the students echoed around him and he winced slightly thinking of the events of the morning where Yourichi had visited the Kuchiki house with a mission that seemed to revolve only around torturing him.

Suddenly the class quieted as the door swished open, Byakuya’s gaze was instantly drawn to the bright shock of orange hair as his gaze slowly travelled down, observing the pale skin, frown etched upon his face and the robes of the Shinigami academy students. The teacher a cheery woman with rosy cheeks and caramel hair, who taught history, smiled and glided over to the new student who didn’t even blink an eye at the attention now focused on him.

The two talked for a quiet moment before Mrs. Aomori pushed the orangette to the front of the classroom. The new student stood for quiet moment at the front of the class his mind seemingly elsewhere as his gaze rested above their collective heads. The teacher gave a soft cough and the new student seemed to shake himself of his musings and bent at the waist in a quick bow.

“My name is Ichigo Shiba, I was unfortunately ill and am only now able to join class, and it is a pleasure to meet you all.”

The name stirred a slight recognition in Byakuya’s mind as he remembered his grandfather talking about the new Shiba member and how it had caused quite the conundrum as he had appeared as if from air. Byakuya surveyed the Shiba once again, noting his likeness to the lieutenant of the eleventh division, the way his posture stood straight, and his presence unwavering as he presented himself in front of the class. Underneath chocolate eyes lay a beast wrapped in chains of obsidian kept under tight control, Byakuya shuddered slightly a wisp of fear dancing across his heart before he shook it off. Byakuya nodded softly to himself the new member of the Shiba clan was far more than he seemed.

X

Ichigo leisurely stood up a soft yawn plaguing him momentarily as he stretched out his stiff arms. It was horrendously boring to practice the same strike fifteen times in a row when one already knew the basics. He shook his head softly this was supposed to be an advanced class but perhaps the teacher decided to go “easy” on them by having them practice drills over and over again. The teacher in question was a great brute of a man with dull mud coloured hair and sharp flint eyes that roamed over you, judging every strike and piercing your soul. The class ended with a small round of duels testing their improvisation and the drills they worked on in class.

Ichigo was paired with someone who was likely the best in the class and the contempt on the teacher’s face seemed to prove it. Shiro joyfully suggested a bit of sadism was hidden under those penetrating eyes. The match had been a tad difficult for Ichigo as he constantly had to remind himself to tone down his powers so as not to draw attention to himself. Old man Zangetsu’s suggestion of a seal seemed like a ray of sunshine in what would be a very difficult year without one. Ichigo was quite adept at higher level Kido and after Hachigen showed him the fun in constructing barriers well it only spiralled onward from there. That is to say though, that he still had tremendous difficulty with the lower level spells as his reaitsu flowed through him and overpowered the spell.
His opponent had been defeated easily enough once Ichigo had a slight handle on his powers, the student he faced put too much strength in his swings saving no energy for the rest of the battle. He was cocky and overconfident and Ichigo gladly knocked him down a few pegs.

Ichigo slowly glided outside towards one of the large cherry trees which stood like an old sentinel protecting the ground below with its flowery blossoms. Settling on to the soft grass Ichigo pulled out the simple onigiri Ganju packed for his lunch. It was a kind move and only boosted Ichigo’s already high opinion of Ganju. It takes true courage after all to charge through the mess of battle to be by his sister’s side, to protect her so that she might continue fighting.

Ichigo shook himself harshly the food in his mouth tasting slightly bitter but he forced himself to eat not wanting to be rude and leave the food prepared for him unfinished. Ichigo let out a tired sigh as he thought of the rest of the day, he still had two more classes and then he was to move into the dorms the school offered. Kaien and Kukkaku were keen that he stay at home where they could keep a careful eye on him. But Ichigo protested stating the need to recover on his own, the chance to make friends and the fact that it was only a short distance away; reluctantly they agreed making Ichigo promise to visit at least once a week.

A wisp of foreign reaitsu drifted across Ichigo’s senses and instantly he was alert, to any outsider it would seem as if the Shiba heir had merely shifted into a more comfortable position when in actuality he was shifting into a slightly defensive stance and resting his hand on Zangetsu who rested comfortably at his hip. Ichigo let out a small huff as the bushes behind him ruffled “suspiciously” in the lack of wind, really Nelliel in her child form could sneak better than the oafs hiding in the bush behind him. One reaitsu made itself prominent in the small group “hiding” behind the bushes and Ichigo let out a small sigh, people could be so petty.

Heaving himself off the soft ground Ichigo looked at the emerald grass longingly before turning away and entering a light flash-step carrying him away from the ruffling bushes and the ancient sentinel.

Ichigo flickered into existence on a small pebbled path the large academy behind him blocking out the sun’s golden rays leaving only shadows that shifted eerily with the soft swaying of the trees. Spinning in a small circle Ichigo was met with eyes the colour of silver and raven hair which cascaded softly to his shoulders framing an angular face that held a nobleness in its structure.

Ichigo blinked slightly in shock the image of an older Byakuya overcasting his vision, one weathered by the war with eyes like stones, flat and emotionless, as he fought to honour Rukia’s memory, and the blood…

X Flashback X

It had been bloody and brutal, sometime during the middle of the war reports came of a joint attack on a small party of healers. Ichigo and Byakuya were selected for the mission and fast as their legs could carry them they raced towards the 54th district of Rungokai. They were too late. It had been an all-out slaughter the healers sprawled brokenly upon the ground. As they looked at the scene with sadness checking the pulse of a small golden haired Shinigami, the opposing forces sprung on them like the snow blankets the ground, wave after wave until you were buried under the snow unable to breathe.

Their blades glimmered under the eaves of the trees as they whirléd in tandem slashing through Quincy and Hollow alike, but it seemed as though for every one killed two more appeared to take their place. Blood soon trailed up Ichigo and Byakuya’s arms and splattered across their faces in untidy sprawls. As the sun began to rise in the east colouring the sky lush shades of coral, gold and crystal blue, they began to drive the enemies back. That’s when one of the Sternritter appeared in a
bright blazing inferno, suddenly the Quincy’s who were losing moral began to fight back as Ichigo and Byakuya were once more driven back.

Ichigo and Byakuya fought with all their power destroying the Quincy where they stood, as the Hollows were incinerated by their power. The sun soon rose high above them casting light on the gruesome scene below as the sound of clashing blades and guttural sounds rang out through the narrow clearing, Ichigo still saw it as his fault, only a few more remained and the Sternritter was lying on the ground choking on a pool of his own blood while his eyes slowly lost colour. They should have been more careful. He should have been more cautious. As the last were defeated the two Shinigami turned to leave the clearing, when a pale white blade pierced Byakuya’s side; blood glistening on the blade in the afternoon light.

Ichigo’s blade flashed through the air before his mind even registered his hand doing so, slicing through the crimson haired Sternritter with ease as the dull sound of a head thumping to the ground echoed throughout the clearing. Turning to Byakuya with worry in his eyes he quickly caught the nobleman as he fell, a nobleman who had become one of his best friends during the course of a war that tore them all apart. Byakuya coughed harshly bright crimson painting pale lips as he looked in to Ichigo’s chocolate orbs, already filling with desolation and despair.

“I will tell Rukia… you say hello. Do not blame yourself for this Ichigo, any of it. This was never your burden to shoulder in the first place… what you have done has far surpassed the expectations of any Kami out there. You will find peace soon Ichigo have patience.”

Byakuya spoke softly trying to lighten the mood before becoming serious the light in his eyes fading slowly. Ichigo hastily covered Byakuya’s wound the blood of his friend covering his already stained hands, Ichigo’s breath caught in his throat as he stared at his friend nodding his head softly and quietly whispering, “Goodbye.”

Byakuya closed his eyes and let out one final shuddering breath before he grew still, the angular face ashen in the afternoon sunlight. Ichigo closed his eyes, his head folding forward to rest on his chest as his body shook his reaitsu swirling violently around him, his hands clenched into tight fist resting on his lap. Slowly Ichigo opened his eyes looking at his bloodstained hands, stained with the blood of his friend, Ichigo let out a shuddering breath before picking up Byakuya’s limp body in his arms.

As he left, the clearing behind him burst into flames his reaitsu striking furiously at the ground below igniting the grass and trees like the anger that swelled within him; it was a lesson learned quickly when one could bring back the dead. Byakuya would be cremated in Soul Society he deserved that much. Ichigo looked down once more at the cool body in his arms feeling suddenly lost and small in a world far too big for him before turning his head away and speeding off towards Soul Society.

X

Byakuya looked up startled from the small tome he was reading as a gentle presence suddenly invaded his personal space. Looking up an impassive expression resting on his face and a dismissal resting on his tongue, he was shocked to see warm chocolate eyes which blinked in shock at Byakuya. Byakuya took a slight step back allowing for more space between the two nobles before looking at the Shiba curiously as he had yet to say anything.

The once bright orbs seemed to fade slightly, the colour in his cheeks fading till his face was pale as death, and his gaze no longer rested on Byakuya rather it was staring at an unseen object in the distance. Byakuya frowned slightly in concern before calling out softly, “Shiba-san are you alright?”

The orangette took no notice of his words and a small frown seemed to settle on the young man’s face. Hesitantly Byakuya tried again and received no response, slowly Byakuya brought his arm up
and lightly rested his hand on the clothed shoulder lightly shaking while calling out the heir’s name.

Blinking softly the orangette opened his eyes the dull light fading once more to be replaced with rich chocolate hues. Shiba-san’s brows furrowed slightly as if in confusion before looking up slightly and locking eyes with Byakuya’s own silver orbs. Hastily Byakuya brought his hand to his side once again as the Shiba heir turned away to look into the distance before saying, “I—I’m sorry that’s never happened to me before…my name is Shiba Ichigo and you are?”

Closer to the young man Byakuya could hear the soft tenor and rich undertones hiding under the polite tone and see the slight shaking in his hands as he held it out, a pained expression flashed across his face briefly before it was gone leaving only an impassive expression resting upon his narrow face. Byakuya stretched his hand out to meet the others and with a polite smile said, “Byakuya Kuchiki, it’s a pleasure to meet the new Shiba clan member.”

Shiba-san nodded before a small frown settled across his face and briskly he said, “You can call me Ichigo, Shiba-san is a tiresome name and far too common with so many of us.”

Byakuya nodded and with a slight smile said, “Then please call me Byakuya.”

Ichigo nodded his shoulders gently slumping before the young man’s head whipped around suddenly and a mumbled “Imbeciles” slipped from his lips as turned with an apologetic smile on his face his hand coming up to lightly scratch the back of his head.

“I’m afraid I will have to cut this meeting short as a baka is heading my way that is unless you would like to join me?”

Byakuya considered the offer, the Shiba heir seemed intelligent (compared to the useless fools) and a glint of humour flashed underneath his eyes, it would only be beneficial for the clan if he was friends with Ichigo. A beast could be dangerous but when one recognized you as one of its own there was no safer place in the world. The final piece was the lost look in Ichigo’s eyes; hidden well under the mask of impassiveness but peeking out when no one was thought to be looking. His eyes were full of desolation and loneliness, while even his shoulders seemed burdened with sadness.

Byakuya nodded slightly and a pleased smile flitted across Ichigo’s face before he turned and in a light flash-step made his way to the small roof of the school; Byakuya following closely behind the bright shock of orange.

X

The dorm was spacious but the simple furniture added a small sense of comfort, the soft ebony sheets seemed to beckon Ichigo closer to the bed but he merely shook his head; he still had a few important tasks to finish.

Planting his heavy books on the nearby desk, Ichigo padded further into the room till he stood under the small circular window whose pale blue curtains were drawn shedding little light into the already dark room. Reaching up on the top of his toes Ichigo pushed the curtains aside letting the waning afternoon sun shine through onto the cool wood below.

Gently easing himself into a seiza position, Ichigo rested his hands on his lap, closing his eyes and focusing on his breathing. This time he did not allow himself to sink into his inner world, instead he pictured his reaitsu as a swirling vortex of a miasma of colours that crashed upon each other melding and folding in on one another. Slowly Ichigo let pale yellow walls rise up to surround the vortex not letting a wisp of his reaitsu escape the sturdy walls. In time the wall began to take shape, forming into the Kurosaki clinic. Ichigo paused to gain control of his emotions and even out his breathing once
Ichigo’s reitsu raced forward trying to escape through the small exit like a herd of school children at recess. Ichigo let out a long exhale as his power slowly retreated further inside the lemon walls. The seal was finished. Ichigo leaned back and inspected his work with a critical eye; it was flexible allowing for a minimal or large amount of power to be used while still containing the rest. It would allow him a measure of control over that would otherwise be unachievable with so much reitsu.

Satisfied Ichigo let the image fade and opened his eyes taking in the sudden darkness that surrounded him and the pale beams of the moon that shone in a heavenly manner through his window tracing shadows in the lines of his face. He had taken longer than he though to build the seal. Feeling a slight pulse run up his arm Ichigo carefully drew up the sleeve of his uniform to see thick charcoal coloured lines forming a crescent moon high above a harsh desert tattooed into his skin just below his elbow contained in a small circle.

The seal was simple yet beautiful and easy to cover up Ichigo smiled softly a tiny bit proud of himself. A yawn disrupted Ichigo’s thoughts and his hand came up to cover his mouth as his eyelids flickered shut for a brief moment hiding caramel orbs from view.

“Rest Ichigo we will protect you always.”

Old man Zangetsu’s soothing baritone filled Ichigo’s mind and gracelessly he heaved himself from the ground wincing at the slight ache present in his muscles. Clambering over to the warm bed Ichigo slipped under the covers letting his tired eyes close as Zangetsu’s presence hummed around him. Ichigo ignored the fact that he would likely wake up early in the morning screaming about the blood he choked on and their dead eyes as they clawed at his ankles. Slowly his breathing evened out and the pale beams of moonlight landed on his peaceful face

X

Ichigo sighed leaning back on his hands as his head tilted up eyelids slipping shut, shoulders gently slumping. A week had passed since he first entered the academy in all its glory and already Ichigo was quite bored; the classes seemed repetitive in his mind as they practiced the same drills over and over again. A ray of light in a cloudy week came in the form of Byakuya, who underneath the cold exterior of a noble had a dry sense of humour and sarcasm to rival Ichigo himself.

It was pleasant to talk to someone of intelligence who could hold a conversation or ignite a fierce argument of wits that had the mind working faster than the speed of light and your blood pumping. There was also the slight difficulty in keeping any knowledge of the future out of any conversation, for when one spoke of who they thought was going to be promoted to captain next it was hard not to stumble and say names far off the register of ever becoming captain at that point.

A slight breeze whistled behind him and the flowing presence of Byakuya washed over him, slightly his shoulders tensed before relaxing once again as the raven haired noble sat down beside the orangette.

“Eating lunch on the rooftop again Ichigo?” Byakuya said a slender eyebrow raised as he handed over a small bento box to Ichigo knowing that Ichigo “forgot” to pack or buy a lunch. Ichigo blushed slightly a mumbled “thanks” spilling from his lips as he took the offered box. This was the third time Byakuya had brought Ichigo lunch, knowing by now that Ichigo was averse to eating, stating when asked why he preferred not to eat
“It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth no matter what I eat and a slight nausea will overcome me.”

So Byakuya the “kind soul” that he was had taken it upon his duty to bring lunch for Ichigo and make him eat it, or at least Ichigo suspected that was his mission. The sky darkened slightly as a silver cloud drifted lazily across the sun covering its intense rays.

“How did you find zanjutsu practice today?”

Byakuya’s smooth tenor filled the crisp autumn air as the sun peaked out from behind the clouds. Ichigo turned his head slightly to look at Byakuya whose gaze was locked on the white buildings gleaming in the distance. Ichigo’s eyebrow crinkled as he wondered at the random question before replying, “Quite boring as usual the teacher decided it would be a good idea to use me as his example in class.”

Byakuya nodded turning to lock silver orbs with Ichigo’s caramel coloured eyes and with a dead serious face said, “And did you make a good example out of him?”

A small smile broke out on Ichigo’s face before it descended into quiet giggles, beside him Byakuya was already laughing the clear sound ringing out through the empty court below. Before the two knew it they were both in full blown laughter their sides aching as they struggled for breath. Ichigo turned to face Byakuya with a wide smile, mirth dancing in his eyes as Byakuya stared back at him for a moment before descending into laughter once more.

X

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed I think it was pretty obvious who the Sternritter was but if you have any guesses feel free to guess. Please leave a review and I will see you all in the next chapter!

Umbrella!!
Byakuya and Ichigo get into some troubling situations ;)

Solivagant
(adj.) wandering alone.

Hello everyone here is the new chapter! I have quite doomed myself in that I’m starting a YouTuber au while also working on this, but do not fear as this story takes priority. In this chapter keep there is an air of shipping hinted at, but this will lead to nothing as I am not pairing Ichigo with anyone this was more satire than literal shipping. Feel free though to let your imagination run wild. Enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo
X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

X
Ichigo shivered slightly as Byakuya walked beside him; through the echoing halls the hungry eyes of the woman who lined the corridor trailing after them. The girls giggled and pointed whispering and mumbling under their breath as they watched the two men walk by on their way to Kido. Papers seemed to shuffle ominously behind them and Ichigo let out a soft sigh; already it was beginning and would likely only gain momentum. It was startling that such a simple event could change everything so drastically.

X
They had been sparing for fun in one of the smaller dojos the sound of wood clashing against wood echoing throughout the small square room as sweat beaded on their faces. Byakuya was already panting slightly while Ichigo wasn’t short of breath, an exhilarant smile on his face as he brought his blade up once holding it level in front of his face once more to attack. Byakuya took a moment to center himself and Ichigo watched as his posture straightened the heavy bokken held at the ready in front of him.

Byakuya gave a slight nod and Ichigo darted forward blade flying through the air in a graceful arc overhead. Byakuya hastily brought his blade up to defend against the incoming strike staggering slightly at the weight pushing down from above, lifting his left leg up he swiftly stepped back as his leg flashed out attempting to hit Ichigo in the stomach. Ichigo danced out of the way, his caramel eyes reflecting the sun’s soft light filtering in from the slightly open doors.

Back and forth they moved across the beige matting below, harsh panting filled the air and sweat
gathered like bees to sweetness. Light glinted in both Byakuya and Ichigo’s eyes as the thrill of having an able opponent and the rush of adrenaline filled their bloodstreams and sharpened their senses. With a final resounding crash of blades Byakuya lightly tumbled to the ground the heavy wooden sword landing some distance away with a dull ‘thump’ as Ichigo swung the blade in an elegant curve. Ichigo rested the wood at Byakuya’s neck, the gleam of victory shining in his eyes as he lowered the bokken and offered his hand to Byakuya who was looking up at him from his sprawled positon on the pillow like mats.

X

“I surrender. You win again for the 17th time.”

Byakuya looked up at Ichigo, good humour shining in his eyes as he took Ichigo’s calloused hand and stood up before padding over and picking up the pale bokken and resting it on one of the many weapon racks lining the walls. Turning Byakuya spotted Ichigo doing the same and quickly glided over to stand beside the orangette. Ichigo turned to him with a bright smile gently brushing the back of his hand against his forehead to wipe away the lingering sweat.

“Nice job today Byakuya, you accented your moves, making sure they were sharp and you controlled your strength not going all out from the beginning. Next time try to let your body loosen up a bit more, you need to be able to flow from move to the next, and you can’t be rigid or stiff.”

Ichigo’s rich tenor quietly flowed between the two and Byakuya nodded taking the words to heart and focusing on improving what Ichigo suggested. It had become routine for them to spar with each other at least once a week. A few weeks before Byakuya had foolishly challenged Ichigo to a duel wanting to test his friend’s prowess with the blade. He was thoroughly defeated and asked Ichigo for some tips in sparring, it only escalated from that point till Ichigo was teaching him more than classes ever could. For one so tall Ichigo was swift, darting from place to place hiding strength behind ebony robes and an easy smile.

Ichigo’s sock-clad feet began padding towards the door, Byakuya following behind with an easy smile on his face as energy hummed pleasantly in his veins. A muffled curse resounded throughout the room as Ichigo arms were flung out to the side in an attempt to balance himself. The maneuver did not succeed and the lanky orangette began to fall backwards a small flash of panic alighting in his cocoa orbs.

Byakuya hastily stepped forward catching his friend before he could crash into the ground. Byakuya’s eyes widened slightly at the weight that had fallen into his arms, Ichigo was light and one could mistake his weight as that of a small child if not for Ichigo’s appearance. A frown danced unbidden across Byakuya’s features as he stared softly at his friend, for what reason was Ichigo so light? If asked he would probably glare, and upon insistence attribute it to light bones, but there was far too little weight to support such a flimsy excuse. He suspected it had something to do with Ichigo’s aversion to food and the bitterness that hung behind his eyes when he looked at it.

X

Ichigo’s held tilted up locking caramel eyes with Byakuya who turned his head away slightly a light flush dusting his cheeks before helping Ichigo to his feet. Ichigo’s head swerved suspiciously from side to side glancing at the floor, where it was as if the mat had jumped up and wrapped itself around his ankle yanking him backwards and into Byakuya’s waiting arms. Once more Ichigo’s head swiveled searching the empty dojo for a hidden culprit and rose petals that may have appeared out of nowhere drifting in a soft cadence around them as the background faded to a lush crimson. Seeing no evidence of such an event Ichigo shook his head as a shiver traced his spine, and the hair on his arms stood at attention.
Ichigo’s head whipped around only to spot the threads of chocolate coloured hair as the owner rushed past the wooden door a surprised feminine squeak escaping the watchers lips. Ichigo’s hand dragged a slow path down his face as he let out a groan of resignation, one of them had seen Ichigo fall into Byakuya’s arms and it wouldn’t be long before word spread throughout the school. The girls lined in the hallways and whispered in the corridors about the sudden feelings that blossomed between the two nobles. The whole matter was of course unfounded as Ichigo had long ago sworn to stay off the path of romance; it only led to tragedy and heartbreak.

Ichigo turned to see Byakuya’s puzzled stare slightly full of apprehension, Ichigo merely pointed at the door and watched as mute horror crossed Byakuya’s face, his eyes wide and a tinge of fear shining through as he considered this new development and the impending doom it proclaimed. Ichigo only smiled apologetically before making a small ‘come hither’ gesture and began to step outside the stuffy dojo, bright afternoon sun layered the grounds below in rich shades of emerald and lime as the crystal sky and puffy clouds above floated contentedly. Stepping to the side Ichigo stretched his arms above, wincing slightly at the sharp pop before smiling as he felt Byakuya’s warm presence beside him.

“I’m sure we’ll survive if we’re locked in a closet together for a day.”

Ichigo joked slightly a small smile settled on his face and a radiant light shining from within his eyes. Byakuya turned to face Ichigo with an arched brow before replying, “Oh yes because we totally wouldn’t kill each other in that long amount of time in a tightly enclosed space.”

Ichigo only let a small laugh trickle from his lips before he turned to face the horizon, a soft glimmer in his eyes that spoke of content; an emotion seldom felt when you were in the middle of a war and the corpses of your friends lay strewn about beside you. The trees rustled slightly with a quiet caress of the breeze and a small ivory bird lifted gracefully from the hulking giant’s slender branches. The bird’s elegant form faded slowly as Ichigo watched it fly farther away disappearing into the pale sky.

X

Ichigo hissed from his cramped position trying to make out Byakuya’s face in the darkness of the supply closet. It was a wonder how he kept getting into these situations, one minute they’re walking to the next class, and suddenly an ominous chill steals over his spine, and a dull rumble sounds from behind. If the whispers travelling the halls were any indication the fearsome presence behind them had only spelt their doom. In a haste to escape the adoring eyes and manic smiles the two friends darted into one of the nearby closets, thinking it to be a classroom they were sorely mistaken.

Ichigo let out a soft sigh as the last of the footsteps faded into the distance leaving only the sound of their breaths in the compact room. Ichigo hesitantly reached over and twisted the small brass knob wincing as the resounding squeak the unoiled handle let out, with a light push the door swung open onto an empty hallway. Ichigo peered out hesitantly his head swinging from side to side before with a slight nod he stepped out of the shadowed room, Byakuya stumbling out behind Ichigo.

Together they escaped to the roof breathing out twin sighs of relief at the fresh air and sunlight that greeted them. Ichigo padded over to the narrow ledge and plopped down onto the cold grey stone watching as Byakuya gracefully settled down beside him. With a small laugh Ichigo said, “I guess I can predict the future?”

Humour laced his voice as his eyes darkened briefly at the words he was speaking. Beside Ichigo Byakuya broke into a small grin only nodding slightly his reitsu projecting his happiness and content.

“I have a paper due tomorrow on the theory of Kido would you like to come to the library with me?”
Byakuya’s deep tenor floated towards Ichigo’s ears and he nodded a teasing smile on his face as he said in a voice full of grandiose, “The great Byakuya is not prepared for a paper! The horror! It would be an honour Kuchiki-sama to travel with you below to the haven of knowledge that is the library.”

Byakuya snorted a mumbled “hardly” escaping his lips before he elegantly stood up the wind blowing his raven locks in an intricate dance as a pale hand extended towards Ichigo. Smiling Ichigo grasped Byakuya’s warm hand and let himself be pulled up. Together they descended the stairs the echoing of the door shutting behind them ringing through the stairwell. Cautiously their eyes roamed the hallways searching out potential “enemies” before continuing onwards to the vast library the academy offered.

Ichigo stared at the paper on the desk in front of him blankly his mind gently wandering unknown paths taking him across vast seas, and lush forest where inside it was dark, and the small toadstools that lined the pathways, carved by the animals, glowed ominously casting slight shadows on the colourful plants surrounding them. Ichigo let his bare feet gently lead him forward, walking over soft soil, and twisted roots that snaked up from the ground. A few daring rays of sunshine pierced the canopy above shedding light on small sprouts that twisted ever upwards.

The peaceful walk Ichigo was taking in his mind was disrupted by the soft sound of thunder from above, slowly Ichigo pulled himself from the gentle meditation he had eased himself into when the dull paper he had to write began to override his basic functioning skills. Turning slightly towards the door Ichigo easily identified the presence drawing near and let out a small sigh. Kaien had chosen to visit.

The door burst open as Kaien pranced into the pale room his eyes instantly locking onto Ichigo’s own amber ones, bracing himself for the incoming words Ichigo let out a soft breath and nonchalantly raised his hand in a small wave. Kaien’s face was soon sporting a bright smile as he sashayed closer letting the door close behind him as he sat on the ebony sheets of the bed which rested across from Ichigo’s desk.

“Really Ichigo you need to come home far more often, Kukaku has been complaining and trust me that is not a pleasant experience. Come on don’t be such a baby I’m sure she won’t hit you…that much. Plus Ganju’s cooking is to die for!”

Ichigo nodded turning away from the desk so he could face Kaien as they spoke.

“I understand, I am still settling in to regular school life, also please refrain from calling me a baby Kaien-san”

Kaien let out a soft wail crocodile tears slowly cascading down his cheeks as he let out began to yell, “Oh the horror my baby brother! Ichigo your heart is so cold, might you refrain from using honorifics? Unlikely! Unable to take a joke what has the world done to my innocent little brother!?”

Ichigo only sighed his head descending to rest in the palm of his hand; far too familiar with the normal Shiba antics. Ichigo let out a soft huff as he watched Kaien fondness shining in his eyes minutely as he thought of Kaien’s spiel. Kaien only pouted seeing Ichigo’s lack of reaction before looking from side to side with a determined look in his eyes. Finally in a hushed voice Kaien said, “Did you hear the rumours that Urhara, Yourichi’s former second in command is secretly a mad scientist? Or the one about Captain Unohana fighting a young boy in Rungokai and losing?!?”

Ichigo merely raised an eyebrow content with letting Kaien continue with his gossip as one nosy as
Kaien is wont to do. Kaien continued a pleased smile on his face before he leaned in as if this was the most important rumor yet.

“Ichi can you confirm this rumour for me? All the female Shinigami are whispering about you and the Kuchiki heir. They say you two are in love.”

Kaien’s last words ended on a sing-song note and Ichigo could feel a small tic forming above his brow, it seemed that no matter where he went rumours of his supposed “love affairs” would haunt him. Ichigo shook his head trying to indicate that the rumours were untrue, while also giving Kaien a warning look trying to dissuade him from continuing the topic of Ichigo’s and Byakuya’s supposed romance.

Kaien only looked at Ichigo with a scrutinizing gaze before in a dramatically boisterous tone saying, “Oh! My little brother’s grown up so fast! Already in love and with a man! Not to mention a Kuchiki, the horror! How will I ever survive?!”

Ichigo pinched the bridge of his nose taking a deep breath in, trying to calm himself; it didn’t work. Shiro’s suggestions of torture that echoed in the background of his mind seemed more and more pleasing by the moment. Kaien continued on unaware of Ichigo’s growing ire, which revealed itself in the form of clenched fist and the grinding of his pearly teeth. The straw that broke the camel’s back was what Kaien finally uttered after an endless amount of poetic waxing before falling quiet.

“And you better watch out for the Shinigami’s woman association! They’ll be on your tail like a petit furry kitten to a mouse! But I’m sure if you hide in a closet you’ll be fine.”

Shiro’s suggestions were about to become reality as Ichigo ground out a harsh, “Kaien it would be wise of you to run.”

X

Kaien froze a quick glance upwards revealing the truth in Ichigo’s words. With a barely perceptible nod Kaien was fleeing the room like the devil was hot on his tail, in all seriousness Kaien was very close to the heart of the matter. Panting slightly as he urged his legs to move faster, blood pumping through his veins and his heart beating like a clock gone haywire. Kaien could feel Ichigo’s icy presence behind him, hounding him and forcing Kaien to accelerate least he be caught.

It was with great relief that Kaien finally burst through the light oak doors and into his captain’s office. Ukitake-taicho and Kyoraku-taicho looked up as one in astonishment as the sight of Kaien panting with flushed cheeks and wide eyes greeted them.

“T-taicho! Save me…he’s after me!”

Kaien gasped once more after he pleaded with his captain his eyes fearfully roaming the room as if searching for an unseen enemy. Ukitake traded a concerned glance with Kyoraku before speaking in soft reassuring tones.

“Who is after you Kaien?”

Kaien slinked away from the door until he was closer to the two captains before in a hushed voice as if whoever he was speaking of could be called to them said, “Ichigo. I may have talked about some things that he was not pleased about. That being the rumours of a relationship between Ichigo and the Kuchiki heir, I was questioning him whether they were tru-“

Like the sudden onset of a summer storm a heavy presence hung above their heads and projected feelings of anger and pleasure at finding one’s prey. The doors slowly slid open cinnamon eyes
blazing with heavenly fire peaked from behind the frame and hair like burning embers shadowed the features of the cocoa eyed man. Kaien let out a quiet unmanly squeak before diving under Ukitake’s desk, praying that Ichigo hadn’t noticed. He doubted his luck would be so fortunate.

“Ah you must be Ichigo, I’m Ukitake, Kaien’s captain.”

The fire seemed to disappear in an instant leaving simmering ashes in its wake, Ichigo inclined his head respectfully as his gaze roamed over the room seemingly searching for something. Lingering underneath the searching gaze was a hint of recognition, and a touch of sorrow at the sight of the two captains sitting together. Kyroraku studied Ichigo with a slightly calculating gaze, taking in the guarded eyes and tense shoulders. The way Ichigo held himself reminded Kyroraku of a crouching animal, prepared to pounce and always watchful.

“Ma, ma such a fiery gaze, my name is Kyroraku Shunsui captain of the Eighth division.”

As Kyroraku spoke Ichigo’s hazelnut eyes locked onto Kyroraku widening slightly in what could be taken as surprise and yet the emotion was unclear. A fracture of a smile alighted on Ichigo’s face before his gaze swung elsewhere, as if he could not bear to look at Kyroraku.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both, have you seen Kaien? I have a great need to ‘talk’ to him.”

Kaien gulped slightly from under the desk as Ichigo’s rich tenor echoed through the room, pleasant in nature, but with a sinister undertone hiding underneath. Kaien shuddered slightly and wondered if his captain would surrender him to the tender ”mercy” that Ichigo would oh so graciously provide. Kyroraku’s soft baritone soon entered the silence once again as the coffee haired captain spoke.

“Why are you looking for Kaien? Did he upset you?”

Ichigo let out a harsh bark of laughter, a slight smile settling on the stoic man’s face as he said, “Something of the sort, Kaien can be oblivious at the best of times and it was an unfortunate time for him to be so. He was talking about the gossip as one nosy as him is wont to do when he stumbled onto the topic of Byakuya and I’s apparent love affair. He could not see the signs that I did not like that topic. One easily reaches a breaking point when it comes to Kaien.”

The two captain’s nodded understanding looks on their faces as they thought of the lieutenant cowering behind the desk in a fond manner. Kaien felt a glare penetrate through the desk and reach his soul, sending icy shivers cascading down his spine.

“Kaien gets off with a warning this time, but next time it is unlikely he will be so fortunate.”

The foreboding warning echoed around the room and Kaien shivered slightly while the captain’s regarded Ichigo with amused looks. Ukitake in a soft and convincing voice said, “You’re not going to take the opportunity to stay and talk with two captains quite high in Soul Society’s hierarchy?”

Ichigo shook his head and said, “I’m not some ass kisser, and I’m not looking to do favours. Whatever seat I earn will be through my own power, not greed and corruption. On the other note I’m sure we could have some splendid conversations, but already the afternoon draws near and I have an essay on the theory of Bakudo due tomorrow.”

Kyroraku pouted slightly before a crafty gleam entered his eyes and his deep voice soon rang out as he said, “Not even for a few minutes? We have some fine Sake. Think of it more as a chance for us to get to know Kaien’s wonderful little brother he’s been telling us all about.”

Ichigo seemed to let out a long suffering sigh before shifting with a rustle of smooth cloth and sliding over to one of the plain seats that lined the small office. Kyroraku let an easy smiled slip across his
face as he pulled out the extra cup he always kept on him. It was good to be prepared if one found a new drinking buddy. Ichigo’s next words put a stop to the lovely idea.

“No thank you, if anything to drink it would be tea. I rarely drink Sake now as it leads to a slip of the tongue that could be quite costly, though I am quite sure that if the occasion arrived I would gladly drink you under the table.”

Kyroraku’s laughter bounced around the room as he regarded Ichigo with an amused expression; Ukitake smiled pleased to see the two interact well. Once Kyroraku’s booming laughter diminished and silence filled the room once more, Ukitake regarded Ichigo with a curious glance before asking, “What squad do you plan to enter?”

A pensive look was cast upon Ichigo’s angular face as he pondered the question before saying, “I’ve narrowed it down to four options, those being the Fifth, Sixth, Eighth and Ninth. I can’t see myself working as one of the Onmitsukidō, I am not one who murders in cold blood and I am not a scientist at heart. I know for certain that no matter how great you are Ukitake-taicho, your lieutenant would not survive long if we were in the same squad, and it is doubtless that I would gain some form of anger issues. The Eleventh is too focused on fighting for my taste and I’m not a healer, though I bet I could keep the patients in their beds. Having the Soutaicho breathing down you neck is doubtless an uncomfortable feeling so I settled for the squads I felt best suited my skill range.”

Underneath Ichigo’s statement words hung in gaps before he spoke and a wicked grin was carved into his face when he talked about the Fourth. Ukitake seemed a touch morose at the news that the orangette was not interested in his squad but could sympathize with the reasoning; he understood well enough what Kaien was like. Kyroraku seemed to be ready to crow with glee, if the smile on his face was any indication of his feelings. Kaien frowned from his position under the desk but made no move to protest as the chances of Ichigo murdering him were still quite high.

“Kaien was saying you’re only attending the academy for two years at most?”

Ukitake’s silvery voice soon filled the comfortable silence and Ichigo nodded his response and said, “Yes, the examiners were impressed with my knowledge and reaitsu levels. I have already achieved my Shikai as well.”

Interest peaked in the other occupants of the room, with Kaien mourning under the desk about how his little brother didn’t tell him anything. Kyroraku smiled once more this time with a hint of predatory light in his eyes as he said, “Would you be willing to show us?”

Ichigo shook his head a teasing smile hiding under the shadows of his face, while a strange despairing look haunted his eyes. His next words were spoken quietly as his gaze glided to the window and the afternoon light it shed on the small office.

“Another time, it is late and I…have the paper due.”

The bubbly light that once inhabited his eyes was replaced with a somber look while the rest of his face displayed no such emotions. Ukitake sensing Ichigo’s desire to leave nodded and said, “Yes we better not keep you from your homework. Feel free to come by and visit you definitely add a spark to an otherwise boring day and a large load of paperwork. I will look forward to seeing your Shikai I’m sure it’s something altogether unique.”

A soft smile slipped onto Ichigo’s face at those words and he bowed to the two captains, sent a heated glare at the general desk direction and seemed to flee from the room. Orange hair fading like the day to night.
Kaien slowly crept out from the desk, head darting from side to side checking for the fiery wrath of his brother, when he found none he padded over to the two captains who had amused smiles in place as they watched his actions.

“Ma, ma Kaien your brother is a very interesting figure. A depth hides behind his eyes, one cannot see it easily.”

Kaien nodded pausing to stare at his hands before saying, “Yes he can be cold and distant at times, like his emotions have been locked inside a box of obsidian and the key thrown into the ocean. That’s partially the reason I tease him, if just to see happiness instead of sorrow. It was good that he met the both of you, he keeps to himself other than the Kuchiki heir and it would be well if he saw mentors in you. He seems to have taken a liking to you which is hopeful. I try to encourage him to come home, where the warmth of family can melt the coldest of ice, but he insists on staying at the school. I’ve been drawing him home slowly with the threat of Kukkaku and the enticement of home cooking to cafeteria food.”

The two older captains took in Kaien’s words carefully analysing the soft spoken words and relating them to the young Shiba with eyes of fire. Kaien’s words rang true and they felt no ill will to the Shiba at his slight plotting.

“You are trying to help him, are you sure this is the right way?”

The question was posed by Kyroraku who now sported a somber look coupled with thoughtful eyes. Kaien nodded and said, “With all my soul. Ichigo doesn’t need space, he needs the strength and support that only family and friends can provide. And I will help him! For in his eyes hidden so delicately under layers of emotion there is a fragile glimmer of hope, I will kindle that hope until it blazes like the fiercest of fires, unquenchable.”

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter, I hope you noted the carefully mentioning of eyes that is appearing ;). Enjoy your week, please leave a review, and I will see you all soon!
Frame!!
Chapter Summary

Seeing his old mentors alive again, Ichigo is overcome by a wave of memories.

Chapter Notes

Lorn
(adj.) lost, ruined, or undone.

I hope you all enjoy this super long chapter (at least for me) which is over 6500 words! Yay! This chapter is real emotional rollercoaster so wrap yourselves up in comfy blankets, hold you snacks close, and enjoy the chapter.

I'm also super sorry I didn't post on my regular date, I was at my dad's and didn't have the chapter, so again sorry. I hope everyone had a merry Christmas and will have an excellent New Year.

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo
X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo walked through the academy halls in a light daze; his eyes foggy and barely visible under the curtain of his bangs. His mind swam elsewhere, his body remained taut like a strewn bow as he walked down the near empty hallway. Byakuya cast a concerned glance at his friend as Ichigo passed him without acknowledgement, continuing to glide through the hallway like a spectre. Byakuya padded after his friend with furrowed brows and a slight frown resting upon his carved face. Once he was level with the orangette he softly called, “Ichigo?”

Ichigo’s head swiveled to face Byakuya, a blank look still resting on his face, it took a moment for the fog to clear slightly and comprehension to dawn slightly in Ichigo’s eyes.

“B-Byakuya?”

His voice was soft and emotion slurred the fine accenting that was usually present when Ichigo spoke. His head tilted up shifting the bangs that covered his eyes so misty caramel eyes could be revealed; a haunted look danced within them, the only gateway to Ichigo’s true emotions.

“Are you alright Ichigo?”

Byakuya posed the question in a soothing manner as he gently led Ichigo to the side of the hall, where they would not obstruct traffic and could speak with privacy. Ichigo blinked glancing around
in confusion as if just now realising where he stood.

“T-I’m fine I j-just need to get back to my room.”

Byakuya’s eyes widened as he heard Ichigo stutter, a slight uncertain tone hiding underneath. Byakuya nodded and moved back to let him pass, stepping beside his friend as Ichigo continued down the hall a lilting manner in the way he walked.

Ichigo grasped the door and with a deft pull the door slid open to reveal Ichigo’s room which was covered in muted tones of black and blue. Byakuya had passed through the thin doors a few times and of each he was surprised by the feeling of Ichigo’s reitsu which coated the furniture and saturated the walls; kept under tight control in a compact room. Ichigo glided into the room before turning to lock eyes with Byakuya, his eyes were clearer and the setting suns fading rays peaked through the curtain danced across his hair like fire.

“Thank you Byakuya I’m sorry I was so out of it.”

Byakuya regarded Ichigo warily before taking in the dark indigo under his eyes and his sharp features, his eyes were clear and no longer spoke of confusion. Byakuya nodded slightly and Ichigo’s shoulders dropped faintly in relief. Byakuya locked eyes with Ichigo once more, a warning shining in his eyes as he said, “If you need anything don’t be afraid to ask Ichigo, even if it’s being stuck in a closet with you for two hours. I’m here for you.”

Ichigo snorted his eyes lighting up minutely and his eyebrows quirking quizzically before he said, “Even if I asked you to dance in front of the Soutaicho?”

Byakuya pretended to pause for a moment his hand coming to stroke his chin thoughtfully for a moment before he smiled a slightly predatory smile and said, “Only if you’re right there beside me.”

Ichigo smiled once more and suddenly seemed a bit lighter as if some of the tension that rested on his shoulders evaporated.

“Thank you Byakuya, it means quite a lot to me.”

Byakuya nodded as Ichigo finished speaking and extended his hands for a soft shake before turning and striding towards the door, the whole dramatic effect would probably be better if he had a scarf or cape of some sort. Turning at the doorway he saw Ichigo’s smouldering eyes and let a whispered goodnight leave his lips before he turned and slid the door shut with a pleasant ‘click’.

X

Ichigo slumped boneless to the floor his hand tentatively tracing the small scar behind his ear, and then moving to the one on his shoulder that splayed out like a lighting strike in a stretch of pearl skin. Memories of the many battles he had fought in accompanied by twin blades. Ichigo’s breath stuttered and he felt the unwanted push of the memories trying to escape the small barrier and race to the forefront of his mind. It was times like this, seeing them alive again that almost caused him to fold in on himself, and self-destruct the walls he struggled so hard to maintain and build come crashing down on him, burying Ichigo and suffocating him.

“King ya know it’s best to deal with the memories and get them over with.”

Shiro’s dual tone voice rang almost condescendingly but underneath it there was general concern, his Zanpaktou understood him better than any man could, and as such knew why Ichigo delayed the oncoming memories as they would surely leave a devastating trail in their wake.
“Go forth Ichigo we will protect you always against the coming storm.”

Old man Zangetsu’s soothing baritone resounded in Ichigo’s minds and with a quiet grunt he heaved himself off the floor and dragged his feet towards the bed, the memories already clouding his vision as he embraced the sweet comforts of the silk sheets.

X Flashback X

Standing shadowed at the door frame, Ichigo peered into Ukitake-Taicho’s office noting the set of worn chairs, the large stack of paperwork that looked like it might topple any moment, and the ivory haired captain standing by the window staring at the fading sun and the crimson sky. Swiftly Ukitake-Taicho turned around his cider coloured eyes landing on Ichigo’s bright hair which peaked out from behind the frame. Noticing Ukitake-Taicho’s gaze Ichigo stepped into the small room, feeling a shiver go down his spine in the tightly enclosed space. Ukitake-Taicho noting his discomfort smiled soothingly and said, “Hello Ichigo, is there anything I can assist you with?”

The orangette smiled sheepishly, gingerly rubbing the back of his neck and deciding to study the floor which had suddenly become a complex irregularity among the other inhabitants of the room.

“I know you are quite busy already but Rukia suggested I ask you for help. I’m trying to learn everything I can so as to better fight Aizen and that includes Kido. I have tried a few times but each time I end up much like Renji; I was wondering if you could assist me, if it’s not too much trouble?”

Ichigo’s words tumbled out in a slight rush as a tinge of colour touched his cheeks and his gaze darted away from the frail captain. Ukitake let out a soft chuckle regarding the young Shinigami with a fond smile before saying, “It is no problem at all, and we will just have to find time in this madness called war. Though I’m curious as to why Rukia suggested me, there are plenty of Kido masters you are acquainted with.”

Ichigo nodded his hand coming up to brush away the tangerine strands that clung to his face and said, “She said that your method of teaching is quite different and would likely suit my learning style better when it comes to Kido, but I think she also wanted me to focus more on reaitsu control first.”

Ukitake nodded pausing a moment to look at the paperwork before turning to consider Ichigo with a serious gleam in his eyes.

“I will gladly help you Ichigo, keep in mind though that my sickness plagues me often and leaves me bedridden for days.”

Ichigo nodded sharply a determined gleam shining in his eyes replacing the timidity that once his in amber orbs as he said, “I thank you very much Ukitake-Taicho.”

X

“Focus Ichigo, picture the stream in your mind, calm and controlled, you direct where it flows. From your arms to your feet, feel your reaitsu swell and ebb like the tide that crashes upon the shore.”

Ichigo nodded taking a deep breath in, once more letting his mind calm, closing his eyes Ichigo saw the clear stream in his mind and let his body connect with the stream. A soft smile stole across his face as he felt the warmth of his reaitsu flow throughout his blood stream, leaving a deep seated energy in his bones. The mediation state Ichigo had let himself sink into was roughly disturbed when he was pulled into the warm side of Kyroraku-Taicho, who as always smelled of sandalwood, sake, and the barest hint of sweet lotus flowers. Knuckled fist grinded softly into Ichigo’s spiky hair and Ichigo quickly pulled himself out of the head lock.
“Shunsui how many times do I have to tell you not to interrupt Ichigo while he’s mediating?”

Ukitake spoke in a patronizing tone, while his eyes shone with fond recognition. Kyoraku tilted his head searching for Ukitake who was sitting in the cool shade provided by the veranda above. With an easy going smile Kyoraku pulled away from Ichigo, and sauntered over to Ukitake plopping down beside his friend with a soft huff. Pulling out a small bottle of sake from his robes Kyoraku turned to Ichigo with a cocked eyebrow and an easy going smile as he offered the bottle.

Ichigo shook his head laughing before saying, “It’s illegal to offer a minor alcohol Kyoraku-Taicho, and I should be focusing on my meditation.”

Kyoraku pouted tucking the bottle back in his shihaksho and turned to Ukitake with slight puppy eyes and a small pout on his handsome face.

“Hear that Ju? Ichi-chan is so mean to me! Even after I ask him to call me Shunsui he still refers to me with such formality, and accusing me of breaking the law, the fiend!”

Ichigo laughed as in Kyoraku’s flamboyant manner he flung himself over Jushiro fake crocodile tears trailing down his cheeks. Slyly Kyoraku pulled himself off of Ukitake sending an amused smile in Ichigo’s direction before turning to talk to Ukitake. Ichigo took in a deep breath once more letting the feel of his reaitsu sink into him as he drifted into meditation, the comforting presence of the two captains in the background.

X

Ichigo’s eyes flickered from side to side as he paced along the narrow streets of Soul Society where a few souls mingled about at the market. He was on his “break” told to go out into the streets and assure the common folk that all would turn out well. Ichigo scoffed at the idea, he was not one for such petty minded games or manipulation, he knew very well that the outcome of the war would be anything but “well”, but he was satisfied in the knowledge that his vigilance as he walked the street and his presence was reassurance and comfort enough.

So lost was Ichigo in his thoughts that he didn’t sense the two approaching captains till they were on either side of him practically frog marching him over to one of the many restaurants that lined the cobbled streets.

“Ma ma Ichigo you need to eat more! You are as thin as the Soutaicho’s eyebrows but you didn’t hear that from me.”

Ichigo let out a small laugh catching Shunsui’s wink and the joking tone underlying his words, shaking his head softly he let the two men guide him into the small restaurant the Chopped Apple. Inside the room was cramped with furniture and a few windows covered by heavy curtains let in meager light, letting the warm yellow glow of the lamps illuminate the room. A woman wrapped up in layers of makeup and an ample bosom ambled up to them an approving smile on her face and a peculiar light in her eyes as she said, “Table for three?”

Shunsui nodded and the woman lead them further into the warm room to a small table set far into the corner of the restaurant; preferable seating as the noise would be less, and the attention not forthcoming. Ichigo settled himself with a quiet sigh onto one of the thick mats placed around the table, battling day and night in the sands of Hueco Mundo was like swimming constantly as the sand slipped below your feet and you were never on stable ground.

Shunsui and Jushiro shared a quick glance a conversation passing in the blink of an eye, while a tense atmosphere reigned. It quickly passed and Ichigo felt a slight weight leave his shoulders as the
homey atmosphere of the place surrounded him and the presence of the captains left no doubt of his safety.

“When was the last time you took a chance to relax and eat properly Ichigo? Field rations don’t count.”

Jushiro’s soothing yet concerned voice echoed softly in the space between the three and Ichigo paused for a moment, looking at his hands Ichigo thought about it and with a small despairing smile looked up and said, “Ah I don’t know, maybe Renji’s promotion when we all celebrated or the few times I visit my sisters. These past few months have been blurry I’m not quite sure what day it even is.”

Shunsui and Jushiro shared concerned glances seeming to convey a guilt unfounded and a sadness before the waitress sashayed over to their table, obviously not sensing the air of secrecy.

“What can I get you to drink?”

Her honeyed tones seemed to pierce the veil that descended over the table and Ichigo looked quickly at the menu in his hands before asking for water, alcohol would only taint his dreams further. Jushiro proceeded to order one of the many teas offered and Shunsui smiled coyly before pointing at one of the sake options listed. As the woman ambled away the poignant smell of wildflowers fading, Jushiro turned to Ichigo with a soft smile and asked, “What do you think of the Arrancar that have joined us? You seem quite close with them?”

Ichigo nodded his shoulders settling slightly as they moved away from the tense topic.

“Nelliel will be a great ally if Orihime can heal her mask correctly; her Resurreccion is quite powerful more so than Nnoitra as we’ve seen when they clashed. Harribel is trustworthy as long as we keep the safety of her fraccion in mind and respect her. Stark and Lilynette are happy enough that their reaitsu doesn’t crush the rest of us, and Grimmjow is more than joyful that he has an opponent in Kenpachi. I guess I’m closer with them than most, having fought all off them, excluding Nelliel, at one point or another. It’s in battle that one learns the most about their opponent.”

Their hostess bustled back bringing with her the drinks and with a graceful sweep she set the three drinks down. With a roll of her tongue she asked them for their orders and Ichigo rushed once more to the menu distracted by the conversation. Shunsui beat him to it, ordering something that sounded closer to a party than a platter of food. Ichigo only sighed sending Shunsui a knowing look before passing the crinkled menu to their waitress.

“Have you heard what the Soutaicho proposed at the last captain’s meeting?”

Ichigo blinked a few times as Jushiro’s words echoed the woman’s parting before saying, “No I think I was in the field that day and Rukia hasn’t had time to debrief me yet.”

Ukitake nodded and described the new pair idea Yammamoto was proposing based off Kisuke’s pushing and scheming (there was no doubt the Shinigami’s Woman Association also played a part). It was simply supposed to be a measure of caution that those on patrol went in pairs of two and if in the field the numbers could be spared the lieutenants and captains were to work in pairs.

“Do you know who Yam-Jii wanted me paired with?”

Ichigo posed the question in a casual manner while underneath the table his fingers crossed in a silent prayer, when the Winter War as it had been dubbed first started, they had worked in teams and Ichigo was paired far too many times with those of arrogance or idiocy.
“So tense Ichi, worried about another Ryohei? Don’t be he said either Byakuya or Shinji depending on the assignment.”

Ichigo let out a visible sigh of relief as his shoulder slumped and his breath came out in a rushed exhale. The smell of food wafted toward Ichigo’s nose and his eyes widened when he saw the large plate set before him, arching an eyebrow in surprise at Shunsui who only shrugged helplessly with a slightly apologetic smile resting on his carved features.

X

The dull mummer of conversation slowly lulled Ichigo deeper into sleep and he barely processed that he was leaning against a warm body, the pleasant glow of sunshine on his face and the sweet earthy tones that accompanied the ground after a soft rainfall glided on the gentle breeze.

“Ichigo?”

Jushiro’s soft voice gently pierced the veil of sleep and Ichigo blinked groggily for a few moments, squinting as the sunlight pierced his eyelids before his gaze slowly glided up. Shunsui peered down at Ichigo a tiny smile settled on his face and a warm glow in his eyes as mocha strands dangled between the two. Ichigo slowly pushed himself up a yawn stretching his mouth as he blinked again trying to get his eyes to focus. Shunsui’s deep baritone rumbled softly beside him when he spoke, helping to clear the sleep from his head.

“Falling asleep on us, are we that boring?”

Ichigo shook his head looking between the two captains apologetically before saying, “Sorry if anything your stories are thrilling. Isshin’s been driving me pretty hard trying to help me achieve the Final Getsuga Tensho, while Zangetsu and I have been trying to figure a way to keep my powers. Plus the days in the field are long, trying to help Shuhei achieve Bankai is another matter entirely, and I’m not quite sure of the last time I had proper rest.”

Jushiro cast a concerned glance in Ichigo’s direction most likely taking in the deep bags that rested under Ichigo’s eyes like small hills and the paleness of skin that usually glowed with a healthy tan. Once more grief filtered through his eyes before Shunsui put a comforting hand on his friends lap.

“We understand Ichigo, there’s no need to explain yourself, and if you feel yourself dozing off once more don’t force yourself to stay awake for these old geezers.”

Ichigo laughed quietly at Shunsui’s words nodding his head and letting the two continue to talk about their lieutenants or to be frank Shunsui complaining about Nanao and Lisa and their cruelness towards him. Jushiro only hummed quietly along in “sympathy” every once in a while bringing up Rukia, mentioning a funny incident or unique quirk.

Ichigo felt his eyelids grow heavy again, and his head nod forward slightly, the soft presence of the two captains soothed his nerves and comforted him. Slowly Ichigo let his eyelids slide close, tenseness leaving his shoulders as he surrendered himself to the realm of sleep.

X

Ichigo would likely have laughed when Jushiro slid the slim wooden door open, a look of surprise blasted across his face, Shunsui in the background, a cup of sake in his hand, mirrored the expression similarly. Ichigo would have cracked a small smile of amusement if it weren’t for the tremors that shook his frame and the cold that endlessly racked his body. He probably was quite the sight to see with dark purple bags under his eyes, pale skin, dull hair and a gaunt look to his face.
“I-Ichigo! What are you doing here? How are you here? I thought that your powers were gone?”

Jushiro’s voice rang out in fatherly tones of concern as he opened the door wider and stepped back to let Ichigo enter. Ichigo swayed for a moment before catching his balance and stumbling forward, the weight on his shoulders lightening as the shoji door was closed behind him with a quiet ‘click’.

“Zangetsu worked it out…it’s a gradual process, excruciatingly slow with a mild degree of pain. But we didn’t want to inform everyone as they would just wait impatiently… Zangetsu wanted me to enjoy some peace. I-I needed someone to talk to…Kisuke doesn’t know, none of them suspect, I’ve gotten better at lying, far too good for my own wellbeing.”

Ichigo’s voice sounded broken even to his own ears and he nodded his head in thanks when Jushiro carefully guided him to one of the worn, yet comfortable chairs that lined the office floor. Shunsui carefully slid his chair closer, it scraped lightly on the cherry wood floor, and an awkward silence reigned before Jushiro said, “Why not go to Kisuke or Isshin they are only a short distance from your home?”

Ichigo couldn’t stop the bitter laugh that trickled from his lips as his gaze shifted towards the window displaying the soft lilac and indigo hues of the night. Ichigo’s voice rang out soft with a hint of bitterness as he said, “Home is not something that I would call the Kurosaki Clinic at this point and time. Everyone walks around me as if they are stepping on eggshells and one wrong move will lead to me snapping if they dare mention Soul Society or any of your names, yet they blatantly fraternize with the residents of Soul Society when they think I am not looking. They do not have the decency to tell me the truth! And as Karin and Yuzu grow older the house echoes in silence…still and lifeless but for me. It may not seem it but I have patience I can wait for Zangetsu knowing everyone is safe…and yet…you ask why I do not seek out Kisuke or my father. It’s simply because they cannot aid me, Isshin will always be my father but he has always connected well with the twins, with us there lies a barrier I cannot identify. Kisuke while intelligent is not best described as comforting and though I consider him a mentor, his role is not that of the kind that protects their pupil from their own head. Shinji one might also suggest is willing to help me but I doubt he even knows or can understand the severity of my situation.”

Silence rang throughout the small room as a race of emotions climbed over the captain’s faces, ranging from horror, sadness, grief, to surprise. Kyoraku stood up slowly making sure his movements were clear and defined as he glided towards Ichigo, stopping in front of the orangette, the cinnamon orbs shining as he gently pulled Ichigo into a hug, holding him tightly towards his chest. Ichigo’s body shook even more and he tightly grasped Shunsui’s shihaksho, holding onto him like a life line.

“You need not explain why you came to us, only know that we are always here for you. Speak of what ails you Ichi and we will listen with open ears and honest hearts.”

Ichigo held the position for a few more moments before pulling away and slumping boneless into the seat behind him. In a voice tired with the weight of the world Ichigo said, “I-I can’t hear him. I’m able to pull my soul from my frame, cast weak kido’s and yet… It’s like my mind once filled with thoughts of colour and images of expression is empty a land of desolate white sand. I said I could be patient and wait for his return… but that is partially a lie. The shadow that has walked behind me, guided me and comforted me has faded in the light of celebration provided by the end of the war. I-I thought I would hear Zangetsu soon, but the burden of silence every morning echoes throughout the house. I could live without my powers with ease knowing they’re safe, at least that’s what I tell myself, in truth it is the loss of Zangetsu that pains me the most.”

Jushiro and Shunsui seemed to be riveted to their seats, dawning horror shining in their eyes as they
stared at the broken soul before them. Ichigo let out a quiet huff drawing a hand over his eyes and letting them fall close before continuing.

“Tears streamed down Ichigo’s face in soft rivulets, glinting in the dim glow of the oil lamps and the moonlight’s gentle beams. Jushiro stared at Ichigo a fierce expression of concern and worry etched onto his face as Shunsui swooped up from his chair pulling the orangette into a strong hug once more.

“How can they not see the pain you dwell in?”

Ichigo shifted slightly lifting his head from where it was pressed into Shunsui’s robes and said, “People see what they want to see, if they want to see a happy smile then they will not see the strain underneath and the deadness of one’s eyes. Uryuu has a hunch and Chad as always inordinately knows, but they cannot for all their searching find the truth that I bury. As if lady fate laughs at me, whenever they are close a hollow invades the area and they are forced to flee.”

Anger passed fleetingly over Jushiro’s face and Ichigo could feel the grimace Shunsui sported as he pulled Ichigo close allowing his warmth to seep into the orangette. Ichigo let out a soft sigh before pulling away and falling into the cushioned chair behind him, at the moment it could have been made of cardboard and still have felt like it was made with down feathers.

“Feel no rush to speak Ichigo, we are here for you.”

Jushiro managed to retain his calm demeanour and was once more speaking in soft and soothing tones that comforted Ichigo like a care-worn cotton blanket. Ichigo raised his hand slightly letting them see the small tremor that racked his hand before he let it fall to his lap with little effort. Shunsui scowled before springing up and walking over to the open windows emitting a pleasant breeze and firmly shut them close. Pacing once more Shunsui strode over to the small metal grating that acted as a fireplace in the dead of winter. Within a few minutes a steady fire was blazing and Ichigo felt inherently better at the warmth that settled in his veins.

Shunsui sat down once more and from within his shihaksho pulled out a large bottle of sake and three drinking cups. Jushiro was already beginning to protest while Ichigo looked at the mocha haired captain with something akin to confusion.

“Sometimes alcohol can be the best medicine. It allows one to speak freely of matters close to the heart that clog up the tongue and allows the burden of life to slip from your shoulders if only for a short time. Drink with me and recount tales of the battlefield, we shall be united in facing a sea of blood that rushes upon us like a tsunami.”

The ivory haired captain looked ready to protest Shunsui’s idea when he saw Ichigo take the small glass looking at it curiously pondering the idea before thrusting it out in front of him towards Shunsui. Ichigo’s lips quirked up as he saw the soft smile on Jushiro’s face as he took the offered cup with a sigh of resignation. Shunsui carefully poured the sake before downing his own in one fell
swoop, his tone becoming slightly teasing as he said, “Who remembers Daichi Mori? The poor fifteenth seat who screwed up that one mission so badly that everyone had to go trekking through the swamp for days looking for a non-existent weapon?”

Ichigo chuckled softly remembering the mud that had caked his robes for days, Jushiro smiled in amusement remembering his poor squad members returning, dragging their feet with mud everywhere.

X

Ichigo let the longer blade of Zangetsu sail through the air in a wide arc before bringing it up hastily to block the invisible blade clashing down on him from on high. With a small smirk Ichigo brought Zangetsu’s smaller blade up from below into the gut of his “opponent”. Ichigo lowered both of Zangetsu’s blades before he turned to face Shunsui who was staring at Ichigo with a calculating look in his eyes. His deep baritone echoed throughout the slightly enclosed space and underneath a layer of pride shone through.

“Good job, you executed the moves quite well. Try to focus more on your sense of balance as you move through the kata, and let instinct guide you.”

Ichigo nodded raising Zangetsu once more when Jushiro strolled into the area where Shunsui was coaching Ichigo. Jushiro smiled softly at Ichigo before padding over to Shunsui and plopping down beside his cinnamon eyed friend. Ichigo took a deep breath lowering his stance, and looking forward before beginning the delicate dance of blades. As Zangetsu cut through the air in graceful sweeps his mind wandered over the events that had come to past.

In receiving the true form of Zangetsu he had as soon as possible attempted to travel back to Soul Society; Bach was obviously expecting such an idea and was prepared to enter through the way in which Ichigo exited the realm of the Soul King. What he did not expect was the new power that hummed in Ichigo’s veins which filled his heart and surrounded the new bond he created with Zangetsu.

They were able to successfully hold him off long enough for the entryway to be closed and from there the fighting began anew, back and forth Soul Society fought against the rampant Quincy who invaded narrow streets surrounded on all sides by white washed walls. When the sun began to crest the hill in a slow descent Bach called for a retreat and Ichigo watched with betrayal and sadness as Uryuu glanced back cool Aegean blue eyes connecting with Ichigo’s own displaying a remorse hidden deep under disgust.

Ichigo was startled from his musings and kata when a Shinigami with hair the colour of leather burst inside, breath escaping her in large heaving gasps. She took a minute to compose herself before looking at the three and saying, “The Soutaicho has requested you travel to the Rungokai division as a Sternritter has seen the ample opportunity to attack the small area of district thirty-one.”

Jushiro and Shunsui paused in their animated discussion with slight frowns resting on their faces. With haste the two captains stood leaving the cool shade of the veranda to stand on the emerald grass, zanpaktou firmly attached to their waists.

“Am I to come as well?”

Ichigo inquired letting Zangetsu rest in the ground as he wiped beads of perspiration from his brow. The petit Shinigami nodded and with a world-weary sigh Ichigo slung Zangetsu across his back and followed Jushiro and Shunsui, a grim expression firmly in place and the comforting weight of Zangetsu against his spine.
As they arrived at the prescribed destination Ichigo felt shivers coalesce down his spine, a faint ringing echoed around the clearing and the dust that often lingered when a soul passed on was present like a fog in the air. From the tree line in the distance a line of pale white figures emerged, from such a distance Ichigo could not identify if they were mindless hollows or the well-organized Quincys.

As they drew closer Ichigo let out a soft sight they were merely hollows with a few Quincy thrown into the mix, Ichigo had not doubt that a Sternritter hung nearby just out of reach and waiting for the perfect moment to spring into action. But a mix was preferably to a line of highly trained Quincy instructed to kill on site. Turning to face Ju and Shunsui, Ichigo quirked his lips, hefted his blades and said, “Extra practice right?”

Shunsui laughed quietly drawing his own blades with the soft hiss of metal pulling out of a scabbard, Jushiro nodded pulling out a thin elastic band and pulling his hair up into a high ponytail, before drawing his own Zanpaktou. His resonant voice cast throughout the grounds as he said, “The usual dynamic? You two on offense with me performing defense?”

Ichigo and Shunsui nodded and the three turned to face the incoming wave of enemies that grinded closer every moment. With a tense breath of anticipation held for a few seconds the sea of hollows crashed onto the three Shinigami who stood resolute cliffs against the incoming waves. Ichigo’s blade glinted in the sunlight as it rose and fell in an endless rhythm leaving a mass of bodies that crumbled to nothing in his wake. Besides Ichigo, Shunsui laughed slightly and Jushiro smiled in amusement, together the three beat back the opposing force pushing upon them, mirth and grim determination on their faces all the while.

X

The world was crumbling around the small collection of Shinigami gathered in the small circular building. Eyes cast upwards fearfully as dust drifted from the ceiling like snowflakes. Juha Bach had reached the Soul Palace and in doing so ended the life of the Soul King, and in consequence the world. The future if there was any looked bleak. Kisuke stared ahead pensively as if trying to think of a solution.

Ichigo bowed his head, this was all his fault he wasn’t strong enough to stop Bach from entering the realm of the Soul King and now everyone would suffer for it. A throbbing at his side reminded him of the cut he received from the blade Bach wielded with deadly accuracy. A soft hand on his shoulder startled him and he glanced up into warm brown eyes, no sign of accusation dwelling in Shunsui’s eyes. Before he was able to say anything to comfort Ichigo, Ukitake stepped forward a dark light in his eyes and a grim look on his face.

“I bear the Right Hand of the King, it can perhaps stop such a catastrophe from occurring. I have always been sickly but moreover when I was younger, my parents prayed and the Right Hand of the King descended upon me saving my life. Without it I will die. But the rest of you may live.”

Ichigo stared at Ukitake shaking his head, in a quavering voice he said, “No…you can’t”

“I’m sorry forgive me Ichigo, Shunsui. You knew that one day something of this instance might occur when I told you of my past, I only mourn the time that we have not yet spent in peace. We will see each other again, fate is an unfair mistress but she favours the bold. Don’t let him do something reckless Ichigo and Shu… take care of him we have been so errant and thrust too heavy a burden for any a soul on his shoulders, when he is only a child in the years measured between us.”

Jushiro stood before them the Right Hand of the King spiraling around his back and around him in a thick black miasma. Ichigo watched with growing horror as Jushiro locked eyes with Ichigo and
Shunsui a farewell on his lips.

His piercing scream filled the air and Ichigo shot forward held back only by Shunsui who pulled Ichigo to his side, tears streaming from cinnamon orbs and mocha strands shadowing his face. Ichigo couldn’t take his eyes away as Jushiro was drained of his life force before his very eyes, sacrificed to try and save the three worlds from utter annihilation.

Finally the air fell silent and Ichigo rushed forward Shunsui following closely behind him, side by side they stared at their friend now a lifeless body upon the ground. His ivory hair was sprawled around his head like a halo, his eyelids were closed presenting a false image of peace, blood stained the side of his mouth, and his pale skin grew cold with death. Shunsui brought his hand to his mouth and bit his knuckles as if trying to keep in the howling torment swelling inside.

Bending down Shunsui carefully picked up Jushiro’s body, holding it close to his chest he turned around and glided towards the exit like a ghost. Silence reigned as he turned and connected eyes with Ichigo and nodded, he would respect Jushiro’s last wish. Shunsui swept from the room and Ichigo after staring blankly at nothing turned and followed Shunsui, with a bowed head and tremulous heart.

X

Juha’s chilling laugh echoed around the battle field as the Quincy King left; crimson dripping from his carved blade. The Quincy and Hollows surrounding them jeered and laughed as Ichigo turned fearful eyes on Shunsui who was collapsing to his knees, hands held over the wound in his stomach. Ichigo dropped down beside Shunsui, unconsciously releasing his Bankai in a steady flow of reaitsu that snaked around the two protecting them while striking at the enemies surrounding them. They disintegrated at the force of such powerful reaitsu but Ichigo paid no mind focusing only on his friends pale face.

“H-Hey you’re going to stay with me, you still have to beat me in a sake drinking competition… please don’t leave me, not like everyone else.”

Shunsui looked up at Ichigo blood trickling softly from his mouth, he croaked a laugh before his hand reached up to gently hold Ichigo’s cheek. Slowly as if each word was painful he said, “Ichigo… do not wallow in our deaths, live. Seek out what makes you happy, do not seek death when there are those who need you. We will always be with you, in your mind, heart and soul. I doubt you could forget about us if you wanted to. We will live on in you, we will see the dawn of a new day with your hands. Do not weep I’m only going on to another adventure…there is no end to our journeys, death and life are interconnected irrevocably. And if you must console yourself know that I get…to see Ju again. As he said we will meet again. For such a life of pain you have lived I know you will find happiness amidst the weariness in sorrow, do not turn down that opportunity if it presents itself. Farwell Ichigo…”

Ichigo tried to apply pressure to the wound his eyes burning and a fire raging in his chest as Shunsui slowly closed cinnamon orbs a small smile of peace on his carved face. Ichigo’s voice rang throughout the empty battlefield with sorrow as he said, “No! Don’t… don’t leave me alone. Not again… I don’t want this, why did this happen? What did I do to deserve this!? Please…I’m sorry, forgive me. I wasn’t strong enough.”

Ichigo shook as once more he carried his friend’s body in his arms, lifeless and cold as the warmth of life faded.

X
Near the end of this chapter when writing the death scenes I was actually so overcome with emotion I started crying, I hope I conveyed well the emotional trauma Ichigo is going through. Please leave a review and tell me how you felt about the chapter Blossom!!
Eccedentesiast

Chapter Summary

Ichigo goes for a drink and meets friendly face, Byakuya is curious, and Kaien goes a step to far.

Chapter Notes

Eccedentesiast
(.n) Someone who hides pain behind a smile.

Hello everybody here is chapter 6! And wow is it a long one over 7000 words yay! I hope you all enjoy this early chapter and have a happy New Years, there is quite a complex range of happenings (forgive me) in this chapter so enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo fell to the floor with a hard jolt, his eyes snapping open, while the breath was stolen from his lungs. With a quiet groan Ichigo reached out blindly in the darkness searching for the nightstand that stood as sentinel beside his bed. Grasping the wood firmly beneath nimble fingers, he used it as a support to push himself up. Ichigo swayed where he stood whether from the blood rushing to his head or the memories that overcame him was uncertain. Blindly Ichigo fumbled about the room for a few moments until he reached one of the small oil lamps on his desk. With a gentle prod from his reaitsu the wick caught fire filling the room with a warm honey coloured glow.

Ichigo slumped into the wood frame that served as his desk chair, his hands coming up to hold his head, a slight pounding echoing throughout it. Glancing up from his hands Ichigo’s eyes landed on the doorway a thin beam of light shining from underneath as if beckoning him forward. The quiet hum of encouragement and comfort in the back of his mind only assured him of his decision. Pushing himself up from the chair Ichigo paced to his closet and fetched a cloak of ebony from the back hardly to be seen in the darkness of the night. Swinging it around his shoulders and pulling the hood over his eyes he slipped from the room his feet like a soft breeze upon the paneled floors.

The cold wind of night blew through the air and Ichigo shivered for a moment sheltered under a stone overhang staring at the looming expanse of land in front of him. No hesitation lingered in his soul and with a last turn towards the academy he spotted a silhouette against one of the windows watching like a phantom of the night. His eyes connected with that of the figure in the window for a tense moment before the figure turned away leaving only the swaying curtains in his wake. Ichigo turned and fled the courtyard traveling far into the outer districts of Rungokai.

X

The door clamored shut behind Ichigo as he strode into the cozy tavern which appeared much like a dilapidated shack from the outside, but was warm with a homey manner about it on the inside. The few patrons of the bar stared at Ichigo for a few moments scrutinizing his every move with eyes full
of suspicion. It was unusual to see an outsider grace these care-worn floors. Sōshitsu Tate was a unique alehouse in that it was not widely known, very few had graced the cherry wood tables and sat by the bright fireplace; a source of warmth on many a cool night.

Ichigo stumbled upon it during the war quite accidentally when he was chasing after one of their own who had betrayed them to the enemy. The man was not overly strong but was fast like a hare and led Ichigo on a wild goose chase through Rungokai. It was pure luck (as usual) on Ichigo’s part that the man fell asleep, a victim to the nursery rhyme of old. Once Ichigo dispatched the traitor he realised he was quite thoroughly lost.

He wandered for some time before stumbling upon what appeared to be a ruined building. With the coming storm clouds on the horizon he decided to seek shelter, entering he saw that the outside did not truly reflect the inside in the slightest. And now he was here again in a place where one was not jostled and mead not forced down your throat.

Pulling out one of the discoloured bar stools Ichigo gracefully slid into it, a pale hand reaching to tip back his hood, letting bright orange strands free once more. The barkeep a thin man with a beak like nose, a mop of curled brown hair, and a pleasant smile sidled up to Ichigo a curious light in his eyes as he carefully dried a small tankard in his hands. His coarse and deep voice echoed softly between the two as he asked, “What will ya be h’ving this ev’ning?”

Ichigo smiled softly, another reason he like the place was the lack of questions. Ichigo though old in mind still appeared to be the age of eighteen and often times when one couldn’t see his eyes he was questioned thoroughly. It confused Ichigo slightly and Yourichi and Kisuke always laughed about it before telling him with appeasing smiles that he had a “vulnerable” look about him. Ichigo never understood what they meant by such words but choose to ignore the subject most of the time.

Ichigo picked up one of the aged pieces of washi paper, feeling the unique texture, unlike the one he was familiar with in modern society, beneath calloused fingers. Studying the options for a moment he pointed at one of the middle priced options and reached inside his cloak pocket to pull out the desired change. The steward, for that was the position he occupied along with his kind and fresh faced wife, nodded and bustled away with the clinking of glasses ringing after him.

Ichigo tensed slightly as a presence familiar to his senses slid onto the bar stool next to him. Turning slightly Ichigo’s first impression was of strawberry blond hair and a chiseled face, eyes widening slightly Ichigo stared at Rōjūrō Ōtoribashi better known as Rose. The Shinigami captain was swirling a clear glass of rich red liquid and starring at it as if it held complex answers to the problem he sought.

As if feeling Ichigo’s eyes on him Rose turned, his own eyes obviously catching Ichigo’s own shocking hair, glowing like the embers of a fire in the dim lighting. Seeing Rose’s face up close brought up the memory of his death. Piano strings tight around his neck, his face pale with the blue pallor of death and many gashes littering his torso, the dissonant notes ringing forebodingly in the background of the cool night as he passed defending one of the many districts, allowing the occupants to flee at the cost of his life. Ichigo let the memory go, flowing like a leaf in the rapid river of Ichigo’s torrential mind.

“What is one so young as you doing on a night like this? Drinking away troubles that plague the mind?”

Rose’s rich and honeyed voice flowed softly between the two and Ichigo nodded slightly ready to reply in kind when the barkeep bustled back with his drink and placed in front of him with sharp incline of his head. Ichigo lifted the glass and scented the strong Sake wincing slightly at the burn that accompanied it before tipping the misty glass and letting the scorching liquid trail down his
throat. Setting his drink down once more he turned to face Rose and said, “Indeed for my mind
wearies me with visions of abundant chaos. What about you with fingers of a musician?”

Rose chuckled softly at Ichigo’s flowery words his eyebrow arched slightly in interest. The blond
took a sip of his drink setting the glass down with a soft ‘clink’ and said, “I am a musician of a kind,
the life of a Shinigami can be morose at times but I seek to fill it with the graceful harmonies of my
Zanpaktou. And you? Where do you stand now?”

Ichigo smiled slightly, it was not widely known that he was a fan of Shakespeare’s works and
speaking in such tongues as they were conversing delighted him. It was rare for Ichigo and Rose to
talk in such ways in the timeline in which he once dwelled. For then there was a border of age and
familiarity wrought not of kinship. But for two strangers in a bar to speak in such mannerisms was
merely a passing coincidence one might find.

“I study at the academy, which is many days full of melancholy when one must listen to the droning
on of lessons already taught. What led you to this bar, for those who find it are rare among the many,
and always there is a tale behind the eyes.”

Rose sipped at his glass once more casting an amused glance in his direction before tilting his side as
if to try and remember the event that led him through rusted doors that swung with a gently push.

“It was the music, one night a lady of great beauty with almond eyes, caramel hair, and a voice like
the many seraphs of heaven, clambered onto one of the chairs littered throughout and with the night’s
pleasure sang of seasons. I was wandering the nearby district as my squad was searching for a
hollow reported to be seen nearby. Such a heavenly litany could not be ignored, and my feet were
pulled towards the sound until I came upon gray wood and light like honey spilling from within. And
you with hair like the flames one might stroke in the fire?”

Ichigo looked towards the door for a second a slight frown on his face as he considered the question
before his eyes brightened with a solution to the slight problem that presented itself.

“A man of small stature with beady eyes and the narrowed face of a rat, stole an heirloom of my
family. In anger I chased after him and though he was weak of body, his legs pumped with the blood
of Kami, he seemed to fly across the fields as I dashed after him. It is his foolishness that doomed
him for when his body complained he lay down to rest thinking me far behind his trail. I caught up to
him within minutes and swiftly returned what was stolen to my hands, and left a warning of justice to
greet him shall he wake. It was there in a field with a tree of gnarled and twisted bark that I found
myself lost with no sense of direction in mind. I drifted aimlessly for many a fortnight before
stumbling upon what appeared to be a ruined building. A storm drew near and heavy tension hung in
the air. I chose to enter such meager protection rather than brave such errant weather.”

Rose smiled and lifted his glass towards Ichigo. Inclining his head Ichigo picked up his own and
with a chorus of “To misadventures!” they clashed their drink together, drops lifting from the cup
and glinting in the low tavern light.

X

They spoke of many a thing that night and Ichigo gained a new understanding of the musician. There
was also the bonus of finally having some dirt on the captains that he would soon walk amongst.

“You are young no? Joining us soon you will find we are a tricky lot and hard to play with. But I
like you, an aura of something else hangs around you, and with it a future incomprehensible. If it
were any other man sitting in front of me he would hear no such words. So listen well as my tales
come at no price for this night.”
What had followed was laughter and a smile that sat softly upon his face as he heard tales that never once graced his ears in his own timeline. His mind did not dwell on the sorrow of hours before and only the soft rays of sun peaked through those memories.

Stumbling slightly through the door Ichigo peered through the thick curtains to see the sun rising, squinting slightly at the light that invaded his corneas Ichigo turned away from the window and trudged to his bed. With one last look at the door Ichigo tucked himself in. It was not so much the alcohol that put him in such ill health for he could drink far more than he and Rose consumed and still be limber with energy. Rather it was the lack of sleep and the prospect of missing school that enticed him to roll himself into bed.

X

Byakuya cast a concerned gaze upon the imposing Shinigami academy, searching for a shock of orange hair among the many students milling about their lunch break. It was Ichigo’s normal routine to be up before sunrise and outside Byakuya’s dorm twenty minutes before class and so Byakuya was surprised when only an empty hallway greeted him in the morn. He had just left the orangettes’ room in an attempt to wake him, and was hoping the Shiba would be grouchy but in front of him within a few moments (he found the prospect highly unlikely). His mind flashed to the night before when some phantom sixth sense had awoken him from the comfort of his bed and guided him to the window. He pulled the curtains of thick satin away to peer upon the courtyard below, where cobbled stone appeared to glow slightly in the luminous hues of the moon.

It was then that movement at the corner of his eyes dragged his attention to the stone overhang that graced the courtyard’s entrance. A figure stood huddled under the high arch of stone a cloak of darkness wrapped around their frame. As if noticing Byakuya’s own motions the figure whipped around eyes hidden by shadows connecting with Byakuya’s sleet grey ones. A sense of unease had descended upon Byakuya’s shoulders as for a small slice of eternity he stared at the figure below. Byakuya turned from the curtains as the seductive call of sleep whispered in his ears encouraging him to forget of the strange figure below the window. Byakuya wondered now if under the cover of darkness hung vibrant orange hair and caramel eyes of soft dexterity.

Distracted in his thoughts Byakuya turned from the academy building and glided towards one of the sakura trees shaded slightly by the stone set walls guarding the grounds. Byakuya whipped around suddenly when a heavy spiritual pressure drew near to where he stood. The reaitsu was reminiscent of Ichigo’s own, a trace of familiarity hiding in it. A shock of ebony hair appeared in his view and Byakuya’s tense shoulders settled slightly as he saw it was only the Shiba head, Ichigo’s “brother” Kaien.

A sense of calm danger hung about the man as his eyes alighted on Byakuya and he quickened his pace. Stopping in front of Byakuya, a small frown identical to the one that sometimes rested on Ichigo’s face, Kaien’s eyes raked over him assessing his every aspect with intense scrutiny before the man’s smooth voice said, “Heir Kuchiki what do you seek to gain in being friends with my brother?”

Byakuya’s eyes widened he had met the Shiba Head many times before at the noble galas and balls but that was before Ichigo’s stormy presence burst into his life and took him by the hand. Truthfully he had expected some suspicion from Kaien, Byakuya saw the way Kaien would glance at Ichigo a fierce protection shining in silver eyes. The man was a Shiba and if there was one thing the noble family did well (other than their fireworks) was protect their own.

“I am not quite certain what you mean, I seek only the presence of intelligence in the academy and have found it in Ichigo. Indeed his strength is admirable and I doubt I will ever come within fifty feet of it, that it why I seek to better myself by training with him but it is not the reason I find
companionship with him. His status means nothing to me as we are both of noble houses. Once one knows him you can see the compassion and empathy that shines in his eyes, the determination that rests in his soul, the care of all even those who pose harm, and if he has shown me the error of my ways than I am only the more thankful because of it. I seek nothing from him, being his friend is far more of a reward than any gift of power.”

Kaien nodded a proud smile resting on his face, his voice echoed softly between the two as he said, “I see. I’m glad Ichigo has found a friend such as yourself. Within his heart there rests a great darkness, I fear that if nothing is done we shall lose him to it. A sentinel of light stands beside him then. Take care of him Kuchiki or by my wrath you will taste my blade;”

His words were melodic and a soft pondering echoed underneath them but at the end of his words his eyes darkened like a storm upon the bluffs and dark promise rested within those craggy depths. Byakuya nodded a spark of determination colouring his eyes a fierce silver as if just forged into a new blade.
Kaien’s demeanour seemed to change in an instant, the serious and protecting older brother disappearing behind a mask of fake obtuseness. The sky suddenly seemed brighter as a goofy smile settled on the Shiba Heads face.

“What’s the way where is Ichigo?”

Although what Ichigo fondly dubbed “Shiba obliviousness” had made a reappearance, Byakuya could still see the spine of steel lacing those words. Gazing at the school for a moment Byakuya sighed and rubbed a hand over his eyes before saying, “Asleep I ventured to his rooms before exiting the building. I knocked and I heard something along the lines of “come in” so I entered his dorm to see him rolled up in far too many layers of blankets to count. His eyes when cast upon me were slightly venomous and we starred each other down before I told him it was lunch. He nodded and rolled over mumbling something about going to school tomorrow. I left it at that hoping he would come out soon after, I have not been so fortunate.”

With a mumble of “skipping school!” Kaien nodded his own eyes tracing the imposing building before he turned to Byakuya with his goofy smile once more and said, “Ah I best be getting back to the squad before Taicho is displeased. Tell Ichi I said hi and that he should come for dinner soon!”

With those parting words the lieutenant flash-stepped away leaving a bemused Byakuya under the sakura tree, he glanced at the school and cursed slightly when he realised Kaien had wasted much of his lunchtime. Shaking his head the young noble ventured inside the school glancing upwards with a fond smile.

X

Ichigo’s head casually swiveled from side to side as he glanced at the many vendors and colourful silks lining wooden stalls. Byakuya walked beside him an irritated look gracing chiseled features (as much as emotion can grace a noble’s face in public). Ichigo hummed softly to himself as he led Byakuya through the crowded streets, the store Ichigo sought held a book bound in many layers of leather and Ichigo was curious if such power still rested behind dank cabinets and moth eaten curtains. Byakuya, with curiosity peaked had asked to come, Ichigo only arched an eyebrow curiously before nodding.

Ichigo veered off the street’s busy path and glided towards one of the stores tucked into a dark corner, the name of the shop was impossible to read as the paint was peeled, the wood was draped with mold, and dirt clung to the sign like a second skin. Ichigo glanced back at Byakuya with an amused expression before sliding the door with a small ‘click’ and stepping into the dingy atmosphere. The building appeared far worse on the inside rather than the outside. It was a clutter of
old furniture crumbing in on one another, stacks of dusty books that threatened to topple at any moment with the gentlest of gales, the windows covered with a thick layer of grime let only the barest sliver of light in giving the room a feel of decay and abandonment.

Byakuya glanced around with a raised eyebrow and hint of disgust as Ichigo ventured further into the store letting his reaitsu map a path of safety as items spun and twirled left and right. With a slight sense of finality Ichigo came upon a large wardrobe of carved wood, a glow seemed to lie in its polished wood and it provided a faint hint of light in the darkness. Byakuya gazed upon the object with wide eyes, before those charcoal orbs swiveled and landed on Ichigo curiously.

“A relic from times long ago, I am quite sure the Soutaicho would recognize it from his own younger years. Everything has a way of finding themselves here, this shop of the broken glory.”

Ichigo’s voice was barely above a whisper, a quiet decibel that Byakuya had to strain to hear. Ichigo nodded slightly stepping forward and letting his hand glide across the smooth wood, feeling the rich grain beneath calloused pads. Reaching upwards slightly Ichigo let his fore-finger drag against a small blossom, a curled rose engraved into the wood. The sound of gears shifting slightly echoed throughout the shop as Ichigo let his finger add pressure slightly before drawing back.

The wardrobe shifted slightly to the right on invisible rollers, revealing a small nook carved into the wall. A smile danced across Ichigo’s face and he took a step closer, letting his reaitsu gently caress the nook searching for anything malignant. When nothing of the sort was revealed Ichigo carefully grasped what was hidden by the darkness, the long sleeves of his Shihaksho covering his pale hands.

Ichigo carefully slide the heavily bound book from the darkness, aware of Byakuya’s bated breath and confusion. The tome resting heavy in his arms Ichigo walked slowly to the front of the store stopping in front of a counter laden with trinkets that glimmered in heavy darkness. Slowly as if a robot coming alive after many years frozen in the same place, a carved with wrinkles and crystal blue eyes that peered out from deep sockets revealed itself in the form of a wizened old woman.

“Find what you seek?”

Her voice was hoarse with disuse and was much like the croaking of the frogs on a moonlit night, but her smile though few of teeth was pleasant with crinkled laugh lines around soft eyes. Ichigo nodded and lightly rested the novel on the counter, her eyebrows reached her hairline and an amused smile perched upon her lips as she regarded Ichigo with new interest.

“Are you sure this is what you seek?”

Ichigo nodded his voice coming out in soft rich tones as he said, “Indeed for the wisdom bound in these pages is extravagance for the mind full of melancholy.”

She nodded and Ichigo rummaged around slightly before pulling forth the desired change and a bit extra. The soul in front of him only smiled with a slight nod a kindness to her tone as she said, “Feel free to come back and look, my doors are always open to Hōrō-sha.”

Ichigo nodded and carefully lifted the thick tome before sweeping out of the store of mystery, a curious Byakuya following behind him with impatience thick on his tongue. Ichigo led Byakuya to one of the dango stands lining the streets and ordered two before turning to face Byakuya, who now had a slight tick above his eyebrow.

“Perhaps you can explain to me the fiasco that just occurred.”

His smooth voice rang between the two and a soft sigh followed as Byakuya drew a hand over his eyes regarding Ichigo with a slightly condescending look. Ichigo opened his mouth to answer when they were handed the sweet treats. Smiling softly at the rich sent that drifted towards his nose he led
Byakuya to a small alcove hidden from the sun where they might continue their conversation in privacy.

“It’s something far lost to time, full of origins and theories.”

Byakuya only raised his brow obviously unsatisfied with the answer, his shoulders slumped and he seemed to let the question pass most likely chalk it up to one of Ichigo’s weir quirks. Ichigo smiled softly finishing the sweet dango before asking, “Any other shops you’d like to look at? We don’t have any classes for the rest of the day.”

Byakuya nodded his gaze thoughtful as he glanced around the busy streets seeing the souls aimlessly wander by. His deep, smooth tone lifted softly between them as he said, “I’m looking for a pair of Kenseikan as Ginrei wishes me to prepare for becoming a noble.”

Ichigo nodded and with a smile he gesture with a wide arm towards the crowded ways. Byakuya’s lips twitched slightly and they ventured into the crowds browsing the many shops and carts selling their wares.

X

“Kuchiki-sama! Kuchiki-sama!”

Byakuya and Ichigo whirled around as the loud call cut through the bubble of conversation that the busy streets echoed. A lower ranking Shinigami with short dark green hair and wide pecan eyes pushed through the crowds breaking free of their oppressive mass dashing towards the two nobles. The Shinigami bowed at the waist as he stood before the two, Byakuya with a small wave of his hand gestured for the nervous Shinigami to speak an aura of control and dominance replacing Byakuya’s casual smile.

“Kuchiki-sama, Kuchiki-Taicho wishes to speak to you, he says it is a matter of utmost importance.”

Byakuya nodded a slight frown marring noble features before he turned to Ichigo with an apologetic smile. Ichigo nodded sadly a soft smile mirrored on his own face before he said, “Go, I understand there will be many more a day where we may endlessly walk the streets and talk of nothing.”

Byakuya nodded and placing a warm hand on his friend’s shoulder he gave a tight squeeze his eyes conveying a promise of such things and a soft smile before following the young Shinigami who watched their encounter with wide eyes. Ichigo gazed after Byakuya with something akin to a forlorn look in his eyes, the tome still clenched tightly in his hands his head turned and he let his eyes glide across the busy streets and carved shop signs.

With a slight nod Ichigo pushed forward and began to wade through the crowd much like one would try to wade through maple syrup. With a slight push he appeared on the other side of the street where the traffic was significantly less dense. Letting the wind blowing orange locks about guide him, Ichigo turned to the left and began to glide up the streets, a slight tenseness to his shoulders and his eyes casting about searching for danger even as his mind drifted upon a lazy current of minimal thoughts.

Spotting a sign carved with intricate flowers and a dragon curling around the elegant script, Ichigo stepped closer so he could gaze upon the window display he saw that it held a variety of different objects. Bejewelled sword sheaths glittered in the afternoon sun, long beads of pearl, amethyst and onyx dangled tantalizing from beams above, a few books lay open upon a desk where maps and other sheaths of paper cluttered the floor around it, and perhaps the grand center of all stood a thick and heavy trunk with fabric of a deep rose settled on it, on a coat rack beside the box there were many more garments of iris, basil, cream, cobalt, strawberry, and raven. With His curiosity peaked,
Ichigo slid aside the door and stepped inside breathing the heavy scent of incense, a sweet scent with rich tones of lemon hidden underneath.

Movement at the far corner of the store alerted Ichigo to the presence of the clerk who was high upon a frail ladder gazing at a glass bottle filled with a murky substance and a worn label. The man who was likely in his late forties with salt and pepper hair and teal eyes smiled at Ichigo and clambered down bringing with him the bottle of mysterious liquid.

“How can I be of assistance to you today sir?”

The man’s voice was rich and reminded Ichigo of melted chocolate slowly being poured. Smiling kindly in greeting Ichigo replied, “I was merely passing through when I saw the collection of valuables in your store, the catching of the light has caught my eye.”

The man nodded and bustled away with a gentle smile and kind words of assistance if needed. Ichigo slowly walked around the store gazing at the many trinkets that lay in shuttered boxes, and glass casing. Coming close to the trunk in the middle Ichigo could see that the fabrics were all ceremonial kimonos, the rose coloured one caught his eye once again, making him think of Kukkaku and the likeness of being hit by a wooden spoon if he were to ever venture to the Shiba mansion.

Turning away with a slight shiver a soft glint of metal in the corner of his eye attracted his attention. Ichigo glided towards the light his eyes landing on a pair of finely carved Kenseikan, the lines dipped and flowed into one another illuminating the image of soft cherry blossoms descending. These were far different from the ones Byakuya wore in Ichigo’s own time, these ones were not cold harsh steel with a simple pattern. These spoke of growth and the love of craftsmanship put into their making.

Glancing around his heart decided Ichigo spotted the sales clerk dusting off a tall vase with a five toed dragon etched in gold. Ichigo called out carefully so as to not disturb the man in his work. The clerk nodded and placed the vase down before he strolled over and interesting gleam in teal eyes.

“Ah those Kenseikan are indeed fine, crafted from silver in the Emperors forge, and carved with the delicate hand of a master goldsmith. Are you interested in buying the pair for yourself?”

Ichigo shook his head with a quiet chuckle, the image of him wearing them floating in his mind’s eyes. Ichigo’s eyes gleamed with amusement as he said, “No they are for a friend as he is soon gracing the position of head of the family.”

The man nodded and they moved on to discuss the price. Ichigo agreed to the allotted amount and the Kenseikan were soon wrapped up in thick paper and placed inside a small box. Ichigo thanked the man and trekked to the door calling out a thanks as he let the thin frame slide shut behind him.

Ichigo paused for a moment to take in a deep breath his eyes tracking the sun’s lazy progress towards night as soft evening descended like a warm blanket. The peace was disturbed when a familiar presence graced his sense, turning with a tired sigh and slump of his shoulders, Ichigo was greeted with Kaien’s spiky ebony hair and determined flint eyes. Upon spotting Ichigo his face lit up like a puppy when their master arrived home and he sped towards Ichigo with a jovial smile alight on his face.

“Ichigo! What a surprise to meet you hear of all places. You won’t believe what happened today! But that’s a story for another time…what are you carrying?”

Ichigo’s brow twitched uncontrollably and he took a soft breath to steady himself, Ichigo’s wasn’t quite sure what it was that upset him when Kaien was in his spastic hyper mode, but it always dug under his skin and every word was a thousand times worse. Kaien was fine when he was calm or serious, he could be sensible and Ichigo could talk to him without fear of sudden spine crushing hugs
and crocodile tears.

“It’s a gift, I just bought it.”

Ichigo spoke with much hesitation knowing it better than to let Kaien wallow like a petulant child. Kaien gazed curiously at the box his upper body swinging gently from side to side to better observe the mystery item. Kaien glanced back up at Ichigo and said, “Is it for me?” Ichigo shook his head and Kaien continued in a moping voice “How cruel! Nothing for your big brother!? Oh I know… I bet it’s for Byakuya, I guess the rumours are true, Yourichi owes me!” Ichigo clenched his fist and took a deep breath as Kaien raised his brows trying to instigate what his words did not clearly state. Ichigo tried to think of a response that wouldn’t end with Kaien’s strangulation and an awkward explanation. Pulling his hand softly over his face Ichigo said, “It’ nothing like that, it’s just a gift between friends. And why would I get you a gift when you annoy the ever living angels above every time you speak to me?”

Kaien took a minute to stare at the box once more before he made a noncommittal sound of doubt, then the second part of Ichigo’s sentence kicked in and Kaien began to pout his eyes growing dramatically wide as he flung his arms around Ichigo with a cry of, “My cruel brother! Oh woe is you so full of bitterness!” Ichigo frowned and said, “Kaien I’m giving you a warning, tread carefully or you may find that you should have ran the local marathon.”

Kaien pouted before a wicked gleam entered his eyes and in a sing song, teasing voice he responded, “Oh like you chase after Byakuya?” Ichigo growled and reached out to grab Kaien who was wisely already a short distance away with wide eyes and the mumbling of ‘bad idea, very bad idea’ echoing loudly around him. Ichigo twisted his neck slightly and with a sadistic smile that would make Shiro proud he raced after Kaien.

X

The thin paper doors clattered open with a large ‘bang’ echoing through the dimly lit restaurant where Shinji was seated with Jushiro and Shunsui, they had invited Kisuke but he had denied claiming he was close to breaking through in one of his experiments.

Shaking himself from wandering thoughts the blond glanced towards the door to see Kaien Shiba panting bent over with his hands on his knees. The young lieutenant slowly straightened up his eyes casting around with a hue of fear, upon spotting the three captains Kaien’s eyes lit up with relief and tense shoulders drooped slightly before he sashayed towards the small table situated in the far corner of the warm and crowded room.

“What has ya bursting in here in such a hasty manner?”

Shinji inquired as Kaien stopped in front of their table and sat down on one of the plush cushion with a soft sigh when Jushiro gestured for it. Kaien let out a tense laugh eyes glancing once more towards the door before saying, “Ichigo, I’m afraid that I might have made a very grave mistake in ticking him off. I have no doubt that any second now his vibrant hair will grace the scene and I will turn a shade of green!”

Shinji snorted an eyebrow arched in scepticism while Jushiro and Shunsui regarded Kaien with varying looks of sympathy and amusement. Still a bit confused as he had heard bits and pieces of Kaien’s new “little brother” but as of yet he had no concrete information (other than the fact that his lieutenant eyed him like a wolf to a hare).
“What did ya do to tick off ya brother?”

Kaien smiled at the memory before clearing his throat to answer Shinji’s question. The ebony haired lieutenant glanced around the small tavern apparently just taking in the scenery before replying, “I might have been “over hyper” as Ichigo dubs it, and I might have insinuated that Byakuya and Ichigo are dating again. It would likely have been wiser for me at that point to keep my mouth shut, but Kami knows I have no such luck in these matters.”

Shunsui laughed at Kaien’s words his cheeks staining a pale rose as the force of his laughter slightly overtook him, Jushiro looked at his friend his eyes glancing between his lieutenant (who was moping in indignation) and Shunsui (who was slightly gasping for breath now) and let out a soft chuckle.

“Why are the three of you meeting here?”

Kaien’s voice pulled the three back to the moment at hand, and Jushiro shared a glance with the other occupants of the low table before his soothing and gentle voice said, “Ah Shu and I usually like to go out once a month so Shu can eye the ladies without Lisa-chan getting on his back. Shinji wanted to talk with us in particular about his lieutenant, Sōsuke-san.”

Kaien’s eyes darkened at the mention of Aizen and Shinji felt a bitter taste enter his mouth thinking about the sense of unease that haunted his barracks whenever the man was near, not to mention the little fox that followed him like a puppy.

The sudden dark atmosphere was dispersed when a reaitsu presence of great magnitude began to approach the inn, Shinji’s eyebrows shot up in surprise as even though the reaitsu was suppressed under tight lock it still snaked through your senses clouding your sense with its power. Kaien began to cower and shake where he stood and as the door began to slide open an ominous aura of deep plum and oil seemed to slither in through the small crack. With a quiet sound Kaien dove under the table trying to hide himself from the foe at the door.

Shinji’s first impression of Ichigo was the colour orange, such a bright colour drew ones eye to the untameable and spiky hair immediately. Letting his eyes trail down slightly Shinji could see warm chocolate eyes that swirled with hints of emotion, sharp features that could cut through butter, Ichigo’s hair rested in a long ponytail at the back of his neck a mess of hair with strands trailing everywhere, a slim build hid under a simple shihaksho of raven, and a the hilt of a blade was visible over his shoulder, wrapped in white bandages.

Chocolate orbs trailed around the room mirroring Kaien’s earlier actions before landing on the three captains, Ichigo winced a frown flashing across his face as his eyes seemed to focus on Shinji.

X

Ichigo had stood outside the tavern for ten minutes trying to prepare himself to see Shinji Hirako alive and well; he worried no longer about seeing Jushiro and Shunsui for the memories having overcome would not strike twice. Zangetsu, giving a comforting presence in the back of his mind, Ichigo pulled the door open and stepped inside the warm atmosphere settling a little as the chill of oncoming night was leaked from his bones.

Gazing around the room and trying to avoid the stare of a certain blond-haired captain Ichigo relented and turned catching eyes with Shunsui and Jushiro. Painfully Ichigo let his eyes drag toward Shinji who was sprawled on one of the mats, a coy smirk on his face and hair of honey resting against his hips.

X
Blood, gore, yellow eyes flashed across his sight. Shinji pushing him away as the Quincy that was self-detonating in the background laughed and mocked them chillingly. Shinji telling him to leave, to flee without him as his injuries were already too great. Ichigo tired from the battle and days of fighting hadn’t listened and began to sling his friend over shoulder a litany of encouraging words spilling from his mouth in a rush. Shinji’s wide eyes and soft hope as Ichigo stumbled away from the blood soaked battleground. They had been so close, within reach of safety, when they had been ambushed. A single Quincy low of reaitsu barely noticeable among wasteland of Soul Society. Shinji had pushed him out of the way, a spear piercing his abdomen as Zangetsu flashed out in wicked bloodlust.

He had caught Shinji and held him in his arms as blood stained his lips and his eyes seemed to lose the coy light that always shined in them. His voice was rough from yelling battle orders all day and coughs gently disrupted his speech as he said, “Hehe sorry Ichi, ya were right I’m too old ta be fighting in a war. At least I’ll get ta see the others again. Hey now don’t worry bout me, don’t give up keep fighting.”

The cool hand that held his cheek as Ichigo stared on with wide eyes slowly fell limp to Shinji’s side and he let out a harsh startling breath before his pulse fell still.

X

Ichigo shook himself startled realizing his feet had led him close to the captains already. Shaking his head once more Ichigo plastered a small smile on face even though on the outside it felt like he was being run through with irons hot from the forge while buried under the crushing weight of snow.

“Are you alright Ichigo you look pale?”

Ichigo looked to Ukitake whose kind words helped to dull the pain slightly before with a nod of his head he said, “I’m fine now, my mind was dwelling on unpleasant thoughts. Have you seen Kaien, I am certain he went this way and yet I cannot trace it at this moment, perhaps it is because of the overpowering power of captains.”

Shunsui laughed softly while Jushiro arched an amused eyebrow at Ichigo’s teasing tone a hint of concern still lying in caramel orbs. Shinji coughed slightly and turned to face Ichigo said, “I’m Hirako Shinji captain of squad five, I’ve heard many an exclamation of ya name when Kaien is near.”

Ichigo nodded with a soft sigh chills of unease tracing his spine as his eyes were drawn to a small oval window perched between the two senior captains. Shunsui seemed to notice the same as Jushiro, the paleness of his skin and the deep mauve under his eyes, his deep tenor was soft and comforting as he said, “Ma, ma Ichigo you seem tired why not stay for a while and rest?”

Ichigo smiled apologetically and rubbed the back of his neck softly and said, “I can perhaps stay for a few but Kaien must still serve his sentence and the thought of sleep calls temptingly to me.”

“Good sit, sit.”

Heading Shunsui’s happy order Ichigo slid into the seat with a soft sigh, smiling softly at the thought of Kaien cowering under the table in fear. Shinji regarded the orangette curiously before asking, “What squad are ya planning on joining Ichi, any inclination to squad five in particular.”

Ichigo laughed softly at Shinji’s unsubtle hint at joining the fifth division before with slight mirth he replied, “Sorrowfully it is not so Hirako-Taicho, my heart lies with the eighth, sixth, and ninth once a short time ago I considered the division but to be truthfully your lieutenant and third seat unsettle me.”
Hirako nodded slightly in understanding before turning to snap back at Shunsui who was playfully taunting Hirako about the loss of such a promising Shinigami. A small yawn stretched Ichigo’s face and the look that Jushiro shot him was clear enough.

“I’m afraid I shall retire, sleep calls me softly whispering in my ear. Forgive me gentlemen perhaps I shall chance upon you again. If you see Kaien before I, warn him simply of his imminent doom at the hand of his executioner.”

Shunsui guffawed loudly, while Shinji chuckled and Jushiro smiled fondly as with his muscles aching in protest Ichigo pushed himself up. Shooting a heated glare at the table Ichigo bowed and bade the captains’ goodnight before padding outside the warm restaurant, barley feeling the cold that swept through the streets in mighty gales. Taking a deep breath of the chill night air Ichigo closed his eyes and let his mind mourn softly before with a snap of his eyes he was away.

X

Chapter End Notes

Did anyone catch the foreshadowing, I was kind of surprised when I realized I had written without even knowing it. Anyway I hope you enjoyed this chapter and the changes made (including tons of extra) and I will see you all in the next chapter and have a Happy New Year!!

Pentagram!!
Heimat

Chapter Summary

Ichigo finally musters the courage to venture home.

Chapter Notes

Heimat
(.n) A place that you can call home; a sense of belongingness, acceptance, safety, and connection to homeland.

Here is chapter 7! This chapter has a bit more of a positive note and focuses more on family so enjoy the slight drift from angst. I’ve been trying to focus more on the scenes and what I want to do in a chapter rather than the word count. Don’t be surprised to see 7000 to 4000 words chapters it all depends on time and content. I’ve also been trying my hand at including more figurative language (partially as it’s such fun). Also, I forgot to mention this last chapter but Hōrō-sha translated to wanderer. I hope you all enjoy this chapter and try keeping your eyes out for themes.

I’d also like to mention/thank Intrigued Chameleon who has joined the team (so to say) as my beta reader.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The normally welcoming Shiba mansion loomed ahead of Ichigo; candlelight flickering in curtained windows ominously. Ichigo sighed softly doubt flickering to the forefront of his mind as he considered his plan of action. After insistent nagging on Kaien’s part and the seed of guilt that wormed its way into his dreams or rather nightmares, endlessly taunting and teasing him with their deaths; warping their faces and leaving an ache in his chest that lay with him all through the day Ichigo decided that it was time he connected with the Shiba clan. In the past he hadn’t spent nearly enough time with his family, and when they were cruelly ripped away from him regret echoed endlessly in his head. The air was thick with a heavy tension; tilting his chin upwards Ichigo could see plumes of silver and amethyst twisting in an intimate battle that stretched across the early evening sky. A softer instinct one less of battle and more of experience whispered that no storm would be forthcoming this night only the tenseness of a drawn out stalemate that would break upon the morn.

Shaking himself he woefully acknowledged his procrastination and took a heavy step forward, Old man Zangetsu whispered comfort to his hesitant mind while Shiro chuckled and in his harsh way teased Ichigo about going soft. He let his gratitude flow softly towards them before knocking on the wood frame of the elegant shoji doors, the sounds of feet scuttling about soon reached his ears and a large shadow graced the door. The door slid open with a soft hiss and revealed a flustered servant with tousled brown hair, a large frame, and coal eyes.

“Ah Shiba-dono we weren’t expecting you! Dinner is almost ready and Lady Kukkaku was just
descending to eat, are you staying to eat?”

Ichigo’s eyes widened slightly startled at the warm welcome he received before he quickly recovered and said, “I was hoping to stay if Kukkaku doesn’t mind?”

Shiro seemed to be laughing at Ichigo’s sudden display of shyness, usually the orange head would be blunt and at times rude, and so to see shyness was a rare thing indeed. Though it did make sense in that Ichigo was afraid of rejection, the thought of her cool disapproving eyes and venomous words chilled him more than any Quincy drabble. For what was he left with if the people he came to save viewed him as the monster?

The servant nodded a happy smile dancing on his face as he invited Ichigo in telling him ‘to wander as he pleased’ before the coal-eyed servant bustled off humming a cheery tune while an aura of contentment surrounded him. Ichigo gently toed his simple sandals off and peered at the décor, during his stay of more than a month he had been given a tour and shown the many walls that lined carpeted hallways. But he had never truly taken in the fine craftsmanship and detail inlaid in the very walls as his mind had been fogged with the knowledge of the time he now resided in.

Stepping forward the tips of his lips quirked up as a warm and homey atmosphere descended on him wrapping him up in a soft blanket of comfort. Unsure of what next to do Ichigo followed Kukkaku’s fiery reaitsu which boiled in her veins and lit up the house with crimson threads. She was descending the carved stairs when Ichigo found her, hair tied in a messy bun at the back of her head, a simple rose coloured kimono draped over her curvy form, and charcoal eyes full of blazing fire. Upon catching sight of Ichigo she stomped over a frown marring her usually glowing face, her hand was swiftly raised and Ichigo winced preparing himself for the oncoming strike.

Recoiling with the force of the blow Ichigo gingerly rubbed his stinging cheek before looking up with humorous eyes and saying, “Nice to see you to Kukkaku.”

The ebony haired woman smirked softly at the snark in his voice before pulling him into a tight hug that crushed the air from his lungs. Her words were a softly whisper upon his ear as she said, “Took you damn long enough baka! I’m glad you’re home.”

Ichigo smiled at the warm feeling that pulsed in his chest and caressed his cheeks and his reply came out soft and slightly breathy.

“It’s wonderful to be home.”

X

Kukkaku smiled against Ichigo’s shoulder before pulling away and studying the young academy student, his orange hair was still hanging down his back in a small ponytail that swayed slightly with his every move, his caramel eyes were alight with warmth and a soft love glimmered in them, lavender bags still hung under his eyes and cast a slightly harrowing look to an already thin and chiseled face, and his lips were quirked up into a slight smile; so welcoming and open that Kukkaku couldn’t help the smile that slipped onto her own face looking at him.

Leading Ichigo towards the dining room, the two made idle talk speaking of Ichigo’s school and his studies and in change Kukkaku’s work on a new brand of fireworks. The air was filled with an aura of comfort as the two talked openly about this and that, Ichigo’s shoulders losing the tense set to them that first greeted Kukkaku.

“Kaiken won’t be here for dinner he’s staying late to help Ukitake-Taicho, I swear that idiot brother of mine…but you already know that.”

Ichigo nodded to Kukkaku’s inquiring looks as the two stepped into a smaller dining room meant for
simple family meals and not extravagant balls that warranted over five tables. The Shiba’s were practical and understood the value of wealth, they choose not to display it in such a flamboyant manner unlike other clans where the table stretched a long and narrow room, and the guest had the space of an elephant between them. Pulling herself from her thoughts she heard Ichigo’s deep and smooth voice say, “That’s partially the reason I came this night, better to have as little interaction as possible with that goof.”

Ichigo’s words if said in a different tone might have seemed offensive but they were said with good humour and a laugh upon his lips, and truly Kukkaku could understand where Ichigo was coming from. Kaien was overprotective it was quite simple but he also was a Shiba which led to a bit of an overbearing mix of protection and hyper-activity. As they stepped through a high arch into the dining room the heady scent of food wafted towards their noses and Ichigo let out a tiny sigh, amusement in her eyes and a smirk on her face Kukkaku said, “Better than cafeteria food?”

Ichigo nodded with a smile on his face before glancing around the room curiously and asking, “Will Ganju be joining us?”

Kukkaku laughed, it seemed Ichigo shared the Shiba trait overprotectiveness that or their inherent curiosity.

“She should be… I know he was helping in the kitchen but he also wanted to visit the nearby district for a little while. It’s sweet really, he visits the children and gives them food if they hunger, and he always stays and talks to the elderly listening to their tales of glory past.”

Ichigo chuckled softly for a moment before his eyes connected with Kukkaku’s own curious ones, rubbing his head sheepishly Ichigo said, “It just seems like something Ganju would do, he wears his heart on his sleeve and optimism is his greatest weapon.”

Kukkaku only nodded and settled into one of the plush cushions placed beside the table Ichigo sat across from her leaving the position at the head of the table open as was customary. The food was quickly brought out on gleaming trays and settled before them, almost a small buffet with the many servings offered. Kukkaku glanced up to see Ichigo’s dramatically wide eyes and slightly open mouth, the expression was quickly washed away and replaced with Ichigo’s normal expression. One that wasn’t menacing, nor happy it was a blank expression, but some emotion slipped through in the crinkle of his eyes and the curve of his lips.

“Whenever Ganju cooks it’s always a feast. This is why you should come home often, mouth-watering food is always set at this table.”

Ichigo smiled slightly, chocolate eyes darkening briefly, a slight guilt coloured his voice when he said, “I’m sorry for not visiting yet, my mind was cluttered and I needed time to settle. I hope to from now on visit regularly so I can better know the family that I share a last name with, though less of Kaien is always fine.”

Kukkaku laughed and reached across the table to gently grab Ichigo’s hand making sure her movements were clear before saying, “I understand change can be difficult I’m just glad you finally decided to come home. And come now Kaien isn’t that bad…oh wait yes he is.”

They both broke into laughter at Kukkaku’s patronizing tone before beginning to dig into the delicious array of food laid out before them.

X

Halfway through the meal as Kukkaku and Ichigo were discussing the Soutaicho’s majestic beard Ganju entered an apologetic smile on his face, and shock quickly dawning in his eyes when he saw
Ichigo.

“Kukkaku-nee san I’m sorry I’m late the children wanted to play extra-long today and Nakamura-san was telling me about her son who fought in a great war many years past, though she can’t remember the name of it or the opposing sides. Ichigo I’m so glad you’re here! Are you enjoying the food?”

Kukkaku laughed softly at Ganju’s fast paced talk and briefly glanced over to see Ichigo slightly surprised but mostly amused he inclined his head slightly towards Kukkaku letting her know she could speak first.

“Its fine Ganju just come sit down and enjoy the food, you can regale me with tales of your Rungokai adventures another time.”

Ganju smiled sheepishly before settling beside Kukkaku so that he could face Ichigo when they spoke.

“The food is excellent thank you, a thousand times better than the cafeteria food which is alike in taste to swamp water. “

Ganju blushed slightly as Kukkaku and Ichigo laughed slightly, it seemed that Ganju was doomed to always be the baby of the family, always receiving the brunt of the teasing, and the most attention.

X

They continued to chat for a long while after the plates were cleared, nursing steaming cups of teas in their hands they traded stories of funny mishaps or outrageous events. As the night drew closer a small yet deep smile settled on Ichigo’s carved features, and in the forefront of his eyes happiness radiated much like the sun, but in the those caramel orbs hidden carefully a glimmer of pain and sadness shone through illuminating Ichigo’s hidden emotions.

Kukkaku laughed a fair share that night and enjoyed the tales Ichigo told of friends unnamed often enough reminding Kukkaku of the many residents of Soul Society, and more than once the thought of sitting down with a good bottle of sake between the two and getting piss drunk crossed her mind.

As soft night surrounded them Ganju sleepily rubbed his eyes before bidding them both good night, a quick peck on Kukkaku’s cheek and one of his bone-crushing hugs enveloped Ichigo. To see Ichigo’s surprised eyes and slight smile before choking breath and slight pain overtook him would likely imprint itself in Kukkaku’s mind for a long while. Kukkaku could feel sleep weighing her own eyes as Ganju padded up the stairs leaving them creaking and groaning in their old age.

“Are you staying the night Ichi?”

Kukkaku questioned as she pushed herself from the soft pillow stretching out slightly like a cat as she cast a curious glance to see Ichigo doing the same. His voice was slightly rough from the amount of talking that had traversed the night when he said, “I was hoping to if that’s okay? I doubt it would be the safest option to try and head to the academy dorms in this overwhelming darkness. Plus we have a day off tomorrow, something about a teacher’s conference of something of the like.”

Kukkaku nodded amused by the sudden switch from shy and tender to teasing and brash that occurred when Ichigo was uncertain, the young man was definitely interesting by anyone’s accounts. An enigma with so many quirks and turns that when one figured one part of the puzzle three more revealed itself, at least that’s what Kaien compared Ichigo to with soft fondness.

Padding towards the stairs she turned and gestured for Ichigo to follow her, he nodded orange hair swaying slightly before gliding after her, his footsteps a bare whisper on hardwood floors. Kukkaku
led him down the long hallway reserved for the inner circle of Shiba clan members, highly ornate with plush carpet and elegant prints scattered about, and stopped at the room designated for Ichigo.

Pushing the door open Kukkaku smiled at Ichigo’s shocked expression, the walls were painted a soft grey that faded into sudden stripes of sapphire and scarlet sparsely decorating the walls, the furniture was simple and carved of a rich ebony wood that glowed in soft candlelight, there was a collection of chairs with plush ruby pillows placed in one corner surrounding a deep fire place, a desk with a large bookshelf filled to the brim with tomes of knowledge and history placed beside it, the bedframe was simple and elegant with vivid pictures of moonlit skies carved into the wood and soft curtains of slightly see through white dangling around the frame, two great windows stood at the end of the room oval in shape with curtains of sable covering the pale crescent moon, and the floor of cherry wood was covered with a mat made of ivory cotton and wool.

“Kaien and I decided on the design of the room, do you like it?”

Ichigo looked stunned his eyes roving over the many aspects of the room, with Kukkaku’s voice he shook himself from his stupor and said, “Like it? It’s amazing, I’m just having trouble believing Kaien helped design it.”

Kukkaku laughed before padding closer to Ichigo and standing on the tips of her toes she placed a soft kiss on his head and whispered, “I’m glad you like it, sweet dreams Ichi.”

With those words she stepped back and passed through the door leaving Ichigo to bask in his room as she headed the call of her own room which her sleep filled mind graciously responded to.

X

Kaien stepped into the Shiba mansion with a sigh rubbing a tired hand over his eyes the moon was already on its descent towards the end of night, letting his reaitsu gently guide over the occupants of the household to make sure his family were safe his eyebrows skyrocketed when he landed on the presence of a certain orange haired student. Uncertain if his tired mind was playing tricks on him, Kaien let his reaitsu scan the mansion again to be certain. When it was confirmed a soft smile danced across his face before a harsh frown descended upon noble features. He was exhilarated that Ichigo had finally come home, but he choose to do so when Kaien wasn’t home!

Shaking his head softly Kaien wandered into the kitchen and to the counter where Kukkaku had left a small plate of leftovers resting with a cloth over them, lifting it up to see the contents Kaien smiled recognising Ganju's cooking even in the darkness that surrounded him. Taking the plate with him Kaien gently climbed the stairs and walked down the hallway, stopping at Ichigo’s door, Kaien paused a moment in consideration before shifting the door open and peering inside.

A small candle was lit at the desk the wax nearly burned down to a stub, Ichigo’s vibrant hair was visible in the dim light slumped over the desk a thick tome resting beside his head. Laughing softly Kaien placed the plate down and walked over to Ichigo, arriving at the simple desk Kaien slipped his arms around his little brother and gently lifted him up careful not to jostle him from sleep. Ichigo usually slept feather light, the mere sound of a mouse scuttling across the floorboards waking him. But Kaien knew Ichigo suffered from insomnia, unable to truly rest and suffering from vicious nightmares of a past untold. Sometimes when Ichigo refused to rest for days it would creep upon him and wrap him in suffocating folds till he fell to her mercy.

Placing Ichigo down on the cozy bed Kaien grabbed a soft throw and settled it around Ichigo’s shoulder before gently brushing orange locks out of his face. A whispered ‘goodnight’ leaving his lips as he turned and left picking his plate up on the way out he stopped to blow out the candle covering the room in darkness’ mighty cloak.
Ichigo woke slowly, the soft rays of sunlight hastening his awakening and letting eyelids flicker open to reveal misted chocolate orbs. Taking a moment Ichigo swallowed letting the horrors of night fade away and the ache that pounded in his chest soften. Groaning slightly Ichigo pushed himself up from soft blankets which collected at his waist in a pile as his eyes glanced around the room taking in the tome still open on his desk and a low candle stub where once a tallow candle stood tall.

The book was ancient with brittle pages and a faded elegant script that sometimes disappeared altogether on thin yellow stained pages. The contents of such writing were unknown as even in the past when he first acquired the heavy tome he was unable to decode anything but for a scarce few words with Kisuke’s help. What few words he did decode left a sense of danger and power echoing along his senses. Some unknown force compelled him to enter the small antiques store and seek the mysterious leather bound book out once more, now he was once again studying it.

Shaking himself from musing thoughts Ichigo set pale toes on the hardwood below and let out a hiss before recoiling, the floor was icy to the touch and Ichigo briefly mourned the lack of heating systems before braving the floor once more. As he slipped a simple pair of slippers on his feet he glanced at the door in confusion, he did not make it to the bed last night if he remembered correctly. Surrendering to the beguiling sleep Ichigo had slumped forward resting his head on the desk below and let heavy eyelids slide close.

Tracing his reaitsu slightly over himself he could feel Kaien’s soothing reaitsu tickle slightly across his skin, tilting his head to the side Ichigo smiled softly before shaking his head and wandering to the desk to close the book and hide it out of sight.

Coming down the stairs as early morning light brought the soft chirping of birds to his ears, Ichigo spotted Ganju sleepily rubbing his eyes and heading towards the kitchen, smiling Ichigo padded after Ganju before stopping beside him. It took Ganju a few moments to register the blazing presence beside him, but when recognition dawned in his eyes Ichigo smiled and said, “My younger sister was the cook in our family, but I know a few great breakfast recipes if you are interested?”

Ganju seemed to recognize the hand for what it was, a tentative offer of kinship between them outstretched between the two. Ganju studied Ichigo for a moment before a smile befitting of the sun settled on his face and he nodded happily, momentarily striking Ichigo with the image of an even younger Ganju smiling.

“Follow me! I bet you haven’t seen our kitchens yet, they’re spectacular!”

Ichigo winced slightly at the loud tones so early in the morning before a soft smile stole across his face and he followed Ganju who was practically bouncing with every step.

Ichigo settled onto the same cushion as last night Kukkaku once more sitting opposite him and a beaming Ganju sitting beside his older sister, curious glances were cast his way as the three waited for Kaien to grace them all with his presence so they might began the meal. Truthfully it was nothing of such courtesy, rather Ganju wanting everyone to try the new food he had cooked with Ichigo earlier in the morning.

Kaien graced the scene much like Godzilla, seeming to stumble forward before plopping down with a rough sigh, Ichigo could sympathize coffee was a wonderful thing but a lack of it in the morning led to the feeling much like a stone dropped into the ocean slowly drifting towards sand and seaweed
A servant quickly bustled forward handing Kaien a steaming cup of tea which he took with a
gracious smile and took a long sip of. As he placed the ceramic mug down colour slowly bled into
his cheeks and his eyes seemed to regain the sparkle that was regularly present in his slate eyes.
Nodding to the female servant hovering nearby awaiting Kaien’s orders, she scurried into the
kitchens to tell the others to bring out the steaming platters of hot food and sweet fruit.

As the plates were set down Kaien and Kukkaku cast glances at the wide selection of food
unfamiliar to their eyes, heavenly smells wafted from silver plates and steam curled softly in gentle
spirals. Turning curious eyes toward Ganju who was practically vibrating in his seat, so excited was
he to share the food he had prepared for today’s meal.

“Its western food, Ichi taught it to me and showed me the recipes! He says there’s plenty of
interesting dishes prepared over there and he even offered to teach me other recipes.”

The appraising looks the older Shiba siblings cast him brought a slight blush to his cheeks, it was
easy to learn such dishes when one is stationed there for a few months. During the war news reached
them of Bach trying to form a base of power in America, there was a lull, less fighting and time to
breathe if only a little so Ichigo was sent to America (and Canada for a week or two) with only Chad
at his side. As the Quincy’s are human in a sense Ichigo and Chad were able to walk around the
streets in their own bodies of flesh and feel blood pumping hot in their veins.

As the food was heaped onto clean ceramic plates Ichigo let out a pleased hum as the familiar taste of
waffles danced across his tongue, across from his Kukkaku hesitantly stared at the food below before
trying some and letting out a surprised sound of delight.

“Wow this tastes excellent!”

Kaien as exuberant as ever with his buoyant exclamation as food rapidly disappeared inside the
tunnel that served as his mouth, Ichigo could only shake his head with a soft smile before sharing a
pleased look with Ganju.

“Just what we expect from the babies of the family.”

Ichigo spluttered at Kukkaku’s joking words, wide eyes landing on her devilish smirk. Ganju let out
a soft groan a pout settling on soft features before he petulantly said, “Kukkaku-nee san! How many
times do I have to tell you not to call me that? Isshin-jii already has too many nicknames for me.
Besides you don’t even know Ichi’s age he could be older than all of us!”

Ganju’s statement sent a ripple of laughter through the table before the end of his words hit them and
they cast curious glances at Ichigo. Kaien seemed slightly worried at the thought of Ichigo being
older than him.

“Well how old are you Ichi? When Unohana-Taicho was healing you she did a full body scan, but
she couldn’t discern your age… and when’s your birthday?”

Ichigo had to stop for a moment and really think about his age. He was fifteen when the Winter War
first started and it lasted three years so he was eighteen by the time it ended. The 1000 Year Blood
War lasted ten years so he would be twenty-eight when it ended. He even remembered celebrating
his twenty-fifth birthday with the others, he got completely hammered that night. Yet his body had
passed in the human world around his twenty-second birthday, and that was the age he appeared.

But he couldn’t tell them he was twenty-eight soon to be twenty-nine he’d be regarded as a child,
unfit to serve in a squad, and there would be questions about his appearance. It seemed like he once

again had to lie. One after the other, small insignificant, and ginormous over and over again like grains of sand slowly pilling onto his shoulders, eventually he would suffocate in them.

“My age? I’m roughly two hundred. My birthday is August fifteenth, but I usually prefer not to celebrate it.”

Kaien smirked obviously pleased that Ichigo wasn’t older than him but darkness flashed in his eyes as he comprehended the last part of Ichigo’s speech. Kukkaku seemed to catch on Ichigo’s meaning as well and shared a quick glance with Kaien a small frown resting on her face that passed in an instant.
“See Ganju Ichigo is older than you… if only by a few years.”

Kukkaku said consoling Ganju slightly before Kaien jumped in and said, “More like forty!”

Ganju frowned and shot a glare at his brother as Ichigo laughed softly in the background, he missed such sibling antics as these, mornings filled with flagrant bickering and wailing in the background as sweet aromas drifted around them. The thought brought darkness to his eyes and weighed on his heart and only Old man Zangetsu’s warm presence at his back jolted him from the dangerous funk he could still feel his heart setting into.

Looking up Ichigo could see his family now, Ganju under Kaien’s arm as harsh knuckles dug into his head Kukkaku laughing in the background, and smiles playing across their faces. This is what he had to focus on the here and the now.

X

Yourichi nodded to the two Shiba guards as she pranced up the Shiba mansion short plum coloured hair and a soft cream coloured scarf flowing behind her. She was far too busy nowadays she thought a touch morosely to herself, what with keeping an eye on Kisuke (the lovable genius who was a slight bit crazy in hiring the creepy fellow with face paint), looking after her new lieutenant (who was far too adoring, listening to Yourichi’s every command), and trying to find time to tease Byakuya. It was quite a mess to find time to see her favourite Shiba princess.

Raising a poised hand Yourichi knocked on the thin wooden frame butterscotch eyes glowing slightly in excitement. A slightly flustered Kukkaku opened the door letting Yourichi slip inside as she said, “Ah I’m sorry I completely forgot today was our day! You see my little brother, the one who’s attending the academy, finally came home yesterday and we were just spending some time talking, it completely slipped my mind.”

Yourichi laughed ivory teeth flashing slightly as she placed a reassuring hand on Kukkaku’s bony shoulder, a slight touch of interest in her voice Yourichi said, “It’s fine don’t worry about it, besides I think I want to meet this little brother of yours. Bya-kun has been talking about him a lot and new material to tease that Kuchiki with is always great.”

Kukkaku laughed at the seemingly inside joke and led Yourichi towards one of the smaller more personal sitting rooms. Sliding the door open Yourichi was greeted with flaming orange hair and a lean body sprawled over one of the many chairs gathered about a low table. Looking up seemingly startled Ichigo (for Yourichi presumed this was the academy student) glanced first at Kukkaku and then let his eyes lazily glide to land on Yourichi. Pain seemed to flash lighting quick in those eyes, his body tensing almost unnoticeably before slipping once more into a relaxed position. His chocolate eyes seemed to be focused on nothing as he shifted into a slightly more seated position, Yourichi cast a glance to Kukkaku to see worry slipping across her face before peeling away leaving a slightly forced smile.
“Ichigo I doubt you two have met, this is Yourichi Shihōin head of the Shihōin house and captain of the second division. Yourichi this is my brother Ichigo Shiba who is studying alongside Byakuya at the academy.”

Ichigo stood up with the grace of a cat and the silence of a mouse raising a curious eyebrow as Yourichi regarded him. The corners of his lips turned up slightly as he offered his hand, smiling in turn Yourichi took the calloused hand with her own daintier one. Yourichi’s eyes widened at the feel of Ichigo’s unique reaitsu that prickled under her skin, it was cool fire, light night, mercy, and determination.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Ichigo’s voice was rich with a smoothness to it that was pleasant on the ears Yourichi smiled her eyes traveling up and down his body appreciatively before replying, “Indeed the pleasure is mine.”

Yourichi smirked internally at the slight dusting of rose that danced across pale cheeks, Ichigo would definitely be fun to tease. Kukkaku laughed and separated them, pulling the small triad towards plush chairs and an interesting afternoon.

“So what were you and Ichigo discussing before I arrived?”

The way Yourichi said the sentence caused Kukkaku to snort slightly before casting an amused glance in Ichigo’s direction, the orangette was firmly glancing out the window avoiding the eyes of the beautiful women in front of him.

“We were discussing gossip. It’s quite funny Ichigo has a unique habit of eavesdropping on whoever he’s passing by, taking whatever gibberish they’ve said and pulling the real meaning out of it. What self-respecting noble wouldn’t want to hear the interesting tidbits of information?”

Yourichi could see scarlet spring to life once more as Ichigo looked up with a sigh and a resigned look at Kukkaku’s words. Laughing softly Yourichi regarded the student with an interested eye.

“Really? What an interesting habit, care to share some more Ichigo.”

Ichigo turned towards the two ladies with a slightly worried cast to his eyes, he obviously recognized those hungered stares and devilish smirks that settled on Yourichi and Kukkaku’s faces and said, “I’m not going to escape this am I?”

The two ladies shared twin looks full of devils fire before turning back to Ichigo and shaking their heads in unison, and really what did Ichigo expect when Kukkaku and Yourichi were gathered together.

X

Byakuya followed the mousy servant through pale walls that shined golden in the sun, and highlighted polished wood below. A slight shiver crossed his spine as his eyes glanced around, he would have preferred to stay away from the Shiba mansion and trained at the academy, but it seemed Ichigo was content to stay at the Shiba mansion and spend time with his family and as the instructor (or rather torturer) made the decisions. The female servant pointed towards a thin shoji door where a slip of emerald peaked through and the light was brightly shining on simple walls.

“Shiba-dono is outside, c-call if you need assistance.”

With those parting words the servant scurried off leaving Byakuya to stare pensively at the soft sunlight battering against a thin paper frame. Sighing, Byakuya pushed aside the frame and stepped onto lush grass, a quiet wind blew through ebony locks, the gentle rustle of the leaves accompanying
the sweet breeze. Letting his eyes scan the quaint backyard Byakuya could see a large oak tree
standing watch, a small well was set in the corner under the shade of a curling elm tree, and a large
assortment of coloured flowers bloomed pleasantly throughout.

Sweeping his eyes once more Byakuya landed on a shock or orange hair vibrant against the mellow
greens of the grass, silently Byakuya crept towards the figure splayed in the grass, chest moving in a
peaceful rise and fall.

Ichigo’s chocolate eyes were vacantly staring at the crystal sky above, his hands rested loosely at his
sides. Looking into Ichigo’s eyes Byakuya swore he could see the stars hidden far above reflecting in
them, such depth hidden in eyes so layered with emotion.

“So Sempai are we going to start training?”

The peaceful moment was brutally disrupted as Ichigo blinked before knocking Byakuya over and
pining him to the ground, looking up Byakuya could see an amused smile playing on Ichigo’s face as
his voice rang out slightly irritated.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to call me Sempai,” Byakuya smirked at his friend
eyebrows raised challenging, “You know what? Fine, we’re going to spar today.”

Horror flashed across Byakuya’s face at those words, words of doom. For Ichigo would not go easy
on Byakuya and he would likely come home covered in a multitude of bruises in varying shades of
mauve, juniper, sickly yellow, and crimson.

Determination shone in Ichigo’s eyes as he rolled off of Byakuya and dusted his spruce coloured
pants off Byakuya let out a soft sigh before drawing his zanpaktou and standing up, Ichigo nodded
the corners of his lips turning up faintly in approval. The two backed away from each other blades
held at the ready before an unspoken whisper sounded and they began.

Byakuya brought his blade overhead as he stepped forward before quickly bringing the blade down
to the side and thrusting from that angle, he could feel his presence guiding his arm and infusing it
with strength as he brought it up hastily to block a harsh strike from the side. Letting his instincts
drive him he followed the flow and gracefully brought his arm up and with a flick blocked the back
thrust with ease. Ichigo’s style was controlled strength and speed, a graceful dance far outstripping
his own. There was no flamboyance in Ichigo’s moves only the call of his zanpaktou and his
instincts carving a path for heady strength and nimble soles.

Back and forth they clashed bright gleams of silver flashing in the mid-day sun, perspiration beaded
on Byakuya’s forehead and his breath escaped him in rough gasps as he swung his blade again.
Ichigo looked wholly unaffected, the rare bead of sweat rolling down carved features to drip from an
angled chin, his blade was sure and strong as he defended Byakuya’s clumsy strikes. With a flick of
his wrist the sword was sent flying landing with a loud ‘clang’ in soft ground beyond.

“Again.”

That was the only word Ichigo uttered, but Byakuya could see the fierce pride that shined in caramel
orbs. Byakuya paused for a moment taking in deep breaths and letting his mind and heart settle in
their racing before striding over and picking up the heavy metal with a flourish. Turning to Ichigo he
let a determined smirk grace his face as he sank into position, Ichigo laughed an approving light in
his eyes as he mirrored Byakuya.
Basil vines dangled above them, letting a soft shade cover heated brows and cool misted eyes. Side by side Byakuya and Ichigo lay under a great willow tree with drooping branched and cluttered leaves. Turning to Ichigo with a curious cast to his eyes Byakuya asked, “Did Kaien-san tell you about the Matsuri celebration being hosted by the Kuchiki family in a few weeks?”

Ichigo let out a snort followed by a tired hand rubbing his forehead. His voice was vaguely patronizing with knowing tones hidden underneath as he said, “Of course he didn’t tell me this is Kaien we’re talking about. I’ll keep it in my mind, though I doubt the experience will be pleasurable, gatherings of this kind are simply a waste to attend.”

“I can agree but at least we will have each other to satisfy night’s boredom.”

Ichigo laughed slightly at Byakuya’s words raising his head on a raised palm and casting fond eyes in his direction. Byakuya paused wondering whether to let the question that plagued his mind slip free from his grasp and dance across his tongue.

“Ichigo I know some secret lies deep within you, I’m not asking you to tell me. I don’t want you to tell me unless you’re ready. I just want to know if there will ever be a time where you will trust me with these words hidden in your eyes.”

Ichigo’s eyes widened and silence reigned between the two as Ichigo turned onto his back once more, a puff of breath escaping his lips before he said, “One day you will learn the truth of my sorrow, and when that day comes your shoulders shall be the heavier for it. Know this though that I trust you, now more than ever, and with that trust come the promise of truth.”

Byakuya nodded a small smile slipping across his face as he gazed at the sky above through tangled vines, rich shades of lilac, gold, rose, and cerulean danced across the sky in a magnificent sunset, leaving a deep seated sense of awe echoing in Byakuya’s soul.

X

A headache pounded in his temple as Kaien shuffled through the Shiba mansion doors, the day had been long and though Kaien loved what he did, he couldn’t help the ache and tire that plagued his body. Sentaro was barley experienced and whenever Ukitake so much as coughed he rushed to his aid dropping stacks of paperwork in addition to that chaos Ukitake had another attack rendering him weak and Kaien plagued with worry. There was still far too many piles of paperwork to complete and Kaien could feel the weight unconsciously put on his shoulders pulling him down.

Sighing softly he shook himself from morose thoughts and crept upstairs, mindful of the slumbering occupants. As was his tradition Kaien let his reaitsu sweep over the walls gently tracing the reaitsu of his family, assuring Kaien of their presence. Satisfied that everyone rested safely Kaien paused to wonder if Isshin their uncle who should have held the position of head of the family would come home one night. The animatic captain preferred to hike through Rungokai and rest in one of the many Shiba houses placed throughout. Isshin valued family, but even more so solitude sought him out like a dog to a scent.

Kaien wouldn’t have noticed anything as he walked past Ichigo’s closed doors if not for the loud noise that swept away his thoughts and made his hair stand on end. All the problems running through his mind disappeared as he whipped around to stare at the shoji door. Putting his hand cautiously against the wood Kaien recoiled as potent reaitsu seemed to simmer underneath his hand. Closing his eye Kaien let his reaitsu trace the thick presence in front of the door, he let out a shocked breath at what he saw.

Glimmering threads of onyx and pearl interwoven irrevocably tight surrounded Ichigo’s room, the
The purpose of such threads was vague and Kaien wondered at such strong bonds. To keep noise out? To keep reaitsu in? In any case the kido that shone slightly in the dim light of oil lamps was far above the level of any academy student, and perhaps even those of captain level.

Another pained sound graced his ears and Kaien’s mind picked up pace racing to find a way to enter the room. Willing to try anything Kaien put his hand against the barrier and let his reaitsu “mimic” Ichigo’s own, a true replica was impossible so Kaien summarized the feel and thoughts that swirled in Ichigo’s own soul. The barrier shuddered as if trying to make a decision before flickering briefly and letting Kaien’s hand slip through. Breathing deeply Kaien slid open the thin frame and stepped through the wall of energy and into Ichigo’s room.

The curtains were flung open casting moonlight shadows upon the furniture and illuminating the disarray of the room. Ichigo’s shihaksho was scattered about along with thin transcripts of rice paper covered in elegant swirls and peculiar drawings of unidentifiable shapes. Kaien’s wandering eyes were drawn to the bed when a soft moan echoed in the empty room. Quickly traversing the distance Kaien stopped beside the bed and threw aside thin curtains shading his view of Ichigo.

Orange hair painted the pillows in soaked strands, a flush stained pale skin and Ichigo’s chest rose rapidly as if he couldn’t get enough air into his lungs. His arms were sprawled haphazardly and rapidly as he tossed back and forth. Kaien’s mind seemed to empty at the sight before him, unable to comprehend the image of his baby brother in front of him. Nejibana whispered softly in his mind and he shook himself.

Kneeling on the bed beside Ichigo, Kaien could see Ichigo’s lips move in a rapid mantra the same sentences and words repeating in a broken and breathy whisper.

“Sorry. I’m sorry please forgive me. No! Don’t leave. I don’t want to be alone again.”

The plea left Kaien breathless his heart pounding in his ears and a gasp escaping his lips, reaching down he gingerly pulled Ichigo to his chest and hugged the thin orangette close.

“Ichi, hey wake up. It’s okay I’m here you’re not alone.”

Kaien’s voice was soft as he gently rocked the two back in forth, Ichigo continued to struggle in his arms choked breaths escaping his lips, reaching down he gingerly pulled Ichigo to his chest and hugged the thin orangette close.

“Hey, hey you’re okay. Just breathe with me okay,” Ichigo grasped onto Kaien’s robes a vice lock grip, chocolate eyes locked onto flint eyes and some recognition shone through a panicked haze, “That’s it just follow me, in and out nice and slow.”

Together their breaths were the only sound to disturb the sound of night’s silence. Kaien didn’t know how long they sat there under the cover of moonlight, Ichigo’s breath slowing and regaining control at a steady pace. Reaitsu coiled about them speaking of warmth and peace, Kaien had the faint notion of it being his own, and yet other presences resided within the calm aura.

“T-Thank you Kaien.”

The words were barely above a whisper and Kaien strained to hear them, turning to Ichigo with a
small smile Kaien nodded and that was all that was needed. Sleep came with soft touched striking them slowly, unaware of its spell Kaien watched as chocolate orbs were covered the weight on his own eyelids became too much and he let them slide close with a quiet breath.

X

Chapter End Notes

Alright I hope you all enjoyed there’s just a few things I want to discuss. 1. This is not Yourichi x Ichigo, the way I wrote this is just how I see Yourichi acting around Ichigo, she’s very flirtatious and isn’t afraid to appreciate the good things in life. If anything I am leaning towards a minor Kisuke x Yourichi paring. 2. On age within Soul Society, looking at Byakuya and Rukia’s age you can see that it’s based in the 100’s when translated to the human world, ex. 155 = 15 in human years. So if Ichigo saying 200 seems a bit off it’s also representing his physical age. 3. I have stated this before but there is not pairings with Ichigo and Kaien does not have any feelings for Ichigo. You can take this how you want ;) but it’s more of a focus on brotherly love. I hope you all enjoyed and I will see you next chapter!!
Kibble!!
Noceur

Chapter Summary

Ichigo must attend the Kuchiki party what boredom will plague him.

Chapter Notes

Noceur
(n.) One who sleeps late or not at all; or, one who stays out late to revel or party.

Hello everyone here is chapter 8 of the re-write, this chapter was bit hard to write as inspiration was being a fickle thing but I finally finished it. Keep an eye open for some fun literary devices if you’d like. Enjoy!
Once again many thanks to Intrigued Chameleon for all the help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo stared at the swirling liquid below him; pale rose in colour, steam drifted upwards in gentle spirals. Letting out a soft sigh Ichigo tipped the ceramic mug back and took a sip of the sweet chai tea. Flicking his eyes upwards he could see Kukkaku staring with an amused look, shaped eyebrows raised and curiosity lacing slate eyes. Setting the mug on the oak table below Ichigo frowned slightly before saying, “Are you sure I have to go?”

Kukkaku laughed a smile gracing her elegant features, shaking her head in light amusement she replied, “I see now, you didn’t want to come and have tea with your nice and beautiful older sister. You just wanted to complain about the party!”

Her smooth voice took on a false tone of hurt and crocodile tears seemed on the verge of cascading down her pale cheeks. Ichigo shuffled in the plush chair, feeling slightly guilty but knowing Kukkaku’s nature she understood all too well why he was there.

“That’s not entirely true, can your studious younger brother take time out of his woeful schedule to grace his beautiful sister’s visage?”

Kukkaku’s laughter bounced around the room, a clear ringing sound that tipped the curve of Ichigo’s lips upward. Waving her hand once she regained control Kukkaku nodded and said, “Say what you will, you’re just as sly as Kaien when he’s about to go hunt for girls. Seriously, don’t worry about the party it’ll be fine, you may not have a stick up your ass but you can blend in well enough,” Ichigo starred at her incredulously before she continued, “Don’t give me that look I’ve seen you talking to the elders, even if you totally shut them down without their knowledge.”

They both shared a knowing smile, when Ichigo was first inducted into the clan the elders tried to kick up a fuss stating the lack of Shiba blood. Unohana had swept in with a smile that would frighten Hades and showed them the blood samples she took and the correlation between them and Shiba blood. Ichigo suspected the reasoning behind such plotting laid mainly in the scars covering his torso a clear mark of trauma, even now as he passed through brick-lined streets the onyx haired captain
would send a calculating and concerned gaze his way.

The elders were not wise in their age but rather senile and they thought it a great idea to bring Ichigo, who still swayed on his feet with exhaustion at the time, in front of them. It was like the Spanish Inquisition except Ichigo expected it, or something of that sort. They quizzed him endlessly trying to pry any information they could get frail veined hands on; Ichigo responded in kind with vague answers and blank smiles. The head of the elders soon was fed up with the direction the meeting was heading and so began to insult Ichigo. Perhaps to test him? Lazily Ichigo’s words flowed like honey but underneath hid the venom of a cobra.

Letting his musings drift away Ichigo glanced up to see Kukkaku gazing vacantly out one of the oval windows that framed mint coloured walls. Ichigo took in a breath letting the non-existent weight, a self-imposed weight settle.

“Come now Ichigo cheer up, at least you have a comrade with which you can survive the night. Remember that party hosted last spring? Underneath that emotionless mask of yours, you were a fish floating in the middle of a new ocean where sharks fed freely on all. Now... now you are far greater than any old shark I have encountered.”

Ichigo nodded, a soft smile playing on his face at her kind words. A yawn shook his frame slightly and he said, “I wish what you said were so easy, no it is far more likely that the punch bowl be my ally. As the Kuchiki family is the gracious host he shall be running around and greeting guest much like a headless chicken.”

Kukkaku laughed and said, “You always have the weirdest comparisons Ichi. If it bothers you that much you can always bring a book and sneak into the gardens.”

Ichigo’s hazel eyes visibly brightened at the idea and he smirked at the idea, thanking Kukkaku she only smiled a knowing smile before leaning in conspiratorially and saying, “You’re not the only one who finds noble affairs boring Ichi. I once found Ginrei Kuchiki making origami under the table at a dinner.”

Ichigo’s eyebrows lifted and a small laugh escaped his lips, it seemed that Byakuya learned that habit from his grandfather. Ichigo could with fond ease draw up many memories of the two hunched beneath smoking crimson stained rubble and debris, Byakuya’s hands moving in intricate patterns to reveal delicate birds and fragile flowers.

Arching an eyebrow Ichigo leaned in to meet Kukkaku halfway and glanced at the door before whispering, “If you think that’s stunning you won’t believe what I caught the Soutaicho doing one time.”

Interest gleamed in their eyes and Ichigo’s heart ached softly at the image the two presented in his mind’s eye. When Orihime had learned of his “habit” she began to drag him to any restaurant nearby when the thought struck her and demand the latest feed. In return her silver eyes glowed and she babbled about the latest recipe and Uryuu’s blindness to any attempts, because really when she practically said the words he stared at her blankly the light reflecting off his glasses.

Taking the cup into his hands once more Ichigo smiled into his tea and listened as Kukkaku began to tell him of the time Kaien forgot to brush his hair, if they shared any similarity it was their hair and Ichigo could only wince at the idea of untameable hair left to run wild.

X

Steam curled around Ichigo’s form as hot water lapped against his sides, a blissful sigh escaped
parted lips as the tension strung into his muscles bled out leaving the feeling of melting butter. Ichigo would have to thank Ganju for suggesting using the hot springs located in one of their winter lodgings. After talking with Kukkaku for over an hour Ganju had peered in around the frame like a nervous child and tenderly asked if Ichigo would like to accompany him on his journey to Rungokai.

His agreement slipped from his lips unbidden and Kukkaku stared at Ichigo for a moment in contemplation before her shoulders slumped fractionally and she nodded a gentle and approving smile resting on her face. She made him promise to regal her with tales before sending the two on their merry way.

Ichigo had been pleasantly surprised as he watched Ganju flicker from person to person, sharing kind words, good food, and gentle advice. Children looked upon him with adoring eyes and sweet smiles, and adults who usually held guarded coldness in their eyes let fondness glimmer at the peaceful sight. Ichigo listened intently as Ganju talked to the many elders who sat in noon-day sun letting pleasant breeze ruffle ivory hair.

It was easy to see why the Shiba’s of any noble family were the most respected among residents of Rungokai, it also explained the ease in which the Shiba line vanished from the sight of Soul Society; traitorous names hanging above their heads with the fell swoop of the pendulum.

Light as a feather a soft presence danced on the edge of his senses, resting outside the thin Shoji doors. Opening his eyes Ichigo stared at the door and watched as it slowly slid open to reveal a cat of speckled white fur with handsome honey coloured eyes. Smiling Ichigo beckoned the cat further in watching its tail curl and sway while intelligent golden eyes blinked in curiosity. Ichigo laughed softly so as not to startle the cat before saying, “You remind me of the cat my sister brought home once, though it turned out to a panther… of sorts. Who eventually revealed himself to be a teal haired Arrancar. That was a fun day.”

Ichigo smiled fondly at the memory and the alliance his arrival brought, an alliance that survived two wars. Ichigo was pleased that his heart was not laden with heavy darkness and only a dull ache in his heart and sharpness in his hands reminded him of all that had come to pass. What once started as a rivalry bloomed into a friendship that fueled their determination to fight all the more so.

Looking at the cat Ichigo tipped his head back with a sigh before his silky voice lifted through the air.

“Of course I’m talking to a cat… again.”

The feline let out an indignant ‘meow’ and Ichigo stared ruefully for a moment before shaking his head. Such feisty and temperamental creatures, and yet undeniably endearing.

X

Ichigo sat in front of a mirror with a faint irritated look, of course Kukkaku deemed that Ichigo must dress up properly, which in turn meant layers of clothing, elegant brooches, and shoes that dug into your heels all night.

Rummaging around in the simple walk-in closet located in his room, Ichigo let his eye cast over the many garments of vibrant colours hanging in neat identical rows. A flash of indigo caught his eyes and he stepped forward to nag the piece of clothing. It was simple in design, a pale midnight blue that seemed to shimmer in soft light, stars curled in gentle spirals that appeared like the cluster of a galaxy from afar. The obi was a pale white contrasting sharply against the darker blue, beads of onyx and light iron were woven into the fabric in sweeping chains. A simple haori was left over the hook, it was loose and untraditionally long almost sweeping the floor. Its colour was like that of the clouds
in spring, shades of grey blending into one another in quick transitions of light to dark.

Nodding his head Ichigo took on the long and trying process of putting on the elegant yukata. Finally cloaked in soft fabric that swirled around his feet with every step, Ichigo padded towards the mirror and observed the sweeping lengths and sweet colours. Reaching up to run calloused fingers through thick locks Ichigo glanced at the vanity below the mirror, spotting a simple clasp with sapphires incrusted sparsely Ichigo strung his hair into a high ponytail and let the clasp grasp the hair in a tight lock. Glancing around the room searching for the last elusive piece to the outfit he had pieced together (and really when had he begun to care of his looks, he suspected Uryuu in the matter), Ichigo’s eyes alighted on a pale white scarf.

When they had found him lying in a crater of carved rock it had still been wrapped around his neck as if unable to let go of its wielder, a keepsake from Rukia and Byakuya a symbol of their everlasting friendship. The scarf still graced his neck often but even now the slightest fabric could sometimes leave the feel of large hands grasping and choking the life out of him. Wrapping the scarf around a pale neck Ichigo let the ends gently flutter to rest behind him before stepping out of his room and into the hallway.

Kukkaku was waiting leaning in a relaxed position against the opposite wall. A coy smile danced across her face as her eyes traveled up and down surveying Ichigo’s change of clothing.

“My! You sure clean up nicely Ichi.”

Ichigo smiled letting his own eyes observe the beautiful kimono of pale gold and sweet rouge that graced Kukkaku’s figure, her hair was strung up in an elegant bun with spirals of raven hair framing her angular face.

“I could say the same of you, your eyes sparkle and you look simply ravishing.”

Pale rose painted her cheeks and a pleased smile graced her lips as she playful swatted at Ichigo before turning and gesturing for him to follow her. Shaking his head in amusement Ichigo prayed to whatever deity above that might be listening that the party wouldn’t be an event of such unforgettable proportions.

X

The chatter that permeated every room of the Kuchiki mansion was the first sound that greeted Kaien’s ears other than the gently chitter of night’s creatures. Casting his eyes to the side Kaien’s lips quirked upwards as he spotted the small frown hidden under a pleasant expression firmly settled on Ichigo’s noble features.

“Cheer up brother of mine, this night will soon be over, and I have a few bottles of prime sake stored at home.”

Ichigo’s incredulous look brought great amusement to Kaien who snorted slightly at the look before stepping forward. A Kuchiki servant hurried to greet them; soot coloured hair messed like a bird’s nest and lilac eyes peaking from underneath. Smiling Kaien nodded showing her the invitation and she squeaked before leading them further inside the mansion. Ichigo paused at the door a strange touch of longing in his eyes as he stared at the horizon where the cover of night was descending in pale hues of juniper and cerulean.

Ichigo turned away abruptly and followed Kaien inside, a night of flagrant flamboyance awaited them. Kaien (with Kukkaku in tow) bustled from noble to noble greeting them with (fake) pleased smiles and firm handshakes. Idle conversation was made in quick passing before Kaien was handed
off to another to introduce Ichigo, who hovered behind Kaien much like a spectre piercing eyes casting about the crowds searching for a certain Kuchiki noble. Kaien was swept deeper into the crowd reaitsu pressing irritatingly on his senses from all sides as servants swept across the floor carrying trays laden with thin glasses and delectable treats. A flowered and faintly familiar presence sparked Kaien’s senses and he turned to see Kuchiki Ginrei standing among the crowd.

Turning to glance at Ichigo, Kaien noticed that Kukkaku had already ambled away probably to flirt with one of the many suitors present. Ganju was lucky that he could claim a lack of age and experience, right now he was likely cooking up a storm in the kitchen… that or his weird habit of trying to tame the local hogs.

Ichigo’s chocolate eyes flashed his acknowledgement and Kaien sashayed towards Kuchiki-Taicho whose intimidating height wasn’t bothering Kaien at all… nope not at all.

“Shiba-San a pleasure to see you here.”

Kuchiki-Taicho’s voice was lightly grating and rusted with age, yet it still held the commanding baritone and majestic undertones of his position. Kaien inclined his head in what would pass as respectful enough. Kuchiki-san glanced around as if to see the rest of Kaien’s entourage before his eyes alighted on Ichigo, who was hard to miss in the eye-catching attire he wore.

“Indeed the pleasure is all mine, this is my younger brother Ichigo who I do not think you have yet met; though I am sure you have heard something of him from your grandson.”

Kaien silently choked on his own pompous words and as he spoke simple pleasantries, behind him Kaien could sense good natured humour and a slight weariness flowing along the current of Ichigo’s reaitsu. Kuchiki-san seemed to smile in a slightly pained manner before extending a hand to shake, Ichigo stepped forward gripping the elderly captain’s hand firmly.

“Gratuitous fortune that I am finally able to meet the Shiba my young nephew speaks so often of.”

Ichigo blushed slightly at those words before he regained control and smiled, the perfect image of a noble, he said, “It is kind to hear that Byakuya speaks such words in your presence. Truly it is an honour to meet the figure who stands so wisely, a mentor in Byakuya’s life.”

Kuchiki-san seemed surprise to hear Ichigo’s flowery tone and deep voice. Kuchiki-san opened his mouth as if to respond in kind when Byakuya graced the scene, bedecked in a yukata of artic blue, patterned with soft sakura petals of pale rose. His obi creamy gold and the haori that blanketed his shoulders was a turquoise in colour that rippled around his lithe form. He turned to speak to his grandfather before his eyes alighted on Ichigo poised and the picture of nobility. The young man hid amusement under a fragile mask and leaned to whisper careful words in Kuchiki-san’s ear.

Turning away from his grandfather Byakuya bowed his head a pleasant smile on his face as he said, “Greetings Lord Shiba a fine night it is that you have graced us with your presence. And to you Ichigo of the Shiba clan I bid good evening.”

It was as if some unknown challenge had been initiated between the two students, playful fire danced within their eyes and a smirk seemed to dance on Ichigo’s face fleetingly. Before Kaien could respond to the words of song Ichigo rose to the challenge his voice a sweet crescendo as he said, “My greetings to you Byakuya of house Kuchiki. This night does indeed speak of finesse for what other reason may the stars shine so bright in their high seats of heaven. The scent of sakura and fall hangs heavy on the air bringing saccharine tidings. We have spoken too hastily I fear, let us depart so that those of wiser stature may conference without the impudent thoughts of the young.”

Kaien deemed those words a win on Ichigo’s part as the two shared a look before glancing to their elders surprising Kaien Kuchiki-san, laughed in slight amusement before nodding. Ichigo and
Byakuya flashed away leaving the two Shinigami to dwell on the frivolous passing of their kin.

“You were correct in assuming that I had not met Ichigo until this evening. Now I can see how unlike any Shiba, any soul he truly is, it is no wonder Byakuya had found confidence in he who bears orange hair.”

Kaierenoddedstaring at the arch where the two had traipsed off to, Kukkaku’s energetic presence which coiled under her skin sidled up to Kaieren and she spoke soft words of greeting to the ivory haired man in front of them.

“It is not only your nephew that had benefited from their relationship, Ichigo’s eyes sparkle fervently when he dwells with Byakuya to see him laugh is too rare a sight.”

Meaningful glances were exchanged words not easily spoken between a noble of high house and cordial tongue, and a noble of blistering kindness and soft fire.

X

The night air cut swiftly into Ichigo’s lungs as they stepped out into a small side garden, where bushes and lunging trees crouched on a compact space of pleasant emerald, and a lone stone bench illuminated by the warm lights from within and the rising moon stood. Slipping out of plain sandals Ichigo let lush grass brush his feet as he wandered further into the garden Byakuya a pace behind him. The slight pain at the base of his head grew noticeable in the silence and with a smile of satisfaction Ichigo reached up and unclasped the sapphire brooch that kept orange locks so firmly in place.

An evening breeze rustled his locks so they danced across his sight and whispered against his neck. Byakuya’s quiet chuckle of amusement reached Ichigo’s ears and he turned away the luminous moon gilding his back in soft rays. Silence blanketed the garden only the gentle hum of water flowing and night’s small wonders buzzing about filled the silence. Gesturing with his hands Ichigo settled on the stone bench below. A slight chill seeped from cool marble and left a soft chill in his core.

Byakuya shook his head whether in amusement or ire of Ichigo’s actions was unforeseen and perched on the bench, ebony locks shadowing his eyes for a fraction of a second.

“What do you seek with the passing of this night?”

The question was thrust forth from a weary mind and Ichigo turned to regard Byakuya inquisitively gazing above at the celestial beings of light dust. Ichigo’s reply was hushed in the intimacy of night and a kind fondness seeped into words of intricacy.

“Life perhaps? No longer do I focus on one goal to sustain me, no I must focus on moving forward. If I hesitate the sands of time shall swallow me up in a nameless grave. Maybe that is a truer purpose of a friend, to hold you at a distance or close embrace with a rope of memories and pull you from the ever quick sand.”

“You’re waxing metaphors and poetically again my friend. I have no doubt that if I asked you of tea you would reply along the lines of… “Like tea humans are, we are water that is stepped with knowledge, the longer we wait the richer the taste.” Or something to that effect.”

Ichigo laughed, the clear sound ringing around the garden and causing Byakuya to glance over before his own mirth bubbled from his lips so that they formed a duet of humour. Calming himself with deep breaths Ichigo smiled at Byakuya his cheeks painted a faded rouge in the cool chill of night.
“I will keep that metaphor in mind and cast it at a later date to an audience entrapped by my eloquent words.”

Ichigo’s voice held a pleasant hum and the two lapsed into a comfortable silence born of deep kinship. A pinprick of something unknown neither cold nor moist landed on Ichigo’s cheek with the softness of butterfly kisses, looking up Ichigo could see spirals of white trailing in heavy curtains towards emerald below. Confusion racked Ichigo’s brow for a short few moments, the air was cool but not so much that any precipitation would crystalize, and it was seemingly too early in the year for such an occurrence.

“Is this snow? It is far unlike any I have yet seen.”

Byakuya’s wondrous voice hinting confusion broke Ichigo from his thoughts for a second as Chocolate orbs glanced around, the answer was soon evident in the scent that hung in the air like mist upon a foggy day.

“This is not snow…it’s ash.”

Byakuya’s head whipped around to regard Ichigo a serious expression lining his features, Ichigo placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder comforting him slightly along with his words.

“On this night many a fire may burn to keep spirits of ill-will out of home, and yet this ash has a fragrance unfamiliar and toxic in its cloying descent. Shall we investigate? We can slip away without notice and be back before alarm.”

A war seemed to wage silently in Byakuya’s head; curiosity vs common sense. Ebony locks swayed to reveal silver eyes alight with determination and a curious lace, nodding with a warmth in his eyes Ichigo cast away his haori setting it on the stone bench so as to not impede his travels. Following Ichigo’s actions Byakuya set his own haori down and with a nod they disappeared through a gate of wrought iron, shaped in simple patterns of vine and blossom.

X

Casting his reaitsu out in sweeping searches at a level unnoticeable to those that could sense reaitsu Ichigo landed on a sickening presence. Creeping forward in a flash-step that left the soft rustling of leaf in his wake Ichigo stalked towards the source. Byakuya was an anchor beside him letting Ichigo center himself on the moment and not the simmering rage which frothed in his stomach and bubbled in his heart.

After a great distance of miles were covered in a blur of fast travel they stopped by a dirt road, weather-worn with deep indents from passing horse-drawn carts. Sharing a nod of understanding they crept forward at a slower pace a foul smell wafted through the air and Ichigo winced at the familiarity it brought.

Fire soon lined their sight, great sweeping arches of crimson, sickly yellow, and faded orange. In front of the maddening light of the fire stood three figures, silhouetted by the harshly cast light. One was tall with brightly spiking hair standing in every which way, no orange scarf glittered in the overcast moonlight but Ichigo would recognize the presence anywhere. That devoted and loyal to the bitter end man who was far too blind in his faith, Kaname Tousen.

On the far left stood a figure of smaller stature pale hair of ebony glistening like slick marrow. Gin Ichimaru was a peculiar character when considering his motives, but he had proved an invaluable ally in all his secrecy and spying. If he could, he would save him from the harsh end of impalement, if not for him than Rangiku.

Wrenching his gaze towards the middle of the two Ichigo sucked in a harsh breath, his heart was a
sudden fire and his hands were clenched unmovable, he let the pain in his palms ground him as red seemed to fill his vision. Shiro’s growing rage and insane laughter echoed in the back of his head and Ichigo wasn’t sure who was tipping at that moment.

A warm palm on his shoulders disturbed the bloodlust from his eyes and let the rage simmer down softly. The paleness of his face gave way to slight colour with the soothing murmur at the back of his mind that was Old Man Zangetsu. With the sound of blood no longer pounding in his ears their words soon reached him.

“Another failure Aizen-sama, another village sacrificed for your great cause.”

Tousen’s voice was rasping lure that grinded Ichigo’s nerves raw and left him biting his cheek, the bitter taste of iron filling his mouth at those words. This was not the first village that had succumbed to Aizen’s thirst for knowledge and power, experiments of what manner Ichigo could only guess were already being conducted.

“Ichigo can you see who stands in front of the flames, your eyesight is more like the hawk that glides over the battlefield while I am the sleek raven who must stoop lower to see what your keen eyes may pick up.”

Ichigo’s mind came to a grinding halt and a flare of indecision iced his heart in its stone catacomb. To speak plainly of what he saw would lead to far too many questions and answers that would leave curious eyes burning his back, and yet his heart reached out to confer with someone. This endless doubt that plagued his mind, worry that haunted his every decision, and weary-world tiredness left him aching to confide in someone other than his zanpaktou.

Casting his gaze towards Byakuya, Ichigo observed the softer lining of his face, the lack of creases in his forehead and around his eyes, the rawness that shined in silver eyes. Byakuya wasn’t ready to shoulder such weight, he would protest if Ichigo ever said as much but his walls were not yet high enough and no fortifications lay in their build.

“It seems these hawk eyes of mine have failed me I can make only slight detailing, nothing noticeably defining.”

Byakuya frowned and seemed to pause staring intently at the fire roaring and consuming the surrounding landscape. Turning to Ichigo his baritone voice rang out in hushed tones and a questioning gaze pierced Ichigo’s thoughts.

“Their voices sound familiar as if I heard them in a dream or in swift passing. Should we venture closer and identify those who have wreaked havoc on this village?”

Ichigo frowned pensively there were too many things that could go wrong if they decided to investigate. Byakuya was almost at captain level when it came to hiding his reaitsu but that wouldn’t serve them well enough if they were in Aizen’s range, already they were cutting it close. There was also the increased risk of seeing Aizen’s blade, Ichigo was already immune to the hypnotic effects of the blade but Byakuya would easily fall prey to Aizen’s illusions. The idea of Byakuya attacking him, thinking him to be an enemy chilled Ichigo and left a small wedge of fear in the back of his mind.

Ichigo was saved from answering as Aizen’s head snapped back to gaze at the trees in suspicion; a flash of the moon illuminating brown hair and ice cold eyes before being shadowed by dark clouds overhead. Turning to glance at Byakuya, Ichigo locked eyes and a shared sentiment transferred between the two, even in the veil of darkness that Byakuya’s eyes couldn’t pierce, those eyes of righteous ebony ice shined.
Feeling the weight of his gaze leaving them Ichigo took in harsh gulping breaths with a strange sense of fear plaguing him, something unfamiliar struck a chord in his gut leaving his instincts screaming to flee or fight. Grasping Byakuya’s smooth hands in his own calloused ones Ichigo pulled Byakuya deeper into the forest in a silent haste that spoke of the urgency in Ichigo’s mind.

Ichigo knew far too well to trust his instincts as they have never led him astray (except for one time in the darkness of summer’s blazing night) and they proved true again as where they once stood crouched in the shade of gnarled trees and stout bushes burst into ochre flames painting the surrounding forest life in garish shadows.

They continued to move faster and further into the forest until the smell of smoke was a faint whisper in the back of their minds, while ash still fell to the ground in a light dusting where in the slight clearing it coated the damp soil suffocating the light of all below. When Ichigo judged them a distance far from sight or sound he picked up into a flash step exceeding the speed of any academy student. Pulling Byakuya behind him they soon arrive at the Kuchiki mansion, their hair is an array of strands windblown dressed with flakes of white, their Yukata’s show no trace of their travels but for the white powder and faint smell of smoke.

In the garden Ichigo slumped onto the bench slipping the pale grey haori on and allowing some warmth to seep back into his system, Byakuya paced with a hurried frenzy throughout the garden. Glancing at the sun dial placed in the east corner Ichigo observed the time with a confused eye still trying to puzzle this era’s way of determining time, looking at the moon’s light position in the sky Ichigo would say they were gone for maybe half-an hour. Such short time for an event that seemed to drag on in its horror with sharp claws and scorching breath.

“I-I don’t understand what we just saw… Ichigo?”

Byakuya turned to Ichigo his muttering loud enough to brace Ichigo’s ear and bring a slight sense of foreboding; this night held to much darkness and secrecy. The moon above in crescent form seemed to smile at him teasingly as he contemplated how best to respond to Byakuya’s query.

“We can’t speak of what we’ve seen, not yet. Too much danger and uncertainty lie in the events we witnessed. We must wait for evidence, a key factor or pointer that will lead us closer to the truth. Don’t forget what you have seen simply push it to the back of your mind and do not dwell on it.”

Byakuya’s smile was weak yet hopeful thanking Ichigo for his advice and promising kindness in return. He opened his mouth as if to speak more of the night’s play but was interrupted by the thin shoji door that led inside sliding open. Kukkaku’s ebony hair and pale face became visible in the golden warmth spilling from inside, her eyes cast about the garden searching before alighting on Ichigo and Byakuya. Slate eyes lit up as she stepped outside, her rose coloured kimono flowing around her ankles in controlled swirls.

“I’ve been looking for you two for ten minutes. Kaien and your grandfather say it’s high time you graced the party with your noble presences; as much as I would like to escape into the night we have roles to fulfil.”

Kukkaku’s tone was slightly patronizing but underneath warmth and humour swam in shallow seas. Nodding Ichigo lifted himself from the bench tightening the ivory scarf around his neck to keep the chill that racked his soul away. Byakuya looked slightly lost, torn between leaving the haven the garden provided and entering the chaos that was a gathering of flamboyant nobles. Ichigo rested a reassuring hand on Byakuya’s shoulder letting warm reaitsu pool at his fingers and send warmth and comfort to Byakuya with a nod as chocolate orbs connected with slate eyes and Ichigo strode inside.

Ichigo was waylaid nearly a dozen times as he ventured through the mass of writhing bodies,
Byakuya’s silky hair and carved face soon disappeared likely trying to carve his own path towards his grandfather. His heart beat in an erratic pace as faces swarmed in and out of his vision, some far too familiar leaving a burning sensation behind his eyes and lingering in the back of his throat. Feeling slightly light-headed Ichigo dragged himself over to one of the refreshment tables allowing himself a moment to catch his breath.

Letting his eyes sweep about the crowd Ichigo searched for the familiar character of raven hair and identical face, Kaien would provide some relief from the oppressiveness of the crowd and give Ichigo a shoulder to lean on. It was no use in this rolling mass of bodies one could hardly tell red from blue or lady from gentleman, closing his eyes slightly Ichigo let the currents of reaitsu sweep about him. To try and find Kaien’s presence in this mass of spiritual beings would be nigh impossible for any other being, but then again impossible didn’t apply to Ichigo. After a few moments Ichigo’s eyes flickered open and with a determined stride he entered the crowd once again.

X

“Ah Ichigo there you are! I’m glad Kukkaku found you, the dull atmosphere was beginning to affect me. You look pale and your cheeks are flushed, are you okay? Were you molested? Oh woeful tidings! Tell me the perpetrator and my heavenly fury shall descend like a chorus of demons.”

Ichigo stared at Kaien in bemuse surprise before laughter burst from his lips like the clear water from a fountain. Ichigo’s humour seemed to overwhelm him for a moment before he took a few calming breaths and light shined from within caramel orbs. Kaien decided not to notice the slight tick of irritation that arched Ichigo’s eyebrow.

“I was not molested in any way Kaien, calm your fury and satiate your anger in the knowledge that this drab affair shall soon pass. I’m fine, worry not about the pallor of my skin.”

Kaien smiled at Ichigo’s reassurance, though concern still circulated through Kaien’s system. Ichigo was indeed pale, his orange locks were strewn about in a wild manner as if Ichigo had taken a sudden run, and an almost fevered flush hung on his cheeks heightening the colour of his eyes. Ichigo looked as if he needed a good hug, the desire to flee seemed to eclipse his eyes in half-moon shadows.

“I’m glad you’re fine, I can introduce you to some of the more interesting nobles.”

The light that flickered in Ichigo’s eyes again became steady and the darkness bled from his eyes leaving a light that was pale in comparison to the warm glow of Ichigo’s laughter. Together they forayed into the crowd Kaien could almost see a frown of grim determination on Ichigo’s face and the image of him striding into battle with such expression haunted his mindscape.

X

Kaien let his head tilt back to rest on the back of the plush chair he was lounging in, a deep weariness lay in his bones and his muscles ached unpleasantly. Kaien was more than pleased that the Kuchiki party was over it left a sense of relief tinged with dread of the next formal event. A shadow at his doorway drew Ichigo’s sight towards the frame where darkness blocked out the low glow of the hallway.

“Ichigo?”

Kaien called out in slight confusion easily identifying the potent reaitsu that was bundled up inside Ichigo’s lithe frame. Kaien was curious as to why Ichigo was here by all rights the student should be in his room probably fast asleep by now.
Ichigo seemed hesitant about entering or even letting whatever troubles plagued his mind utter forth from his lips. A swell of determination seemed to resonate within Ichigo and he stepped into the light cast by the candles scattered throughout the room.

“I was wondering if you’d be willing to share a drink or two?”

Ichigo’s question was laced with a hopeful uncertainty. Kaien gazed at Ichigo scrutinizing the deep bags of lilac under his eyes and the limpness to his movements before nodding and letting Ichigo come and sit across from him. Standing up with a soft groan Kaien padded over to his closet and reached inside one of the draws plain in design and look, but with a false bottom. A good security measure if Kukkaku ever thought of stealing his sake.

Glancing back at Ichigo Kaien winked and held a finger to his lips before reaching in and pulling it out a heavy ceramic bottle that sloshed with the sound of liquid inside. Sitting back down in the seat Kaien frowned at the ache still occupying his bones, a concerned glance was cast his way before Ichigo said, “I can help with the pain. If you’d like?”

Kaien regarded Ichigo slightly surprised before nodding and watching as Ichigo’s calloused and scarred hands hovered over Kaien’s leg and a warm emerald glow emanated from his palms. Kaien let out a sigh as the tension from his muscle disappeared leaving him feeling as if he was dough freshly made and newly knitted.

Ichigo smiled and sat back and Kaien inclined his head before pulling out two pale blue sake cups and setting them on a narrow table between the two. With a flourish Kaien let the clear liquid tip into the cups, raising them simultaneously to their lips Ichigo smiled and said, “To life and many more drinks.”

The ease with which Ichigo tipped the bitter drink back surprised Kaien but it was Ichigo’s words and mannerisms that left a deep seated sense of unease in his gut, they were the actions of a man wishing to wash away guilt, grief, or some troubling event.

Kaien shrugged minutely he would ponder the matter later for now the night was theirs to entertain, soon the sweet caress of dawn would stroke their cheeks with golden rays. But it is the night where secrets may slip unbidden and truth may be unhindered.

Filling the glasses once more Kaien locked slate eyes with Ichigo’s chocolate orbs and smiled, a smile full of promise.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed, please leave a review and I will see you all in the next chapter.
Sutton!!
X

Ichigo stared at the black board at the front of the classroom with disdain; the winter holidays drew ever nearer and still the teacher thought it prudent to litter the students with a litany of boring lectures. At least this day had a speck of brightness floating in the ashy light of winter days, the Soutaicho for whatever reason had decided to come and visit the academy today. Ichigo theorized it had something to do with his ever planning mind and like of an apprentice.

Shifting slightly in his seat Ichigo cast a knowing look in Byakuya’s direction, the raven haired student’s eyes fluttered shut every few seconds and he would still for a moment before jerking awake, trying to keep sleep from overtaking his senses. Ichigo could sympathize, sleep was like the sirens resting on rocky shores beckoning sailors towards a rocky doom; her call was sweet and tantalizing. Ichigo knew well enough from experience what sleep held for him, her sharp beak pecked holes in his soul and left gaping torrents where the sea water rushed in, her talons left rivulets of crimson trailing into his eyes shadowing all light, and those feathers would cruelly tickle his senses promising something lost.

Byakuya shook himself again and caught Ichigo’s knowing gaze, a lazy smirk flitted across noble features and Ichigo responded in kind. A conversation passed silently simple nods and hand gestures conveying inane topics and irritation at the teacher leading the class. Ichigo still wondered at the sanity of putting a paperwork class in the curriculum, it was simpleminded stuff, heck a sloth could easily do what the teacher said in long drawn out explanations.

The shuffling of bags being picked up, katanas readjusted, and paperwork being shuffled removed Ichigo from his musings and he glanced over to see Byakuya’s overly amused face. Scowling Ichigo stuffed rampant paperwork into his bag and slung Zangetsu’s sheathed form across his back. Standing up Ichigo made his way over to Byakuya before they excited the small classroom that smelled like a crypt and was just as stuffy.

It was indeed a mercy that the Soutaicho was coming as they hurried towards the main courtyard, all the seniors would be missing the last class and for Ichigo this was more than a blessing considering it
The bustle of the crowds reached their ears long before the cool air whipped through their hair and pale sunlight glanced harshly off polished stone bricks. It was amusing to see such ceremonies in place for the visit, but then the headmaster was a pompous suck-up who couldn’t tell the difference between someone’s ass and the floor. Hissing slightly as they stepped into the crisp air Ichigo pulled his shihaksho closer to his body and mourned the loss of summer while Byakuya laughed slightly, stilted by the cold creeping upon his shoulders. Ichigo’s glare was heated enough to thaw the ice from Byakuya’s shoulders and the two shared a teasing glance before the gates began to creak.

With a great heave the gates shuddered and began to swing open, a large grating sound echoing throughout the courtyard and pierced the occupant’s ears. The Soutaicho swept inside members of his squad closely following the bearded old man. A sense of unease lingered in Ichigo’s gut as Yama-jii stalked past, this powerful figure, guardian of Soul Society that Ichigo barely knew, cut down with swift ease. What part did he play? It was a question that sometimes lingered at the forefront of his mind.

Ichigo flinched slightly as a Shinigami passed by them, ebony folds swaying in bitter wind, looking up Ichigo caught sight of emerald eyes hidden behind bangs of sharply cut gold. The man’s reaitsu was sharp like a knife cutting at any who felt it, and while not evil or full of malicious intent there was something dark in the undercurrents of his reaitsu. Ichigo turned slightly watching the light catch on golden strands before they faded into the distance.

Ichigo felt like laughing at the pathetic display below, the headmaster in his infinite wisdom saw fit to hold a few duels to show the “blossoming” potential the students had to offer. Shaking his head Ichigo scoffed at the thought, the headmasters words were nothing but thinly veiled flattery with an air of flamboyance. Relief tinged Ichigo’s thoughts as the image of the signup sheet nailed in front of the office drifted to the forefront of his mind, the burn of his instincts had swayed him away from signing the weary piece of parchment. Byakuya had gazed at the sheet for a moment before glancing at Ichigo then back at the sheet. Ichigo was slightly proud when a critical light entered Byakuya’s eyes and he turned away.

Now they were gathered in one of the many dojo’s scattered around campus, the clash of blades ringing through the air and bright sparks sailing for a moment before fading like happiness. The Soutaicho stood solemnly at the front of the dojo a keen eye tracking every move and sword swing, Ichigo felt a touch of sympathy for the elder man as his bones must pain him after standing for so long a time. The duel before them finished quickly a stroke unexpected flashed and the clatter of the other’s blade hitting the soft matting echoed. Ichigo let out a relieved sight this was the last of them, already five duels had taken place and in each Ichigo was unimpressed.

The duelers were lacking creativity they fought with the same boring basics taught to everyone in the academy there was no improvisation, it was merely who was stronger or faster. A contest not of battle, wit, or spirit but of the body. Scoffing in disgust Ichigo turned to face Byakuya who gazed at Ichigo in amusement understanding his friend’s disgust with the battles so far. In a way without Ichigo, Byakuya would have been much the same for many years before any real sense of style began to show. Ichigo had fixed that from day one of their training, yes it may have hurt his friend a slight (read great amount) bit but it was well worth the results.

Standing up the two friends escaped the mass of crowd streaming towards the exit, a sea of black and white crashing upon each other and leaving no semblance of order in the chaotic ocean of bodies.

From a safe distance, with the bitter wind nipping at their cheeks Ichigo and Byakuya watched the
dojo empty of students leaving only the teachers and members of squad one inside. A few Shinigami trickled out of the dojo their ebony uniforms a harsh contrast against the pale parchment sky peppered with only a few clouds varying shades of lavender and dull grey. Turning from the sight Ichigo gazed up at the sky, the pressing weight of the future seemed to strangle him for a moment, his breath frozen in his lungs like the flowers wilted by the frost. Warmth on his shoulder and a heated gaze thawed the overtaking ice and Ichigo slumped minutely casting a thankful gaze in Byakuya’s direction before straitening.

The fog cleared from his mind and slightly startled Ichigo whipped around, surprised that his senses had not warned him of the incoming threat. Three Shinigami were swiftly approaching their reiatsu a maelstrom of ill-intent, a female with blood red hair wrapped into a bun, a harsh face that with a smile may soften, and a zanpaktou strapped to her waist led the group. Two men followed behind her, one wiry with a hawk nose and overarching brows, the other was large and muscular his face resembling that of a boulder with a few dents.

The woman’s scorching presence stopped a few feet in front of them her eyebrows drawn together in anger and her lips pinched in a frown, her goons hovered behind her unsure and hesitant. Ichigo wondered how souls like these ended up in any squad, they were hemmed with a touch of darkness, and while some may overcome their shadow and push through to the light, others let it swallow them over time till they were corrupted, merciless, greedy, and any other sort of inane thing that plagued mankind.

“You Kuchiki-bastard! I draw my sword will you raise yours or flee like a coward?”

Her voice pierced the air with shrill ringing notes and the lust for battle was thick on her tongue. Before Byakuya could let a word slip Ichigo stepped in front drawing their attention his voice resonated as he said, “Are you so low to challenge an academy student when you are already and accomplished Shinigami? And for what reason? You have not yet even given us your name, how so do you propose a challenge?”

A scarlet blush painted her cheeks at Ichigo’s cutting tone and reasonable questions, flustered she stared at the two before her spine straitened her head poised like a cobra ready to strike.

“My name is Ketsuryū, my family name need not matter. I challenge this Kuchiki who is far stronger than any academy student if his reiatsu tells truth because of his kind. You Nobles spit on us urchins in the street! We beg of your kind for food, anything and you mock us. You with the bright hair are of the Shiba clan therefore I turn my eye for your kind may seem the weakest of the Nobles but to us you are mighty beyond words for your kindness.”

Ichigo frowned at her words, he knew such hate for the Nobles was prevalent in those from Rungokai but to let this anger fester and consume someone? He wondered how many there were like Ketsuryū who would throw away their life for a chance to strike at those of higher class. Shaking his head Ichigo let his eyes connect with Byakuya’s silver orbs shining in the paleness of night that was drawing closer, Byakuya nodded his head with reluctance not for want of battle rather that his teacher would fight this battle which Byakuya could claim his own.

“If you are so persistent in fighting than raise your zanpaktou against me, for you offend my friend and speak wrongly so. This Kuchiki in front of you bares no ill-will towards any who live in Rungokai, in truth he would rather them fed than the clothes on his back be threaded with silver. If you choose to stay blind then I say again raise your zanpaktou and I will show you the error of your ways.”

X
Byakuya watched pensively a tense silence hanging in the air as students began to stream towards the small group sensing the increasing agitation and likelihood of battle. Ketsuryū regarded Ichigo curiously, a war waging in cerulean eyes. The sound of metal scraping against scabbard cut through the air as she drew her zanpaktou the glimmer of metal flashing harshly.

“Then I will fight you Shiba, and once you are defeated I shall cut your friend down where he stands.”

Byakuya winced at her words and his eyes widened as his gaze was drawn to Ichigo. Very few could easily sense Ichigo’s reaitsu he kept it swirled inside himself under tight control and when he let it loose it was with the force of a tsunami. To Byakuya’s eyes Ichigo’s reaitsu seemed to trace him in shades of crimson, azure, ebony, and ivory. A determined frown rested on Ichigo’s face and his tangerine bangs shadowed the sharpness of caramel eyes that usually glowed with warmth but were now as cold and sharp as a knife.

Gracefully Ichigo released his zanpaktou from his sheath the normally silver blade stained a deep shade of ink, Byakuya’s eyes widened at the revelation. It happened rarely but when Ichigo was emotional (hidden under his emotionless mask) or his energy bounded from him in waves his Shikai would begin to show through its sealed state. Byakuya had never seen Ichigo’s Shikai though he had no doubt that Ichigo knew the name of his blade, the way they connected was proof against otherwise, but Byakuya knew that the blade was powerful and this development signaled danger to any who were foolish enough to tempt his wrath. In hindsight the thought occurred that the reason anger coursed so swiftly through Ichigo’s veins may have had something to do with the female Shinigami insulting Byakuya and threatening to kill him.

Ketsuryū smirked and raised her blade a shallow bow forming at the waist before a wicked smile sliced her lips, Ichigo responded in kind grim determination still carved into his features. A silent command echoed throughout the air and the Shinigami sprung forward her goons standing like awkward statues in the background surrounded by the ever growing crowd.

Their blades clashed with the horrible shriek of metal against metal Ichigo’s greater strength showing as he pushed her blade down before dancing away, she growled and darted after him, her blade reckless in its assault. Ichigo parried her blow striking underneath the blow and catching the edge of her Shihaksho leaving a thin tear, she looked down in surprise before outrage seemed to spark in her eyes. Ketsuryū threw strike after strike at Ichigo he parried each with ease, deflecting them to the side or tossing the opposing blade off, not once did he draw blood and when the opportunity presented itself in her weakness, even so he did not strike as often as able.

Byakuya could see the weakness in her anger, some could harness it and turn it into a deadly weapon an almost unstoppable force, others became sloppy what finesse they once possessed fades away to something far from grace and not close enough to instinct. Byakuya could see that Ichigo was playing with her, his blade sailed with an aura of laziness but his eyes did not delight in this rather he stared into lapis eyes trying to convey his message.

The finale of the battle was drawing near Byakuya could see it in the dawning understanding in Ichigo’s eyes and the tense atmosphere that choked his breath. Ichigo was realizing that the lesson he was trying to teach through the sword would not reach this crimson haired Shinigami; too focused on blood was her mind. It also seemed that the clamour of blades and clash of the crowds had drawn the attention of the teachers and other squad members who previously dwelled inside the dojo. They now rushed forward a varying mixture of awe and horror saturating their faces.

With a final flicker of reaitsu the silver blade was flicked from the Shinigami’s hand and she crashed to her knees no blood spilling onto the dry dirt below only sweat and the liquid falling from her eyes.
Ichigo sheathed his zanpaktou with a graceful curve and stepped forward extending his hand, her lapis eyes gazed at orange hair and chocolate eyes in confusion, doubt, and fading traces of anger. She regarded the hand and Ichigo’s voice broke the silence in soft tones, “Take my hand and let this anger fade, be happy in this duel and better your understanding. If you wish for Rungokai to be a better place fight not within our ranks but against those who wander the streets at night, feed the hungry and spread kindness teaching hate leads only to suffering. But if everyone can see good and spread its kind acts then you have already made a difference.”

Byakuya could see the two paths before Ketsuryū, she could throw Ichigo’s offer away and wallow in misery and hate for the rest of her life spreading violence on the streets, or she could take his hand and reclaim happiness take a different route and see what hope has to offer. The moment hung in tense silence before a soft smile alighted upon her face and she took his hands the harsh demeanor fading with the laugh lines by her eyes and the upturn of her lips.

“Thank you, I have been so blind in my rage, you have opened a door I thought forever shut.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks and she buried her head in Ichigo’s chest. Ichigo froze for a moment, the contact unfamiliar to him before he awkwardly patted her on the back distress in chocolate orbs as they connected with Byakuya’s own silver ones. Ketsuryū pulled away and Byakuya smiled in seeing the soft upturn of Ichigo’s own lips as he regarded the once wayward Shinigami.

“If ever you have need, I am in your debt.”

Worry appeared in an instant on Ichigo’s face and he hurried to refuse saying it was no debt, she responded in kind and Byakuya had to stifle his laughter at the picture the two redheads painted. Ketsuryū turned away from Ichigo to face Byakuya hearing his laughter a sorrowful expression laced her face as she said, “I’m sorry for what I said, if you are willing I would like to work with you and other Nobles in bettering Rungokai.”

Byakuya smiled and inclined his head, her eyes lit up and laughter burst from her rose coloured lips.

X

Ichigo raised his head from where his eyes stared at the rough dirt below in thought, to see the Soutaicho approaching a gaggle of teachers and Shinigami following behind the elder man, the headmaster’s mouth moved rapidly from a distance words coming in a hurried flow like a dam kept river had broken free. The words he spoke in frenzied tones became clear as they drew nearer.

“I apologize for this outrage the student will be dealt with swiftly, please forgive his misconduct.”

The words continued on in honey tones meant to please the ear and ease the mind, but the Soutaicho ignored the words and was obviously displeased if the heat saturating the air was any indication of his ire.

“Would one of you care to explain why you have disturbed our meeting with your fighting?”

The Soutaicho’s withered and deep voice rang out with authority as he swept onto the scene his haori flying about him in the blazing heat that now lit the air, and while true fury did not shine in his eyes of coal it seemed as if fiery vengeance would rain upon them all. Ketsuryū bowed hesitantly before stepping forward stray tangles of ruby hair that had escaped the tight bun flowed in the wind.

“It was my fault taicho, I challenged the Kuchiki Noble in my ignorance and anger. Shiba-san stepped in and took up my challenge, he thoroughly bested me and showed me the error of my thoughts. Forgive me for my ignorance.”
Her voice was still and sincere as she stared straight into Yammamoto’s eyes and not once did her voice waver in admitting her faults. The Soutaicho stared thoughtfully at the three of them as the teachers began to usher the students away before his ancient voice said, “Is what she says true?”

Ichigo nodded, to lie would only complicate the matters further leaving a tangle of webs to uncurl and the truth would be revealed by one of the many bystanders who cheered with each sword stroke. Yam-Jii harrumphed incredulously before weighing the options at hand. The headmaster and ever potent thorn at his side seemed about to burst with the need to speak his face an alarming shade of red that was starting to edge to mauve.

“Ketsuryū to improve your skills so as to not bring shame upon the squad you will take lessons from this student on sword fighting and you will double your previous training regime. Shiba Ichigo If I am not correct? Your skills are impressive and your blade sings with grace, are you considering joining the first squad after graduation?”

Ichigo swallowed heavily, there was the apprenticeship light in in his solemn eyes. Ichigo had a feeling this was coming if only because his lady fortune seemed to smile sadistically at him and watch him suffer. There was relief mixed in with the hesitance and despair at the prospect of joining the first, at least Ketsuryū would not be banished from her squad for something so minuscule.

In the background of their exchange the headmaster was gawking like an overstuffed turkey as he stared at the Soutaicho incredulously, obviously baffled by the Soutaicho’s gracious offer. Ichigo smiled softly at the knowing look on Yam-Jii’s face the old man had obviously seen through Ichigo’s efforts at hiding his skill in the blade, and if the arched (fluffy) eyebrow was any indication he could see the mosaic of colours his reaitsu formed as it swirled around him.

“Soutaicho you offer me great kindness with your question and compliment, however my heart does not sway towards the first squad. I am considering entering the eighth at first.”

The Soutaicho raked his calculating eyes over Ichigo considering the young man in front of him assessing his decision before his eyes landed on the blade resting at Ichigo’s hip, he seemed to understand glancing between Ichigo’s reaitsu and the blade at his waist with a nod.

“I look forward then in future years to seeing you as a member of my squad, till then thank you for that excellent display.”

Ichigo inclined his head and the Soutaicho swept past the two students Ketsuryū falling in rank with her squad after winking at the two. Byakuya and Ichigo stared slightly numb as the squad disappeared through the iron-wrought gates of the academy. A sudden shiver racked Ichigo’s body tracing trails where sweat had run down his back in the steaming heat of battle, Byakuya turned noticing the shiver of his friend and frowned in concern.

Meanwhile the teachers bustled about like headless chickens, the headmaster the rooster squat in the middle of the confusion, his gaze searching amber eyes soon landed on two heads of ebony and tangerine. Trading mischievous smiles the two academy student burst away in a quick flaming flash-step. Landing in the main hall Ichigo let out a sigh as the warmth of fire ran throughout his veins igniting a rosy tint upon his cheeks. Byakuya smiled at Ichigo a flush also painting his cheeks and in the dim candlelight of the main hall it stood out harshly against pale skin.

The two shared a laugh glancing towards heavy oak doors before striding towards Ichigo’s dorm room where Ichigo could make some steaming cups of tea (which were insanely good in Byakuya’s opinion).

Arriving at the dorm Ichigo swept the door open ushering Byakuya inside and gesturing to one of the
many small cushions littered around a low wooden table. Though there was no “real” kitchen in the room there was a counter which served well enough, a few cabinets, and a large jug of water which suited Ichigo’s purpose (both now and at night when the feeling of blood sliding down his throat was thick). Pouring the water into a flower patterned tea pot fetched from a cabinet nearby Ichigo glanced at the array of tea leaves kept in small clay pots (also on the counter), opening one Ichigo let the heady scent of chai float into the air and he grabbed some of the leaves to drop in the teapot with a ‘plunk’.

“Is chai okay?”

Ichigo questioned looking up to see his friend seated on one of the mats Ichigo gestured at, Byakuya nodded with a soft smile and Ichigo nodded in kind before turning his attention towards the teapot. Holding the weight in his hands Ichigo let warm reaitsu seep from his hands letting heat coalesce inside the ceramic, when a thin tendril of steam wafted from the thin pointed stout Ichigo took his hands away and carried the ceramic over setting it in the center of the table before fetching two mugs of matching pattern.

Nodding his thanks, Byakuya gently poured the tea, a dark ruby in colour into their cups as Ichigo settled onto the cushion opposite Byakuya. In unison they lifted their mugs and took a sip of the steaming liquid. Ichigo let out a pleased hum as the rich flavour flooded his mouth and sweet warmth trickled through his center, Byakuya opposite him let out a content sigh and smiled at Ichigo before saying, “Excellent as always Ichigo thank you.”

Ichigo inclined his head in response, a pale blush painting his cheeks at the praise before they delved into a comfortable silence born of true friendship and gentle ease with each other. A question floated to the forefront of Ichigo mind and his voice barely above a whisper in wanting to keep the silence asked, “Are you coming to the Shiba get together? I think Kaien invited you? It’s just a chance to celebrate family (and give gifts) before New Year’s rushes in with a bang.”

“Yes we received the invitation a few weeks ago, though I am likely to be the only Kuchiki attending.”

Byakuya’s deep voice rang softly in the room and Ichigo nodded pleased with the prospect of someone entertaining (excluding the annoying bastard Kaien) being there.

X

Kaien ran a tired hand over his eyes his gaze sweeping from side to side as he entered the Shiba mansion, Ichigo would be home now that his break had started. His tired mind could barely comprehend the tight anxiety that pressed on his lungs as he entered the house, a sense of danger flared through his mind igniting his big brother instincts into a frenzy. Looking around in fogged confusion Kaien took a breath centering himself and letting the mist that seemed to hang onto every limb fade.

Casting his senses out Kaien drew a sharp breath when he reached Ichigo’s room, even behind thick Kido barriers Kaien could sense distress and fear rolling in great suffocating waves only to crash against unyielding shields. Quelling the instincts screaming at him Kaien sighed and paced into the kitchen setting down the thick stack of paperwork for a moment before sliding into one of the plush cushions. Resting his head in his hands Kaien let the weight of the day slump from his shoulders, he wanted to help Ichigo but he would be of no use wrought with tension.

After a few minutes of silence Kaien stood up leaving the messy stack of paperwork for the morning. Climbing the stairs with a few muffled curses and groans Kaien padded down the hallway and stopped in front of Ichigo’s door, taking a deep breath Kaien slid the door open and stepped inside.
And was promptly choked as Ichigo’s overwhelming reaitsu slammed against him drawing the breath from his lungs in harsh tugs. Wrapping a quick Kido shield around himself Kaien waddled through the thick currents of reaitsu that pooled around him like salt water, drawing near to Ichigo’s bed he pushed aside long curtains painted black in the enclosing darkness of the room.

Ichigo was sprawled across the bed his orange locks a mess of sweat soaked strands that clung to his skin, his skin was with the pallor of death in its paleness, a feverish sweat lay like a sheen upon his skin, his hands clenched and unclenched while his back arched or his face grimaced in pain, and worst of all this scene presented were the words that fell broken from Ichigo’s lips.

“I’m sorry, please forgive me. No don’t leave me! Stay with me you’re going to be okay, dammit no! Stop, no it wasn’t my fault. I couldn’t save them… I’m useless I couldn’t protect anyone. Why? No please. I’m sorry.”

The words tumbled out of his mouth in soft pleading tones, like a child asking so innocently. The words struck the breath from Kaien and his heart seemed to stop its steady beat to stutter uncontrollably. Kaien’s face paled and his mouth hung open for a minute before he crept closer and laid his hand across Ichigo’s burning forehead, Kaien almost recoiled at the scalding skin. Turning to glance around the room Kaien spotted a pitcher of water with a cloth set neatly beside it, rushing over Kaien soaked the cloth and rung it out in a hurried matter, his heart racing in his chest. Turning away he quickly strode towards Ichigo and placed the cool cloth on his forehead, a moan trickled from Ichigo’s lips at the cool sensation but he did not otherwise stir. Settling beside Ichigo on the bed Kaien stared in concern at Ichigo before gently running his hand through silky tresses heavy with sweat.

The words a continuous march seemed to stumble upon Ichigo’s breath and Kaien smiled minutely before gently channeling his reaitsu in soft, comforting waves. It seemed to soothe the young man as he sank deeper into a dreamless sleep, his reaitsu settled like the soft stilling of the wind. Kaien considered Ichigo carefully before making to stand up Ichigo’s breath stilted but he didn’t resume his litany.

It was peculiar to see Ichigo asleep so early, usually the young student stayed awake until the early hours of the morning before sleep clawed her way into his mind, often he would wake but a few hours later seemingly well rested but the lavender under his eyes gave truth to the matter. Kaien often noticed when they ate together that Ichigo ate little and always had a slight tinge of green to his skin. Kaien wondered if Ichigo had finally crashed after the stress his body must have been going under, the fever suggested something of the sort.

Stepping towards the door Kaien paused feeling the heat of the room stick to him like a second skin, nodding to himself he crossed the room and wedged open one of the circular windows. The pleasant and crisp air of night rushed in taking away the cloying scent that hung about the air, a weight seemed to lessen on Kaien’s chest and he stalked over to Ichigo to place a kiss upon his forehead before sweeping out of the room towards lady night’s tempting call.

X

In the soft light of morning Ichigo awoke, his head pounding a steady pulse, his skin hot and fevered, and coolness in the room that chilled him even while his flesh burned. Ichigo tried to recall the events of the night before but was met with only a foggy memory of eyes drifting shut of their own accord and a mist descending on his mind.

Cracking open his eyes Ichigo gazed around his room noting the open window that let pale streams of light glance off of oak wood flooring, a crispness hung in the air and Ichigo shivered his blankets
pooled at his waist revealing his scared chest to the teeth of wind.

His door creaked open and Ichigo hastily pulled his blankets up, looking at the door curiously a mop of sable hair appeared followed by clear blue eyes. Kaien padded in and a smile settled on his face when he saw Ichigo’s chocolate orbs glancing about the room.

“How are you feeling Ichi? Gave me a scare last night when I came home.”

Ichigo took a breath asked himself how he felt, thinking for a moment before saying, “Tired, sore, like I’ve been running for two months, hot and yet cold… I’m sorry I worried you.”

Kaien shook his head and came closer, Ichigo tilted his head in confusion until a cool hand settled on his forehead providing some peace against the pounding in his head. Kaien sat himself beside Ichigo on the bed and said, “It’s fine, it looks like you have a fever so you need to stay in bed for few days,” Ichigo began to protest but was promptly quieted by Kaien, “Are you going to be okay you were having a pretty bad nightmare?”

Concern rang true in Kaien’s voice and Ichigo looked up connecting with soulful eyes before letting his gaze drop and saying, “Remember when we got piss drunk and I told you about my family… I was dreaming of them.”

Kaien nodded understanding dawning on his features, once when they had sat down with a bottle of sake they had gotten crazy drunk. It was one of the few times Ichigo was able to successfully fall under the influence, in doing so he was willing to talk a bit more about subjects that he would otherwise be closed-lipped about. Kaien asked Ichigo about his family and Ichigo spoke in soft tones of his sisters, mother, father, and friends in an almost detached reality, but it felt good to have the weight of secrecy lifted off his chest (even if Kaien only remembered bits and pieces the next day).

“I’ll be fine don’t worry about me Kaien.”

Kaien smiled and shook his head in the negative before ruffling Ichigo’s orange locks and standing up with savage glee.

“I finally get to mother hen you, and Ichi can’t stop me!”

Kaien was far too pleased for Ichigo’s liking and he let out a sigh of dread preparing for the next few days.

X

Kaien glanced around the room as he shrugged off his scarf, a pale blue in colour, and hung it on one of the many racks lining the front hallway, the air was bitter with the chill of winter. Kukkaku was holding a glass of sake in the corner no doubt whispering the latest gossip to Yourichi who was happily chatting away plum hair glowing in the firelight shadows, a matching glass in her hand. Ukitake and Shunsui who were stopping only for a short time as they had already made plans with the Kyroraku clan, sat in another corner Ukitake’s ivory hair illuminated by soft candle light as they shared knowing smiles. If the noise was any indication Ganju was in the kitchen wiping up a storm of some kind, and if he was correct Ganju was likely accompanied by one of his friends. A streak of orange attracted Kaien’s attention, Ichigo was seated across from Ukitake and Kyroraku, Byakuya sitting beside the orangette nursing a steaming cup of tea. It was a wonder how one’s eyes could trace over Ichigo so completely when his hair was so eye catching.

Striding inside he was greeted with a chorus of warm welcomes, nodding his head in greeting he swept through and knocked on the frame to the kitchen. The door slid open to reveal a flour spattered
Ganju who greeted Kaien with a beaming smile and took the fresh ingredients from his big brothers hands.
“Smells good, I’m sure it’ll taste amazing. Anything else you need from your big bro?”

Ganju shook his head and made a small shushing motion with his hand, shaking his head in amusement Kaien turned away from the kitchen and meandered back into the living room where an aura of contentment and warmth buzzed the air. Pensively Kaien cast his eyes around the room before swiftly deciding and padding over to the small group gathered by candlelight, settling down with a soft plop.

Ukitake’s warm smile slipped across his face and Kaien returned the smile in kind always happy to smile for his taicho (or any reason for that matter), Kyroraku smiled as well the kind that suggest something more as his eyes flicker over to Ichigo a silent question. Kaien nodded his assent, his eyes fierce orbs of determination displaying the truth in his smile. Turning slightly Kaien could see the soft flush that still splayed across Ichigo’s cheeks and over his nose, the almost vacant gaze and purple under his eyes, but his condition was better than the scene Kaien had witnessed a few nights ago. Ichigo almost leant against Byakuya who provided silent support for his friend and Kaien could only approve the gesture.

“So what exciting things were you talking about while I was gone?”

Ichigo blinked his eyes shadowing amusement before his voice came out sharp and steady, “We were talking about you.”

It was a simple sentence but the tone behind the words suggested many other things were being discussed, Kaien smirked happy that Ichigo’s wit had not fled him in the exhaustion that weighed him down.

“Talking about me I’m flattered really?”

To fake such obliviousness was quite fun, it left a sweetness in the mind that was only doubled by Ichigo’s ire. Ukitake’s laughter pierced the silence and he regarded Kaien with a knowing and amused smile, Kaien shrugged which only raised laughter from the rest of the group.

“So Ichigo still planning on joining squad eight?”

Captain Kyroraku’s question was phrased innocently but Kaien could see the gleam in the cocoa haired captain’s piercing eyes. Ichigo straightened minutely his warm chocolate orbs aglow with determination as he said, “I am almost quite decided.”

Kaien could laugh at Ichigo’s words always a tease, hidden of course behind intricate and sometimes eloquent words. Kyroraku smiled with some hesitance mostly confident in his victory of Hirako-taicho.

“Well make sure you’re quite certain by the end of the year.”

Ichigo only laughed at Kyroraku’s words before nodding tangerine bangs shading orbs radiating happiness.

X

Chapter End Notes
Hope you all enjoyed reviews are much appreciated!
Candle!!
Querencia

Chapter Summary

Valentine's day, Graduating duels and the new squad.

Chapter Notes

Querencia

(n.) A place from which one's strength is drawn, where one feels at home; the place where you are your most authentic self.

Hello everyone here is chapter 10! Slowly but surely getting through this, we are finally finished with the academy which is quite exciting to consider as we are now going to delve into some fun things. Enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo grasped at his knees, hunched over his breath came out in large heaving gasps. Looking up his eyes withheld a fearful glint as they scanned the long hallways that were the Shinigami Academy building. A rumble echoed ominously in the distance as if cautioning Ichigo against incoming doom, instantly his spine straitened orange locks whipping about in wild frenzy as his head swung to the side.

"Oh shit!"

The words escaped Ichigo's mouth unfiltered as he starred down the long corridor apprehension clear in his chocolate orbs. Nodding briefly to himself Ichigo gathered his reaitsu and fled the hallway, weary of the beasts that lurked behind him.

"Oh shit!"

Arriving with a slight tumble Ichigo caught himself and looked around seeing a familiar oak door Ichigo let out a sigh and pushed the door to his first class of the day open. The classroom was near empty with only a select few male students and a single female student perched at their desks, letting his eyes cast over their collective heads he spotted Byakuya's raven hair. Plopping in the seat next to his friend he traded a tired gaze before slumping forward to rest his head on the cool desk.

"That bad already?"

Byakuya's voice while holding sympathy also seemed humoured by Ichigo's apparent misery. Turning his head so a caramel eye could gaze at Byakuya from beneath a wave of tangerine Ichigo frowned and shuffled his head in a rough nodding motion. Raising an eyebrow curiously Ichigo
sighed and said, "How did you survive five years of this nonsense? It's completely insane."

Byakuya nodded and Ichigo thought of days long gone where the Shinigami Woman's Association had plotted many devious schemes themed with the time of the month, everything from stalking captains to take photos, to having Mayuri help them make concoctions unfit for any humans consumption.

"It is quite the wonder, I think I spent more than a few of those days barricaded inside my dorm, if not the Kuchiki mansion. I'm fortunate this year in that their attention now seems largely focused on you, what with senior year I can't miss a day (or so the teachers preach)."

Ichigo laughed softly as Byakuya's words scattered the thoughts that ran rampant in his mind, the raven haired student made a point, it seemed as if Byakuya was a sidekick in the attention Ichigo was receiving. Longing stares followed him throughout the hallways, girls would hastily step in front of him and nervously present something uniquely made, they would follow in hordes ready to tackle him and drag him to their homes.

Ichigo shuddered at mere thought of such horror. The sound of the classroom's door opening reverberated throughout the room the dull sound of unoiled hinges leaving a slight ache behind Ichigo's eyes. Looking up Ichigo could see the teacher marching in, tawny hair swept up into a long ponytail that flowed elegantly; behind her Ichigo's classmates streamed in their eyes raving about the classroom searching for… Ichigo hoped it wasn't him but lady fortune wasn't so kind as their beady eyes swung towards him.

Slowly Ichigo sunk farther in his seat letting his reaitsu swarm up to camouflage him if only slightly. The teacher made an impatient noise, something close to the croaking of a frog in sound; really the woman was quite unpleasant in her teaching spewing an array of useless knowledge as if it would assist them in life. Ichigo let out a relieved sigh as the penetrating stare abated and the students swarmed to their seats.

X

Ichigo paced in a small circle outside the main gates, hidden from view by the large pillars that held the iron wrought gate. The air was cool and a bitter wind nipped at his cheeks as if chastising him for his pacing. A short time later Byakuya's raven tresses made themselves visible as he prowled through the gates his eyes casting about like a prey searching for the hunter that would swoop upon him and grasp him with mighty claws.

"Any trouble escaping the mob?"

Ichigo asked an eyebrow arched in amusement, Byakuya huffed staring at Ichigo for a moment before nodding, Ichigo smiled and sharing a look they flash-stepped away from the school filled with the chatter of excitable students.

They arrived in Rungokai one of the cleaner districts with a hospitable reputation, and more than a few stores of unique interest. Ichigo led the two to a small building squished between two large shops, one a kimono retailer and the other a butcher. The petite building had walls of mint green with worn cedar wood encasing the light walls, the sign above in faded letters in need of paint read: Utsukushī Tea.

Ichigo pushed the simple wooden door open and a bell above let out a pleasant note, stepping inside the fragrant scent of freshly brewed teas floated on the air and pleased the senses. The room was filled with low wooden tables and plush mats of varying colours were scattered about unevenly, lamps hung from the ceiling and cast soft light upon all that it touched, and soft chatter filled the air.
The store had a feel of well-worn comfort and a friendly atmosphere.

A waitress bustled up to them, small in stature and sporting a shy smile her voice was soft and pleasant when she asked, "Table for two?"

Ichigo nodded and the girl led them towards a low table her red kimono fluttering behind her, the table was set against a wall where a window cast fading light upon their table. Settling down on the plump cushions Ichigo smiled encouragingly and the waitress blushed before she said, "U-um we have ten select teas on the menu today, and um we also serve a variety of pastries and light snacks… um I'm Asami and I'll be serving you today… um what would you like to order?"

Ichigo smiled softly at the girl, his eyes darkening slightly, she reminded him far too much of Momo who had fallen prey to Aizen's charms with ease, stuck in the fourth raving delusions. She healed (partially) with time but the girl was never the same, and she still suffered from attacks, it was one of those that cost her life. Byakuya coughed disturbing Ichigo from his dark thoughts before looking at the waitress he said, "Do you have any jasmine teas? Also I think I'm in the mood for a treat, whatever's there."

The waitress blushed and responded in the positive before her gaze drifted over to Ichigo landing upon bright tangerine strands, Ichigo smiled and said, "I'll also have a jasmine tea please," Ichigo leaned in close to whisper into her ear, "Could you please add some sake to both teas? And a pastry for me as well please. Ukeire."

Asami looked like she wanted to protest but when Ichigo whispered the "password" she nodded and backed away to take their orders to the kitchen. The word wasn't so much a password as a symbol of your age (or so he had been told by debatable sources) it almost always worked so Ichigo was thankful for the helpful tip. Raising his head to peer through messy locks Ichigo saw Byakuya's gaze, pointed and full of curiosity.

"What did you whisper to the waitress Ichigo?"

Ichigo smiled knowingly and Byakuya let out a sigh of long suffering knowing well the meaning of that smile. They made idle talk for a few moments talking about class while avoiding the topic of their horrendous experiences and likely tragic memories of the day.

The waitress bustled back carrying a tray with a pewter teapot and two round cups, accompanying the tea was a small plate with two pastries of golden colour with a touch of red peeking out. Asami set it down gently, smiled kindly and said, "Thank you for coming you can leave the money on the table, and I hope you enjoy your date! Have a nice day"

The waitress blushed before scurrying off leaving a dumbstruck Ichigo and Byakuya. Ichigo let out a groan and mumbled, "This didn't happen nearly as much in my timeline." Letting his head rest on the table for a moment, Ichigo pouted and looked up to see Byakuya frowning a concerned expression resting on noble features.

"Do we just give off that aura? Why does everyone… and I mean everyone think that?"

Byakuya's question had sound logic, although Ichigo was certain that not everyone thought that, the idea still seemed to be common. Ichigo shrugged his shoulders with a tired sigh before picking up the steaming mug and tilting it towards his mouth. The rich fragrance delighted the senses and as the hot liquid trickled down his throat a pleasant sweetness rested on the tongue. Placing the mug down with a smile Ichigo looked at the treats that had been set before them wagashi biscuits lay in neat array with strawberries placed eloquently around them to present a beautiful image.
"You always know the most unique stores Ichigo, they are often a strange mix of nostalgia, comfort, age, and beauty."

The offhand comment from Byakuya startled Ichigo slightly and he looked up to see Byakuya nursing the cup of tea gingerly in his hands, a pleased smile resonated in his eyes, his hair glowed like sheets of ebony in the warm lighting cast by the oil lamps. Ichigo nodded his eyes drifting over the crowd of people in the restaurant a toasty homey atmosphere bubbling up and leaving a warm feeling in his chest.

"When one travels often, you see many things. Once I wanted to travel the world, let my feet lead me, no map, no compass just my spirit. But plans change and life attacks relentlessly I have things I need to accomplish before such dreams could be reality."

Byakuya looked up slightly startled noticing the whimsical gaze of Ichigo's eyes, nodding a pensive gaze in silver eyes Byakuya said, "Then one day when you have accomplished your goals, and we're both captains weary of subordinates we'll travel the world together."

Ichigo smiled and a soft laugh slipped from his lips. Shaking his head slightly Ichigo cast a mischievous glance towards Byakuya and said, "And this is why they think we're in a relationship… honestly though Byakuya what you say means a lot, though I don't know if we can last that long. Have you seen our classmates?"

Byakuya laughed the sound reverberating in Ichigo's own chest as he joined in a smile of pure happiness rested on his face untainted by the night. Byakuya turned catching Ichigo's eyes and said, "You spiked the drinks didn't you?"

Ichigo nodded no trace of guilt shining in his eyes, Byakuya shook his head and with a shrug smiled happily.

X

"What do you do if your subordinate is bleeding?"

Their blades clashed against each other, ebony against silver. Sweat dripped into Ichigo's eyes his breath a harsh heaving inside his chest as he swung Zangetsu in an overhead strike, Byakuya hastily raised his blade to block the incoming strike. Grinding his teeth, pushing Senbonzakura against Zangetsu he said, "Find source of injury and if need dispatch. Depending on size of injury wrap with gauze or clean cloth, if available cleanse wound first, calm subordinate and begin healing using Kido. If bleeding continues apply more bandages and do not take away old ones. Stitching may be required depending on size if materials needed are available sterilize needle and thread then begin."

Pushing away Ichigo nodded before stepping forward in a lunge thrusting Zangetsu in front of him, Byakuya stepped to the side and brought Senbonzakura down on Zangetsu. Moving at the last moment Ichigo twisted away and in Byakuya's confusion swept behind him holding Zangetsu to his throat. Shiro sang with glee bloodlust pulsing throughout Ichigo's mind he took a breath and tamped down on the feral instincts making a mental note to relieve some of the tension in Hueco Mundo.

"Well done Byakuya, almost all the questions I asked were answered correctly. Your skills in the blade far surpass that of the average academy student, I have no doubt you'll be fine."

Byakuya nodded his thank pulling ebony strands heavy with sweat back into the ponytail high upon his head, Ichigo fingered his own long locks thrown into a messy ponytail where stray strands scattered every which way. Perhaps it was time for a haircut? The adamant "no" he received from his zanpaktou spirits was answer enough for Ichigo who shrugged and plopped onto the training mats.
"I still think it's ridiculous we have to take an exam, after all we also have to do the exhibition battles in the same month."

Ichigo nodded with sympathy their "exams" drew closer with every passing day hence the improvised studying/battle.

"It's a method to improve those not in the exhibition fights score, remember only the highest ranking students are permitted to fight."

Byakuya nodded laying down on the hard mats and staring at the wooden ceiling above, Ichigo smiled and shuffled over slightly to sit beside his friend before laying down and looking up at the same ceiling.

"Are you ready to become a Shinigami? I'm not sure if I'm ready for that kind of responsibility… I am excited to help Soul Society and serve under my grandfather. But what if I amount to nothing?"

Ichigo sighed softly a weight pressing onto his stomach lightly, turning his head to the side so he could look into Byakuya's eyes Ichigo saw a burst of conflicting emotions; sadness, longing, tiredness, happiness, and confusion. Ichigo lips quirked up slightly in an attempt at a reassuring smile he said, "I think in heart and soul you're already a Shinigami, you can handle whatever weight is put on your shoulders Byakuya. You have a will, a reason to fight. You are strong, it's in your eyes, your heart, your sword, and you won't amount to nothing that's not your fate, you're more than that. And if you think you can wallow in misery and let it weigh you down, I will personally kick your ass to remind you of who you are."

Byakuya smiled his eyes going slightly misty as his hand clenched Senbonzakura's hilt in a tight grip, nodding he slowly stood up stout resolution in his eyes. Ichigo nodded in kind and let his own legs lift him up. Was he ready to enter the fray, this web of politics and secrecy? He had no choice for them his blade would strike clean through all hesitations.

"Ready for round fifteen?"

Ichigo queried shaking his bangs away from sight and whipping Zangetsu forward in challenge, Byakuya nodded Senbonzakura elegantly poised at his side. With a somewhat sinister smile on his face Ichigo charged forward.

X

Ichigo sank into his inner world, the water swirling around him, closed eyes flickered open and he looked at the sunlight a far pinprick of light arched by towering buildings. Sighing softly Ichigo let himself float in the cool water tangerine locks dancing gracefully as bubbles floated past his lips, closing his eyes once more Ichigo let himself bask in the peace and utter silence. Stretching out like a cat Ichigo let himself be drawn to one of the many skyscrapers piercing the clear water below.

Shiro was hunched over on top of the building his shocking white hair clear against the sky, a mix of crimson and cerulean, Ichigo tousled his hair and sat down beside one of his zanpaktou spirits gazing at the vista below them. Specks of emerald made themselves visible in small clusters scattered throughout the submerged city, Ichigo smiled softly at the sight turning to look at the building closest where a gaping hole lay in one side of the building. Vines curled out from the hole wrapping around the sides and curling around chunks of debris, farther inside the hole rich brown bark made itself visible along with braches splaying out to display leafs of many colours.
"I see Old Man Zangetsu got his wish."

Ichigo's voice held the tone unique to his inner world, his voice seemed to bounce and tread softly upon the sound waves, Shiro nodded his spine straightening slightly as gold eyes surrounded by a sea of ebony connected with Ichigo's.

"It's thank to ya King, or rather ya "new" friends."

Shiro's dual tone voice rasped out echoing in the emptiness of Ichigo's inner world, nodding Ichigo tilted his head back looking at the sky once more before saying, "The colour in the sky is new. Was my world ever like this? Before it all happened…"

Shiro turned a concerned eye upon Ichigo as thunder clouds rumbled ominously in the distance. The hollow like being opened his mouth to speak when Old Man Zangetsu's deep baritone rang out.

"When your mother was alive, there was colours unbelievable and there was no skyscrapers. Afterwards the colours started to fade slightly and this city grew as your dream drifted farther away. I think once it was a mixture of landscapes, mountains, rivers, deserts, canyons, caves, forests. Time has changed that and time will change again."

Ichigo turned to face Old Man Zangetsu standing behind him cocoa hair flowing imposingly in the non-existent wind, blue eyes hidden behind ochre lens, and his ebony robe floated on an almost invisibly wave by his feet. Ichigo took in what his Zanpaktou spirit said considering the implications and meaning of such changes, his mind drew back to one of the passages he had managed to decode on one of the many nights hunched over brittle pages by candlelight.

"And I saw that all I once was, was changing it was not evolution…maybe this fragile feeling is hope?"

The writer was vague and often puzzling leaving far too many riddles to solve, sighing Ichigo let the thought go and leant back against Zangetsu's firm legs.

"Are you ready for the task at hand tomorrow?"

Ichigo nodded looking up into fiery lenses Ichigo said, "I will not hesitate, here is the crucible and we are just starting. The future is behind and ahead of me I will face it and all its burdens as I have before."

Zangetsu nodded satisfied, turning to Shiro Ichigo smiled and said, "Try to contain yourself tomorrow, I plan to venture into white sands soon."

"Aw but king ya not even gonna releasing ya real Shikai."

Ichigo smiled in reassurance at Shiro's pleading tone and said, "You know why I cannot release your true form yet, they would cower in fear and awe."

With Shiro's nod Ichigo leaned his head back and closed his eyes letting his mind rest and the moon above him soothe the emotions that raged war in his soul, and the bitter claws of memory were put to rest.

X

The air seemed to crackle with tension as chocolate eyes stared into Byakuya's own pair of slate eyes fierce and full of determination, mirrored in his own gaze Byakuya knew this battle wouldn't be easy. The crowd that once roared as they approached had quieted to the barest shuffling and whispers. The
piercing gaze of his grandfather drove into his back reminding him of what he was fighting for, that and for Ichigo.

A stray strand of tangerine fell across Ichigo's eyes the rest pulled into a lopsided ponytail with curly ends. Byakuya felt a smile pull at his lips as they waited for the moment of battle to begin. With a sharp wave of his hand the referee stepped back and Byakuya released Senbonzakura from his plain scabbard, the hilt was worn and familiar beneath his grip, and the soft whisper of spirit at the back of his mind filled his muscles with strength.

Ichigo's zanpaktou was drawn from his sheath inch by inch, in a slow precise manner that displayed the silver of the blade, catching the harsh rays of sunlight. Flicking Senbonzakura in front of himself, pointed towards Ichigo, Byakuya shifted his stance, and as Ichigo shifted into a similar stance the moment seemed to suspend itself like a drop of dew caught in gossamer threads.

Ichigo struck first his blade swinging forward to disturb Senbonzakura's thrust position, nimbly Ichigo reversed his blade and lunged driving the tip towards Byakuya's eyes. Byakuya flicked his blade up and the two pieces of metal clashed with an ear-splitting sound, sparks flying off the blades like wayward fireflies. Byakuya pushed against Ichigo's blade, leaning back slightly to avoid the point centered near his forehead. A devilish smile curled onto Ichigo's face as he pushed Byakuya's blade back a contest of strength, feeling a smile of challenge whip onto his own face Byakuya twisted to the side letting Ichigo's blade fall flat and thrusting Senbonzakura at his unprotected side.

Silver flew up stopping Byakuya's rapid ascent, once more the two blades were locked. Stepping back Byakuya watched Ichigo noticing the peculiar tremor to his calloused hands, Byakuya was unable to think on the matter further as Ichigo stepped forward katana raised high overhead.

Byakuya darted forward to catch the blade from underneath, Ichigo twisted letting the katana swing around to catch Byakuya from underneath.

The two traded blow after blow, making no move in advance against each other, Byakuya stepped back pushing sweaty locks aside and raised Senbonzakura to rest vertically, his spirit purred in the back of his mind excitement racing through his veins. Reaitsu gathered about him in soft folds of crystal blue, breathing in deeply Byakuya centered himself and let the reaitsu pool in his blade.

"Scatter Senbonzakura."

There were hushed gasps from the audience as the blade separated into thousands of tiny pink petals, or so the crystalline blades appeared. The air was suddenly filled with the luminous crystals that was his Shikai, flowing elegantly around them in swift swirls. Lifting his head Byakuya saw the excitement plain on Ichigo's face, chocolate orbs were alight with glee and his lips carved upwards to form a smile. It was Ichigo who had added Byakuya in achieving his Shikai but it was Byakuya who had trained it so it was a weapon, it would likely have taken many years before he was even close to touching Senbonzakura's Shikai.

Swinging the hilt downwards the petals flew at his command, coalescing and swirling to crash down upon Ichigo. With a quick use of flash-step Ichigo was but a blur the image fading like a mirage in the desert. The tiny blades flew after Ichigo trying to tear at his skin and clothes, Ichigo's blade dispersed the petals momentarily as the blade cut through the air in harsh and swift strokes.

Springing back Ichigo thrust out the silver katana in front of him, the blade slowly staining an ink in colour around the hilt. Reaitsu began to surround Ichigo a fierce wind lifting dust from the ground and relieving the trees of the few leaves budding into existence. Chocolate eyes seemed to glow blue for a moment, a frown of concentration laced his features, and his voice rang out in the silence as he said, "Rise Zangetsu."
Ebony reaitsu curled around the blade sheathing its form from sight. As the reaitsu faded away Ichigo’s Shikai was revealed, the blade was pure onyx in colour and it was far longer than any regular katana, the hilt was a cross guard that wrapped around in a circle with pointed crests, sharp spikes curved from the blade near the hilt with deadly points, the hilt was covered with a fabric of deep sable and hidden beneath was crimson fabric, at the end of the blade a chain hung making a clear tinkling sound and at the end of the iron chain a crescent shape hung.

Rose petals raised in challenge and Ichigo responded in kind raising Zangetsu. Senbonzakura flew forward trying to engulf Ichigo in its swirling mass of blades, Ichigo was already gone drawing near to Byakuya. Hastily the blades created a wall and begin to surround Ichigo, a shock or orange and sadistic smile was all that Byakuya could see of Ichigo from beneath the cover of pink.

"Getsuga Tensho!"

A wave of obsidian and lapis burst through the collection of petals hurling straight towards Byakuya on a path of destruction, Byakuya stepped away letting flash-step carry him far from the carnage as it dispersed where he once stood. Turning around to face Ichigo Byakuya channeled his reaitsu into his outstretched hand.

"Hado number four Byakurai!"

Pale white lightning arched from his hand towards Ichigo who arched an eyebrow in surprise before raising his blade letting the hado clash against the onyx blade sending sparks ablaze. Byakuya could feel his strength being seeped by the spell, letting it fall through Byakuya raised Senbonzakura only to feel the cool press of metal against his neck. Byakuya's chest seemed to fall in great heaving blows as he struggled for breath cool sweat beading his face and running down his back. Where Zangetsu touched his neck Byakuya could feel muted whispers and a reaitsu that was utterly confusing in its duality.

"I surrender."

Ichigo nodded behind him and the blade fell away letting Byakuya breathe easy once more. Turning around slowly Byakuya let his Shikai fade and with a tired smile he eloquently sheathed Senbonzakura who whispered proud nothings in his ear, Ichigo mirrored him sharing the same look with a hint of amusement in caramel eyes. Bowing low to each other Byakuya whispered, "It would be a miracle for to me to win this battle, thank you for fighting with your Shikai."

Ichigo's eyes peered out from a curtain of tangerine and he nodded before they straightened up and extended their hands to shake. Cheers burst out around them, like a stadium of wild beast the noise rose seemingly endless. It was only when the Soutaicho rose did the noise fall quiet leaving an eerie silence in its wake.

"Well done that battle was most formidable whichever squad receives you should be honoured to have you amongst their ranks."

In sync they turned and bowed to the Soutaicho mischievous grins hidden under their bangs and presented as humble smiles. Together they turned and left the arena, there was still a few more battle to follow.

X

Kaien's mind was a crash site, it was as if a meteor had conveniently decided to destroy his brain after the duel he had just witnessed. The two had released their Shikai! And they were spectacular, Byakuya's was powerful with elegance, beauty and a million opportunities. Ichigo's blade screamed
power in the curves of its hilt and in the screaming wave of power that it unleashed.

Stalking forward Kaien followed his senses letting them lead him to where Ichigo and Byakuya hopefully were, more than a few times Kaien had followed only to find empty space. Ukitake-taichō and Kyoraku-taichō followed behind him a small distance back a quiet conversation between the two, Kuchiki-taichō had opted to stay and watch the final duels preferring to confront his grandson at a later time. Letting his gaze raise from where he was staring pensively at the earth below Kaien spotted Ichigo and Byakuya.

The two students were under a great elm tree with furrowed branches where a few leaves of emerald budding in the fresh spring air caught the fading sunlight. Ichigo's vibrant orange strands were visible against the pale folds of Byakuya's uniform, the two were leaning against the tree soft whispers drifting from their lips. Ichigo's head tilted and caramel orbs locked onto Kaien's eyes and a small welcoming smile slipped onto Ichigo's face. Smiling in return Kaien bounded over much like an excited puppy, he could hear the huff of laughter behind him as the two captains followed him.

"That battle was excellent! Your sword strokes were swift, and your Shikai's were amazing to behold!"

A light dusting of rose painted Byakuya's cheeks and Ichigo looked down hastily gathering himself for a moment before letting his gaze rise. Byakuya smiled kindly and said, "Your words are very kind thank you."

Kaien smiled and strained his ears to hear the mumbled "thank you" that slipped underneath Ichigo's breath, Kaien scowled slightly before brightening again as Ukitake and Kyoraku arrived placing a warm hand on his shoulder softly reassuring him.

"So have you made your decisions on which squad you're joining?"

Kyoraku's soft baritone rumbled inquisitively, Byakuya laughed slightly before pointing at the carved silver Kenseikan in his hair, a gift from Ichigo that the young Noble had appreciated greatly. Ichigo remained quiet for a moment, seemingly lost in thought till Byakuya jostled his shoulder slightly, Ichigo shook himself orange hair swaying wildly and said, "Yes I've decided the eighth is the best squad for me right now."

Kyoraku let out a pleased noise, trading a wink with Ukitake he leaned over and whispered into the white-haired captain's ear. Kaien nodded equally pleased, he trusted Kyoraku and knew the man would look after his baby brother, it also gave him an easy excuse to drop in any time and say hello. Stretching slightly the nip of a cool wind tickled his cheeks and left goosebumps rising along his arms.

"Well I think this call for a celebration. If I recall correctly tomorrow you are graduating?" Ichigo and Byakuya nodded hesitantly at Kyoraku's inquiry trading glances filled with meaning, "Well then surly you we can get you two drunk, the ceremony isn't till nighttime anyway. That's plenty of time to get over a hangover! I remember one time Ju and I were piss drunk for a captain's meeting, well more than once. I think we started writing a ballad about old Yam-jii."

Ichigo laughed at Kyoraku's words and Kaien couldn't help the chuckle that escaped his own lips at the mere image of the two hunched together during a meeting scribbling on a stray piece of parchment and murmuring like a band of thieves.

"Shu… it wasn't totally like that though I am quite sure Yammamoto was on to us if the eyebrows were any indication."
The name was said with long suffering fondness and an exasperated look was thrown Kyroraku's way, Kain chuckled and cast a curious gaze towards the two students sprawled against each other and asked, "So are you two interested?"

The two shared a glance with Ichigo shrugging and Byakuya raising an eyebrow as if they understood each other through those simple gestures. Silence reigned accompanied by a an aura of good humour and warmth as the students debated, finally Ichigo turned to face them a strange light in his eyes like shards of gemstone hid within caved depths.

"We'll go, what have we got to lose, other than our dignity."

Byakuya let out a slight huff at Ichigo's boastful words glaring at his friend he said, "You know he's going to kill me, he's already after my tail thanks to the "biscuit" incident as you've so fondly dubbed it."

Ichigo doubled over laughing, clutching his chest as his face became an alarming shade of red. Byakuya just laughed and patted his friend on the back leaning over to whisper something that sounded vaguely like "Karma."

Byakuya shook his head and stood up before extending his hand to Ichigo who took it after a few deep breaths, the rouge fading slightly. Kyroraku and Ukitake shared conspicuous glances, Kain pouted and said, "It's not fair you both have besties and here is Kain the poor third wheel to your duets!"

Ichigo stepped closer to Kain before extending his hand and patting the top of Kain's head leaving a warm trace of heat where his palm rested. Ichigo's voice was mocking and full of sarcasm and with a smirk he said, "There, there Kain."

Kain batted Ichigo's hand away with a growl and Ichigo's laughter accompanied by Ukitake lifted his heart. Shaking his head Byakuya flicked Ichigo on the nose before gesturing in a "lead the way" manner.

X

Ichigo growled in enjoyment as Zangetsu cut through the hordes of hollows that surrounded them, mismatched eyes of chocolate and gold starring at a sea of white and red. Laughing his voice came out in the dual tone rasp familiar to Shiro. Ichigo smiled feeling the reaitsu he had constricted so tightly over the year spill forth and decimate the weaker hollows striking at them like a cobra. The sand rose up to swirl around them, the grains flying like small droplets of rain as a Getsuga Tensho tainted crimson and ebony raced over pale sand.

Ichigo could feel the tension bleed from his shoulders, screw Aizen and his readings! It was unlikely that the sociopaths readings even reached this far, or that any espada had ventured close to the swirling vortex that was the end of Hueco Mundo. Ichigo had stumbled upon it when he was separated from his team and was chased by Ulquiorra for five days straight. The apathetic hollow could be surprisingly determined when it came to Aizen's orders, but that was before Orihime convinced him to join Soul Society (after she raised him from the dead?).

Letting himself sink back into his inner world he let Shiro take the reins, the ivory horns and bone mask appearing along with the pale skin and red tribal markings. Shiro let out a crow of glee Zangetsu like a chainsaw in his hands as he whipped back and forth taking out hollows with a pleased intensity. Ichigo looked up in surprise as he felt a warm hand resting on orange locks, blue eyes hidden behind the yellow lens of Zangetsu's glasses stared down at him fondly.
"You are not worried about falling off the edge?"

Ichigo shook his head laughing, he had done that once pushed by a friend turned traitor. Ichigo had flailed in wordless fear as the air seemed to escape from his lungs, his skin had felt cool like he was drawing near death's door when the sand wrapped around him and set him upon silk grains. It was a mystery for Kisuke or another time.

Looking up at the pale crescent moon in a sea of grey Ichigo sighed and let reaitsu trickle from his hands, sprouts breaking through the concrete to curl and wrap around his fingers. In the softness and silence of Hueco Mundo Ichigo could feel a quiet not easily found, the solitude of the place was like his inner world in some ways and yet the feel of sand beneath your toes and the release of pent up reaitsu had its perks.

X

"God dammit! Captain Kyroraku you can drink your sake all you like just please stop using your bottles as paperweights."

Ichigo sighed as he shifted the bottle off the stake of paperwork "Shunsui" was signing, really the man didn't have to be so surprised that Ichigo could copy any signature. Then again it probably wasn't a common skill and one well-suited to Shunsui's needs.

"Ma, ma Ichi so mean."

Ichigo did not usually yell at his eccentric captain but that was the fifth time this afternoon that sake had spilled on the paperwork. How there could be stacks hidden under the carpet was still a mystery Ichigo had yet to solve.

Lisa huffed in the other corner of the room ebony hair in two long braids, round glasses hiding piercing aegean eyes from sight, her short shihaksho swirled around her thighs as she stood up. Ichigo winced slightly in looking at her, guilt and grief, twin forces, still haunted him every time she spoke and his failure to protect her was a bitter reminder and resolving determination. Turning to face Ichigo she smiled slightly, shifting her glasses she said, "Want to come get lunch with me Ichigo? Kyroraku-taicho can stay here in this dim office and finish the paperwork."

Ichigo nodded heaving himself up from the desk and stretching like a cat he stalked towards the door Lisa following behind him blind to Shunsui's whining in the background. Exiting the barracks the two Shinigami entered Rungokai the familiar smells and sounds welcome to the stunted shuffling of paperwork that filled the small office. Walking down a crowded cobble street Lisa turned to face Ichigo with a friendly smile Ichigo could see why she was being so kind, he was a new face, they shared the same captain, and they were likely to be stuck together for more than a few years.

"Know any good restaurants Ichigo?"

Lisa queried eyes roving around the crowded streets glancing at the many shops where people traveled often and carved wooden signs, Ichigo nodded and said, "One up ahead serves fantastic sandwiches and tea?"

Aegean eyes sparkled beneath clear glass lenses and she nodded with a smile before frowning and asking, "Do you mind if I go and see Nano-chan first?"

Ichigo nodded his eyes understanding before slightly uncertain he asked, "Do you mind if I come with?"

She nodded and the two left the crowded streets in a flurry of dust and flash-step. Heading towards
Nano Ichigo suppressed a slight shudder at the thought of seeing the stern lieutenant reduced to a doe-eyed child.

"It's funny from what I hear the squad members already consider you co-lieutenant and it's only been a week you've barely settled in."

Ichigo arched an eyebrow in surprise as they walked towards the restaurant a comfortable aura surrounding the two. Lisa had been impressed with how easily Nano connected with Ichigo, and Ichigo was having a silent panic attack on the inside the whole time, but he was fine… mostly… Zangetsu was there so it's alright… kinda.

As they were about to enter the restaurant Ichigo a Jigokuchō of deep raven landed on Lisa’s shoulder, cocking her head slightly a frown slipped onto her face and her brow furrowed slightly. Turning to Ichigo a serious light in her eyes she said, "They need us in district eighty-one, there's reports of a hollow attack."

Ichigo sighed and with a shrug nodded his head, determination pooling in caramel orbs Lisa connected with his eyes and they darted off leaving the restaurant behind once again.

They arrived on a scene of havoc, a few of the lower seats were scattered about the scene of chaos splotches of crimson staining the white of their shihakshos. The other Shinigami were surrounding a large hollow bleached pale white with trails of ochre down its body, it had the rough shape of a bear and claws like one too. Immediately Lisa and Ichigo loosed their zanpaktou from their sheaths twin blades of silver glinting in the sunlight.

On light feet they raced towards the hollow Ichigo inclining towards the front while Lisa darted around to the back. Distracting the hollow was an easy matter, hado and bakudo slipped from his outstretched hands and in one swift motion the hollow was finished as Lisa's zanpaktou cleaved through its mask. A roar sounded to the left of them as the hollow in front began to disintegrate another one barrelled out of the trees, Ichigo jumped letting his blade raise and in a graceful arch he sliced through the mask feeling bone crumble beneath his blade.

"Is that the last of them?"

Lisa asked one of the Shinigami standing about in dim wonder, the Shinigami startled and nodded her head repeatedly, Lisa questioned the female Shinigami for a bit longer before turning and striding over to Ichigo.

"We can head back to the squad she can handle the rest."

Ichigo nodded and mourned the lost lunch for a moment before following Lisa and letting his mind mourn the incoming paperwork in its stead. Lisa turned with a smirk as they skirted over Rungokai and said, "We'll have to make up lunch sometime?"

Ichigo nodded and her lips curved up slightly as they landed in the familiar courtyard of the barracks of squad eight. Shunsui came out to meet them the smell of liquor potent on his breath, and evident in the tip of his straw hat and disarray of his flowered kimono.

"Enjoy your lunch? Lisa-chan you're too mean leaving me here all alone and not inviting me, and Ichi you're supposed to stand up for me!"

Lisa snorted dismissively shaking her head sending twin tails swirling while Ichigo laughed a slightly apologetic light in his eyes in a sincere voice Ichigo said, "We are very sorry for this grave offense
captain."

Shunsui snorted seeing through the blatant lie and turned hiding a smile under the plain straw hat. Sharing a conspiratorial glance Lisa and Ichigo followed their captain up carved steps and through familiar wooden doors.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter reviews are always welcome! As always thank to Intrigued Chameleon

Crystal!
Fyrgrebraeck

Chapter Summary

Ichigo is social when he would rather not be. Injury strikes the harrowing discord of memory.

Chapter Notes

Fyrgrebraeck

(n.) The distinct, sharp cracking or breaking sound made by a fire.

Hope you all enjoy chapter 11 prepare for whirlwind of emotions and enjoy! Also look at that 8K that's a new record for a chapter length yay for chapter lengths! As always many thanks to Intrigued Chameleon who provides both editing and poetry.

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

X

Ichigo's skin itched and the hairs on the back of his neck seemed to bristle with tension. Taking in a soft breath, Ichigo squared his shoulders and plastered a small smile on his face. Stepping out of the dark office where he had been, crouching waiting for the inevitability of this day, a frown and the reassurances of Zangetsu in the back of his mind. Lisa upon seeing him smiled with a quirk of her brow, saying nothing yet conveying her thoughts on the matter with ease. He tilted his head in a vaguely apologetic manner, making Lisa sigh and with a gentle sway of head she turned, swirls of ebony cloth flowing around her thighs.

Together they entered a hallway, long and prestigious, though it was nothing to the grandeur that was the meeting room of captains. Ichigo had stood in those halls many times over, hunched over strategy maps, discussing tactics, listening to battle plans, delivering harsh news that stroke a chord of silence and left the air somber with grief. Those were not the same halls he paced through now, and they would never be such if Ichigo held even a wisp of power within him.

The heavy oaken doors swung open with ease and Ichigo let his hand flow outwards to briefly brush across the weathered surface feeling the texture beneath his fingers and nostalgia rise beneath calloused hands. Stepping into the room Ichigo's eyes darted over the walls trying to avoid the familiar yet strange presences that seemed to blanket the room and send Ichigo's heart into an irregular beat. Lisa strode forward unhesitant and unaware of the darkness that darkened caramel eyes for a soft moment before fleeing behind an apathetic mask.

Following Lisa's twin tails of raven hair Ichigo could feel piercing stares touching the back of his
head, curious intensity and unconcerned disdain seemed to dominate other emotions that floated around the room in melodious eddies. It was uncommon to see a third seat at a lieutenant meeting but not altogether impossible, especially considering a high power level or Shikai (both of which Ichigo had in abundance).

Lisa shared one last glance with him, made a slight shooing motion with her hand before flouncing off in some unknown direction probably trying to find a corner to occupy herself. Sighing Ichigo let his eyes cast through the small crowd of milling Shinigami wondering if he could avoid any interaction. Shoulders drooping in slight disappointment when a combination of ebony and silver failed to reveal themselves, it occurred to Ichigo that Byakuya was likely still on the mission to the mortal realm.

Ichigo scowled slightly, here he was shoved into the middle of a crowd by the 'gentle' prodding of Shunsui to meet the lieutenants and Lisa's disappearance leaving Ichigo as the prey in a flock of vultures interested in new meat. When in doubt refer to battle strategies at least that was what Shunsui always whispered when trapped between a rock and a hard place, perhaps the man still had some wisdom in that sake rotted brain.

Gliding towards the far wall the sounds of laughter and hushed chatter accompanying him, Ichigo rested his back against the wall with orange bangs sheltering caramel eyes from a sight that would stir pain in his head and weakness in his heart. Lifting his head slightly Ichigo could feel someone approaching with their reiatsu overwhelmingly saturated by restlessness and energy. Peering through tangerine bangs Ichigo was meet with a shock of lime green hair cut into a short bob, and a face though childish in nature sporting a happy smile.

"Hello! You must be the new third seat! My name is Kuna Mashiro but you can call me Mashiro!"

Ichigo stared for a moment taking in her vibrant smile, and chirping voice. Blood flashed through his mind painting his vision in sheets of crimson intersected with a body covered in white with splashes of tangerine, green hair once so full of life had fallen limp. He saw her eyes darken and drain into the night and her playful light had faded with her final words to Kensei. Shaking himself abruptly from morose musings, Ichigo tenderly stretched out his hand shifting his head so one caramel orb could connect with Mashiro's olive green eyes.

"Hello Mashiro-san, I am Ichigo Shiba the new third seat in Squad Eight."

Ichigo wondered if she picked up on the slight hoarseness that traced his voice, looking at her carefully he saw no such realization only bubbly excitement. Nodding enthusiastically her daintier hand clasped onto his larger and calloused palm, beaming up at him she said, "Well we better introduce you to everyone! I can help I know everyone... and their every secret."

A tender smile slipped onto Ichigo's lips at Mashiro happiness and even if he wanted to deny her and stay shadowed in the corner where memories could not reach him it would not be worth the loss of opportunity that Mashiro represented. Nodding hesitantly Mashiro let out a tiny noise of happiness before dragging him into the crowd. As Mashiro pulled him further down the rabbit hole Ichigo let a barrier construct itself in his mind a small attempt to shield himself from the memories that were already tearing at him with claws wicked and familiar.

People came and passed in a sea of faces that left Ichigo feeling nauseous as if their blood was threatening to choke him. Those eyes familiar to him in their infinite grace held no recognition and observed nothing of Ichigo's distress. Ichigo felt lost, Kaien was reporting an increase in intellect and skill in the local hollows to the captains and Byakuya was travelling with Ginrei-san. As much as Ichigo wanted to trust Lisa to be there for him, their bond of friendship was still tender, and she would never be able to handle the darkness of Ichigo's past.
A sweep of ice across his spine diverted his attention away from thoughts that ran endless circles, turning Ichigo was greeted with curly warm chocolate hair and empathetic brown eyes. With a hasty spin worthy of the Mashiro familiar to him she turned to face Aizen.

"Oh Aizen-san this is Shiba Ichigo he's the new third seat for Eighth Division."

Ichigo shivered as eyes seemingly filled with kindness traced him mapping and cataloguing every stray factor of Ichigo's being. Those eyes appeared so warm and caring yet hidden within was cold and loneliness. Ichigo could almost feel the megalomaniac's blood upon Zangetsu, see the relief and pleading in chocolate eyes asking Ichigo to end it. The end had been drawing near the once wielder of the hogyoku could see it in the lack of soldiers on the battlefield, in the bodies that littered once white streets. Looking up Ichigo suppressed the shiver that threatened his stability and meet eyes filled with hidden smugness with the slightest turn of determination to his lips. Ichigo knew this man would haunt the little sleep that blessed him in the hours of Morpheus realm, would see the torture, blood, loss, and suffer through it all.

"It is a pleasure to meet the new third seat I've heard so much about."

Ichigo cringed internally at the interest sparkling in those eyes, a voice like honey, Aizen knew of him he had perhaps not seen Ichigo in battle but already his reputation preceded him. Anything remotely powerful or mysterious held interest for the sociopath in disguise.

Ichigo bowed his head slightly in respect staring at this man and wondering why he hid behind this façade and chose the way he did, granted Ichigo knew that the mind of a Shinigami was hard to change. Years of experience and battle gave them comfort in their ways and assured them that nothing else was correct, Ichigo was going to change that show them their faults, force them to open their eyes.

Realizing his mind had been drifting for a slight second too long Ichigo smiled slightly apologetic, though laughed manically on the inside might as well play with the man and said, "The pleasure is mine, and it is an honour to meet the lieutenant renown throughout Soul Society for his kindness."

If the slight widening of his eyes was any indication Aizen was surprised by Ichigo's flowered words of praise, gaze becoming critical once more the lieutenant studied Ichigo once again taking in vibrant orange hair, softly determined eyes, angled features, and a pale white scarf snuggled firmly around the third seat's neck. Ichigo looked up tangerine bangs parting slightly letting Ichigo's eyes connect with Aizen's intelligent gaze. A battle of wits waged tension crackling between the two as Mashiro watched in concern. The tight circle of analysis was broken as the oaken doors that had fallen close were swung open with a bang and the lieutenant of the first marched in imposing in this time as much Ichigo's own.

All noise ceased and Aizen jerkily bowed to Ichigo who responded in kind before he paced towards his seat shooting one last calculating glance over his shoulder before disappearing from sight. Waving to Mashiro, Ichigo let his eyes cast onto the crowd until he spotted the sharp glimmer of light playing on Lisa's glasses, swiftly Ichigo walked over to stand beside the stoic appearing lieutenant. As everyone settled into place Chojiro scanned the assembled Shinigami his eyes stopping briefly on Ichigo before continuing.

X

The pain was all consuming as Mugestu's form wrapped around him, covering his body in folds of grey and wisps of ebony three becoming one. Aizen or what was Aizen stared back at Mugetsu in utter shock, this was it the end. To save Soul Society from the maniac butterfly Mugetsu would sacrifice it all, and in the end Mugetsu could understand why Aizen did it. This power that thrummed...
underneath his fingertips, the silence echoing like cannon shots around his head, and the clearness of
his perception.

Why would they burden a teenager with the task of defeating one with so much power? Why was
Ichigo young and still naïve enough to not know what they were forcing him into? Fighting for
them? The war had lasted three years and it had ripped everything from Ichigo leaving him a war
torn man in the body of a teenager. Ichigo could say it was for his family but truthfully the Soutaicho
would have been able to defeat Aizen with ease… Or perhaps it was only Ichigo who could stand up
so fearlessly and face the man turned omniscient. Maybe it was Ichigo because Ichigo understood
this megalomaniac. Urahara had whispered the Hogyoku's true purpose Kisuke told him of its ability
to grant desires and if the solitude and sorrow that Ichigo had felt in Aizen's zanpaktou was any
indication then the genius was lonely.

Mugetsu could sympathize how could any of Ichigo's friends or family understand what such power
felt like? To hide it beneath your skin for years on end could twist you inside leave your every hope
dim and tainted. Mugetsu wondered briefly if Aizen had someone of equal power to stand beside
him would he have fallen so low. Shaking away thoughts irrelevant to the here and now Mugetsu
lifted up his arm, his blade attached to him so completely it was a complete extension of himself.

Sorrow overwhelmed his being and Mugetsu could feel tears prick his eyes knowing the inevitably
of their fate he let a wall of ebony reiatsu race away from the blade towards Aizen, the creature could
only wait and brace for the impact.

As the dust cleared Mugetsu could feel the one threatening to become three but he held on to threads
of silver that danced inside him, he could not be separated yet he still had purpose left. Mugetsu
wondered on the strings that seem to drape his spiritual form, almost binding him together, and then
there was no more time to think as he was standing in front of Aizen cleft in two and slowly drawing
together once again.

Leaning forward to look into eyes of empty amethyst Mugetsu spoke, his voice a whisper that carried
towards Aizen, "I understand and know this. The emptiness you feel"

With those words distance was again between them as Urahara stepped out from behind a cluster of
rocks, his piercing gaze landed on Mugetsu full of sympathy and pity as if he understood what was
about to happen. The kido burst from within Aizen bright lime green in colour and Urahara began to
talk to the former scientist. Mugetsu turned away and the casing around his face began to crack it
was happening one was becoming three. Mugetsu wanted desperately to hold onto the silver tendrils
binding them but knew there was no escape this time.

Pain erupted in his body as if choking every atom alive within him, ebony hair became short and
vibrant, crimson eyes returned to pain-filled chocolate and bandages the colour of smoke faded and
fell away to the gentle eddies of the wind. All the while fire raged within Ichigo burning his fingers
and eyes leaving him wanting for a cool touch of relief, the pain was made bitter in the knowledge
that this would be only the first of any bouts of pain.

What could you expect when your soul was being rendered apart and the very beings of your core
retreating far from where one could ever touch them? Blind to the conversation behind him Ichigo
sunk to his knees no tears tracing down his cheeks and his mouth opened in a silent wordless scream.

The pain faded slowly just as Urahara finished speaking. Ichigo stood up their voices bare whispers
at the back of his mind, hiding the pain that seemed to coil about his soul Ichigo turned to face
Urahara

X
Brown eyes stared up at Ichigo from Aizen's position on the floor, the former captain leant against a crumbling wall a hand clasped against his shoulder trying to stem the push of blood that stained pale cloth white. Ichigo crouched beside the man neither enemy nor ally there was a truce between them in the wake of the destruction Bach brought with him, Aizen had seen it and when in desperation they released him he had complied. That wasn't to say the man was loyal to their side, it was only the threat of extinction that forced his hand.

But now with blood in the air like red mist and skies of grey few stood on the battlefield, most were corpses scattered upon the ground lifeless eyes staring at the sky unseeingly. Time was drawing to a close. A quake shook the ground beneath their feet sending rocks cascading from their palace of safety and raising dust from the ground.

"I must go soon, what will you do?"

A bitter laugh echoed throughout the air bouncing off of empty streets, Ichigo's gaze cast upwards where lightning crackled with ferocity. He was prepared to face Bach, now there was no point in delaying the inevitable not when Zangetsu hummed in unison, not when his mind was at peace and his heart in turmoil. Glancing down Ichigo's eyes were drawn to the wound on Aizen's shoulder blood coated his fingers and a pale ghost of pain danced across his face.

"Go. I will be here, whether I die or you die has yet to be seen. I stand no chance against him, and if you live then I stand will stand as nothing against and before you. That isn't to say that my blade won't fly forward again."

Ichigo laughed and shook his head the man was as confusing as ever and even with those words tension prickled slightly. Ichigo would remember the exhilaration of fighting the Quincy with this man as much as he would remember the insane tilt to his eyes and horrific transformation.

"Take care Aizen."

The man looked up eyes connecting for a second, he nodded and said, "Good luck kid."

Ichigo turned away the wind blowing long tangerine locks carelessly, the weight of life and existence weighed on his shoulders heavily as he stepped forward.

X

Ichigo considered the chessboard in front of him carefully, one wrong move and the game would be finished, and leaning back Ichigo nursed the steaming cup of tea in his hands. A chamomile that soothed his senses, and looked into the aged face of the Soutaicho. Wise was this old man and full of knowledge that Ichigo had never had the chance to hear in his timeline, then this old man had been an imposing figure; powerful yet distant. Now the two meet once a month if the time could be spared, to share a cup of tea and play a game of chess.

Ichigo sometimes wondered why he kept being invited back, he always seemed to both irritate the old man and bring a smile to his aged face. It probably helped the man looked upon Ichigo with fondness similar to the way he looked at Shunsui and Jushiro, it seemed he had unknowingly been adopted as an apprentice (even if it was more in battle strategy and politics). Ichigo didn't mind it gave him the chance to voice his opinion, to tell the head captain about how inequality and hatred ran rampant in some divisions.

Making his mind up Ichigo sighed the movement releasing some of the tension from his shoulders as he leaned forward and slid a white pawn over a space. Yamamoto arched an eyebrow, fluffy and with much the same appearance as a caterpillar, and moved his own piece easily knocking one of
Ichigo's pawns from the board.

"A curious choice, you are in a pensive mood today what troubles you young one?"

Ichigo looked up from the board where he had been studying the endless pieces of ebony and ivory, Yamamoto's question struck a chord within Ichigo he paused to consider the date placing the slight feeling of nausea upon the significance of such a date.

"It is merely a time from whence a loved one left me."

Yamamoto nodded sympathy apparent under layers of piercing grey, letting his lips lift up in a slightly reassuring smile Ichigo moved his knight over a few squares and waited for the Soutaicho to reciprocate.

"Last we met you were speaking of a plan for Rukongai in case of invasion have you made any more advances?"

Ichigo paused watching as Yamamoto's frail hand calloused with veins of pale sapphire showing through skin like old paper to consider his question before replying, "The first step would be to fortify all districts so that if one was conquered there would be places to go, especially the farther districts that see little care they are vulnerable to attack. Knowing that we cannot afford to disperse the Shinigami commonly throughout all districts a tactic we could consider would be to consider a militia of sorts. Take the students who couldn't pass or any with bare traces of spirit energy and train them so that they can wield a katana and deal with low level offences."

Yamamoto nodded thoughtfully watching as Ichigo moved his bishop towards one of Yamamoto's pieces. A smile filtered onto the Soutaicho's aged faces one full of knowledgeable humour as one of his pawns moved in an intricate dance to finish the game.

"Checkmate."

Ichigo sighed in good humour and begin to collect the carved wooden pieces under Yamamoto's careful eye and place them in the carved box that rested on one of the bookshelves filled to the brim that covered his office walls. Standing up Ichigo took the box and paced towards one of the shelves choosing one at random, a few treasures and scrolls decorated the shelves along with unfinished paperwork. Smiling Ichigo placed the box down gently and turned to face Yamamoto who was staring at Ichigo thoughtfully snow white beard illuminated in mid-afternoon light and the casing of purple in his beard was stained deep violet in the shadows cast by thick curtains.

"Any update on your plans to join my squad?"

There it was, the question that always haunted their meeting and the question that Yamamoto never pushed for an answer merely asked. Ichigo tilted his head in thought a slightly mischievous smile appearing on his face for a moment before disappearing in the swirling sands of time. Stalking forward Ichigo settled across from Yamamoto once more and cradled the cup of tea to his chest before taking a small sip.

"Ah not this day it has only been a few years with Kyoraku-taicho and I plan to fix his drinking habit before I leave."

And there was the evasive answer that goaded a snort from the Soutaicho and amusement in those coal eyes full of wisdom. Ichigo did consider the offer every now and then, be able to make more of an impact on the Soutaicho, earn his trust, and see his secrets. But that was not what he was destined for nor would it help him in the long run, no he was where he needed to be. Vague discomfort rolled
through his system and Ichigo felt like suppressing a yawn, the nights were too long with only one's mind and the darkness to keep you company (that and a few disgruntled spirits if they had any say).

Yamamoto made a small displeased noise his face dipping in slight disappointment before his voice grating in the way someone old could only sound said, "One day you will join my squad. I have no doubt you would push it off till you became a captain at this rate, alas I will not take you from your captain any more than I already have."

Finishing his tea Ichigo placed the ceramic mug on the table Caramel orbs connecting with Yamamoto's wise eyes, thanks evident in Ichigo's eyes he nodded and stood up making his way towards the door where the weight of the world seemed to burden him once he put his hand on the cool and polished wood. Looking back Ichigo smiled not certain if the emotions that were threatening to bubble up inside him were showing. Opening the polished wooden door Ichigo turned and exited.

X

Shunsui shuffled the paperwork in a simple attempt at making it look like he had at least started the large and frankly overwhelming stack of paper which was a waste of the poor trees lives. In reality Shunsui had been drinking a cup of sake and enjoying the silence that was a rarity in his office, Lisa-chan was visiting Nanao-chan on a rare day she had decided to take off, and Ichi was visiting Yam-jii like he usually did once a month.

It seemed as if Shunsui's thoughts drew the orangette close as Ichigo's familiar reiatsu tingled across Shunsui's senses, such power kept under a soft blanket, tampered with steel and imbued with love. The door to his office slid open and Ichigo stepped inside his hair in slight disarray as if he had been running his hands through it unceasingly, a paleness seemed to hang about his face, and his shoulders seemed weighed down but otherwise the young Shinigami appeared well.

"How was tea with Yama-jii?"

Ichigo looked up with a tiny smile at Shunsui's words his head tilting with slight amusement he said, "He defeated me as usual and offered the same position to me which I so humbly declined stating a need to cure my poor captain of his drinking problem."

Shunsui bit back a laugh at Ichigo's teasing tones and smiled fondly at the orange-haired Shinigami. A pout soon filtered onto his face as Ichigo's eyes zeroed in on the stack of paperwork leaning precariously to the left on his desk.

"You didn't write one thing did you?"

Ichigo's tone lacked accusation just resigned acceptance, with Shunsui's sheepish shrug Ichigo shook his head the movement sending tangerine bangs flouncing about. A comfortable silence and Ichigo moved his hand to brush the bangs away from his eyes, that's when Shunsui noticed a soft flush on Ichigo's cheeks and his eyes seemed slightly glazed.

"Ichigo are you okay?"

Concern flooded Shunsui's system as he stared at his third seat, Ichigo's movements were slow and Shunsui cursed himself for dismissing the paleness of his skin as normal. Stepping out from behind the desk Shunsui stepped closer to Ichigo reaching up he gently placed a hand upon Ichigo's brow. Eyes widening in worry at the heat that radiated from the orangette's skin Shunsui peered into Ichigo's eyes and saw exhaustion promptly accompanied by a deep aching pain.
Before Shunsui could say anything to Ichigo the young Shiba crumpled forward almost folding in on himself whether from pain or exhaustion was a question that plagued Shunsui as his arm darted out to catch Ichigo's limp form. Turning the young man over he carefully settled Ichigo on the couch, Shunsui was a fool not to have seen the paleness of his skin, the blush of his cheeks, the hazy eyes and slow weighted movements.

Sending his reiatsu out he prodded his fourth seating urging the young women to come to his office immediately. Turning his attention back to Ichigo Shunsui brushed bangs lightly soaked with sweat out of his eyes which were slowly dropping close hiding dazed caramel eyes from sight. The fourth seat rushed in, slightly out of breath her eyes casting about the room in frenzied emergency. Spotting her captain she rushed over and stopped in her tracks at seeing the kind and strong third seat passed out on the couch. Shunsui hastily barked out orders telling her to fetch Unohana-Taicho before turning his attention back to Ichigo, Kaien would throw a fit when he found out.

Unohana's intimidating presence announced her arrival well before the door to his office slid open once again. Stepping inside she instantly glided towards Ichigo the iridescent mint colour of healing kido encasing her hand as Shunsui stepped away letting her look at Ichigo. She made a distressed noise as her hand hovered over his body, turning to Shunsui her voice smooth as silk said, "I can barely sense him in this room we need to move him to the fourth he's burning a high temperature."

Nodding Shunsui carefully lifted Ichigo into his arms cradling the surprisingly light young man to his chest he followed Unohana towards the fourth, worry for his third seat a familiar and repeating pattern in his mind.

X

Ichigo awoke to the sterile smell of hospitals for a moment he panicked thinking he was within Aizen's clutches again, memories of tools and syringes vibrant in his mind accompanied by the cloying scent of antiseptic. Taking a moment to calm himself and center himself in the present Ichigo tried to recall how he had ended in the fourth. All he recalled was walking back to Shunsui's office feeling overly tired and slightly nauseous, sharp pain lanced through his head and Ichigo let the thought slide away from him. Letting his eyelids flicker Ichigo slowly opened his eyes wincing as bright light pierced the veil of darkness that once covered his eyes. Relief came swiftly as Ichigo let his eyes cast around the small room squinting in the bright light, a shadow by the door and a heavy presence announced her approach.

Unohana stepped inside the petite room her long raven hair braided meticulously in front of her chest, eyes seemingly full of kindness but with hidden strength studied Ichigo taking in his condition and analysing every tick. Sweeping into the room her ghostly form glided towards Ichigo silence hanging like a blanket over the two Shinigami. Ichigo felt surprise course through him at the cool relief that spread from where Unohana's soft hand rested on his brow.

"You gave your captain quite the scare Shiba-san. What do you remember?"

Ichigo stared at Unohana for a moment his mind feeling like it was filled with clouds, alleyways well known collapsed. Slowly the memory filtered in through soft cracks in the barrier shuddering in its foundation. Ichigo opened his mouth to respond but dryness plagued his throat and choked silence from his breath, Unohana frowned in slight concern before helping Ichigo to sit up the movement tearing groans from his lips muscles protesting the small movement. A glass of water was placed before his lips and Ichigo though greedily wanting to down the glass slowly sipped the refreshing liquid.

"I was in S- uh, Taicho's office and I was feeling slightly nauseous and then there was pain and
dizziness in a worrying cocktail. That's all I remember."

Unohana nodded moving away slightly to cast her eyes over Ichigo once more taking in the paleness that still clung to his face and the hills of purple under his eyes. Her voice smooth like a river coursing throughout the land rang through the room when she said, "You had everyone quite worried Shiba-san you suddenly collapsed. It seems you are suffering from exhaustion, and a lack of nutrients in your system. You will be staying in the fourth for a week," Ichigo frowned the displeasure obvious on his features if Unohana's arched eyebrow and the turning of her lips was any indication, she continued, "Is that a problem Shiba-san? No? Good then I will continue I will be setting up a diet for you so you can retain the nutrients your body requires, it's nothing too serious merely three meals a day. I've also talked to your brother who is frantic with worry if I may warn you."

Ichigo frowned again at Unohana's words, the mere thought of food sent his stomach rolling and left him grimacing. Ichigo supposed it was his fault though for not monitoring his body well, chalkling it up to a long day or old battle wounds ghosting his flesh. Logically it made sense, as the son of a doctor he could understand the mechanics behind his body failing him. During the war he had been able to fight for days on end with little to nothing in his stomach and two hours of sleep if he was lucky. The constant energy and adrenaline had kept him stable, or at least what passed for stable when your mind was a shipwreck and your body a litany of wounds.

The constant streak of rebellion rose inside Ichigo's chest when he considered the idea of a dietary plan. It wouldn't work he already knew that, no any recovery his body would make would be through him alone for no one knew his body better than himself. Looking up from where tangerine strands fell across his eyes he could see the concern that lingered in Unohana's eyes, those slate orbs usually so full of cold and cynical care now gazed at Ichigo with pity. She had seen the scars that crossed his chest, the remnants of broken bones, his aversion to touch even unconscious, and the state of his body. And yet she knew nothing of Ichigo's true wounds hidden underneath the flesh from healing kido, hidden in the mind, the heart. For what was a scar but a reminder of the memory?

"As I've said I've spoken to Kaien and he spoke to your clan head Isshin Shiba, he is coming to visit you Kaien will be permitted to enter when I think him less like a crazed monkey."

Ichigo nodded appearing calm even with the slight twitch upwards of his lips as she spoke of Kaien. But her words were a devastating blow, the thought of seeing his father alive and well tore a rift in his very center and left his inner world to suffer the consequences. The soft whispers of Zangetsu were a gentle cascade soothing the fears and memories that threatened to drown him swiftly, it was only avoiding the inevitable but Ichigo took in relief in every moment. Ichigo knew this would come it was as inevitable as the stars one day fading from the sky leaving only darkness in the whole of space. He was thankful that he had made it so long without encountering his father, Ichigo didn't want to see him young, happy, full of life, and without Masaki.

"Ichigo can I ask you about your wounds? I can only help you heal if I know what caused such ailments. I've tried to scan you, see what caused your injuries but it's never clear always muddled by your reiatsu."

Ichigo looked down at his hands clasped together skin once tanned and golden, pale in the sunlight streaming in from a window in the room of white walls. She always asked the most important questions, the questions that were sometimes the hardest to answer. She had been invaluable during the war, her zanpaktou powerful, her mind cunning and ruthless, and without her Zaraki would never have achieved his Bankai.

"It's complicated a matter one does not let slip from their lips. To tell of it would bring you nothing
but sorrow and the hounding of my person. Know this than Unohana-Taicho that it may soothe your thoughts slightly. I have survived more than I should have and I will continue to survive, I have purpose in this time."

Ichigo felt weariness settle on his shoulder once more at his own words, this constant secrecy thoughts swirling in his head like a vortex. During the war there had been a friend at his side no matter who, his thoughts were easily shared and secrecy was pointless in his position. Unohana stared at Ichigo pensively taking in the fiery determination that sparkled in his eyes underlain by sorrow heart tearing in its infinity and said, "And when your purpose here is finished?"

The question left Ichigo reeling his head snapping up to stare at the woman, so perceptive and keen of mind. Running his hand through his long spiky strands Ichigo ignored the dull ache of pain in his muscles and with smile soft and slightly depreciating he said, "I focus on the here and the now, my purpose will lead me on a long quest weary may I be in the end I will push forward and find new purpose. That's who I am, hesitate and I will fail."

Unohana nodded understanding though reluctant to accept what she could now see, stepping closer to the bed Ichigo resided in Unohana slowly lifted her palm making the movement clear in a considerate way that left Ichigo's heart aching. Gently she rested her hand on his arm her touch light as a feather and soothing the fire that raged within his skin.

"If you need me Ichigo I am here, if you say that the troubles that plague you cannot be spoken then perhaps I can provide help elsewhere. Trust that I can keep a secret. The offer stands whether you take it or not. I wish to help you Ichigo the sorrow in your eyes and the scars of your body incite in me feelings of protection I have not felt in a long while."

Ichigo didn't know what to say to Unohana's powerful words the offer she proposed was kind and left Ichigo wanting to accept. Yet Ichigo knew that he could not speak the whole truth with her, she held a position of power and if he spoke freely it would be her duty to tell the captains of his past. Nodding his head in shaky acceptance Ichigo reasoned that half-truths were better than nothing and if the burden on his shoulders were lightened it would help.

"I will go now you should rest, Shiba-Taicho shall be here shortly."

With those words Unohana left the room her reiatsu following her like a cloak and leaving the room empty of her heavy presence. Ichigo sank back into the bleached white pillows his head falling back. Taking in slow deep breaths Ichigo let the tenseness that thrummed throughout his body settle. Patiently Ichigo let his reiatsu uncoil slightly letting wisps of blue wind around his arms and legs soothing the ache deep-seated in his bones.

Sighing Ichigo let his reiatsu fade feeling significantly less sore and yet the weight of his eyelids seemed to have increased tenfold. Briefly his mind entertained the idea of escaping through the window, escaping the encounter that drew ever nearer. Shiro's laughter in the back of his mind only confirmed his own ideas of how far he would get at the moment not to mention Unohana's fury. The soft whisper of Old Man Zangetsu drew Ichigo under sleep's warm folds promising for once that nightmares would not haunt him for the short time his eyes closed.

X

Ichigo jerked awake the moment his reiatsu danced across his senses, any semblance of sleep gone like the fleeting sunlight cascading into darkness. Ichigo's breathing became shaky and erratic, his chest heaving and his heart rate accelerating, his hands clenched at his side and Ichigo bowed his head. Zangetsu's reiatsu reached out and wrapped around Ichigo comforting him and slowly Ichigo's erratic breathing drew to a halt.
Breathing deeply and in precise counts Ichigo glanced up at the door his presence was still far enough away that Ichigo could slowly draw himself into a state of calm. Ichigo wondered how he was going to deal with meeting his father again in this new life. Ichigo knew that he could only hold the memories already heavy with the weight of an avalanche back for so long, he would be fortunate if their encounter was without memories of him pushing against his mind. Already Ichigo's heart ached and looking up once more Ichigo could see a shadow by the door the thin paper hiding nothing of the spiked hair and captain's haori worn like a sash.

The door slid open with a soft 'hiss' tenseness coiled through Ichigo's body once more as his eyes stared fixated at the slowly opening door. Ichigo drew in a sharp breath as Isshin Shiba was revealed. Isshin Shiba was young his famous goatee gone leaving a clear jaw, the age that hung to his face was gone, and the sorrow that had always been present in his eyes after he lost Masaki was gone, concern in its place as he stared at Ichigo. Silence blanketed the room, Isshin stepped inside and Ichigo unconsciously tensed slightly. The man stepped closed to the bed his eyes taking in Ichigo's appearance staring at his vibrant orange hair, chocolate eyes, pale skin, and his likeness to Kaien.

"Hello Ichigo… is it alright if I call you Ichigo? I'm Isshin Shiba captain of the tenth and head of the Shiba clan."

Ichigo looked up at Isshin's words avoiding those silver eyes familiar and yet startlingly not, to hear his voice sent shivers down Ichigo's spine and left his heart clenching painfully in his chest. Taking a small breath as a tiny measure of courage Ichigo looked up with a soft smile wondering if Isshin could see the pain buried underneath it and said, "It's nice to finally meet you Shiba-Taicho… it is acceptable for you to call me Ichigo."

Ichigo's words were stilted plagued not only by his thirst but by the emotions bubbling up in his throat. Isshin took a hesitant step forward as if he wanted to comfort Ichigo before deciding against it.

"Kaien told me all about this, there's no need to be so formal Ichigo we're family even if we haven't met yet. It's a wonder you've been adopted into the clan for more than a year now and this is the first time we've met."

Ichigo smiled at the mention of Kaien knowing full well the mothering and nagging that would soon come his way. Ichigo frowned slightly considering Isshin's words on their meeting and said, "Isshin-san it is most likely because I was attending the academy and you as the clan head stay in the Shiba family mansion where as Kaien, Kukkaku, and Ganju quite often reside in one of the homes near Rungokai."

Isshin shook his head listening to Ichigo's words, the man regarded Ichigo once more squinting his eyes and frowning he said, "I feel like we have met before, perhaps in another life."

Choking on his breath Ichigo hunched over his spine arching, raising his hands to his head Ichigo felt the harsh throb of the memories trying to push through his mind. With a resigned sigh of pain Ichigo
leant back and let the memories come forth.

X

Ichigo was young and so hurt by her loss, Isshin was much the same hurt and devastated. The girls didn't understand they kept asking, "When will mommy be home?" in their cute little voices so uncomprehending. Isshin would pick them up and cradle them in his arms whisper sweet nothing of sorrow and kiss their heads. Ichigo knew he didn't deserve that; love and affection. Not after he had killed their mother, stolen Masaki from them all.

So Ichigo swore that he wouldn't cry, wouldn't be a burden. That he would be strong for his mother and for his sisters.

One night on the walk home from school with his sisters, a few older kids had approached them, eyes mean and bright in the streetlight from above. Ichigo fought them off all three of them, the karate lessons helped but it was his determination that allowed him to pull through. He had been scraped up pretty badly a bloody nose and more than a few scratches. Ichigo hadn't complained only walked his sisters home and gone upstairs to the washroom to get rid of the blood.

That's how Isshin found him the blood streaming down his nose and trickling from his elbow and knee, Isshin had swept inside and instantly began cleaning the wounds regardless of the tears and protests dripping from Ichigo's lips.

Thereafter whenever Ichigo came home after a fight he would be pulled aside no matter how hard he tried to hide whatever insignificant wounds littered his body. Isshin would carefully disinfect each wound a bandage them with the utmost care.

X

The cemetery was cool that day a crispness rare to see in July, bright buds of green hung upon the trees and tranquility seemed to float upon the air. Even while somber at heart a soft smile tilted Ichigo's lips upwards as he watched Yuzu and Karin skip ahead two bobs of blond and raven disappearing in the distance. Beside him Isshin let out a groan as he climbed yet another stone step, worn and ancient they seemed to be part of the hill itself.

When they reached her stone Ichigo dropped to his knees and began to methodically clear away the weeds that clung to the smooth stone and the leaves a faded golden in colour that rested like careless soldiers upon a field of green. Beside Ichigo Isshin sighed a lit smoke in his hand the soft wisps of grey wisps drifting in the summer air and azure sky. Ichigo was silent staring at the grave feeling the memory of that night beneath his fingers, beneath the earth.

Surprise spiked in Ichigo as warm arms wrapped his torso and pulled him against a broad chest a chin light with stubble resting amongst Ichigo's orange locks. Ichigo tensed for a moment, he didn't deserve comfort on this day not when he was the one who ripped their mother away. Isshin's hands tightened pulling Ichigo in closer, slowly and reluctantly he let himself relax in his father's arms. A noise of surprise was stolen from his lips as Karin and Yuzu joined in on the hug their delicate hands wrapping around his waist and eye so full of light yet tinged with sadness looked up at him.

X

Ichigo panted sweat dripping down his forehead, Isshin sat beside him with a smile and handed a small glass of sake over. Ichigo downed the shot before passing the simple porcelain cup back to his father.
"Kisuke running you too hard?"

Ichigo laughed and shook his head running a hand through sweat stroked orange strands, Isshin laughed alongside him the two delving into comfortable silence a relationship forged in silent care and knowing looks. Ruffling Ichigo's hair Isshin stood up with a groan and turned to face Ichigo offering his hand.

"Come on I'll help you get that technique and maybe you can show me how to land a backflip."

Smiling Ichigo laughed and took Isshin's calloused hand feeling the warmth of life beneath his fingertips. Letting himself be pulled up Ichigo arched an eyebrow and in amusement said, "The day you land a backflip is the day Yoruichi decides to become a nun. Besides weren't you the one inquiring after my health a few moments ago?"

Isshin only shook his head muttering about 'damn snarky kids' before stepping back and drawing Engetsu flames sparking in Isshin's eyes. Shaking his head in good natured amusement Ichigo drew Zangetsu the katana in its sealed form of an ebony blade.

"You know Kyroraku's been bugging me to take a captain's position. I've declined every single time, have to look after the twins."

Ichigo processed the information and nodded it made sense there were few captains these days not that any semblance of order existed they were more like generals commanding their soldiers to a massacre. Shaking himself from macabre thoughts Ichigo shrugged and hefted Zangetsu challengingly, Isshin smiled in response and launched forward.

X

"Did I ever tell you how beautiful your mom was? She was stunning like the stars and the sun, she was my whole world."

Ichigo watched as Isshin knocked back another shot, word had reached Soul Society of Kukkaku and Ganju's demise. Ichigo had readily agreed when he offered a drink, the chance to drown their sorrows and celebrate brash, spunky, and courageous Kukkaku and Ganju who wore his heart on his sleeve and always had a kind word.

Ichigo nodded and tipped back another shot the sake burning pleasantly on the way down. Placing the ceramic glass on the carved oak table Ichigo said, "Yeah you have and I love hearing you say it every single time. I love hearing about her smile and the brightness of her eyes or the amazing food she made."

Isshin nodded staring up at the star-lit sky above pouring another shot he downed the clear liquid before speaking, "I'm proud of you Ichigo I might not say it often enough but I'm proud of you and I love you."

Ichigo felt tears start to burn behind his eyes and he turned away for a moment letting his gaze roam over the shadowed trees hanging like ancient sentinels in the darkness. Tuning to face Isshin Ichigo smiled and said, "Love you to dad."

Before Ichigo could scamper away he was being engulfed a large bear hug Isshin's strong arms holding his son to his chest. Even in the hopelessness and darkness that seemed to hang over the world these days Ichigo found light in his family, in his father's eyes when he spoke of Masaki shining like the stars above.

X
Ichigo had been slightly delirious with fever thanks to an infected wound when the call came out. Regardless of what the healers said Ichigo heaved himself from the floor strapped Zangetsu to his side and followed the trail of reiatsu. Haste rushed through Ichigo's veins it wasn't any call, it was a distress call from Isshin.

There was blood everywhere littering the ground in great puddles and droplets coating the sparse foliage that had taken over the decaying city in crimson. Bodies clothed in ebony and ivory were strewn across the street, mostly Shinigami of lower standard barely a name for themselves in this world. Ichigo paused for a moment sorrow plaguing him as he looked upon their dull glassy eyes.

Moving forward towards the sounds of fighting Ichigo stumbled upon Isshin and a third seat fighting against a Sternritter. Before he could join the fray the third seat was struck down blood flying through the air in some grim imitation of confetti. Pushing forward Ichigo appeared beside Isshin Zangetsu raised against the incoming strike. Isshin was panting Engetsu in Shikai and alighting the world to fire, ash sprinkling from the sky like delicate snow.

"Glad you could make it, though you're still looking a bit under the weather?"

Ichigo laughed slightly and brushed his hair out of his eyes before flicking his blade up to catch the sword looking up Ichigo tried to categorize the Quincy they were facing running through a list of those alive in his mind. Shrugging Ichigo winked at Isshin and said, "Yep wound is still slightly infected but I'll be fine."

Isshin laughed shaking his head and they sprung once more into battle their blades twin peaks of silver in the fading light.

The Quincy was easily dispatched with their combined effort, shaking with slight relief Ichigo wiped the sweat of his brow and turned to face Isshin. Letting his reiatsu sweep around himself to check for survivors, finding none he stepped closer to Isshin.

"We should start heading back they'll be here soon like carrion to the corpses. You could take care of that."

Isshin nodded and with a whisper flames sprung up around them pools of blood sizzling in the intense heat that was Engetsu's flames. Turning they began to head back when a cry echoed over the battlefield turning around immediately they drew themselves to the sound. When they arrived where they thought the sound was coming from there was nothing but empty white walls echoing their footsteps. Reiatsu spiked behind them and Ichigo turned too slow the fever weighing his body down.

Before he could move Isshin was blocking the attack and sending fire hurtling towards the opponent, the Quincy let out terrible screams as it was burned alive like a human candle the scent of rotting flesh filling the air and turning Ichigo's stomach. Isshin turned and that's when Ichigo saw the sliver of a knife embedded in his thigh.

"It's poison Ichigo, any cure we might find would be too late."

Ichigo frowned stepping forward to gently lower his father to the ground, inspecting the wound Ichigo could see it had hit a blood vein the poison would travel swiftly to his heart. Connecting eyes with Isshin, Ichigo pulled the blade out blood starting to spill from the wound, bringing the blade up towards his nose Ichigo sniffed the metal and frowned at the scent of the poison upon the blade.

"Dad this poison will kill you within twenty minutes… I could get you to Kisuke but there wouldn't be enough time."
Isshin nodded looking into Ichigo's eyes understanding what that meant reaching up Isshin rested his hand on Ichigo's cheek the warm calloused palm chasing away the cool touch of fear.

"Ichigo please… don't make me suffer… end it."

Ichigo's eyes widened and he shook his head in denial. Ichigo knew he would do it, he wouldn't force his father to die in agony the last moments of his life filled with untold suffering. Pulling out Zangetsu he placed the blade over his father's chest and looked into Isshin's eyes.

"I'm proud of you Ichigo, so proud and Masaki would be too. I love you so much protect the girls. Shh, don't cry not for this old Goatface you've got so much more to live for. Defeat Bach and live well, age well, go bald well, and if you can, die smiling."

Ichigo placed the blade over Isshin's heart tears tracing trails down his cheeks he said, "I love you too, thank you for everything. I'll protect them I swear, they're safe he can't get them. I promise you I'll live this won't be the end. Goodbye dad."

Zangetsu was swift in his descent and Ichigo grimaced as the blade pierced through his flesh, Ichigo watched the light fade from his father's eyes his last breath rattle in his chest, and a smile settle on his face as he looked up at the stars. Leaning forward Ichigo placed a kiss on Isshin's forward and leant back for a moment. Ichigo sobbed emotion escaping him in quiet sobs and wails.

Standing up Ichigo lifted up Engetsu and asked the blade, "Please do it."

Fire sprung from the grounds the last of Engetsu. Ichigo stood there as the flames roared around him the heat singeing his hair and bringing tears to his eyes, he watched as the flames consumed Isshin, as they seemed to consume the night itself painting it crimson.

X

Chapter End Notes

It seems I am unable to go a chapter without killing someone off… sorry. Hope you enjoyed reviews are much appreciated.

Barley!
Alamort

Chapter Summary

Escaping the fourth (if only briefly), a display of power, battle of wits and a family interaction.

Chapter Notes

Alamort

(adj.) Half dead of exhaustion

Hello everyone! I'm terribly sorry I didn't post last week life but Lady Life was a cruel mistress. But on the other hand Intrigued Chameleon and I have been plotting (mildly evil laughter) and there will be some exciting things coming this way. I hope you all enjoy and once again I apologize I will try to stick to the update schedule as best as I am able. Enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Pushing aside heavy covers Ichigo threw himself out of the once pristine medical bed. His hair was a mess of tangled locks, perspiration beaded his brows, and a crazed light hung in Ichigo's eyes. Stumbling blindly forward, Ichigo rested limp against the window frame, his eyes were lined heavy with sorrow. The image of the moon blurred. Resting his hand on the frame he took in a small breath of strength and pushed open the window, letting the crisp air of night trickle in.

Shivers traced his spine as the sweet breeze brushed against his fire soaked skin and tickled locks heavy against his forehead. Closing his eyes once more Ichigo rested his head against the wooden frame, his mind was abuzz with a thousand thoughts swirling inside his head like a swarm of locusts. Ichigo's breath came in heaving gasps and he could feel the tremors that wracked his hands, trailing up his arm and to his chest.

Taking in calming deep breaths Ichigo tried to center himself in the moment, in the time he now resided in. That future would never come to pass. Ichigo knew that. He would give every cell in his body to prevent that future from coming to pass. He had to live in the moment. Be thankful for what was here.

Yet why did his mind plague him so? Force him to relieve memories over and over again a constant stream of despair emanating from the deepest parts of his soul.
"Sorry Zangetsu it's probably raining like tsunami season in there."

Ichigo's voice was brittle and cracked even while hints of humour tried to shine through. What he said was true. He could feel the bright vistas and sprawling urbanism drown underneath the weight of his sorrow. Shaking his head Ichigo opened his eyes and looked out the window, the white cobbled streets of Soul Society rose up around the fourth but for a small garden hidden behind the fourths walls. Mint grass swayed in a soft midnight breeze, colouring their pale sprouts in an unearthly glow. An old weeping birch rose above the towering ivory walls, its longs leaves hanging like the tattered threads of a tapestry. Under the moon's careful watch the koi pond sparkled like a thousand diamonds rested in those waters catching the light and reflecting brilliantly.

Looking around the small room given to him Ichigo let his reiatsu spill out from himself in gentle waves, checking his surroundings for any wanderers of the halls. Finding none nearby Ichigo gripped the window sill and pulled himself out into the garden. The grass was like the caress of a butterfly's wing beneath his feet slightly ticklish and bringing the faintest tilt upwards of his lips. Walking forward Ichigo tipped his head back, gaze resting on the stars above so far strewn from this earth some of them faded and gone but unseen for thousands of years. The wind curled around his form grazing the edges of his clothes and sending them dancing around him. Walking forward Ichigo stopped by the small koi pond, a collection of rocks in various shapes and sizes surrounded the pond and olive coloured reeds peaked up through the rocks. A flash of orange caught Ichigo's eyes and he peered into the pond catching the flicker of a tail disappearing beneath the murky darkness.

"Ichigo."

Turning in slight surprise Ichigo's eyebrows quirked quizzically as he stared at Zangetsu, his long wavy chocolate hair curled around his head, yellow visors hiding keen blue eyes from sight, and his cloak fluttered around his form the rich crimson underlain it. Ichigo nodded and chastised himself for materializing Zangetsu. The two spirits had the ability to do so if they wished but Ichigo's distress must have called them. Many times in battle Shiro had materialized fighting at Ichigo's back, the two an unstoppable force in their own right.

And there he was. Shiro was hidden underneath the tree, the shade cloaking his pale figure in darkness, eyes of pale gold stared out from the shadows, a wicked smile curled upon his lips. Sighing in amusement Ichigo sat down on the grass feeling it brush against his thighs. Zangetsu drifted closer and stood behind Ichigo; his presence was comforting and quelled the sorrow bubbling and frothing like a cauldron inside him.

"I miss it."

Ichigo's voice echoed in the silence of night parting the air like the red sea. Shiro stepped forward, letting some of the darkness fade away and revealing his pale skin and clothing. His expression was curious but teasing at the same time, taunting Ichigo with a smile as he asked, "What do ya mean? Ya need to be a bit more specific King."

"Everything. I miss the food Yuzu cooked and how we would squabble and Goatface would cry to that giant picture of mom. I miss protecting them from bullies and leaving flowers for the spirits. I want to be able to talk to Kisuke, two intellectuals talking about science, about history, and the Soul Society. Yoruichi teasing me and the hot springs. The relationships I had with everyone. I miss being able to walk down the hall and call out Toshiro's name only for him to respond with his usual command, and Rangiku's flirting. Ikkaku's lucky dance and Yumichika's fashion sense. Hanataro who was cowardly yet so kind. Rukia, Orihime, Renji, Chad, Uryuu I miss them I want to talk to them laugh with them. Eat Orihime's crazy food as we plan battles. Have Chad at my back on the field knowing I'll be safe.
I miss being able to let go. The heat of battle rushing around me, even before the wars started. I can't even release my proper Shikai here. I miss the challenge the thrill. There's no one who understands, no one to talk to. Hush. I know I have you two but that's different we're one in the same and I need new opinions and ideas. I-I just want it back, want to see Yuzu's smile, Orihime's blush, Chad's thumbs up, Rukia's drawings, Renji's goofy smile, Uryuu pushing up his glasses.

But I can't because it's gone all of it. And it's never coming back. We're alone in this world no one will ever understand what I've seen or been through. I know Byakuya when I tell him will try but… I can't look at their faces smile and tell them I'm alright when on the inside I'm burning alive. I-I wa-

Before Ichigo could continue, his chest heaving harsh breaths leaving his lungs, Zangetsu was enveloping Ichigo in a hug. The Zanpaktou spirit was rarely one for touching but the warmth that seemed to radiate from his kin chased away the fiery ice burning Ichigo's insides.

"Shhh. Ichigo calm yourself. Why are you doing this? What are you here for?"

Ichigo's breath caught in his throat and he buried his head in Zangetsu's side. A pull on the back of his robes and Ichigo was stumbling backwards into Shiro's arms, the mirror like image tumbling to the ground with him. A smile settled on Zangetsu's face as he looked at the two sprawled on the ground, lips twitching up slightly at the corners as Ichigo looked up at Zangetsu. With Shiro's support behind him he twisted and said, "Why am I doing this, what am I here for? To save them, to protect them that's always been my goal. It's who I am. Who I always will be. I'm sorry Zangetsu my emotions overwhelmed me. I can do this. I have to."

Zangetsu nodded, satisfied at seeing the determination rekindle in Ichigo's eyes. The old yet young Shinigami let out a rush of air and settled back in Shiro's arms familiar to him in catching him before he fell more than once. Looking up at the stars once more Ichigo could see the shining cascade of light that filled the night sky pin pricks like tiny gemstones hidden within walls of dark stone, adrenaline began to boil in his veins and Ichigo considered the night once more.

"If you seek something to entertain yourself this night, smell the air it is tainted."

Ichigo nodded his thanks to Zangetsu's advice knowing the spirit meant well in suggesting something to take Ichigo's mind away from the pain of his emotions and the restless thrumming in his bones. Closing his eyes Ichigo took in the crisp night air in an even rhythm breathing in through his nose he picked up on the faint trace of what Zangetsu spoke of. The smell was corrupted with the lingering taste of bitter ashes reminiscent to the battlegrounds of Hueco Mundo where hordes of hollows fell.

Shifting in Shiro's arms Ichigo stood up thanking his spirits with a genuine smile his soul bared for the whole of him. The two spirits dissipated ebony and ivory wisps of smoke fading in the light of the moon. Stretching slightly Ichigo tested his legs and arms wondering if his strength had returned to him, energy thrummed in his veins and the aches and pains of the night before had settled into memory.

Ichigo knew his body would likely protest this midnight excursion and curse him for it later but the energy balled in his feet urged him forward regardless of the consequences. Ichigo figured he could avoid another attack like that if he induced a healing sleep using kido, it theoretically would work in giving him the sleep he needed but he would have to work it out at a later time. Turning his attention back to the problem at hand Ichigo shifted to face the direction the smell was coming from with his lips curved up in excitement. Then Ichigo launched forward. The ground was a blur beneath his feet, the wind rushing through his hair like he was standing in front of a jet, and reaitsu lit up beneath his feet disappearing in faint whispers of lapis and ruby.

When Ichigo drew closer to the tainted fragrance he slowed down letting the blinding speeds fall
away and allowing him to slip into a light walk. There was a forest around him deep trees with thick trunks and broad leaves, to the south one of the smaller districts was nestled in the side of a cliff. Weak wisps of smoke drifted from the collection of homes and the tawny yellow of straw roofs shone in the darkness of night. White light sizzled ahead sparking in the forest and sending a few birds careening away with loud caws. Touching down in the forest Ichigo muffled the sounds of his feet with his reaitsu; a skill Yourichi had taught him, one of the many the Onmitsukidō were taught.

Voices pierced the veil of night and the quiet that had spread over the land with the setting of the sun was swiftly shattered. Shifting into a crouch Ichigo peered through the collection of bushes and foliage clustered on the ground. A clearing was revealed three figures cloaked in darkness with peaks of white glimmering in the moonlight. Ichigo shook his head with a laugh of course it was Aizen. The bastard never knew when to quit. Leaning back against a conveniently placed tree Ichigo stared ahead and pondered his course of action.

He couldn't charge ahead, accuse Aizen of treason and defeat the three, it would put his family at risk and would likely subjugate himself to more than a few new wounds. Staring at the madman illuminated by the stars chocolate hair hanging around his ears the glint of light reflecting off his glasses. Ichigo felt it again even from this distance the loneliness that seemed to curl inside Aizen’s soul and consume his every passion, even with Gin and Kaname there the man was alone.

Ichigo could sympathize. Having power of such great magnitude put you somewhere else, it was never easy to connect with people when all they saw was your power, and they would only use it for their own means. It was a matter of circumstance Ichigo had always had someone his mom, dad, sisters someone to protect and care for. People who shaped him into a protector not a killer. The question came to his mind once again, if Aizen had someone would he have turned out the way he did? It was hard to say the man was a scientist, he didn't experiment on hollows for sick delight alone. Yet hidden underneath that façade of niceness and the deeper façade of uncaring madman there was more.

Ichigo wanted to save everyone and he wondered if that included the mad man. Could he convince him that the hogyoku wasn't the answer? Ichigo knew that the partial reason he turned was Soul Society's corruption but already plans were in action to change everything. But he couldn't go out there now extending the olive branch, the offer would be refused and shot down, no first was a display of the power inside Ichigo. Then a more tactile and strategic approach but he could figure that out later.

Looking up from where his head had tipped to look at the ground in his musings Ichigo could see the nearest rustle of fabric at the edge of his vision as Gin disappeared from sight, Kaname talked to Aizen for a few moments more before with a nod the blind Shinigami disappeared as well. The clearing was empty except for Aizen the smattering of white upon the Earth and the few hollows that lumbered around.

X

The power curled around his body in slow precise movements his hair lengthened even more so and turned dark as the blackest night, chocolate eyes normally so full of warmth coloured deep crimson some feral power hidden within. Bandages wrapped around his torso like the silver threads of reishi binding three into one, tribal tattoos of onyx raced along his arms and hid beneath his chest.

Mugetsu was a complicated form for any to understand even Isshin when teaching it to Ichigo didn't know the complexities behind the technique. In essence Mugetsu was becoming the blade itself merging with Zangetsu, different from a bankai where they are separate and connected at the same time. In this form there is no three only one. When Ichigo first used the technique it stripped him of
his powers as it was supposed to, no normal Shinigami was to be able to harness that amount of power. Then again Ichigo was never normal. It had taken Ichigo years and the help of Kisuke to figure out the trick to keeping Ichigo's powers.

When they became one their reiatsu bonded them together keeping the three as one but when released it snapped causing pain and forcing Ichigo's powers to recede deep within himself. With great effort and many trials and tribulations Ichigo had learned how to slowly unravel the bindings, without the force of the snap Ichigo's powers remained as did the three. The strain of Mugetsu on his body however still left him bedridden for days.

Feeling the technique's completion Mugetsu rolled his shoulders and stepped out of the clearing, obsidian reiatsu curling around his form and waving through the air in thick tendrils. Aizen turned the moment Mugetsu stepped out from the shadows and cover of the forest his eyes widened dramatically and stared incomprehensibly at Mugetsu. Before the man could blink Mugetsu was in front of him power radiating from him like the sun's rays.

"Who are you?"

Aizen could feel the power Mugetsu possessed how it overwhelmed his own reiatsu and yet the man showed no fear staring steadily into Mugetsu's blood red eyes. Inclining his head in respect Mugetsu spoke his voice a bare whisper upon the breeze of night.

"It is not yet time you know my name though I rise with the moon itself. Feel this power."

Mugetsu's reiatsu exploded from him in a tidal wave of ebony swarming around the two in an endless sea of black. Shock dawned on Aizen's face, his eyes wide with disbelief. Frowning he composed himself eyes of deep umber curious he asked, "Why show me? Are you here to execute me?"

"Kill you? No that is not why I am here, I have come to show you power and what it truly is. And to speak of you, you who grow disillusioned with Soul Society know this. Change is coming, an oncoming storm and you will either join the tearing winds in their path or fall victim to the deadly lightning that strikes down all in its way. Be wise Sōsuke Aizen."

Mugetsu stared into eyes of burnt umber for a moment longer before he darted away the wind howling in the trees and the trickles of ebony reiatsu disappearing the only trace of Mugetsu ever having been there.

Entering the gardens of the fourth, Mugetsu gingerly let the bindings unwind the one haltingly becoming three. The bindings cracked and fell apart like the bandages of charcoal that wrapped his form, long hair shortened to its usual length and vibrant orange locks, and eyes of fierce crimson faded to tired yet warm chocolate eyes.

Taking a deep breath Ichigo surveyed the pain radiating through his body, every muscle seemed to ache and his bones were chilled as if ice had coated them from the inside. Ichigo's eyes felt heavy as if he would drop at any moment and the emptiness in his chest choked the breath from him leaving his chest rising and falling rapidly. Clearing his mind of the pain Ichigo stumbled forward gently easing himself through the window and back into his room in the fourth.

The bed seemed like a cloud in heaven to Ichigo's tired mind, he briefly surveyed himself letting his reiatsu clean the dust away with a shuddering breath. Falling into bed Ichigo pulled the covers over himself feeling some of the haunting cold fade from his bones; Zangetsu and Shiro were weak yet soothing presences at the back of his mind.
Kaien paced at the front of the fourth trying to calm the erratic reiatsu that curled inside himself and spilled around him in heaving quantities. Worry bubbled inside his gut as he stared past the rows of hospital beds some occupied others empty; he'd been forced to wait far too long to see Ichigo. Kaien could see the reasoning behind it with his frantic mothering the brunt of many of Ichigo's jokes but it still irritated him that he couldn't see his baby brother.

Looking up when he felt her imposing presence Kaien spotted Unohana-Taicho gliding down the hall her ebony hair glinting in the light of the fourth. Walking forward to meet the frantically scary captain Kaien bowed and asked, "Unohana-Taicho may I please see my brother."

She considered him for a moment her piercing azure eyes assessing every inch of him, seeing the resolute determination there she nodded softly. A smile slipped onto Kaien's face unbidden and he followed Unohana as she turned and led him to the room Ichigo was residing in. The first thing Kaien noticed as soon as the door opened was the cold, a gentle cold one might find on an early May morning but cold nonetheless. Following Unohana inside Kaien could see the cause in an open window curtains billowing in the gentle breeze.

Kaien’s gaze was then focused solely on Ichigo; stepping closer to the bed he could see that Ichigo was asleep his eyes closed and brow scrunched as if he was suffering a night terror. Perspiration beaded his brow and soaked his locks, blood trickled from his nose and his breath was quiet almost inaudible. Unohana rushed forward concern saturating her features as the mellow green of healing kido hovered over Ichigo's body.

"This is peculiar his body has gotten worse. Nothing serious only showing large amounts of strain on the muscles, increased exhaustion, and a definite need for energy and sustenance."

Kaien frowned in worry looking at Ichigo, turning away to look into Unohana's eyes Kaien nodded and asked, "Is there anything I can do to be of assistance?"

Unohana-taicho regarded him coolly for a moment before shaking her head and saying, "Just stay quiet and let him rest we can work everything out when he's ready to wake up."

As if her words were a que Ichigo's eyes fluttered open glazed and confused he stared at nothing, the space between the two and neither of their faces. Ichigo opened his mouth to speak but no words came out; seemingly nodding in understanding Unohana-taicho passed a wooden cup of water to him carefully tilting it so that the water would go in slowly and not choke him. Pulling back Ichigo blinked again dazed chocolate eyes still fixed on nothing and said, "No the captain's wrong we need to go to the western front. Orihime I can't eat your food now."

"He's hallucinating." Kaien stated staring at his brother in concern Unohana nodded her ocean coloured eyes mirroring the same expression. Unohana-taicho stood up casting an assessing gaze toward Kaien before striding towards the door and saying, "I have to talk to one of the members of my squad I'll return shortly."

Kaien nodded and with the faint 'click' of the sliding door the two were alone, staring at Ichigo Kaien leaned forward and placed a kiss on his brow and whispered, "Get well soon Ichi. I still have to beat you in a sake drinking competition."

Leaning back Kaien watched the gentle rise and fall of Ichigo's chest and listened to his quiet exhale of breath.

X
The archives were quiet as Ichigo slipped in under the cover of darkness, night had fallen and sleep had fled him as it often did. Looking at the worn book in his hand Ichigo sighed brushing stray strands of soft tangerine out of his eyes, he wondered what possessed him to sneak into the archives during the night when the in daylight the door swung wide open. Looking around at the shelves piled to the brim with papers yellow and faded, books missing pages and well-worn spines hr nodded to himself. The knowledge he sought was kept under lock and key deemed too dangerous by the Soutaicho or useless.

Walking further into the archives Ichigo took a deep breath inhaling the ethereal and comforting smell that always accompanied worn old books, it was a welcoming smell almost beckoning you home. Asking you to step away from reality and into a whole new world simply by flipping open the cover. Inquisitive eyes scanned the many spines reading the titles, some were classics (or at least those written within the time period he rested in) others were works by fellow Shinigami. They were legends themselves their tales put in print collecting dust where few would search for it.

Traveling deeper into the archives Ichigo shuddered at the chill draft that traced the library currents of cool wind bustling about before dying down and leaving the quiet so rightly found in a library. The archives were not commonly used, academy students would use the many books and previous essays for their school work and never think twice about the vast well of knowledge hidden behind doors of carved oak.

During the war the system had been updated actual files and novels kept in organized fashion, the doors were of forged steel, and during the war when knowledge of a Quincy plan of attack focused on the archives reached them the Gotei 13 torched the place. Ichigo remembered watching the flames dance upon the night people singing and drinking dancing in the flames of their ancestors. Ichigo had sat quietly in the background mourning the loss of knowledge and listening to the sharp cracks of wood burning.

Shaking himself from the visions of fire in front of his eyes Ichigo smiled fondly as his eyes alighted on a title relating to the theories of reiatsu. Selecting the book he pulled it off the shelf dust billowing in a soft cloud of sparkling grey. There was a librarian a kind old man whose bones ached and his eyes were a pale milky white though knowledge sang through his voice weathered with age. He was kind with a family in Rungokai and a passion for knowledge but he could hardly take care of the vastness and all-encompassing archives.

Opening the tome Ichigo peered at the title before flipping through a few of the pages glancing at the many diagrams and flowing script found only in books handwritten. It was a shame Kisuke has only been head of the twelfth for a few years, Ichigo was looking forward to all the knowledge and wisdom that would soon be found. Ichigo may never have shown it in class, but he was smart. Nowhere near genius but he always understood the lessons, understood the basics of quantum physics because they interested him. Anything he put his mind to Ichigo could figure out (within reason he wasn't likely to figure out how to revive a man from the dead).

During his timeline when he dwelled in Soul Society there was rarely time to stop and read for a passing moment, battle always calling or wounds needing to be tended. Ichigo wondered now if some of the answers they sought rested in these novels, if perhaps Ichigo could figure out how he traveled through time itself.

Shaking himself from wistful musings Ichigo walked forward towards the restricted section the rest of the archives were open to the Shinigami during the day, it was only the archives that were kept under lock and key. Reaching the kido that barred the restricted section from the rest Ichigo raised his palm and let it rest against the faintly glimmering barrier, under his touch pale yellow walls were revealed. Ichigo frowned at the subtle traces of some other reiatsu hidden carefully that a normal
Shinigami would never feel it; Ichigo was not a normal Shinigami. Sending a hushed pulse of reiatsu towards the barrier Ichigo watched it shudder and flicker before disappearing completely, stepping inside with a soft smile on his face Ichigo looked at the book in his hand as the kido snapped into place behind him.

The worn leather cover felt soft underneath calloused pads the mess of string and rope tangled around the book's rough texture beneath his fingers, on top of the tome was a smaller book clean and new given to him for his birthday from Kukkaku. Written inside were all the translations he was able to make using the rough knowledge of other languages he had, the trick was the book was written in a multitude of different languages, some so foreign and ancient Ichigo wondered if they were not code. Caressing the spine Ichigo padded along the worn carpet his eye darting to the titles written in foreign languages and comparing them to the writing inside the ancient tome.

X

Aizen prowled the restricted section eyes searching the many collections of books searching for a select few, ones that spoke of hollows, tomes that spoke of the Soul King and the beginning of all that ever was. Pulling a book cloaked in a juniper cover, blowing the dust away Aizen paused as the sound of crinkled pages being turned reached his ears, cocking his head to the left the lieutenant listened with bated breath. The noise came again and Aizen's eyebrow arched surprise and curiosity waging war across his features. Tucking the heavy tome under his arm Aizen glided across the rich plum coloured carpet a slight breeze the only trace of his passing.

Peeking around the edge of a bookcase Aizen could see a sphere of light against the far bookcase, a figure partially cloaked in shadows with a small oil lamp beside them. Shifting his glasses Aizen let his eyes adjust to the light and looked again, vibrant strands of orange seemed to catch on fire in the warm gold light cast by the lamp, pale skin glowed in the darkness contrasting the light, the figure was cloaked in the standard Shinigami uniform a book held between his hands and two others resting on his lap.

Stepping into the Shinigami's circle of light the figure started slightly and looked up, caramel eyes a tumultuous mix of emotion stared into Aizen's own, a pale angular face almost noble in its casting, Aizen recognized the figure half shadowed in darkness though they had only met once for a brief moment.

Ichigo Shiba. The Enigma. Well deserving of his capital letter. Appearing out of nowhere a few years back almost completely drained of reiatsu and heavily scarred. The fourth's reports stated he suffered nightmares frequently and what sleep he did get was minimal. His power on the other hand was remarkable, needing only one year in the academy which he took voluntarily when he could have moved straight through the ranks. Achieving Shikai before he graduated and offered third seat before as well. Friends with Byakuya Kuchiki he was often alone, seen as antisocial and strange to some.

This man who stared at Aizen knowingly a calculating look on his face and a strange mixture of sympathy and pity in his eyes. This Shinigami who held power hidden underneath tight bonds was a mystery and Aizen never liked a mystery unless they were one of his own design.

"Good evening. Or is it morning?"

Shiba-san's voice was pleasant on the ears. Soft, yet deep in a way that suggested strength, his tone was welcoming and open as if he expected to find another Shinigami prowling the archives corridors at night. Stepping into the light Aizen watched as the young Shinigami shuffled his books to the side before looking into Aizen's eyes.
"I did not expect to see anyone else here tonight. Do you come to the archives often?"

The orangette shrugged a strange grin full of mischievousness and cockiness passing onto his features for an instant before disappearing. Shiba-san turned to the side picking up one of the books piled in a small stack of six or seven high he said, "I don't come here often merely on a certain quest for knowledge that the unrestricted section cannot satisfy."

"So you came to find "Jie translations and verbs" or "Runic alphabet" or "Theories of relative reiatsu" or perhaps more interesting the book bound in leather and scarps with no name."

Aizen's kind smile as he spoke was false yet the curious tone was real. Thankful for the narrow design of the archives Aizen lent against the bookcase behind him regarding the third seat with keen interest. Shiba-san's eyes darted to look at the worn wrapped tome for a moment a strange expression passing across his face before he turned to face Aizen and said, "The book with no name came not from the archives it's why I'm here I wish to translate the text and as for the reiatsu theories I was interested in the concept of reiatsu manipulation in correlation with the Dangai Precipice." Here the Third seat paused, mumbling to himself even as Aizen quite clearly heard him, "Have they even named it that yet?" Then slightly louder, "What about you Aizen-san? The novels you carry under your arm are of diverse content. "History of Soul Society", "Hollows the dynamics of their species" rather interesting selections."

Tension sprang between the two caramel orbs connecting with Aizen's own umber eyes. Those eyes were full of intelligence, sorrow, sympathy, power, pity, anger, bravery, cunning, thirst, and Aizen wondered how one man could feel so much and hide it from the rest of the world. Aizen realised looking into those soulful eyes that few saw Shiba-san as such with his soul this bared and yet still hidden behind a thick veil. Few would even realize what they were seeing to a fool Shinigami it might seem an apathetic mask but the eyes truly were windows if not to the soul then to his heart. Aizen wondered at the emotion stirring in his heart, wondered at the hope that kindled at the edge of his senses. This Shinigami was peculiar. He incited something in Aizen that he wasn't sure he was opposed to. Frowning, Aizen stared once more into those eyes either seeing if the other would crack. He said with utmost sincerity, "You are an Enigma Shiba-san."

"Good I was beginning to think I was far too normal."

A smile akin to a wolf baring its teeth was flashed his way before it too was gone, leaving the apathetic mask back in place. Aizen smiled in kind, a hint of the lack of sanity flashing in his eyes before he returned to the kind façade that was presented to the rest of soul society. Shiba-san didn't even blink at the insanity that flashed through Aizen's eyes the only response was the slightest touch of darkness to caramel orbs before Aizen was looking at the stars endless galaxies wrapped up inside of Shiba-san's eyes.

"We should meet again when the darkness does not cloak our every movement?"

Shiba-san posed the question, a knowing look on his carved features. Aizen considered the offer and the hidden message behind the seemingly innocent words. Aizen wondered what would come of it if they met again. Friendship was a far and foreign concept to Aizen and yet so was having someone on a level equal to him. Oh Urahara was smart, a genius but he would never understand. The hidden power coiled underneath Shiba-san's every movement suggested otherwise.

Aizen nodded, staring to eyes infinitely old and yet so young. Pushing off from the wall Aizen adjusted his glasses, light from the lamp flickering off the lenses he fixed Ichigo with a hard stare. Wishing he could understand the message hidden in those eyes, he turned away shihaksho billowing behind him as he approached the end of the aisle.
"Farewell Shiba-san. I have no doubt we will meet again soon."

With those words Aizen disappeared from sight. The warm golden glow of the oil lamp fading to the darkness all-encompassing cloaking him in her tender folds. Aizen pondered his account this night thought on the strange Shinigami cloaked in sorrow and joy, swathed in the folds of the universe.

X

Ichigo watched as Ketsuryū swung her sword in a fast and harsh stroke the blade felling in an invisible enemy swiftly, she pivoted roughly her ankle twisting a slight hit too far to the right Ichigo chalked it down in his mind and watched as an overhead swing dispatched the last of her foes.

"Good job, watch your ankle you almost twisted it because you overextended, also keep in mind the weight of your zanpaktou you want to maintain a balance. Remember always that the blade is not some sheets of metal welded together. It is an extension of yourself, how you wield your blade is how your soul is seen."

Ketsuryū nodded her crimson hair escaping its tight bun to hang in loose curls around her head, she was panting with her hands on her hips a smile of determination still rested on her sharp features. Shaking his head in amusement Ichigo was about to step forward to engage her when the presence of an eighth squad member announced itself. Frowning Ichigo sent a slightly apologetic expression towards Ketsuryū and said, "It seems duty calls. Off you go we can resume some other time, and remember to watch your footwork!"

Ketsuryū smiled in relieved thanks, her lips quirking upwards to soften the sharpness of her face she nodded and left the courtyard where they'd been practising for over two hours. Running his hand through his hair Ichigo turned to face the squad member who was glancing around nervously seemingly in haste. Grinning in a friendly manner Ichigo turned his attention to the young man.

"Kyoraku-taicho would like to see you, he says he has a task he needs you for."

Ichigo sighed and prayed it wasn't helping him hide the sake from Lisa again; when was the man going to learn that woman had the nose of a bloodhound and she would likely find sake buried underneath the eighth. Nodding his understanding the Shinigami bowed and left the soft whistle of air marking his passing. Squaring his shoulders Ichigo followed the Shinigami towards the squad the normal buzz of chatter and welcoming reiatsu washing over him.

Striding towards Shunsui's office Ichigo ignored the hushed whispers and eyes glued to his back, Shunsui was a fan of the females and as such many of his squadron consisted of the female gender (though there were some men staring as well). Ichigo was used to the stares by now, he only wondered if they would ever get tired of it.

Pushing open the thin shoji door ichigo wasn't surprised to see Shunsui sprawled on the couch, his straw hat tilted precariously over his eyes hiding the no doubt napping captain's eyes from sight. Shaking his head in amusement Ichigo padded forward and tipped the hat off listening to it clatter the floor with a pleased smile. Ichigo watched as Shunsui woke up his eyelids blinking groggily and his hand coming up to block the light streaming in from one of the windows out of his sight.

"You wanted to see me captain?"

Ichigo stared his voice an octave higher than it needed to be startlingly Shunsui awake. The chocolate haired captain stirred for a minute more before sitting up his flowered haori fluttering around his shoulders.
"Ah Ichigo must you wake me from such sweet slumber… alright, alright I need you to deliver some papers of important matters and all that's secrecy to the tenth captain."

Ichigo bit his lip at the thought of seeing Isshin again when it had only been a month and a bit since he had escaped Unohana's clutches. Casting his gaze around the office he could see the unfinished stacks of paperwork sprawled across the floor in heaps and piles of cluttered chaos, a bottle of sake was on the small table beside the couch along with an empty sake cup. Ichigo could easily make the assumption that Lisa was nowhere in sight or near enough to stop the whirlwind that was Shunsui.

"Are the papers the one in the red binder with the Soutaicho's crest?"

Shunsui nodded and Ichigo picked up the folder surprised at the weight and bulk of the package turning back to face Shunsui Ichigo said, "I'll be back soon do try and clean up some of the mess taicho, you know Lisa won't be happy if she sees the office a mess…again."

Laughing even while his nerves bubbled beneath his skin and rattled his rib cage Ichigo pushed open the door the image of calm. Bursting into flash-step Ichigo felt some of the tension fade away as he travelled over the yellow tiled roofs of Soul Society the anxiety bubbling in his gut settling with Zangetsu's presence.

X

Ichigo knocked on the door before entering taking muted breaths trying to release the emotions that frothed underneath his fingertips. The door slid open and Ichigo blinked in surprise to see Rangiku the women's short strawberry blond hair glowed in the fading afternoon, and a smile settled coyly on her face as she regarded Ichigo.

"I'm here to see Shiba-taicho I have a file from Kyroraku-taicho."

The young lieutenant pouted before stepping back and letting Ichigo in. The office was far different from when Toshiro had run it, paper was scattered everywhere an almost mirror image to Shunsui's own office. Toshiro dutifully sat at one of the desks, the sound of paperwork being filled out a monotone background that stopped as the ivory haired third seat looked up at Ichigo.

Isshin was in front of Ichigo before he could prepare himself to see the young energetic captain, a brilliant smile rested on his face as he looked at Ichigo taking in the signs of increased health or at least compared to their first meeting in the fourth...

"Ichigo glad to see you're looking better. Did you finally decided to come and visit your clan head?"

Toshiro and Rangiku stared at Ichigo obviously connecting the dots, and Ichigo knew the man had talked about him before even if he didn't know Ichigo well in this timeline. It was in his nature to talk about his family, frankly it was in his nature to be overdramatic.

Stepping back before he could be pulled into a bear hug Ichigo said, "Actually I'm bringing this folder from Kyroraku-taicho."

The man wilted at Ichigo's dismissal of wanting to see him before his eyes snapped to the folder and a serious expression stole across his face. Pacing back to his desk Isshin quietly sat down and flipped through the folder his eyes glancing up to stare at Ichigo pensively for a moment before snapping back to the folder.

A few moments of tense silence later Isshin put the folder down and stood up, a bright smile residing on his face he turned to Toshiro and Rangiku beckoning them forwards he smiled and said, "Rangiku, Toshiro this is Ichigo Shiba my nephew and third seat of the Eighth division. Ichigo this is
Rangiku my lieutenant and Toshiro my third seat."

Ichigo bowed inclining his head in respect, Toshiro repeated the motions; Rangiku merely winked and smiled twirling a lock of strawberry blond hair. Isshin nodded pleased before he pulled Ichigo aside obviously wishing to talk to the orangette.

"Ichigo I was hoping you would come to the family home one night, I know you're not one for socializing but I would like to know my own nephew better!"

Ichigo nodded reluctantly knowing there was no way of escaping the dinner that would inevitably come. Ichigo only dreaded spending time with the man who wasn't his father, already memories pushed against his head, creating a bitter headache and his heart was heavy with grief.

Isshin grinned, ignorant to the frown and reluctance in Ichigo's eyes. Before Ichigo could protest he was being pulled into a hug large strong arms wrapping around him and pulling him into a broad chest. Ichigo felt some of the tense energy thrumming through his body fade at the scents that assaulted his nose, it was like he was being hugged by his dad and yet everything was different.

Pulling away Ichigo let a smile stretch across his face hoping the façade would fool Isshin and hide the tremulous sorrow in his eyes. Ichigo received a wide grin in return, nodding to Rangiku and Toshiro Ichigo turned his shihaksho billowing around his form as he left the room.

Darting away from Seireitei, Ichigo landed in one of the many wooded areas surrounding the districts. Sinking to the ground his back resting against a tree its bark rough against his spine Ichigo closed his eyes. Taking deep breaths Ichigo stopped the questions that wanted to plague his mind from overwhelming him instead focusing on the soft touch of sunlight upon the hills.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, comments are always appreciated as they are a source of nourishment for authors.
A pleasant breeze tickled the tangled locks resting on Ichigo’s shoulders sending them floating about his head and playfully tickling his ears. The garden was quiet except for the soft padding of feet upon a well-worn path of simple dirt. Ancient and withered sentinels rose up sparsely around them, leaves hanging from heavy laden boughs as if reaching to caress him. The pleasant hum of nature filled his ears and invaded his senses filling him with a sense of inner peace so hard to come by. Lavender and various other herbs such as basil and rosemary cluttered the ground in small patches of curling vines and emerald leaves.

Turning to look at his companion Ichigo smiled at the slightly open expression on the Soutaicho’s face; the normally stoic old man had a calm expression though still jaded, waiting for the slightest
hint of attack. It had been Yammamoto’s suggestion that they embark from his dreary office into the afternoon sunlight of pleasant May. Buzzing floated along the breeze tickling Ichigo’s senses and he looked ahead trying to identify the sound. Surprise sprinkled his features as his eyes caught a speck of bright green hidden among the soft purples of the lavender. Taking a step closer Ichigo peered down to see that the creature was a praying mantis it’s long and narrow body camouflaged as a leaf among its resting place, Ichigo stared for a moment at the minuscule creature pondering its intelligent gaze before taking a step back to align himself with Yammamoto.

“Earlier you were speaking of discord among our ranks?”

Yammamoto queried eyes once like the simmering coals of the fire blazed as they stared into Ichigo’s warm chocolate eyes. Ichigo shook his head slightly in the negative his eyes casting around taking in the scenery before he replied, “In a way, I was suggesting that discord may rise among our ranks. I was also speaking of the Shinigami education and its faults.”

The old man harrumphed turning a raised eyebrow to regard the youngster before stroking the pommel of his cane in thought, they continued to walk, their feet bare whispers on the breeze accompanied by the barest sound of the cane pounding against the floor. Taking the silence as an invitation to continue Ichigo said, “While the teachers are well trained the academy lacks some aspects of Shinigami training that weakens our ranks. While in the academy students are taught the same basic movements over and over again, practising them till their blades sail through the movement like water. Yet they are never encouraged to develop their own style, they become weak and complacent when facing hollows and would hardly survive in a duel...”

The Soutaicho nodded conceding the point, the sun glanced off the violet ribbon threaded through his beard throwing light into Ichigo’s eyes for a sparse moment. Pausing where they stood Yammamoto deviated to the left following a path of his own design through the ankle reaching grass. The sweet sensation of grass curling around his ankles was broken as they settled onto a stone bench, its features twisted and a multitude of grey in the sun’s warm light. Staring out from where he sat beside the old man Ichigo could see the small expanse of the garden closed in behind white bricked walls, hiding them from the rest of the world.

“And how would you suggest we solve the problem, one who has time to identify the flaws in society must also have the time to find a solution.”

Ichigo laughed muted in the stillness of the garden at Yammamoto’s small criticism and humour. Shaking his head orange tresses swaying over his eyes with the movement Ichigo inclined his head and said, “I was thinking sending in one of the lieutenants or third seats every two weeks; a different one each time. Have them impart different skills, tips, or knowledge to the students. They can talk about finding their own style and the older ones can tell of numbers lost on the field because Shinigami have become lax in their skills seeing only the hollow as their enemy.”

Yammamoto shifted in his seat, keen eyes the colour of coffee revealing themselves as he stared into Ichigo’s own chocolate eyes. Determination blazed like a fire in Ichigo’s soul daring the old man to challenge Ichigo’s words, to accuse him of foolery but in doing so Yammamoto saw past the warm layer of compassion that fooled many into thinking Ichigo happy, past the blinding pain searing his insides and begging him to let go. Yammamoto saw the weary eyes of a soldier, aged beyond his years, full of darkness and the tired ache of the living and to the Soutaicho’s surprise beyond all that dwelled inside Ichigo’s soul was the pale flicker of hope, a candle struggling to stay lit in the billowing winds that buffeted Ichigo’s every movement.

“You have seen this?”

Ichigo let out a bitter laugh hollow and empty, lifeless compared to the laughter that would spill from
his lips when a particular move was made, or a funny phrase spoken. The youth rested his head in his hand balancing elbows on ebony clothed knees he took a moment before tilting back to face the heavens above. Ichigo looked at the sky the palest shade of sapphire and said, “Seen it… I lived it, sent those men to their deaths knowing not one of them would make it out alive.”

“So you fought in a war Ichigo.”

The Soutaicho’s words were a statement filled with kind undertones of sorrow as he considered the young Shinigami eyes cast towards the sky. Ichigo shook his head mirthless laughter escaping his lips and echoing around the empty garden he quieted for a moment before he said, “Two wars. One just a pawn on the board moving under false puppet strings. The second was a board of my own making. They fell around me like flies caught in a spider’s web and I was the one who left them in the dust to be caught, except in the end there was no web to support anyone. Only I remained.”

The old man stood up the sharp crack of his bones marking his shift in position as Ichigo hastily sprung to his feet offering the Soutaicho a hand, the sorrow temporarily cleared from his mind. Together they began the slow pace first set as they trekked through the garden, the wind whistled softly through Ichigo’s ears whispering pleasant lullabies.

“If I asked you for details you would be unable to tell me?” Soutaicho quietly asked. Ichigo nodded, the motion more easily conveyed than the lump that resided in his throat and made swallowing a task. The old man continued, “Men will fall that is that fate of all man and woman. Death comes to claim us all, even us his so called gods, you cannot measure your own life by how many you have taken. I have sent countless men into the fires of battle knowing they will not return as well, young Ichigo and I have seen their wives cradle unresponsive bodies’ cold with death’s kiss. Not once do they beguile me for his loss. Those Shinigami died in honour providing a valuable service even if it cost them their lives. The hard part isn’t dying or sending a man to certain death. The hardest part is living with what you’ve done.”

Ichigo began to speak quietly and solemnly saying “But what is the point of life if dismissed so casually. A good man may die on the battlefield at peace knowing that his aid may be small yet worthwhile. What is the purpose if that life could be saved, find a different tactic or a new plan. The problem is we don’t try hard enough, we are no longer scared of death, it holds nothing for us other than what religion tells us. We justify every life taken with the ‘greater good’ and ‘they’re in a better place’ when we have forgotten the joys of life. War turns men into monsters seeking only the end no matter the cost, and monsters are turned into men in the face of greater evil.”

Silence reigned dominating the small garden as the two Shinigami thought over the others and their own words. Truth lay in each of their words and spoke honey of the other, Ichigo knew both sides of the coin intimately while the Soutaicho who had grown on war his whole life perhaps did not see the way Ichigo did. Ichigo always had something to protect, something to hold close to his heart. Memories of Yuzu opening the door and wrapping chubby little arms around his leg followed by Karin’s bob of ebony hair. In Soul Society it was a bit different from the flow of normal life where in time not far past the Shinigami had been cold and ruthless.

Brushing the questions simmering under his skin away and the apprehension at the Soutaicho’s questions Ichigo turned to face the man noting the studying expression placed on him once again, then a smile spilled across his face, the barest turning upwards of lips.

“You are indeed wise beyond your years Ichigo, I hope in time we may speak more freely of your war and my war, for nothing is better than two old men squabbling over the past.

Ichigo cracked a smile nodding his head at the humour Yammamoto displayed in cunning words. Silence that hung like a curtain of tightly woven thread as they spoke was lifted and the faint hum of
nature filled the silence.

“You have a hidden agenda Ichigo, what it is even I cannot see. But clear to mine eyes even blinded with age is the fire in your soul. A fire that burns all evil and provides warmth to those you cherish. Words are a tricky thing cunning snakes may speak with honeyed tongue, but it is the eyes that show truth in falseness.”

Yammamoto’s voice flowed along the quiet hum of the garden neither piercing the silence nor imposing on any perceived peace. Ichigo nodded his head his own eyes of soulful fire connecting with the simmering coals of Yammamoto’s eyes waiting to be stirred into fire.

“Darkness comes with the slow and ever encroaching pace of a glacier, gliding silent and unnoticed. The light waits to greet them in slow pursuit, unknowingly preparing themselves for what soon may dawn in coming evening.”

Yammamoto turned to Ichigo an amused expression cast into features of carved marble he said, “They accuse men burdened with age like me for speaking in riddles and yet you so easily do the same.”

Ichigo laughed the sound like wind chimes clear in the afternoon sunlight, the sorrow heavy on his shoulders evaporated slightly leaving him feeling light in the wake of the Soutaicho’s humour.

X

Ichigo grumbled under his breath as he stepped into the barracks of the twelfth, cool air traced his skin in uneven gusts swirling around his ears and raising the hair on the back of his neck. The building was hardly as high tech as the one Ichigo knew from his timeline, still wires hung from the roof like snakes from vines, cables curled under his feet connecting one thing to another. The smell of smoke and other hazardous chemicals hung heavy on the air leaving a slight burn at the back of Ichigo’s throat. Flickering light from above shrouded some parts of the lab in darkness casting a slightly eerie feel to the place.

Ichigo was thankful that it was Kisuke who was the captain and not Mayuri with his twisted thoughts and creepy demeanour. The man was intelligent, genius maybe but it was sharply contrasted by the insanity of his gaze.

Cursing Shunsui once more under his breath Ichigo strode through the lab cast in half darkness, intrigued eyes roving from side to side to observe the variety of projects and experiments assembled on benches and tables weighing down stacks of paperwork likely to never see the light of day again. His mind briefly spotted on Hiyori the little fireball of painful doom, the twelfth didn’t suit her feisty nature and yet she stayed loyal to her captain (though to which was debatable). A lazy smirk curled upon Ichigo’s lips as he thought of the many fights Hiyori and Shinji had entertained while he trained with the Vizard.

The sound of muffled cursing drew his mind from fond reminiscing which would likely turn sour in time’s passing. Turning his head towards the sound Ichigo spotted a Shinigami cloaked in a white lab coat hunched over an early design of a microscope spiky green hair branching out from the hunched over figure. Stepping closer Ichigo regarded the worksheets with the messy scrabble akin to chicken scratch sprawling across the pages.

The Shinigami was quite intelligent if he was studying a baser form of human physiology, an import aspect that could help developments in healing and Shinigami training itself. Ichigo frowned at the diagram for a moment detecting a few small faults in the crude drawing of the human figure. When you grew up with pictures of the skeletal and nervous system on your walls it became easy to
Ichigo remembered once far away dreams before his life had changed dramatically, of becoming a doctor studying medicine like his father and treating people and saving lives. That was always the core of his goals to help people, make a difference in the world. Plans for the future had changed and fluctuated over time bouncing from one thing to the next never truly certain of his future.

The irony of knowing a future while in a different past was easily apparent and he snorted silently to himself before turning his attention back to the Shinigami who as of yet hadn’t noticed his presence.

“You know the reason you’re having trouble is you’re not seeing the proper function of a heart… I doubt you’ve had time to do any dissection but a heart works as a pump. It circulates the blood through the body. Also the humours research you were studying from the medieval ages is completely off. You might want to consider studying some of the compounds of the human body as well and compare them to the compounds of a Shinigami it might help you differentiate between any differences in strength and manifestation of reaitsu. I found that certain elements become more pronounced allowing for a more durable form able to hold and withstand the great forces of reaitsu, a normal human body can sustain some but never the weight of a captain.”

The Shinigami startled before looking up curiously listening to Ichigo’s words, he turned facing his notes again and comparing them to the rough diagram before arching an eyebrow. Ichigo shook his head taking the paper and turning it over he picked up the brush dipping it into the ink before quickly sketching out the heart in a simple design that displayed the different caverns and channels.

“Amazing, I never thought of looking at it that way. Thank you so much!”

Ichigo nodded his head in welcome to the Shinigami’s words of thanks before turning away leaving the young Shinigami to ponder over the rough-hewn sketch. Shaking his head Ichigo turned to head towards Kisuke’s office when he came face to face with the man himself.

Ichigo flinched back minutely as he took in his old friend’s appearance. The tired and weary weight of the world that hung upon his face when Ichigo knew him was gone, the stubble that smattered his chin had disappeared leaving him clean shaven and giving him a younger appearance. A vibrant light shone in pale eyes… those eyes had been guarded and jaded hidden in the shadows of his customary bucket hat.

“Ichigo Shiba a pleasure to actually meet you. Last we met was when I was inducted as captain and that was only for a brief time though Yourichi has said much about you. What brings you to my humble division?”

The sly teasing that had always accompanied the man’s speech pattern was less pronounced as was the customary flapping of a fan in front of his face, Ichigo blinked away the double image his lips curling up slightly in response to Kisuke’s teasing and quick tones.

“Indeed the pleasure is mine Urahara-taicho. I come with some report from Kyroraku-taicho on the hollow samples from the mission to the thirty-second district of Rungokai.”

Kisuke nodded his eyes spotting the Shinigami Ichigo had helped keen eyes of pale emerald lighting up with an emotion of glee all too familiar to Ichigo, wincing slightly Ichigo hoped Kisuke didn’t notice the faint grimace at the manic smile. Considering it was Kisuke Ichigo knew nothing would slip past that man’s radar, he was a genius for good reason.

“That was quite interesting how you helped my young friend over there, how did you know about the human heart? Or the compounds of humans?”
Ichigo could hear his subconscious otherwise known as Shiro berating him for interfering with the green haired Shinigami. Shrugging in a slightly helpless manner Ichigo tipped his head forward allowing tangerine strands to tangle uselessly in front of his eyes shielding them from Kisuke’s piercing gaze.

“My father was a doctor I grew up with the knowledge and as such I’ve always been interested in-,” Ichigo muttered under his breath questioning if he should call it by its name, if it had even been given such a title or thought yet, cautiously Ichigo continued aware that every breath and blink was being studied, “biology regarding human physiology. Of course the other sciences are plenty interesting in comparison.”

Kisuke blinked shaking his head straw coloured locks swaying with the motion before an amused laughter tinkled from his lips the Shinigami tilted his head with a coy smile and said, “Come to my office you can give your report there. It’s such a shame you didn’t join the twelfth division we could have used your talents here. Alas perhaps I shall convince you one day.”

Ichigo could almost picture that man tipping the striped hat forward shadowing his eyes and adding to the flamboyance and dramatics present in every movement. With a swirl of his white haori the captain moved away soundlessly the training he had received while in the Onmitsukidō clear in the weight of his step and the cast of his gaze observing his surroundings. Staring forlornly at the figure quickly becoming faded in the distance Ichigo shook himself from painful thoughts; the brilliant hue of his eyes sparkling as they fought back to back and the battlefield present in his mind.

Kisuke’s office was a cluttered whirlwind of scattered papers with various substances of iridescent qualities spilled on it, half-finished contraptions, some giving off worrying puffs of charcoal coloured steam, and a variety of metals parts and tubes plastered over the wood flooring; scarce to be seen hidden under the mound of objects.

Smiling slightly abashed Kisuke rubbed the back of his head a flush of embarrassment peaking up from under the collar of his shihakshō, the captain quickly moved displacing some of the piles of paperwork and a few inventions to the floor with a loud clunk. When two chairs were unearthed from the catastrophic mess that was Kisuke’s office Ichigo strolled in and sat down on the chair opposite what served as the captain’s desk. Kisuke fluttered around the room for a moment more akin to a moth searching for some hidden source of light, it was here that Ichigo could see Kisuke’s youth. Even as he tried to display confidence and teasing slyness the man was still slightly inexperienced and nervous underneath, a bit absent-minded in the face of all his experiments.

The Kisuke Ichigo knew had always appeared collected and knowing, hesitance was a rarity to see in his step and any plan he revealed was thought out with grandiose and revealed with flourish. That Kisuke had plotted for months ahead scared of losing the others, or failing once again like he (believed) had failed the Vizard.

The captain settled down in the chair after a moment of fluttering his eyes assessing Ichigo once more, calculating Ichigo’s closed position and curious amusement. Shuffling some papers onto his lap Kisuke reviewed what Ichigo supposed was the mission report that had been pre-delivered along with a basic summary of the entailed events.

“Were you on the mission Ichigo? Your name is not mentioned in the report?”

Ichigo shook his head and eyebrow arched at the familiarity in which Kisuke already called Ichigo by his first name with no suffixes attached. Glancing at the paper Ichigo coughed slightly and said, “No I was not on the mission, Lisa was on the mission but is still in the Fourth for a minor injury. She should be out within a few days but Shunsui the “cruel taskmaster” wanted me to deliver the results as soon as possible.”
“I see and Lisa is alright?”

Kisuke said stroking his chin in thought, concern for Lisa evident in his voice while curiosity threatened to peak through. Ichigo nodded the motion unseen as the scientist turned to glance at the window where the blinds were tightly shuttered letting sparse rays of light dance across the floor sparingly.

“Lisa should be returning to duty within the next few days.”

Ichigo spoke his voice seemingly muffled in the dim room, Kisuke nodded his lips turning upwards in a small smile. The scientist said, “Good, good. Now onto the reports what can you tell me about the hollows encountered?”

Ichigo thought back to Lisa’s pale form ebony hair contrasting against the cream coloured sheets of the fourth, her voice had been slightly sore with disuse but her words had rang clear an ominously in Ichigo’s mind.

“The hollows apparently had a heightened sense of awareness, or rather an increase in instinct. From what Lisa said they seemed to move before the Shinigami even lifted their blades blocking attacks that had as of yet barely begun. She likened it to mind reading of a sort but said even when they cleared their minds and drove on instinct alone the creatures reacted the same. I have some of the samples she collected from the battle for analyzation.”

Kisuke nodded concern flashing across his face followed by a thoughtful expression his brows turned inwards as he pondered over the mystery Ichigo had set before him. Letting silence reign Ichigo watched as the scientist ran through scenarios and plausible constructs of explanation. Ichigo ruffled through the inside of his shihaksho for a moment before pulling out two small glass containers, one containing blood a deep cherry colour so dark it was closer to black, and the other a sickly white that turned your stomach when gazing at it. Setting the two jars on the desk beside them Ichigo watched Kisuke’s eyes flicker to land on the glass containers.

Cautiously he reached out taking the jars into his hands, holding them up to the pale rays of light his bright green eyes gazed at the substances critically. Springing up from his chair Kisuke began to rush about the room with all the organization and coordination of a Jack rabbit. There was the dull clink of glassware being shuffled and Ichigo turned slightly in his seat to see the scientist curled around another version of a microscope, pieces of wood and the acquired samples were placed cautiously to the side.

The captain stepped away for a moment eyes scanning the room searching for one material or another relevant to his examination before his piercing gaze landed on Ichigo. Kisuke arched an eyebrow with a pensive frown and said, “And what have you found Ichigo? You’ve done some testing already?”

Ichigo ducked his head avoiding Kisuke’s keen and knowing stare, he stared at his hands noting the callouses and rough texture for a moment gathering his thoughts. Sighing softly to himself Ichigo looked up warm eyes the colour of melting chocolate full of hesitance and yet excitement connected with Kisuke’s.

“The hollows appear to have a higher concentration of awareness as Lisa suggested. From the samples we could attribute this to the property of their reaitsu, which is by far more complex than any samples we’ve seen in hollows so far. It seems someone has been trying to splice DNA and other such qualities with the hollows DNA to see what comes about.”

Kisuke gazed at Ichigo for a moment taking in his words and Ichigo’s results before he swirled and
hunched over the microscope peering through the glass lens at the substances below. Ichigo looked at the fading rays of sunlight in pale hope, wishing to escape the dim and cluttered room where emotions still threatened to take his breath from his lungs. Seeing his mentor and friends in such a manner was both warming and heart-wrenching. To see him happy, full of life, and alive brought joy to his heart even as it reminded him constantly of all Kisuke had become, from when Ichigo first met him to the course of war which hardened everyone.

Kisuke coughed and Ichigo turned surprised at being caught musing, Kisuke appraised Ichigo for a moment before he glanced down at the microscope thoughtfully and said, “Your findings so far are correct though with a bit more time I’m positive we will unearth a few more bits of information. You really are quite intelligent Ichigo, though you hide it. For what purposes I cannot guess. If ever you feel the need to discuss science my division is always here, that isn’t to say that I might borrow you from your captain for some discussions.”

Ichigo smiled pleased with the idea and said, “Thank you for the kind words, you honour me with your offer and I will gladly accept.”

Kisuke nodded his eyes glancing towards the shoji doors where the moderate hush of voices grew steadily louder. Seeing an opportunity Ichigo pulled himself out of the chair which was surprisingly comfortable even with the amounts of paperwork spliced in-between the cushions.

“I hope you will find what you are looking for Urahara-taicho. I really should be going before my captain or rather my brother starts to fret that I’ve been gone too long.”

Kisuke cracked a smile which faded to a small frown as he nodded wishing Ichigo to stay for some time longer. Accepting the young man’s words Kisuke led Ichigo towards the door and slid it open stepping into the hallway after him.

As they paced the hallways towards the exit they briefly passed Hiyori and Mayuri arguing in the hallways over some inane things. The sight brought a slight smile to the tips of his lips as an image of Shinji and Hiyori superimposed itself over reality. Shaking himself from wistful mirages Ichigo bid Kisuke goodbye plotting a time when they could meet to discuss science or discuss other such matters.

Stepping out into fresh air Ichigo felt some of the tension in his shoulders settle even as his mind pulsed an angry gong in his head. Tipping his head back Ichigo took a deep breath of the cool August night the air crisp yet sweet with the last rays of the sunset. Turning to face the Twelfth Ichigo inclined his head before heading towards the Eighth division barracks and his no doubt drunk captain.

X

The air was damp and the fresh smell of rain hung about the air in fine shrouded mists clinging to the ground in wispy tendrils. Trees loomed from the fog surrounding them, the light of day hidden beneath the thick foliage of green above their heads, where sparse few rays of light pierced their veil to curl upon the mist. Shinji’s gold hair flashed above as the captain stood up from his stooped position where he had been studying the large prints ground into the mud and the wreckage the creatures had left in their path. Beside Ichigo Lisa huffed shifting ebony bangs away from her eyes she peered into the darkness ahead where shadows lurked formlessly. The few lower ranking Shinigami that accompanied the three shifted with nervousness and stared hesitantly and uncertainly at the trees bordering them from all sides.

Shinji turned to face the tiny band of Shinigami his eyes drawn to the hesitance of the lower ranking Shinigami and the cool and collected calm on Lisa and ichigo’s face. Nodding seemingly to himself
the captain turned to peer at line of trees before saying, “The group of hollows went north, what their pace was I can’t say, nor their final destination. We will follow the tracks and see where they lead. Whether to the enemy or another mystery.”

The faint flair that had been present in his movements when Ichigo first met Shinji was as apparent now as in the past. The captain spoke not to reassure his unit rather he was waxing poetically for the enjoyment of seeing the doubt flash across the inexperienced Shinigami’s faces. Shaking his head in slight amusement Ichigo nodded shifting Zangetsu’s sealed form resting on his back slightly so he could draw the long blade with ease.

They moved forward at a steady pace alongside the tracks stopping every so often so Shinji could analyse the prints, often a confused or concerned expression was prevalent on his Cheshire features but the blond said nothing.

A sawing roar stopped them in the tracks, eyes darting around in hurried frenzy trying to see the creature that had let out such a fearsome sound. Shinji calmly stood up from his crouched position bones and old joints cracking slightly at the repeated movement. Honey coloured eyes locked onto Ichigo and Lisa a question in Shinji’s eyes, asking them if they were ready. Ichigo nodded imperceptibly while Lisa gave a dismissive wave of her hand light bouncing off the lens of her glasses illuminating the keen gleam in her eyes.

The Shinigami huddled closer together forming something close to a circle, the hiss of metal drawing from its sheath echoed around the forest before being muted by the heaviness of its silence. No time was given to prepare as three hollows lumbered out from the shade of the trees. Their ivory skin glistened sickly pale in the scarce lighting of the forest while the hues of red, blue, and yellow that patterned their bodies randomly stood out harshly in the otherwise dull shades of green that made up the forest. The smell was the second thing Ichigo noticed. Tainted and vile like the rotting corpses of the dead left too long in the open elements, or some chemical so hazardous that it was kept from human contact for good reason.

Drawing Zangetsu Ichigo let the familiar weight rest comfortably in his hand as he surveyed the hollows in detail. One with markings of red was thick like a boulder with the round accoutrements and dents familiar to the stone, what was most startling were it’s hands (or what served as them) they were akin to the paws of a great bear sharp claws jutting out from the pads with a liquid of indigo colour on the tips, it sparked and caught the light in a way that left Ichigo feeling nauseous. The second was long and thin like a skeleton of a man with misshapen bones, blue danced across its arms and legs in unsteady strokes. The third was akin to a bird with clipped and tattered wings dragging uselessly on the ground behind it, yellow like the colour of its pupils pale and sickly framed his features in garish lighting.

By some unspoken signal the two parties stared at each other for a moment more before launching at each other. As if on the same wave length the three powerful Shinigami separated choosing a target, Ichigo darted to the left signaling out the large one whose figure resembled that of a grotesque bear. The hollow’s pale yellow eyes in a sea of darkness alighted on Ichigo and the creature roared charging forward swinging it’s great paws in an overhead stroke.

Ichigo dodged the attack stepping lightly and springing upwards he flew through the air Zangetsu poised at his side ready to slice through the hollows mask. An uneasy sensation traced Ichigo’s spine, the hollows seemed different from the hollows seen regularly throughout patrols and yet somehow familiar. Keeping the feeling in mind Ichigo let the weight of his blade lead him forward to attack the pale being. Before Zangetsu could connect the creature was moving his great arms almost textured to look like fur raised to block the strike. Surprise crossed Ichigo’s heart for a moment before he changed tactic in mid-air dropping to the ground immediately in front of the hollow and slashing out
at its legs as thick as the tree trunks that surrounded them.

The air shifted the slightest hint of vibrations as the creature was literally moved back a few paces from where Zangetsu would have bitten in to the pale flesh of its leg. Ichigo cursed realising why the creature had seemed so familiar. Ichigo had faced this breed of hollow in the Winter War. They had been stronger then, faster, and instead of simply dematerializing a few feet they could access sonido for brief passes of time and be in and out in suicide missions that damaged their squads and left them reeling.

Cursing Ichigo knew he needed to disperse of the hollow as quickly as possible so that he could assist the others, he had no doubt that they would be able to hold their own but he didn’t want to risk their lives not when the poison that glinted on their claws was deadly enough to easily put a captain down. Metal glinted as Ichigo hefted Zangetsu charging forward in the bare blink of an eye, Zangetsu cut through the air in a wide sweep the hollow had not time to dematerialize and could only raise a hasty arm in defence to stop the otherwise deadly slice. With a loud ‘plop’ the creature’s lower arm fell to the ground claws coated in the strange substance clutching at nothing before stilling.

The creature roared enraged and charged forward swinging it’s arm wildly, Ichigo laughed darting away as adrenaline pulsed through his veins. Shiro cackled within his soul in rising bloodlust, Ichigo’s warm amber eyes flashed deep gold framed by a sea of deep ebony for a moment before the colour faded. Ichigo wished he could set Shiro free watch his zanpaktou tear into the nameless hollow, hear its pained calls and watch it crumble to nothing. The hollow paused in its movements upon seeing the colour of Ichigo’s eyes, hesitance framed it’s figure and it’s wild eyes flashed with fear. As much as Ichigo could master compassion the knowledge that this was an early model of a creature that had been used against him set his blood boiling.

Ichigo drove forward once more knowing he didn’t have the time to spare on petty wants, his blade sailed through the air ineffective as it cut into the hollow’s hierro blood splattered a soft sea spray glossing upon Ichigo’s cheeks. Smirking Ichigo pulled back and drew the blade under his arm and slid Zangetsu up into the creature’s throat. Ichigo tried to back away knowing the creature would lash out, the wound had been too shallow hardly enough to maim never mind kill.

The mist that had remained neutral in the battle turned against him in the last moment curling around his ankles and forcing him to catch his balance roughly, he barely had time to straighten himself before the hollow swiped at him. Ichigo leant back trying to straggle out of reach but it was useless as one claw the colour of sapphire’s hidden inside dark caves scrapped across his chest.

The wound was shallow a mere scratch but that wasn’t the problem, the indigo substance on the creatures wound now grazed the outside of his torso in sickly stains. Ichigo could feel the poison began to work its way into his systems trying to kill Ichigo. Shiro grumbled in the back of his mind about carelessness even as he knew the truth of the matter, Ichigo feared few things and his blood had been alight what was to keep him from charging against the three with a war cry, where calm precision and planning usually reigned in his strikes instinct had run rampant heedlessly.

Ichigo’s hierro and blut vein had combated most of the poison and as Ichigo had experienced it before he expected the foreign substance to be gone from his system in minutes. Surprise and cool dread threaded through his stomach even as Zangetsu raised in the killing arch splicing the mask from the body. The poison may have shared similar components as the one Ichigo knew when he was in the future…past but it was vastly different and his body would likely need a day to combat the disease and purge it from his system.

Ignoring blood that stained his tunic in uneven amounts Ichigo found Shinji locked in battle against the bird-like creature, the figure cloaked in different shades of yellow. Listening to the dull rumble of
Shiro in the background and Zangetsu’s fond murmurings and cautions Ichigo stepped forward. Zangetsu raised poised with elegance and ready to strike.

Darting to the right Ichigo appeared beside Lisa knowing she would need assistance more so than Shinji. The hollow brushed with blue had already lost one arm to Lisa’s keen blade, Lisa fractionally turned her head nodding at Ichigo before turning once more to face the hollow.

As the two worked in tandem Ichigo’s thoughts drifted to when the new batch of hollows had been introduced. It had been unexpected on the field and that surprise had been their downfall, they were devastatingly powerful in the first on sweep. No one knew how to combat the poison heavy on their claws, or when they appeared from behind in seconds cutting you down before you had a chance to defend yourself.

Ichigo was poisoned the second day on the field, a passing cut to his shoulder more of a scratch. By then Kisuke and Mayuri had already been working on a cure to the deadly poison that raced through his veins. First it caused light-headedness followed by internal bleeding and excruciating pain, before you succumbed to its clawed grasp.

Ichigo remembered the pain well. He forged on for four more days coughing up blood in large amounts and fighting against the hollow and espada all the while a fever tracing his brow. Ichigo had collapsed on the fifth day, he was taken to the fourth where once again the Shinigami were surprised he had survived so long, the poison had already taken out Komamura-taicho and it was only through his more canine qualities that he had survived so long.

Recovery had been painful, and when Kisuke had finally come up with an antidote Ichigo had already recovered. Unknowing to himself at the time his blut vein and hierro had counteracted the poison rendering Ichigo immune.

Focusing on the battle once more Ichigo stepped back to let Lisa take the killing blow, her katana slicing clearly through the hollow’s malignant mask. Silence reigned through the clearing the ringing sound of blades silenced, Ichigo cast his eyes around and spotted Shinji crouched on the ground over the scattered remains of the yellow patterned hollow. The blond looked up catching Ichigo’s eyes before he stood up striding closer to the two lieutenants.

“That’s quite a bit of blood on ya face there Ichi.”

The tone was easy and relaxed even as tension still strung his shoulders and was prominent on his face. Ichigo briefly became aware of the cool liquid coating his face in uneven splotches. Looking down Ichigo could easily see the blood coating his shihaksho hiding the tear in the fabric of his torso and the cut that even now trickled blood cool against his abdomen.

“You’re going to have a hell of a time cleaning that up Ichigo, don’t you have the Noble ball tonight.”

Ichigo let out a groan at the thought, it had slipped his mind completely that he would have to attend the dull function marking the beginning of the fall season. This would be problematic. Ichigo could easily wrap the wound and try to hide it, but the smell of blood would linger and if Ichigo remembered correctly demonstrations of skill were required of those part of the Gotei 13. If he brought the wound to Unohana she would notice his self-healing, as evidence by the lack of wound the next day, it would lead to far too many questions and answers he wasn’t ready for to be revealed. An idea sprung to the forefront of his mind and Ichigo pondered the uncertainty of its merits.

“I’ll be fine as long as I stay far away from Kaien.”
Ichigo joked even as a frown turned his lips for a brief moment, Lisa chuckled softly while Shinji guffawed loudly. The easy atmosphere dropped as Shinji surveyed the battlefield and the lesser ranking Shinigami who had fled to the shadows of the trees where they had been assisting with kido. Ichigo sighed running his hand through orange locks slick with blood, today would be a long day.

X

Aizen stared at the sketches in his hand pondering the design with a critical eye, soft candlelight illuminated the room in warm hues flickering every so often and plunging the light into darkness. Aizen’s eyes cast about the room for a moment in thought, relieved that Shinji was at a captain’s meeting relaying the details of his recent mission rather than bursting in on Aizen accusing him of one fowl thing or the other. Standing up with silent grace Aizen padded towards the window and gingerly lifted the blinds to peer into the outside world.

The afternoon sun still hung in the sky its warmth touching the ground in golden light and splaying across the Cherrywood that was the small veranda outside the office Aizen was currently huddled in. Turning away Aizen paced back to his notes and began rifling through them once more, trying to find the fault in his calculations.

A knock resounded throughout the small room and Aizen looked up critically, cool brown eyes sharp and challenging. Aizen’s reaitsu twined forwards like a snake sliding across the ground and under the door to tentatively taste the reaitsu of the person on the other side of the door. Aizen frowned in slight surprise as the reaitsu of Ichigo Shiba the enigma he had met not long ago in the library on a silent night met his own in a defiant clash.

The door slid open to reveal the young Shiba, Aizen’s frown deepened as his gaze assessed the Shinigami. Orange strands were splattered with a red substance presumably blood, smears of the liquid traced his forehead and cheek in rough faded lines, his shihaksho was also splattered with blood but more successfully hidden in the dark cloth of raven.

“What brings you here Shiba-san?”

Aizen queried casually as the orangette silently stepped inside closing the shoji door with a soft ‘click’ sealing out the light and cloaking the room once more in half shadows. Shiba-san turned to face Aizen eyes a warm passionate brown were hesitant and the young Shinigami bit his lip for a moment before he said, “I need… your help.”

Surprise lurched through Aizen, never did he expect the Shinigami to seek him out for aid of all things, and he had many allied who could assist him more so than Aizen.

“How could I possibly help you?”

The young man sighed and tentatively pulled the folds of his shihaksho aside. Aizen frowned at the wound that was revealed, it was a long gash running from his hip to his chest, a sickly indigo stained the skin around the wound and mixed with the blood that still leaked from the wound in small trickles. There was also the assortment of scars ivory lines running in all directions, some large and thick others thin and long. They crossed over one another in inane patterns, the cause for some were obvious; katana slices, a hollow’s claw. Others were not so clear strange circles like a blast of extraordinarily strong kido, or pockmarks as if the slice of a dagger quick and repeating. Stepping forward cautiously Aizen looked up briefly catching permission in amber orbs before he bent towards the cut to inspect it.

The wound was jagged obviously not a clear slice from a rival katana, more likely from a hollow. Thinking back Aizen acknowledged that Ichigo had been part of the mission Shinji had entertained
an hour earlier that would explain the fresh blood and dried smears across his face.

“Why haven’t you sought Unohana-taicho she should be able to easily heal this?”

Even as he spoke Aizen’s reaitsu reached out to trace across the skin of the wound analyzing the tainted reaitsu that burrowed inside the orangette’s body. Aizen hissed on the realization that the liquid glimmering harshly in the candlelight was poison, drawing back Aizen looked into Shiba-san’s eyes pain radiated there, not the dull ache of heart loss a constant thrum in soulful eyes from what Aizen had seen that night in the library. This pain was fresh and accompanied by a slight glazing of his eyes almost with fever, even beneath that his eyes were pleading and hopeful.

“It will heal within a few hours, the matter at hand is covering up that such a wound existed.”

Aizen was confused and for a moment lost a feeling he disliked, he was used to being on top of everything knowing everyone’s next move and thought and yet here once again was the enigma disrupting any preconceived notions he held of the young Shinigami. What did he mean when he spoke of the wound healing so quickly? Even with healing from Unohana-taicho one would need days to recover and the healing of such a poison would take far longer.

Pausing his train of thought Aizen considered the second part of the young man’s sentence why would he need to cover up such a wound in short time? Mind running over the possible answers Aizen nodded upon reaching one and said, “You need the wound hidden for the Noble Gala held this evening there is to be demonstrations. The ladies and lords have asked that any who present disrobe their shirts so infections can be spared and any wound clearly seen,” It was a statement relieved with a quick nod. Aizen continued, “And how could I assist you in hiding the wound?”

“Your zanpaktou.”

Aizen spluttered coming to a standstill his eyes darted up locking onto Ichigo’s calm eyes confident in his words. Tense silence filled the air Aizen’s eyes glanced to his zanpaktou resting on his hip of their own accord the pale peacock coloured hilt glowing in the flickering candlelight. Taking a deep breath Aizen calmed himself regaining the collected image he always presented he smiled charmingly and said, “Surly you know my zanpaktou is a water type?”

Shiba-san smiled a smile full of bitter humour, seeing the falseness in Aizen’s statement. Shiba-san’s voice soft and deadly in its silence said, “I was there when you demonstrated your Shikai to the academy students. I saw what they didn’t, what very few else have seen. You have an illusion type zanpaktou, likely the most powerful of its kind ever seen.”

Kyoka Suigetsu whispered outrage and confusion in his mind, how could this fool Shinigami see past her perfect illusions? The questions plagued Aizen as he starred at the orange haired Shinigami starring determinedly into Aizen’s own coffee coloured eyes.

He could deny the young Shinigami’s accusations claim falsehoods and demonstrate Kyoka Suigetsu’s “true” Shikai but that wouldn’t answer how he knew of her true power nor the many questions boiling and frothing in his mind. Standing up Aizen backed away from the Shinigami’s intense stare striding towards the window to stare out of its shuttered blinds, the afternoon sun was starting to set casting everything its rays touched in burnished hues of crimson and gold.

“How do you know my zanpaktou’s true power?”

Shiba-san laughed for a quiet moment the sound clear and yet brittle with pain. He said, “That I cannot tell you.”
Aizen frowned this back and forth motion was gaining him nothing, it was obvious the young Shinigami would not easily part with his secrets and Aizen had no doubt the longer he knew the orangette the more the enigma of him would deepen. Pensively Aizen paced the small office for a moment before turning to face the orangette noting the blood still fresh on the wound and the pain saturating amber eyes.

“You asked me of a favour does this incline that I may receive something in return for my troubles?”

The young man nodded hesitantly conveying the unspoken “within reason” with the light tilt of his head. Nodding Aizen stepped closer to the Shinigami once again peering down at him as stray tangles of chocolate coloured hair danced around his ears.

“I will hide your wound if in return you answer any questions I may have.”

Shiba-san looked up slightly startled a pensive look donning on his face as he considered Aizen’s proposal, he turned staring at the door in thought. Finally after moments filled with thoughtful silence he shifted tangerine bangs, splattered with blood, outside of his eyes and said, “One question whenever we may meet, whether on the street or a lieutenant’s meeting. I have the right to refuse answer if the question to my standards puts me in danger, or the information is too sensitive.”

Aizen considered Shiba-san’s terms and what the prospect meant. He would step by excruciatingly slow step be able to put together part of the mystery that was Ichigo Shiba like a puzzle piece. Aizen nodded locking intrigued eyes with warm eyes glazed with fever and pain and yet still so determined.

Drawing Kyoka Suigetsu Aizen whispered her release feeling the illusion swirl around his torso, all who Shiba-san met this night would see his torso as it was without the cut; patterned with a miasma of scars tender to look at.

Suddenly Aizen felt the tug in his core, surprise filtered onto his face. When Kyoka Suigetsu created an illusion she took an imprint of the Shinigami’s reaitsu, this allowed her to truly entangle her mirage within the fabric of her victim’s mind. Occasionally when she tried to do so on a being with immense spiritual power they were pulled into their mind for a brief second. Before Aizen could stop the process darkness was filling his eyes.

X

The air was thick and acidic with the scent of smoke and the metallic tang of blood. Ruin surrounded him, the once pristine walls of Soul Society crumbled around him blood fresh and old spattering their walls now a dusty grey. And then they hit.

Shiba-san’s emotions slammed into him with all the power of a ship a maelstrom of grief and suffering, they battered into him happiness, joy, relief. Followed by the bitter claws of sadness, anger, suffering, pain. All emotions stilled under the faint light of hope as it drew near to Aizen caressing his face intimately for a moment before it was gone along with the others leaving him alone in the battlefield with emotions raw and untamed bubbling up inside himself. Never had his emotions been so rampant or so many in their collection.

Thoughts and memories passed through Ichigo’s mind in fleeting glimpses, battles and death where the enemy and allies were hidden from Aizen’s sight. Kind smiles and warm embraces left chills running through Aizen.

He saw grief, destruction, and suffering the like of which he never before had imagined in all his plotting for Soul Society. The desolation was chased away by warmth the taste of fine sake, and the burning warmth of a fire.
Aizen opened his eyes to radiant amber orbs staring into his own. Kyoka suigetsu sealed herself in his hands the illusion complete and well-crafted in its intricacies, feeling cool dampness on his cheeks. Aizen reached up to touch the warm flesh. Surprise coloured his features as he felt the cool liquid of tears on his cheeks, brushing them away Aizen looked at his hand where the clear liquid glimmered in the warm candlelight.

“W-what was that?”

Aizen stuttered confused at the bubble of emotion frothing in his chest in uncanny waves, what did he feel and why? What did he just see inside this young Shinigami’s mind so full of suffering?

“Me… or some of it. You’ve barely scratched the surface.”

Aizen stood up the folds of his shihaksho brushing against his ankles oversensitive to his frayed nerves, pacing around the room Aizen took deep calming breaths his gaze darting over to glance furtively at Ichigo before hastily sliding away.

“I still have my question may I ask it?”

Aizen’s voice was like the sound of metal against silk cool and scraping in equal measures. Ichigo tipped his head upwards and nodded orange bangs shifting restlessly. Nodding Aizen asked, “Did you have any siblings?”

It was obvious by the shape of his face and his likeness to Kaien-san that Ichigo was a Shiba the question was the branch he belonged to, it was a question that could help solve the tangled threads that were the mystery of Ichigo. Aizen felt a bit better as his calculating mind took place over his rampant emotions calming them to a soft simmer for the moment. Aizen had no doubt that he had been irrevocably changed from the inside by his experience inside Ichigo’s head.

“Two my sisters, they were twins. Karin who had raven hair and was a fighter, and Yuzu with honey-coloured hair she was sweet.”

Ichigo’s voice was choked with emotion, Aizen could easily identify the sorrow that stole his breath from his lungs. Ichigo looked up eyes full of sorrow and yet content in a balance finite to tipping. Aizen nodded unknowing of the sorrow that easily shone in his own eyes, the cool mask of the megalomaniac broken in the face of Ichigo’s overwhelming emotions.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all very much reviews/comments are always appreciated (:}
Ichigo shivered minutely wondering if it was the cool air of the ballroom upon his sensitive flesh or the hungry gaze of the ladies dressed up elaborately; whispers followed his every move. Ichigo scoffed silently to himself the whole affair and show of the duels was a pathetic excuse of entertainment; Ichigo hardly doubted the merit of disrobing the top of the yukata so that no infection would come to pass nor the supposed want to see whatever wound was bequeathed. It was merely an opportunity for the ladies (and some of the men) to cast their gaze upon the physique of the participant.

Mentally Ichigo went over the few duels he would have to perform this night, it was with relief that he tallied only two matches. One with Byakuya which Ichigo only looked slightly forward to as it presented an opportunity to talk to his friend and flaunt unchanged skills in his face. The second if Kaien spoke the truth was between Ichigo and Shunsui. A smile slipped predatory in nature unbidden upon Ichigo's face at the thought of facing his captain in battle, Ichigo knew he wouldn't be able release even a fraction of his power but the duels were a contest of blade not power.

Shifting as the piercing feeling of eyes on his back increased Ichigo turned the movement shifting orange locks held in a high ponytail at the back of his head. Byakuya was striding towards him, he was likewise disrobed and ebony hair curled around his shoulders in careless waves, he appeared like a fallen angel in the dim and pale light of the ballroom. Some unearthly essence seemed to hang about his figure a poise and grace that few nobles could muster in any cadence.

"Good evening Ichigo."

His rich voice had been lacking in Ichigo's life recently the past months had been busy with missions
and encounters painful and fulfilling, therefore the tone of his voice easily set Ichigo's tense shoulders at bay and easily curled a smile upon his lips. Mastering himself so as to retain an apathetic image Ichigo turned fully to face Byakuya noting the weary lines to his face, hidden under a mask made of chiselled stone hard to see from a distance much less anyone who knew little of Byakuya.

"Whether it is indeed a good evening is debatable Byakuya, but your presence has helped in lightening the cumbersome burden these duels set upon us."

A smile threatened to break through the cool Kuchiki mask before it was tamed though Ichigo could still see the light of amusement rich in Byakuya's silver eyes. The dull background chatter that surrounded them in soft hues faded till the silence was so thick a zanpaktou could cut it. Sighing Ichigo acknowledged that the duels were to begin if the pompous voice rising over the silence was any indication. Nodding to Byakuya Ichigo shared a quick glance conveying his desire to speak more freely at a better time, Ichigo padded off to find Kaien who would lead him to where ever he needed to be.

Zangetsu was a familiar weight in his hands as Ichigo stared into Byakuya's determined eyes full of anticipation and excitement, letting emotions of equal proportion reflect in his own amber eyes. The air was tense and quiet as the lords and ladies watched on with eager eyes placing bets, and sharing rumours of the two opponents' strengths. The noble lord (someone of the Kannogi family if Ichigo remembered correctly) who had organized the first gala of the fall season, hoping to rise in the supposed ranks of nobility stepped forward. From the folds of his yukata he took out a scroll of parchment faded to the colour of honey with age, he slowly unrolled the scroll the sounds of cracking paper the only noise rising above the hushed silence. The lord took a breath the sound rattling through his teeth before he began reading; his voice was monotonous and dull a droning sound like the buzzing of the cicadas on a hot summer night in June. Ichigo tuned the man out with his eyes sliding over to glance into Byakuya's eyes appearing emotionless yet showing a spark of boredom.

Ichigo looked up as the drole voice came to an end, the lord stepped forward pulling a handkerchief of rich lavender out of his sleeve he waved the little flag in the air letting the battle commence. Bowing as the customs stated Ichigo straitened and drew Zangetsu the sound of metal against scabbard a ringing hiss piercing in the wide ballroom, Byakuya responded in kind drawing Senbonzakura with thinly veiled grace.

The two opponents regarded each other for a moment playful light dancing in their eyes before they launched forward. Ichigo let Zangetsu lazily rise to catch Byakuya's fearsome swing the blade crashing towards him like a meteor set for earth, dull pain rippled from his side the illusion holding any from seeing the cut now wrapped with gauze. Springing back Ichigo brought Zangetsu around in a sweep darting forward at the same time to add speed to the attack. Byakuya predicting the attack raised Senbonzakura to counter the movement, eyes flashing in slight triumph Ichigo switched tactics sliding to a stop the movement bringing him close to Byakuya he flicked Zangetsu up under his guard. Byakuya caught Ichigo's eyes remembering the technique from days spent in the academy dojos and plush mats under foot. Senbonzakura reversed so that the blade was vertical stopping Zangetsu's cutting stroke, the movement wasn't reinforced and the loud jarring sound and slight grimace on Byakuya's features alerted him to the fact.

Like two graceful pinpricks of light their blades danced wisps of the metal seeming to melt into the air forming trails like a comet. So they tangoed the movements fast to a beat of their own making full of excitement and playfulness the battle of two old friends familiar with the other's quirks and thought process. The duel could not last till the morning sun swept her golden blanket across the hills and with one dazzling array of attacks splicing together seamlessly Senbonzakura was sent clattering to the ground the blade striking against marble ringing around the round room.
Sweat beaded Ichigo’s brow and shone like glimmers of dew on Byakuya's brow as he knelt slightly, Zangetsu's blade quivering at his throat as if encouraging Ichigo to take his life or the weight of the blade was too much in Ichigo's hands. A smile unhindered by emotion or a mask broke across Ichigo's face, the smile so easily contagious broke Byakuya's mask, blooming on Byakuya's own features bringing warmth to the cool stone of his noble mask. Lowering Zangetsu Ichigo slid the blade humming with excitement into the scabbard at his back and extended his hand for Byakuya to take. Warm fingers grasped his own the shared heat of their bodies entangling their hands for a moment as Ichigo pulled his friend forward and up. Stepping back Byakuya gracefully bent down picking up Senbonzakura whose polished metal shone in the candlelight above and sliding the blade into his own scabbard sheathed at his hip. Facing each other the two bowed.

Polite applause broke out amongst the watchers where they had remained frozen in place by the fight enraptured by the sleek movements, delicate fragility, and unwavering strength that rose in that battle. The moment broken as the two bowed to each other, their abdomens glistened with sweat and all to show for their duel was a thin slice of red on Ichigo's bicep where his response had been slow as if reaching to defend so high had pained his stomach, and the other a gash tracing Byakuya's collarbone.

The lord of house Kannogi stepped forward declaring the winner and announced a short intermission before the next match would commence. Bowing once more to each other the two warriors exited the ringed area where they had been fighting, the weight of eyes upon them increased twice fold since the early evening. Wanting to escape the crowds and false praises and compliments sure to come Ichigo turned towards a hallway. The presence of Byakuya behind him was reassuring as he led the two to a small balcony overlooking a garden of lush greens, covered in a multitude of shades in the waxing moonlight from above.

"It's been some time since last we could meet freely."

Byakuya's voice seemed haunting as it tilted on the breeze in the whispers of the eddies, turning to face his friend Ichigo stared for a moment taking in the somber cast to his eyes belayed by being with his friend, tilting to face the moon in its ethereal beauty above Ichigo said, "Time has been a hasty master, pushing us forward and giving us little time in between one hour and the next. It seems noble functions and the occasional tea here and there become commonplace between us."

Byakuya remained silent for a time thoughtfully gazing at the garden below the gentle trickle of a stream glistening like a river of diamonds below filling their ears. A feathery breeze brushed against the yukata that cloaked Ichigo's shoulders and swirled about his feet coloured in shadows and sweet lilac, Byakuya's yukata sage with rose threaded through in simple hues was a sharp contrast against the deep sapphire of night.

"I should like to catch up some time whenever it so dawns."

Byakuya's voice was subtle a murmur tentative and uncertain, wondering if such time could be found in what now served as their lives. Ichigo missed their camaraderie, the easy laughs shared between them, teasing glances, subtle touches and the weight that pressed down on his shoulders and heart feeling the weight of the world dispersed if only for a short time.

"Time will dawn when we so choose, more agreeable am I to catching up then standing at this drole gala where the ladies may fawn over us. Two days from now my morning shall be free."

Byakuya turned to gaze thoughtfully at Ichigo pondering his words with a wistful and teasing smile he nodded eyes casting to the heavens above to see what Ichigo sought whenever caramel orbs strayed above his head. He said, "Two days hence we shall meet, where so then?"
Ichigo closed his eyes in thought for a moment blocking out the soothing caress of the moon and plunging all sight into darkness, opening his eyes moments later he replied, "In Rungokai there is a teahouse, we were there once before in the early morning of my birthday. That day was long and arduous but the morning was filled with warmth and serenity rarely found."

Byakuya nodded a fond smile playing across his features as he remembered the early August morning, the air had been clear and cool with the fresh scent of apples in the air. Their tea had chased all chill of the night and its terrors away and left wholesome warmth bubbling in Ichigo's chest like a spring cascading through a valley.

"Come night furrows its wings at us bidding us enter this noble establishment once more however we may dread it. To long already have we been gone will our elders chide us but it was time more enjoyable then any spent in that house full of antiques polished reverently. As much as I loathe it this time of peace and tranquility must now end, father time has come to collect. But soon again shall we meet in more fitting measures then this."

Byakuya raised an eyebrow quickly speaking, "Poetry is heavy upon your tongue this evening Ichigo but I acknowledge the truth in your words. Come let us enter and weather this storm together for as long a time as permitted."

Sharing one last open smile the two turned away from the moon in her splendour and entered the house where warmth blanketed them like the heady air of the jungle and tangled their breaths. Already eyes traced them and the quiet peace of the garden faded into the dull idle chatter.

X

Shunsui was strung with anticipation as he tapped a forefinger against his thigh eyes of metallic grey scanning the bustling scene the gala presented, Jushiro shifted subtly the pale blue yukata donning his thin form rustling heavily with the motion. Turning a concerned eye upon his friend Jushiro waved away the motion a faint smile curved on his lips, the ivory haired captain arched an eyebrow and said, "Excited for your battle with Ichigo? Kaien has been frantically buzzing about of late and I worry for his health more than my own."

Easy laughter at his friend's humour slipped from Shunsui's lips as curly strands of chocolate coloured hair waved in front of his eyes with the force of his laughter. Shaking his head Shunsui shivered slightly in the cool eddies of air that circulated the ball room. The whole matter was a simple farce in Shunsui's mind a man who would favour hovering around the tables of sake with Jushiro guarding against any drunken folly of his, to battling against his own lieutenant.

"Alas I'm excited for this match, for so few have tested their blade against Ichigo's other than the hollows roaming lonesome forests and Byakuya his fellow. Though I also cower in a slight fear that he may best me and take my captaincy from my unwilling hands."

Jushiro laughed hiding his amusement at Shunsui's boisterous dramatics in the long sleeves of his yukata that draped to rest against his sides when his arms hung freely, he was more fortunate than the rest that he was excused from such frivolous fighting. Beaming at his friend Shunsui sighed running a hand through curly locks, Jushiro looked up from where eyes of warm cinnamon had been gazing at polished tile below. A slight blush still tinged Jushiro's cheeks rose from the force of his laughter and some of the pale weariness had fleeted if only briefly.

"I think it is unlikely you will have to worry about your captaincy being stolen from underneath you. While Ichigo may have a mind for order and paperwork I have little doubt that putting him in such a position would bring chaos unaccountable, he would very well start a revolution for the fun of it."
Shunsui moved to protest thinking of the serious demeanour (though whether it was seriousness or boredom was debatable) that often suited Ichigo during the day. The image came to mind of eyes alight with laughter and mischief, a grin full of tooth and promising untold chaos to whoever had incurred it. His mind also dragged on to the many times Kaien had been subject to such mischief, as much as Ichigo threatened Kaien with beheading it was far more likely to see the unfortunate lieutenant trapped in a kido bubble for nigh half the day.

"I think I can agree with you there Ju, not to mention all those meetings with old Yam-jii I have no doubt that the two are plotting some evil device for us poor hardworking captains, that or Ichigo like a cunning snake has been sowing seeds of rebellion at the heart of the matter."

Jushiro cast an amused glance his eyes conveying his thoughts on Shunsui's joking about his lieutenant, shrugging helplessly the movement was made less innocent by the loss of his favoured straw hat. Another reason he faulted these galas, already he missed the comforting fragrance that seemed to hug his flower patterned haori and the subtle smell of sake that filled his office. Before his thoughts could ramble on to the detailed spots where he would like to hide sake from his lieutenants' silence fell around them like a blanket.

Pouting Shunsui rolled his shoulders a few times stretching out muscles tense with anticipation, sharing a knowing glance with Jushiro Shunsui stepped closer bidding a faint parting in his ear before whirling around and stalking off. The duel was beginning soon and Shunsui had best be in the arena when it starts else he would surely receive a talking to from Yam-jii (again).

Ichigo was a bright flame dulled by its surroundings, a wispy grey yukata clung to his lithe form and long tangerine locks clung to the back of his neck. Shunsui had watched Ichigo's match with Byakuya; noted the fluent and graceful way the two fought bladekin one might call it, like brothers they were. Yet from a distance one could scarcely see the scars littering Ichigo's body, pale lines sometimes catching the light. They dragged over his body in arches and curves, blasts and cracks in the very skin of his abdomen patched together in a canvas of swirling ivory upon the slightly darker hue of Ichigo's skin.

Ichigo was frowning Shunsui noted, the motion scrunching his eyebrows and casting his eyes in shade as his head tipped forward orange locks cloaking thought from sight. Averting his eyes from Ichigo's torso and the uneasy feelings of protectiveness that rose up inside him (he could understand partially the reason for Kaien's concern) Shunsui let an easy smile slip on his face even as keen eyes tried to catch Ichigo's orbs of caramel cast towards the ground.

Feeling Shunsui's gaze Ichigo's head lifted to catch Shunsui's silver eyes with his own. Determination shone a mirror image in both their souls, Ichigo also held slight hesitation, a pensiveness and distance that suggested thoughts drifting elsewhere. Curling his hand worn with callouses over Katen Kyōkotsu's handle Shunsui smiles indulgently at her teasing in the back of his mind. A challenging smile curled upon Ichigo's lips, barely touching his eyes as they traced far different fields, and yet focused on the battle at hand.

The noble lord stepped forward forgoing reading the rules once more as they were experienced Shinigami, and it was far likely that he himself had grown tired of the same litany. Waving his lavender flag fervently the lord stepped back a hush falling over the crowd as they looked on the two opponents. Shrugging his shoulders once more Shunsui watched as Ichigo shook himself from whatever realm his mind had drifted to, chocolate eyes alight with excitement caught Shunsui's own. As one they draw their zanpaktou's Katen Kyōkotsu's dual handles a comforting weight in his hands, Zangetsu Ichigo's zanpaktou glowed a faint ebony, raven tendrils seeming to coil among the blade in honeyed candle light.
Silence held for a tense moment more before Ichigo stepped forward. Raising his blade Shunsui blocked against the incoming strike, the blades clashing with the ringing hiss of metal and sent sparks flying. The force of the attack sent vibrations down his arms and Shunsui raised an eyebrow in slight surprise before stepping to the side to let Ichigo's blade fall. The exchange was quick as Ichigo whirled away a half step before flying forwards once more. Shunsui blocked the strike again Katen Kyōkotsu's dual blades forming an x and interlocking Zangetsu's long blade.

Twisting away Shunsui swung one of his katanas forward the other coming underneath to form a vicious uppercut and paralysing blow to the ear. Ichigo smiled. The blade flying through the air sailed through nothing as Ichigo ducked Zangetsu whipping out horizontally to catch the sharp hollows sported by his blade. Dancing away Shunsui and Ichigo paused regarding each other, assessing each movement.

They sprang forward a deadly dance of blades and skill unseen that night, their blades were peaks of light a three pointed star hurtling towards the earth at devastating speeds. Ichigo would dart forward light and swift on his feet Zangetsu's longer blade reaching out in an attempt to cut, Katen Kyōkotsu would snap up one blade defending as Shunsui would side step bringing the other forward in a lunge. On and on they played their moves getting riskier and bolder trying to tire the other out or waiting for one to slip up.

Springing back once more Shunsui's breath came from his lungs in harsh pants the movement letting sweat soaked curls rest heavily against his forehead. Rarely did he battle like this, only the few occasions Jushiro dueled him or the Soutaicho thought fit that they improve or test their skills were akin to this battle. Ichigo was lightning fast with the blade, his lithe body of coiled muscles guiding him forwards in a dangerous dance like lightning strikes. The skill he showed with his blade was stunning far above any lieutenant, his connection with his zanpaktou was radiant shining through in every fell sweep, and Shunsui could see that Ichigo was holding back. Movements stopping short, continually checking himself it was evidence that Ichigo wasn't showing half as much as he could. Then again what could one expect, Ichigo held secrets woven into the very fabric of his soul, questions and mysteries were a part of him even to friends.

Taking one last deep breath Shunsui looked up catching Ichigo's eyes beads of sweat rolled down his forehead and dripped off his chin, orange hair was messy and tangled slicked back with sweat but determination still shone. Nodding the two straightened imperceptibly and Shunsui was launching forwards on the attack. Ichigo arched an eyebrow in surprise his blade tainting a dark raven rising in a half circle deflecting Shunsui's dual blades.

Back and forth across the duelling area they paced, Ichigo began to slow his movements becoming slightly sloppy. Still he pushed on their blades weaving through the air with mighty clashes, pain would occasionally flash across Ichigo's face and Shunsui felt concern and the desire to finish the battle arise in his chest. Darting forward Shunsui feinted to the left before swinging one of her blades aimed at Ichigo's head and the other thrust forwards towards his heart.

Zangetsu fell limp in Ichigo's hands the wielder acknowledging his defeat with a pleased smile. Locking eyes once again Shunsui let the concern rise in his eyes and arched an eyebrow Ichigo shook his head reassurance in his eyes even as a slight grimace passed over his features for a second so brief Shunsui wondered if he imagined it. Sheathing their zanpaktou the two Shinigami bowed low to each other the hushed crowds' breaking out into loud applause at the magnificent duel they had witnessed.

"Thank you for that splendid duel Ichigo, your technique was amazing perhaps we should duel more often?"
Ichigo looked up at Shunsui's softly spoken words of praise pride shining in silver eyes, warmth saturated Ichigo's eyes filling them like melted pools of chocolate. Ichigo paused pensive for a moment considering the light and slightly humorous tone that accompanied Shunsui's offer.

"It certainly sounds interesting captain, though I fear my muscles would sorely protest it we dueled too often."

Shunsui accepted the excuse and answer for what it was, Ichigo would duel him but at the orangette's time and pace. Stroking the pommel of Katen Kyōkotsu's blades Shunsui heard the soft purr and felt the pleasure of the duel radiating from his zanpaktou. Stepping out of the court where they had dueled Shunsui led Ichigo to where the ivory locks of his best friend caught his eyes. Kaien and Jushiro were standing together polite conversation floating around them even as heavy stares settled on the two competitors.

"Ah Ichigo! That was amazing!"

Kaien was his usual bouncy self as he sashayed over to Ichigo enveloping his younger brother in what was likely a bone-crushing hug. Jushiro smiled catching Shunsui's eyes a conversation passing between the two old friends on a breath as Shunsui strode closer to stand beside his friend and watch the brother's antics. Ichigo wrestled himself from Kaien's tight grasp his hair mussed and yukata slightly rumpled.

"That truly was a sight to behold you two were indeed amazing."

Jushiro's kind voice spoke praise and Shunsui thanked his friend taking a hand smooth and cool in his own fevered flesh and grasping it tightly. Ichigo nodded his head in thanks pain flashing once more in faint traces, sharing a glance with Jushiro, Shunsui gestured towards Ichigo. Jushiro nodded plain understanding playing across his features.

"Do you have any more matches this evening Taicho?"

Ichigo queried his voice subtle and swift in the heated atmosphere of the main hall. Shunsui shook his head a happy smile playing across his features he replied, "No more this evening, I'm planning to spend the rest of this dull night with a bottle of sake. That is of course as long as Jushiro's here to make sure I don't make a fool of myself like that time with the chandelier."

Curiosity was directed his way accompanied with a knowing look from Jushiro, shrugging innocently Jushiro shook his head in amusement ebony strands swaying gracefully with the movement.

"I'm going to refresh myself the night is near sunrise yet time drags its boots."

Ichigo said running a hand through tangerine locks slicking them back further and revealing his eyes open with contentment and a pleased expression. Nodding Shunsui stepped forward extending a hand that Ichigo firmly took in his own.

Ichigo strode off into the distance orange locks flowing behind him as he cut through the crowd ever an imposing figure. Kaien's bubbly and excited demeanour disappeared in an instant replaced with a serious expression his lips curving to form a frown.

"Did you notice it?"

Kaien asked his silver eyes radiating protection as they followed Ichigo's retreating form, Shunsui paused confused by Kaien's questions before understanding what the concerned elder brother was asking. Nodding his head chocolate curls swaying slightly with the movement Shunsui said, "He's in
pain" the realization clear in the open air where the statement hung tensely. Kaien nodded silver eyes swirling to connect with Shunsui's own he continued, "During our duel pain would occasionally flash across his features not caused by my blades."

"He's injured and he's attempting to hide it from us. For whatever reason he doesn't want us to know he's hurt."

Kaien spoke a hint of frustration reaching through the concern heavy in his voice. The lieutenant took a few calming breaths his hands clenched in tight fists at his sides slowly loosing as he calmed himself, looking up from where his head had tilted to face the ground Kaien sighed sorrow and sympathy a complicated swirl of emotions in his eyes he said, "He's so guarded, always holding himself up and refusing to show weakness. Ichigo is stubborn, he won't accept our help unless we shove it down his throat and even then he refuses as best as possible. I just want to help him... you've seen the scars that decorate his body! The sorrow prevalent in his eyes and heavy upon his shoulders. But I don't know what to do, when I spend time with him, or when he's with Byakuya you can see the darkness that resides in his eyes lighten slightly the weight of the world that seemingly rests on his shoulders is lifted if briefly."

Silence reigned for a few quiet moments as Shunsui digested the complex swirl of emotions ranging through Kaien's voice as he spoke, it was easy to see the protectiveness and love Kaien held for his brother in that moment. Eyes shining, fist clenched, chest heaving, and heart heavy with tumultuous emotions. Jushiro swept forward pulling Kaien into a brief hug the movement swift in the crowded ball room. Kaien's tense shoulders relaxed slightly the pent up feelings deflating leaving Kaien tired and weary in the face of his anger.

"I guess all we can do is support him, and trust that one day all will be revealed."

Kaien's voice was soft a quiet whisper of hope as he turned to face the exit where the folds of orange had disappeared through. Shunsui smiled kindly before saying, "Ichigo is a veteran of a war none of us have seen, and he guards his heart in a gilded cage of iron nigh unbreakable. But everything has its time, nothing is impenetrable. We just need to be there when he falls."

Kaien nodded solemn and determined at Shunsui's words, Jushiro who had remained quiet placed a hand on Kaien's shoulder a promise in his eyes, they were all going to support Ichigo no matter what.

X

"The Shikai you showed at graduation was that your true Shikai?"

Ichigo wasn't even surprised that the genius had figured out Zangetsu's cloaked form, the megalomaniac leant against one of the pale walls of Soul Society his features cast in half shadows and the lens of his glasses catching the light of the fading sun. The two had bumped into each other as Ichigo hurried from one errand to the next for his likely wayward captain, and as the rules of their agreement applied Aizen had drawn Ichigo into one of the alleys.

Shaking his head Ichigo smiled the movement cast in an almost predatory light with the flashing of pale teeth in cloaked darkness and answered, "No it was not my true Shikai."

X

Ichigo ruffled through the many papers scattered across the wooden table a miasma of writing sprawling across the pages in graceful curves. Translation notes, theories, plots and notes of the like. Running a hand lazily through orange locks Ichigo looked up from the notes shifting slightly in the plush cushion his eyes glanced around the tea house, a warm atmosphere bubbled the place and quiet
chatter filtered through the background like a waterfall. Seeing no sign of Byakuya Ichigo returned to his notes, he was trying to plot his own timeline and all he remembered of it, in accordance he was also trying to pinpoint where he stood in time.

Among the notes were scattered translations of the text bound in leather, the few novels he looked at in the archives had brought Ichigo a step closer to decoding the worn book's secrets the more Ichigo translated the more his head spun and his chest tightened with uncertain feelings. A few diagrams peeked out from the pile of rough sketches accompanied by cramped handwriting; theories concerning the Hogyoku and time travel itself. Ichigo had vague almost certain ideas of what had happened and yet the answer didn't seem plausible. Thus the scattered diagrams and rough idea of conversing with Kisuke.

Flipping through a scarlet bound book Ichigo squinted at the words harsh and jagged as if written in a hurry, wishing he still had the glasses he wore in the human world Ichigo sighed and shrugged for a moment eyes returning to pages stained yellow with age. The clear sound of a bell ringing cut through the peaceful chatter of the cozy restaurant. Looking up over the near empty room where groups hunched over low tables Ichigo spotted a familiar gleam of silver amongst stark raven locks, catching grey eyes Ichigo smiled invitingly as Byakuya strode inside. Bathed in the soft mint green of the shoji dividers spattered scarcely throughout the room in a maze of golden light Byakuya seemed to glow from within like the fae rumoured to dance upon midsummer eves.

Ichigo pushed himself up from the table a soft hiss parting his lips as his muscles protested the movement, his duel with Shunsui had been invigorating a challenge well needed even if his muscles now nagged him for it. Byakuya smiled knowingly likely suffering the same aches and pains to a greater degree, nodding in half thought to himself Ichigo stepped forward so that the two friends were within arm's reach.

"Ichigo."

The happiness was evident in the deep roll of his name, Byakuya paused a moment assessing Ichigo before he pulled the orangette into a quick hug arms of corded steel wrapping around Ichigo and the faint taste of cherry blossoms saturating his senses. Ichigo froze for a moment the movement unexpected both from Byakuya and the warmth of touch against his skin. Seconds later with the calming baritone of Zangetsu a lilting melody at the back of his mind Ichigo settled returning the hug in a cautious gesture, even when Kaien decided to spring from the sky to hug Ichigo the movement had become familiar and Ichigo was far more use to tossing the fool across the room in repercussion.

Byakuya pulled away a strange frown tilting his lips, Ichigo pursed an eyebrow in question but the soft sway of ebony locks told him to wait. Settling onto the low table Ichigo became aware of the scattered mess of papers cluttering the deep cedar surface. Byakuya watched with amusement as Ichigo scurried collecting the papers with a loud rustle and shoving them along with a few thick tomes inside a bag situated by his feet.

The frantic clean up finished Ichigo smiled unabashed and looked up into Byakuya's cool grey eyes and perched comfortably in his seat once more. Huffing Byakuya looked at the wooden table a finger reaching through the folds of his shihaksho to trace the swirled grains of wood. Silence sat between the two quaint and relaxed the two friends unwound from tense meetings, rushed paperwork, and noble galas with no words spoken between them only the reassuring presence of the other.

A waiter bustled by, scrawny with a head of tawny brown hair and ferret like features the man had a certain glow about him. Looking up Ichigo smiled as the waiter relayed the many tea options they were offering this morning as well as the selection of cuisine available. Byakuya who seemed almost
half asleep blinked lazily his head tilting up slightly to indicate he was indeed listening to the fast paced tone.

"I'll have the green tea and the chamomile for my friend here. He's not nearly as tired as he has any right to be."

Ichigo laughed quietly at Byakuya's teasing tone catching the smirk that flashed across his features from one moment to the next. The waiter nodded enthusiastically asking them if they'd like anything to eat on the side. Ichigo shook his head to Byakuya's questioning gaze Ganju made splendid meals and breakfast had fast become one of his favourites with Ichigo's interjection but the youngest Shiba always made far too much.

The waiter flounced off a sway to his hips and a bounce in his step Ichigo smiled fondly for a moment watching the waiter fade into the distance before turning to face Byakuya who was studying Ichigo contemplatively.

"When last was it we met? It seems as if ages have passed us by in the swift blink of an eye since our days at the academy."

Ichigo asked hands tapping out an unknown rhythm on the wooden table and he leaned back slightly shifting to rest with ease. Byakuya frowned in thought eyes gaining a somber cast before lighting with some hidden thought. The noble smiled and said, "Why two days ago I would have presumed."

Ichigo laughed the movement rumbling deep in his chest and easing the steel band that seemed to weld itself to his ribcage since that night. Byakuya laughed alongside Ichigo the sound rare in the political scenes of Soul Society clear and with a deep resonance that bounced inside one's heart. The laughter dwindled to a silent hum of pleasant amusement and Byakuya continued, "I do think excluding the ball it was likely almost a month ago when I was invited for the dinner celebrating one thing or another."

Ichigo nodded the memories of warm sake and good food a pleasant accompaniment to the already light air of the restaurant. A smile slipped onto Ichigo's face and he said, "Come let us drop the speech so heavily influenced by our position and the time in which we dwell, may simpler deeds be spoken now. By which I mean to say how are you?"

Byakuya laughed at the slight tip of an accent shining through the first part of Ichigo's speech in the gradual flounce of his words appearing grave even with lightning quick humour glowing beneath. Byakuya prepared to answer but their waiter returned a tray holding two tea cups with thin wisps of curling silver rising from the simply painted light blue cups. Nodding their thanks, the waiter set the two cups down with a bright flourish and let them be trouncing off to serve the other customers that had trickled in before the sun rose to tower high above the rest of the world.

Ichigo let out an appreciative hum as the flowery taste of the tea graced his taste buds, warmth radiated from the cup curled in his palm and sent pleasant shivers through his body easing the tension in his body slightly. Taking a deep breath of the rich fragrance Ichigo tipped the cup forward to take another long sip before placing the clay mug back on the table. Byakuya opposite him studied Ichigo with an amused cast to his eyes the sky blue cup cradled in his hands rested in his lap pale green tracing his hands and caressing the cup a bit of healing kido to soothe the inflammation of his muscles.

"I'm not sure how I feel these days. Having Oji-sama as captain is both stressful and endearing at the same time, and it seems like my face has become carved stone. I'm grateful for the tips and lessons he gives me; I know I'll need them but that doesn't mean I resent certain aspects of nobility any less. Life is crowded I feel like a leaf caught in the stream where the current carries me I must follow."
The lightness of the day had dimmed somewhat in Byakuya's confession but Ichigo felt no ill will towards it only concern for Byakuya, catching Byakuya's eyes Ichigo smiled reassuringly and said, "It will pay off in the end, you're going to have deal with those Central 46 bastards at some point after all. But you will always have me, you don't need to completely seal yourself off and become a machine who heals only to Soul Society. Stay the crazy, humorous, sarcastic Kuchiki I know even if it's hidden behind layers of cool ice bathed in sakura."

Byakuya grinned with a huff of his lips some of the encroaching darkness fled from silver eyes as he took a sip of his tea nursing the cup close to his chest as he considered Ichigo's words. The Kuchiki noble said, "I'm glad to have a friend such as yourself Ichigo, it is likely otherwise I would have no one to turn to. The Shihounen were-cat may be full of spunk and teasing but she's got nothing on you Ichigo. Which reminds me to ask you in kind how you are?"

Ichigo shrugged the movement displacing his shihaksho fractionally and startling the fine locks gathered at the back of his neck he said, "Life is neither good nor bad which is more than I can ask for, though Kaien has been crowding me recently with eyes of hot coals. Taicho the lazy bastard that he usually is keeps foisting paper work onto us but Lisa and I split it evenly so the time goes by swiftly. I'll have to tell you about the other night with the sake, also my recent mission was… interesting to say the least."

Ichigo's voice was faintly whimsical as he reminisced the usual finite trace of annoyance sauntering into his voice as he spoke of Kaien and his over protective mothering ways. Byakuya regarded Ichigo with a smile as Ichigo continued to talk silver eyes tinting slightly as Ichigo spoke of Kaien before a full out smile broke upon his face as Ichigo spoke of Kaien once again spoke of his captain. The young raven haired Shinigami sighed idly starring at the table and sipping his tea before saying, "Ah I think that Kaien was crowding because of the recent duels, they myself included noticed that you seemed in a bit of pain… are you alright Ichigo?"

Ichigo turned to look out the window at the concern heavy in Byakuya's voice his eyes cast towards the smooth wooden paneling before he sighed running a hand through tangled orange locks and said, "It relates to the mission I was talking about, you wouldn't believe the hollows we encountered they were massive even for a regular hollow. They clearly weren't normal, their markings too vibrant and their instincts too sharp. I was caught off guard by it and received a paw to the chest but I'm fine seriously."

Byakuya looked into Ichigo's caramel orbs assessing his words and the truth in his gaze before setting his mug on the table with a heavy sigh. Taking a sip of his own tea Ichigo inclined his upwards for a moment before tilting to face Byakuya once more he said, "You wouldn't believe what happened the other day though. It was crazy first Taicho was already slightly buzzed on sake from kami knows where though Ukitake-Taicho is likely the culprit. Then Lisa found one of his stashes of sake, it was hidden under a floor board and covered with a mat. Cue a whiny Taicho and frustrated Lisa and it was quite the sight to see."

Byakuya laughed his eyes sparkled in the hazy glow of candlelight Ichigo joined him the chaos of that evening fresh in his mind. The two laughed for a moment, more warmth in their gazes and filling their hearts.

They continued to talk about inane things from the latest news circulating through the ranks to training and hard headed captains. Throughout their meeting a smile played softly across Ichigo's features hardly diminishing in the few hours they spent that felt like an eternity. Peace and tranquility seemed to hover on the edges of Ichigo's senses and the chamomile tea accompanied by kido did wonders for the strain of his muscles as the hours wore away.
As the chatter filling the tea house grew in volume and occupants the two friends shared a knowing look it was past high noon and it was likely time that they return to their captains. Ichigo silently dreaded returning in a way one would dread the end of winter break, shrugging aside the heavy feelings Ichigo and Byakuya exited the restaurant stepping outside where chill air brushed teasingly across their skin and billowed the folds of the shihaksho. The bustle of everyday life in Rungokai greeted their ears, the sounds of yelling, carts being pulled, children running and playing, and the other sounds filtering in the cracks of their perception.

The faintest flicker of reaitsu brushed against Ichigo's senses before Byakuya was crashing forward into Ichigo. Ichigo fell to the ground almost in slow motion bracing himself for impact and still not expecting the burn as the air escaped his lungs in a gasp. Sitting up slowly Ichigo rubbed the back of his head and gazed upon their assailant. Ichigo's breath caught in his throat stifled and he felt like his heart was clawing its way up his throat. And then he saw the eyes lilac with pale swirls of light blue and her bangs parting over nose. Ichigo drew in a breath the fire burning his chest doused by the relief that this was not Rukia, he wasn't ready to see his old friend not at this time (probably not ever).

Byakuya stood up his form tall and gangly in the light of the fall sun, noting who had felled him Byakuya extended his hand over the noble and helped Rukia's sister to her feet. Little was different of her from the picture Byakuya had showed Ichigo once when the memory of Rukia hung in the balance itself, pale skin, ebony hair, and eyes of soft lilac she was so much like Rukia and yet infinitely different. Byakuya whispered a few words to Hisana and Ichigo caught her name shared between the two followed by Byakuya's own name.

Turning away to give the two a semblance of privacy Ichigo's eyes cast around the Rungokai stalls, their brightly coloured tarping of red, blue, and a multitude of other colours garish in the orange light casting everything in half glow. Turning around after a few moments Ichigo watched Byakuya bade farewell to Hisana a strange light in his eyes as she faded from sight her petite form disappearing among the crowds.

Byakuya turned soulful eyes full of slight confusion onto Ichigo, before a question could slip past his lips Ichigo stepped forward taking Byakuya's hand alike in size to his own and pulling him along.

"You'll see her again, fate has many plans and many strings cast in crimson. Come I have to buy a birthday present for Kukkaku and I have two cents of an idea of what to get her."

Byakuya stared at Ichigo for a moment finding the advice his floundering heart and mind had sought, confusion still bubbled like a cauldron but he set the emotions aside and took Ichigo's offer with a smile following the orangette from one store to the next the crisp air of fall tangling about them.

X

The thirteenth always smelled vaguely of ginger and hibiscus a unique combination that left the sense tingling in a flurry of shivers. Ichigo walked the familiar halls of the thirteenth the sparse Shinigami collected inside nodded or greeted him as he passed them they rarely questioned why he was in the thirteenth it was commonplace to see these days. The answer would most likely be found in Ukitake's office.

In this instance they were correct as Ichigo slid open the door and was greeted with Shunsui sprawled out on one of the couches placed in Jushiro's office, Ju was dutifully filling paperwork as he listened to Shunsui babble on about nothing and everything in between. The two captains looked up as the door opened to see Ichigo's vibrant hair accompanied by a small frown.

"Ah Ichigo good afternoon come in Shunsui wasn't expecting you to turn up today?"
Ichigo shook his head in amusement stepping inside and sliding the firm wooden frame unrelenting beneath calloused fingers shut with a 'click'. Pacing inside Ichigo seated himself on one of the singular chairs placed what Ichigo deemed a safe distance away from his captain. Shunsui pouted from where he was sprawled one arm hanging over the side and the other resting behind his head.

"There was a report from Yam-jii I thought you would like to look at it yourself Taicho."

Shunsui nodded metallic grey eyes hardening as Ichigo pulled the file out of the boundless folds of his shihaksho. Jushiro arched an eyebrow but remained silent as Shunsui pensively cast his eyes over the folder, silence reigned for a moment before Shunsui snorted and passed the vanilla folder to Jushiro. The ebony haired captain scanned the contents before placing the folder on his desk.

Seeing that the folder wasn't a matter of dire importance Ichigo moved to lift himself from the comfortable and plush chair, Shunsui made a startled sound and rushed to say, "Ma ma Ichigo always in a such a haste to leave your captain, why not stay for a few it's not like Ju and I discuss anything Kaien will likely freak out on us for."

Ichigo debated the offer his eyes casting around the quaint office, succulents gathered in small clusters on the window shelves preening in the faint rays of the sun, book cases piled with scrolls and an assortment of knick knacks layered the walls, the furniture was simple in plain shades of grey and dark blue that accented the room nicely. Eyes gliding to trace over the captains Ichigo noted the pale hues of purple hiding under Jushiro's eyes made all the more stark by the contrast of his ebony hair a benevolent and welcoming expression full of warmth rested on his face and Ichigo's heart wrenched painfully in his chest for a moment. Shunsui's curly brown hair was lose from the regular ponytail he often sported the strands fell about his shoulders highlighted by the flowered haori painted rose by the sunlight, gun metal grey eyes seemed joking at first glance but underneath the prevalent seriousness and determination Ichigo respected in his captain shone through.

Nodding his head with a weary sigh Ichigo slumped into the seat sinking into the fabric like one would sink into quick sand, Ichigo privately wondered if Ukitake had the chair for that design alone. Shunsui smiled and shifted slightly so he could easily turn and face both Jushiro and Ichigo. With a set of two expectant eyes Jushiro sighed and set down the pen the stack of paperwork perched in the corner of his desk wobbled dangerously for a moment before stilling as the benign captain stood up padding over to a seat near Ichigo. Ichigo tipped his head back to hide his eyes from view as Jushiro's reaitsu curled out in greeting to tentatively curl around Ichigo's. Rubbing the bridge of his nose Ichigo listened with a quiet contentment as the two captains resumed their discussion from earlier.

"Hm?"

Ichigo shook himself from the daze his mind had drifted off to Jushiro's voice bringing Ichigo back from a land of waking dreams. Blinking hastily for a moment Ichigo reoriented himself and noticed warm brown eyes and concerned grey ones traced on him. Shaking himself Ichigo smiled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his head with a shrug Jushiro laughed and said, "Its fine Ichigo I know old men like us can be dreadfully boring. I was asking you about your plans for the academy," Ichigo snorted at Jushiro's dry sense of humour before confusion flashed briefly across his face Jushiro continued, "Remember you were asked to come and demonstrate at the academy?"

Ichigo remembered now that the white haired captain mentioned, the thought hadn't come to mind about preparing anything he would likely just see what happened. Shrugging his shoulders in nonchalance Ichigo replied, "I haven't thought about it very much but I'm sure I'll be fine."

Jushiro nodded the two friends resuming the banter as Ichigo's mind drifted cradled by the familiar reaitsu of his two mentors.
Coughing broke the peaceful silence and instantly Ichigo was wide awake and alert. Ukitake was hunched over a hand covering his mouth red beginning to stain the pale flesh. Taking in a calming breath Ichigo centered himself and stepped forward to where Shunsui crouched beside his friend whispering calming assurances in his ear.

"What can I do to help?"

Ichigo asked waiting for Shunsui to tell him, his captain looked up telling Ichigo all he needed to know the orangette turned and paced to the door. Before he turned to leave Shunsui called out, "Are you fast Ichigo?"

Ichigo smirked and was gone, a blur the barest afterimage accompanied by the faint rustling of an invisible breeze. Shunsui turned back to Jushiro helping his friend sit back calm and worry raging war internally.

The Fourth was quiet the dull hum of medical machinery in the back ground irritating to Ichigo's aggravated senses. Stalking forward Ichigo's reaitsu snaked out and located the imposing Taicho located in the far corner of the open room. Unohana looked up as she sensed the presence of one of her more familiar patients Ichigo was walking towards her a deadly calm to his step he stopped in front of her.

"Ukitake is having an attack."

Ichigo's voice was like silk over steel calm and quiet, Unohana nodded preparing to leave when she turned to see Ichigo holding out his hand. Curiosity quirked her brow and she starred at Ichigo's arm for a moment longer Ichigo sighed and said, "Take my arm it will be faster."

Unohana looked like she wanted to protest before silver eyes caught Ichigo's own amber one, his apathetic mask held firm even as his eyes were a swirl of emotion curling in on each other. The female captain grabbed his arm without hesitation and they were gone a blur marking where they had once stood.

Unohana stumbled as she slowly opened her eyes not realizing she had closed them in the near blinding speeds in which they had travelled, shaking herself from inane thoughts she could ponder later the woman stalked forward to attend to her patient. Ichigo breathed a small sigh of relief and settled his back against the wall still strung with tension, as he watched Unohana treat Jushiro a sliver of an idea formed in his mind caressing his thoughts and sending them spiraling down the rabbit hole.

Looking up after a long period of silence where Ichigo's thoughts had run rampant Ichigo could see Ukitake sprawled on the couch his chest bare and sweat beading his brow and glistening upon his toned abdomen. Shunsui was curled protectively beside his friend as Unohana finished casting another healing kido over his body the familiar green glow casting peculiar light on the objects in the room. Pent up breath left Ichigo's lungs and he watched on in silence as Shunsui talked to Jushiro in hushed tones drawing a smile from tire brown eyes.

X

Chapter End Notes

Well I hope you all enjoyed! Did everyone like seeing Hisana and/or the duels? I will
see you all soon thank you for reading reviews/comments are always appreciated.

Sandbar!
Desiderium

Chapter Summary

The Shinigami Women's Association gathers. Ichigo is forced into a family meal and midnight reminiscing commences.

Chapter Notes

Desiderium

(n.) An ardent longing, as for something lost.

Hello everyone here is chapter 15 and we are now over 100k! Yay! I hope you all enjoy this chapter and as always thank you all for the amazing support.

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

“We now begin the tenth meeting of the Shinigami Women’s association!” Yourichi crowed as she sat down crossing her legs, golden eyes sweeping around the room and observing the collection of female Shinigami. Lisa was hunched in the corner shadows partially hiding her figure from view as she held a book up to her face, only the quick flash of light bouncing off her glasses gave any indication she was there. Hiyori was glowering in the corner, putting up a heavy front of reluctance even though Yourichi knew the short blonde wanted to be there. Unohana, who had finally been convinced to attend, sat in the corner her elegant posture tainted with slight boredom. Mashiro was bouncing in her seat vibrant lime coloured hair flopping every which way with the movement. Beside her Rangiku smirked lecherously, crystal blue eyes glancing around the room curiously.

“Today we are going to discuss the topic of our next article as well as the usual rumours.”

Everyone’s attention perks at Yourichi’s statement eyes flashing dangerously, some more so than others. Settling slightly like a cat into the plush cushion underneath Yourichi regarded the ladies waiting for one to pipe up with an idea. Rangiku’s crystal eyes were a mere glimmer as she squinted her eyes in thought a hand coming daintily to rest under her chin as she pursed her lips. Brightening in her movements, a smile that would send shivers down any sane man’s spine slipped across her face lighting her eyes from within she said, “We could do an article on the most eligible bachelors in Soul Society, it would certainly be entertaining and informative.”
Silence hovered over the room for a moment the small party considering the merit of the bubbly blonde’s idea, Yourichi smirked she could already see that their next article would have the chosen topic. It would be splendid, a glory among their past articles if the vicious light shining in eyes of melted gold were any indication. Receiving a general consensus Rangiku smiled looking toward Yourichi for a moment before continuing, “We should focus particularly on the top ten so as not to have too long of a list, and really only third seats and up.”

Whispers broke out among the collection of women Hiyori snorting and shaking her head at the idea even as a thoughtful light cast her eyes in shadow. Unohana leaned back watching the chaos in amusement, as Lisa set down her book the thick tome resting heavily on the hardwood flooring.

“That is a lovely idea Rangiku. Now we must start deciding our lucky (or should we say unlucky) bachelors.”

Laughter followed Yourichi’s cocky declaration amusement light in the room. Nodding to herself in thought Yourichi went over the many eligible men in Soul Society dismissing some with ease, others her thoughts rested on for a few quiet moments. A certain mad scientist came to mind, the thought of the eccentric man she had known nearly all her life bringing a soft smile to her lips and a fond light in her eyes.

“Who will start naming some victims… sorry did I mean options anyone who has someone in mind feel free to share.”

Laughter bubbled into the air, like the rich sensation of a wine bottle newly opened. As the laughter settled down Rangiku smirked the movement revealing pearly white teeth flashing almost predatorily she remarked, “Well I know for certain of two very eligible bachelors. Recent graduates from the academy and with high standing, and the rumors…” Rangiku trailed off teasingly eyebrows wagging suggestively, suspense hung in the air for a moment, a delicate piece of string fraying by the second. Rangiku continued, “Ichigo Shiba and Byakuya Kuchiki. Think of it, those two are the talk of their barracks much less Soul Society.”

Glancing curiously at Rangiku, Yourichi thought of Byakuya, tall dark and handsome seemed to describe the young lieutenant well. Her thoughts drifted to Ichigo; fiery, fearsome, and yet kind and compassionate in a way one rarely saw. Already a plan was forming at the edges of her mind, twisting short locks of rich plum around her finger Yourichi smiled and waited for another to speak up.

“Oh that’s perfect! I like that and we can do specials on the top three!”

Yourichi was slightly surprised to hear Mashiro speak up about such a matter, the lime haired lieutenant often only spoke up when it came to rumours. The exuberant woman had the inane ability to appear in the right place at the right time. Nodding Yourichi considered the idea, a special had merit, all the latest gossip and rumours surrounding them was sure to excite. Especially when one considered the many mysteries that Ichigo had surrounded himself with over time.

Lisa looked up sensing expectant eyes she faced the group adjusting her glasses pointedly, Rangiku shrugged carelessly, the movement shifting the short strands of honeyed blonde hair dangling around her ears as she said, “Lisa-chan you’re pretty close with Ichi no?”

The lieutenant sighed for a moment pinching the bridge of her nose in long suffering agony before speaking, “I know more than most, but if Ichigo finds out I told…. Well he can be downright vicious. What’s in it for me?”

Yourichi smirked there was the Lisa she knew well, and considering the many things Yourichi had
heard from Kukkaku and seen herself in action she could understand the worry of the ebony haired lieutenant.

“I have a certain collection of novels you might like?”

Yourichi offered innocently, teal eyes flashed towards Yourichi red rims hiding the interest in those eyes. The lieutenant pondered the offer for a moment before nodding and saying, “Agreed but I have right to mention it was your idea if he corners me.”

Yourichi nodded her head in accordance, before they focused on Lisa Yourichi wanted to hear some of the other rumours that floated about. Turning her head to address the rest of the seated ladies Yourichi said, “Before we get some concrete fact, what have you all heard about Byakuya and Ichigo?”

Mummers and hushed whispers filled the room, amused and wary glances traded with ease and comfort. Yourichi smiled pleased with the chaos as she took another sip of the still warm tea, a fruit blend rich and heavy on the tongue delighting the senses. The noise quieted and the ladies gathered, watching on with rising interest at the topic of today’s meetings.

“I hear that the young Kuchiki heir and Shiba-san are in a relationship? I also hear some other interesting rumours some say the two are planning to overthrow Soul Society.”

Mashiro’s revelation brought forth a cascade of chatter as the ladies considered the rumour of the two dating. The idea had its merits the two were nearly inseparable, always near to the other at any formal gala, and when Yourichi visited Kukkaku the two were often speaking in hushed whispers, they seemed to have a truthfully small concept of personal space around the other. Their eyes also contained a whirlwind of emotions when they connected, rich chocolate and cool silver dancing to a tune of their own making.

Shaking herself from wistful thoughts Yourichi shook her head unconsciously it was far from the truth but pleasing fancy for the mind even if the glances were the only unsubtle thing about the two. The rumours had no ground but were a fun idea none the less. The women continued to chat, giggles and coy laughter filling the air along with unsubtle gazes and perverted smirks. Yourichi let the rumour stew in their minds for a few moments more before coughing drawing their attention back to the matter at hand she said, “Whether they are in a relationship is an unconfirmed mystery, albeit an interesting one. For now, we can play on the two men supposedly single? But maybe not? It will skyrocket the interest centered on the two for those who haven’t already thought it. What do you think Lisa-chan anything else to add?”

Lisa tilted her frames in thought regarding Yourichi for a halting moment before she smiled. The movement was akin to a predator or one who has found the last cookie and taken it for themselves. The ebony haired lieutenant said, “The two lieutenants, and you might as well consider Ichi a lieutenant with the work he does and the power he holds, both have their Shikai. Not everyone has seen them though, I have and a few others could deliver the details. Nothing too in-depth of course. Not to mention their exhibition match with each other at the academy, I stopped by briefly to watch some of the match.”

The ladies gathered thought on the pieces of information delivered into their well-manicured hands, Yourichi traded a smirk with Rangiku who was positively beaming. The lieutenant was normally quite lazy, or rather apprehensive when it came to work, but draw gossip into the equation and she pounced on the matter.

“Any other rumours? What do the residents, souls and Shinigami alike, think of the two?”
The women shared glances of interest debating silently who would step forward first. Yourichi settled back into the plush cushion once more idly twirling a strand of raven hair mind drifting to her squad and her more than eager lieutenant, she would likely bring Soi-fon to the next meeting. She was a stern and serious girl but Yourichi was sure she could find the hidden gossiper inside of her.

“Many of the souls of Rungokai particularly the inner districts are familiar with the two, they often go on walks browsing the shops and trying many of the restaurants gathered. They also have a kind reputation among the souls, more than a few times it’s rumoured they have stopped thieves of a kind worth stopping and aided others, children who hunger. They are respected among the community. Especially after that fiasco a few years back when they were in the academy, a member of the First division challenged Byakuya and Ichigo dealt with the Shinigami cordially and changed her mind. They’ve been acting as liaisons with the Soutaicho and Rungokai services.”

Yourichi stared in slight surprise at Rangiku not knowing the blond was so informed of their activates and the opinion of the lieutenants shared by the souls of Rungokai. Rangiku smiled proudly straightening her posture slightly.

“Some whisper the two are Kami come to earth. I’ve also heard talk about the two being star crossed lovers born again in Soul Society. Many also wonder about Ichigo’s mysterious backgrounds if you remember he seemed to appear out of nowhere. They say he is a traveller of time or worlds, or that he is actually a member of the Soul King’s court. No one knows for sure and the souls have crazy imagination.”

Mashiro’s fast flow of rumours left Yourichi struggling to process the many facets and rumours that continued to grow and surround the orangette. Tilting her head like a curious cat Yourichi thought to the time Ichigo was found, everything seemed to change from that date on. Changes already rippled across Soul Society, the increased strength of outer districts if only minimal was a hint. Yourichi shook her head in amusement deciding to contribute to the rumours picking up on Rangiku’s thread and said, “I know that Ichigo also goes out every two weeks with Ganju on his rounds around Rungokai they often visit poorer districts. They regard him as a saint or an angel what with the orange hair like heavenly fire. What about the opinion shared by the Shinigami?”

Yourichi questioned glancing at the other females encouraging them to speak up, what was the point of a meeting if Rangiku and Yourichi could share gossip with each other easy enough. The information about Ichigo and Ganju’s rounds was easily found whenever Yourichi visited Kukkaku, the older sister was always proud to babble for a few about her younger brothers. Hiyori frowned for a moment blond hair scrunched up shaking as she tilted her head to the side and said, “I know that Ichigo also goes out every two weeks with Ganju on his rounds around Rungokai they often visit poorer districts. They regard him as a saint or an angel what with the orange hair like heavenly fire. What about the opinion shared by the Shinigami?”

Yourichi nodded pleased that Hiyori had spoken up and contributed to their information pool, looking around the room Yourichi decided to contribute a bit about Byakuya, Ichigo was a mystery that could be discussed for hours on end.

“Bya-kun isn’t as mysterious as Ichi but there are a few twists and turns behind that Kuchiki façade, you would hardly believe it but when he was younger he had quite the temper.”

Curiosity and surprise were directed her way and Yourichi preened slightly under the attention, Unohana nodded in the corner a strange smile of fondness playing across her lips she remarked, “I remember that, quite the spit fire he was, Kuchiki-taicho took him in a few times for checkup or the like and he was petulant and disobedient to the last mile. Of course it is not like that now.”

Yourichi smirked internally pleased that the normally stoic though calm captain had spoken.
Yourichi also knew that the captain was only partially right, wanting to add Yourichi mentioned, “He is still like that Unohana-taicho he’s only succeeded at perfecting the Kuchiki mask, you should see him when he hangs out with Ichigo. I swear the two are full of sarcasm and dry humour, accompanied by uncanny understanding of each other.

The exasperation in Yourichi’s voice brought giggles from Mashiro and quiet laughter from the other ladies, a warm atmosphere filled the room and settled in Yourichi’s gut she liked the camaraderie that filled the room, the sense of companionship hard pressed to find in a man.

“Well I think we have quite the scoop on those two, I think they no doubt tie for number one or place first and second respectively what do you think?”

Yourichi observed watching the reactions of the other Shinigami assembled, collective nodding and agreement was received and the Shihōin princess smiled gold eyes coiled and flashing in amusement she continued, “Who else would make our list of eligible bachelors?”

“Certainly not the Soutaicho.”

Lisa muttered under her breath, silence followed the snarky comment for a moment before laughter broke out in great gales. The collective women were clutching their stomachs at the wonderful image and thoughts Lisa’s comment had provided however unknowingly. After a few more merry moments the women began to calm down rose still lingering in their cheeks from the force of their laughter.

“What about Kyoraku and Ukitake Taicho?”

Mashiro suggested the green haired Shinigami practically bouncing in her seat and uncontrollable energy thrumming constantly in her bones. The surrounding women considered the new prospective choices the ivory and chocolate haired captains appearing in their mind’s eyes. Rangiku laughed coyly running a hand through her hair before saying, “Now don’t forget my captain the pervert he is or Kaien. But you do make a good point those two are certainly eligible.”

“Aren’t they together?”

Hiyori asked callously arching an eyebrow critically, silence fell around the room before breaking out in whispers debating the question. While the rumours surrounding Ichigo and Byakuya were that purely rumours (with a subtle hint of truth) there was an uncertainness when it came to the relationship between the two veteran captains. Before the discussion could continue two resounding knocks sounded on the shoji doors.

Everyone’s eyes snapped to the door curious as to who the mysterious knocker might be, the squad members had been ordered to not disturb the meeting unless a dire emergency had arisen. Before anyone could say something or move Rangiku rose from her seat and flounced over to the doors pulling them open suddenly likely startling the person on the other side.

“Ichigo! How nice to see you!”

The exclamation was followed by what was likely Ichigo’s back cracking as the orangette was pulled into a tight hug squished against Rangiku’s more than ample breasts. After a minute Yourichi began to be concerned for Ichigo’s health. Finally, the exuberant lieutenant pulled away revealing Ichigo whose hair was now a mussed mess (more so than normal) with more than a few creases in his uniform, the young Shinigami took in a few deep breaths the blue tinge to his face fading slightly.

“Hello Rangiku…”

Ichigo began looking at Rangiku before his eyes cast around the room observing the collection of
female Shinigami now staring at him, a light blush dusted his cheeks whether from embarrassment or his returning breath Yourichi couldn’t tell. Smirking the violet haired captain gracefully rose to her feet sashaying over to the door.

“My Ichigo such a surprise seeing you here! The Shinigami Women’s Association was just meeting. Quite odd how you found us and escaped the notice of the many Shinigami in the barracks”

Ichigo eyes snapped towards the door as if the orange haired lieutenant wanted to flee, he held his ground taking a deep breath reaching up to gently massage the bridge of his nose he said, “I was actually looking for Lisa I just wanted to warn her about the mess in the office, Captain decided he absolutely needed to find a certain document and upended more than one filling cabinet. Finding Lisa was a simple matter I just followed her reaitsu.”

As if that explained everything Ichigo shrugged his eyes drawing towards Lisa who was frowning a steely light entering her eyes as she tilted her glasses in a threatening manner Ichigo gulped looking at the door once more likely wishing he had not been the bearer of bad news nor that he had stumbled upon their happy meeting. Before he could flee Mashiro called out, “Hey Berry-Tan! Do you know if Ukitake and Kyroraku Taicho are in a relationship?”

A flash of annoyance although good humoured in nature flashed in Ichigo’s eyes at Mashiro’s nickname which she had refused to give up no matter how much he begged her before he comprehended her question. Ichigo started spluttering in confusion eyebrows rocketed towards his forehead in confusion as he regarded the collection of them warily. Sighing he closed his mouth and massaged his temples for a moment before he commented, “I don’t know. I better be going, have fun?”

Ichigo’s statement had tapered off into a question but the flustered lieutenant left them no time to continue as he high-tailed it out of there leaving an open shoji door in his wake and a room full of amused woman. Smiling at the new teasing material Yourichi and Rangiku turned to face the gathering of females and said, “So Ukitake and Kyroraku taicho?”

“X”

“What war did you fight in?”

Ichigo laughed as he darted around the hollow his blade a wicked pinprick of silver as it sliced through the hollow’s pale mask. Shaking his head in thought Ichigo yelled across the clearing, “Can’t answer that, sensitive information!”

Aizen frowned petulantly regarding Ichigo as Kyoka Suigetsu cut through another hollow’s mask the mindless beast serving no challenge merely annoyance in their numbers. Aizen huffed stepping closer he asked, “How long did it take for you to achieve Bankai?”

Ichigo turned the answer over in his mind before with a flick of his katana he dispatched another hollow and said, “The first time a week. The second time was more complicated maybe a month?”

Aizen’s brow twitched in surprise and if the man wasn’t a master of his emotions Ichigo suspected he would be gaping. Aizen looked like he wanted to question what Ichigo meant when he said a second time but Ichigo smirked coyly and said, “Only one question Aizen-san.”

The man grumbled to himself and sliced through another hollow. Ichigo smirked and the two methodically dealt with the rest of the hollows all the while he could feel Aizen’s eyes critical and assessing on his back.
Ichigo slipped through the shoji doors of the Shiba family home with a sigh head cast in an attempt to hide his presence. It was inevitable that this dinner would come still the matter weighed heavy on Ichigo’s heart. He could now look at the man and not feel as if the whole world was spinning but pain seemed to radiate from his heart in a steady stream when he gazed upon young eyes.

Ichigo had managed to mostly avoid Isshin at any recent Shiba gatherings as they were often packed with the multiple branches of the family, it was easily excusable that Ichigo was busy greeting one relative and the next that no time remained to greet the clan head. If the wounded looks the ebony haired Taicho sent him were any indication Isshin had caught on to Ichigo’s little game however pathetic it was, he needed time to cope before he could look the man in the eye and not crack. If he let his emotions be shown in their raging intensity inside himself Ichigo worried that questions would arise, he would be hassled or forced into counseling. Jushiro and Shunsui had already noticed the age in Ichigo’s eyes, maturity gained not through age.

Sighing once more Ichigo agitatedly ran his hand through flaming locks, this was the reason he was here tonight his bad habit of procrastinating and trying (always failing) to run away from his feelings. Isshin had decided to come for dinner on a night he knew Ichigo would be home, Ichigo couldn’t run away any longer. He wondered briefly at the longing in his chest, he wanted to see his father again talk to the man and know him. The thought sent shivers down his spine, a calming wave of reaitsu washed away lingering fear and apprehension thanking Zangetsu Ichigo squared his shoulders and stared ahead. Taking a deep breath Ichigo entered the living room where Kukkaku, Kaien, and Isshin were relaxing, Ichigo noted with amusement that Ganju was once again in the kitchen wiping up a storm.

Deciding to visit the youngest Shiba before the drama of the night unfolded its furrowed wings Ichigo passed the sitting room cloaked in shadows his presence the merest whisper of wind upon one’s senses.

The kitchen was a mess of steam and the heady smells of cooking food accompanied by the ever ringing sounds of cooking utilities being used. Ganju perked up the minute Ichigo stopped to hover in the doorway amusement hovering on the orangette’s face Ganju had some reaitsu, granted it wasn’t enough for a Shinigami or he would surely have followed Kaien’s footsteps.

“Ichigo!”

The boisterous young Shiba strode over an apron splattered with old stains no amount of washing could remove hanging off his shoulders, his ebony hair was pulled back and a beaming smile shone on his face. Ichigo tentatively settled in the near-bone crushing hug Ganju enveloped him in slowly wrapping his arms around the younger male. Ichigo still was hesitant with touch but time, and an annoying brother had slowly helped him settle his anxiety (it helped that the whole Shiba family were lovers of touch).

“Just thought I’d check in before dealing with Kaien’s antics. How is the meal coming?”

Ganju smiled understanding Ichigo’s reluctance to deal with Kaien at the moment, his eyebrows perked up the minute Ichigo mentioned food. The talented cook launched into a short spiel about the many dishes he was preparing and a few alterations to the recipes Ichigo had given him that Ganju made. Ichigo nodded happily listening to Ganju prattle on, nostalgia rose in Ichigo’s chest. He paused wondering at the happiness that seemed to blossom and coil around his heart.

It took a moment for Ichigo to understand, it had been far to long since he had a younger sibling to care for (even if Ganju was technically older). Ichigo knew this sensation listening to his sisters talk
about the newest sports teams or an interesting recipe she had found online. The thought of them left Ichigo drowning in emotion for a moment, sorrow radiated in his chest he knew he had failed them. Ichigo never wanted to fail Ganju like he had his sisters. Before Ichigo could shake the feelings and memories hanging over him tight arms encircled his lithe form once more.

Ichigo looked up in surprise not even aware that Ganju had stopped speaking, already with the warmth the pain of heartbreak was retreating slightly. Wrapping his arms in Ganju’s forest green yukata Ichigo took in a deep breath centring himself in the here and now. Ganju was alive and Ichigo would do all in his power to protect his family.

Pulling back Ganju smiled blearily at Ichigo seeing that the orangette no longer looked so haunted. Ganju had seen it before Ichigo’s eyes would become distant hazy with memory and always so full of sorrow so much that Ganju wondered how one man could shoulder it. He would become closed off barely a hint of emotion on his face as if it was carved from cold stone. No matter how much Ichigo tried to hide emotion his eyes were always alive with it a complex sea of emotions always swimming in his eyes. Ganju had felt a cold hollow feeling well up in his chest when he saw that look on Ichigo’s face and before he knew it Ganju was trusting his instincts and wrapping his big brother in a hug.

“Thank you Ganju, sorry my mind… got lost on other things.”

Ganju nodded and didn’t question where Ichigo’s mind had gone, Ichigo smiled thankful emotion sparkling in his eyes once more. The younger Shiba stepped back giving Ichigo room to breath, Ichigo let his gaze drag over his younger sibling before he smiled apologetically and said, “I’m distracting you from your cooking I’ll see you at dinner.”

Ichigo ruffled Ganju’s hair an assuring smile on his face, Ganju stared critically a moment more before nodding a smile on his own face he ventured back into the kitchen where a pot simmering on the stove drew his attention.

Ichigo chuckled turning away from the kitchen he slowly padded towards the sitting room the buzz of the three occupants reatsu brushing against his senses and Ichigo bit back a sigh and determinedly faced forward. Pausing at the door Ichigo stared at the wooden frame in thought for a moment before with the “gentle” nudge of Shiro in the back of his mind Ichigo heaved open the door. All conversation stopped for a moment as bright eyes regarded him for a moment before Kukkaku sprang up from the cushion she had been resting on and prowled over to Ichigo.

“You sir are late!”

She exclaimed hastily even as she pulled him into a tight hug the corners of her lips tilted up in welcome. Ichigo laughed the darkness fleeing for the time as he pulled back and smiled connecting with Kukkaku’s icy blue eyes a touch of indignation and fury was accompanied by her usual warmth. Laughing with Ichigo she stepped back leading Ichigo farther into the lion’s den.

Kaien popped up from his seat bouncing on his feet like a jackrabbit and grinning madly he bounced over and enveloped Ichigo in a hug. Ichigo huffed resolutely wrapping his arms around Kaien before pushing the energetic lieutenant away. The man pouted a glint in his eyes promising repentance later. Turning to face the last occupant of the room who had remained silent Ichigo swallowed forcing a faint smile on his face.

Isshin was calm and quiet an exception from his normally exuberant self, Ichigo appreciated the gesture for what it was. The two stared at each other for a quiet moment contemplating the other, dark brown eyes searching Ichigo’s caramel orbs asking a silent question that Ichigo couldn’t answer. Isshin broke first a mellow smile resting on his face, Ichigo’s heart heaved in his chest but he
drew on Zangetsu’s strength holding him up when he threatened to fall and smiled.

“Ichigo glad we finally have a chance to relax and get to know each other. It is a shame at other gatherings we have been so preoccupied as to barely have a moment to speak to each other.”

Ichigo recognized the subtle accusation for what it was, guilt clawed its way through his stomach before he pushed it down swallowing with an uneasy shrug he said, “Life is a funny mistress indeed. I’m glad she has provided us with this opportunity.”

Ichigo’s voice seemed to lilt on invisible eddies falling quiet at times before rising to his regular octave. Isshin nodded and before they could say any more Kaien popped up between the two directing Ichigo into one of the many colourful cushions gathered around the low table. A few cups of tea rested on it’s hard wooden surface thin wisps of steam rising from one of the teacups.

“Now why were you late Ichi?”

Kaien queried in interest ever the nosy older brother as he leaned across the table to peer at Ichigo skeptically, rubbing the bridge of his nose in tired amusement Ichigo said, “Lisa and I had to finish a report for Kyroraku-taicho, it just took a little longer than we thought it would as some of the evidence didn’t add up so we had to hunt the Shinigami present on the mission. I also went and greeted Ganju in the kitchens before venturing out to visit you.”

Kaien nodded his understanding and some of the anger faded from Kukkaku’s eyes at Ichigo’s tales. Kukkaku turned to face Ichigo curiously looking him over with sharp blue eyes, feeling her heavy gaze Ichigo looked up.

“Have you been eating regularly and getting sleep Ichi? We don’t want you to have another attack, you had us all worried.”

Ichigo bowed his head slightly in apology he hadn’t meant to worry the rest of the family but it had been unexpected. The truth to Kukkaku’s question was a complicated manner, he had slowly but surely been forcing himself to eat more (even if Shunsui and Lisa’s prodding was a contributing factor) and Ichigo was trying to receive more sleep but it was hard to shut away the night terrors so deeply embedded in his mind even a healing sleep couldn’t shield Ichigo from them all.

“Yes, Kukkaku I’ve been eating regularly and am getting more sleep.”

Kukkaku peered at Ichigo for a moment assessing the truth of his words, apparently satisfied she nodded and settled fractionally into the plum coloured cushion she was resting on. Ichigo gently fingered the hilt of Zangetsu resting at his side. Soothing waves of reaitsu eased some of the tension building in his muscles.

Smiling Ichigo settled back and listened to the conversation surrounding him, information on the other clans as while as their own inner workings. The three elder Shibas bounced from topic to topic with Ichigo occasionally butting in with an interesting point or question. The atmosphere was warm and Ichigo found the tension winding him up like a string began to fade as tallow candles slowly burned their heavy smoke filling the room and drifting towards an open window and their warm rich scents filling the air.

They were discussing the merits of including a paperwork course in the academy when one of the many servants knocked before sliding open the thin shoji doors. The servant a thin man with sharp black hair bowed at the waist before announcing that dinner was to be served. The man quickly fled; message delivered he returned to his post.
Pulling himself from the cushion with a few pops and cracks of his bones Ichigo stretched slightly before regarding the other members of the room. Kukkaku was on her feet offering her hand to Kaien who was petulantly gazing out the window after a snide comment from Ichigo. Shaking his head in amusement Ichigo observed Isshin standing solemn and thoughtful, he gazed at the scene before him with distant fondness.

The dining table seemed ready to collapse under the feast of dishes collected upon it’s surface, steam rose from the dishes and an alluring scent rose from the food and assaulted their noses tempting them further into the room. Ganju excited the kitchen a proud smile on his face and more than a few dashings of new sauces on his apron and flour or something of the like in his hair.

The members of the Shiba family seated themselves at the grand table hardly able to see each other over the large piles of food. Ganju stared at each member of the table for a moment before he spoke, “I hope you like the food I prepared today I tried a few new recipes as well as tinkered with some old ones.”

They nodded their approval assurances of the taste of the food flowing of their tongues with ease. Waiting a moment more the assembled family finally began to eat from the delicious feast prepared for the night. Ichigo hummed pleased at the rich tastes bursting across his tongue it was a sharp contrast of spice and sweetness that left Ichigo appreciating the effort put into making the dish. Similar courses of pleasure rang through out the dining room and Ganju blushed at the praise his cheeks colouring a sharp red.

Silence reigned for a few moments as the diners appreciated the food taking the time to savour each morsel. After a time Kaien posed a question to Kukkaku about her latest ventures to the Rungokai markets and conversation began again; quiet and peaceful.

“How you noticed the surplus of souls in the outer districts?”

Kukkaku directed the question towards Ganju as they commonly visited Rungokai in comparison to the Shinigami of the family. Ichigo’s attention was instantly riveted on the conversation at hand his mind pondering the sudden situation. He wondered briefly if it was some machination of Aizen that the souls of Rungokai were more than usual but dismissed the idea, the man was still only beginning to experiment the few that Ichigo had seen already were some of his very first.

How Ichigo came by that information was another matter entirely. When one spent days curled over books in the archives researching vastly different topics in compatible silence, or being accosted in whatever setting whether at the local market or in the midst of battle for a simple question one saw through his façade and met the man behind the mask if only a little. Aizen was still young just on the cusp of madness needing only a small push or one experiment too great to push him over the edge. Ichigo had a vague idea of what that final experiment might be, and Ichigo meant final. Aizen would finally see the changes Ichigo had wrought and feel the weight of his actions or be dealt with as the megalomaniac he could one day become.

Shaking himself from musings somewhat dark in his mind Ichigo refocused on the question listening intently as Kukkaku finished her sentence, “it seems likely another war has broken out in the mortal world.”

“You’re most likely right many of the new souls look haunted with eyes like the old men sitting on their verandas.”

A silent look was passed between the Shiba siblings after Ganju finished a pointed look directed towards Ichigo. Ichigo was lost for what the signal meant but shrugged pondering what war in the mortal war could have occurred to bring in such an influx of souls. Ichigo had visited the mortal
world only briefly when he was fresh out of the academy, they had barely been in the early eighteen
hundreds when Ichigo ventured there. But time was a fickle thing and sometime passed differently in
the human world and the afterlife, a year in the afterlife could be five in the mortal realm.

Kukkaku frowned her brows furrowing even as Kaien’s bubbly persona disappeared under a mask
of seriousness for a moment, somber was the aura where moments before it had been warm and
welcoming full of the essence of family wrapped up in happiness. Kukkaku spoke, “I hear they’ve
been pushing the new souls into the already crowded outer districts only bringing in more poverty,
plus the many souls are unstable from the stories I’ve heard.”

Isshin frowned even as Kaien took in Kukkaku’s words solemnly, Ichigo’s mind whirled at the
information placed in his hands. He wanted to see what she meant by unstable and how this
knowledge was only reaching them now, it was information easily of importance to the captains. If
the hard lines etched briefly into Isshin’s face and the tight fists Kaien’s hands were clenched into
they agreed with the sentiments.

Ganju sensing the somber and tense mood that had filled the room took a nervous breath before
saying, “It’s not all bad the men are strong and work has been easy. In addition, I was talking to a
young man and he mentioned some recipes that I’m going to get from him at a later date.”

The somber mood was successfully expelled even as it wavered in their hearts easy smiles slipped
onto the assembled diners lips. Conversation fell into an easy flow and Ichigo listened with a soft
smile missing the feeling of family, shaking himself from thoughts that would soon turn sour Ichigo
listened with dread as Kaien began on a spiel of one sort or the other.

X

It was dark in the sitting room a sparse few candles illuminating the space in flickering darkness,
Ichigo leaned against the wall the pale beams of night’s light shining from the window above. A
porcelain cup of sake was balanced in his calloused hands the clear liquid seeming like liquid silver
in the cast light of the moon. The other occupants of the house were all firmly ensconced in their
beds only Ichigo was awake in the wee hours of the morning to hear the creak and groans of the old
house.

Ichigo had tried to fall asleep in vain knowing no sleep would come, only mindless insomnia. How
could he expect to close his eyes when Isshin’s presence danced across his senses and whenever his
eyelids closed under sleep’s heavy folds’ death ran a marathon of horror raking scaly claws down
Ichigo back and through his heart. Better to ponder the night’s silence in the presence of the moon,
she who seemed to always watch over him and who his power called the name of.

Ichigo’s mind wandered over many paths and thoughts twisting and curving. He thought of the
future as always, his mind drifted to it, wondering if all he had done was good or would bring about
catastrophe. Ichigo wondered over his sisters whether they would ever be born. He pondered the
notebook and its mysterious writer the encrypted letters becoming clearer each day and sending
apprehension coiling through him accompanied by a thrill of excitement and curiosity.

Ichigo thought of Kisuke and the Vizard would they suffer hollowfication? Would Aizen become
what he was in Ichigo’s own timeline a crazed maniac? Ichigo had no doubt the man would never be
the kind and caring front he projected to the world but the man could turn the machine inside his
head towards different motives. Bettering Soul Society, changing their strict and old fashioned laws.
Aizen’s intellect could be used to benefit and expand the already incredible knowledge the twelfth
was discovering. Could he save his mother from her fate?

Ichigo felt his shoulders sag because the weight of the future rested on his shoulders alone. His
choices would determine the future, who would live and die. He felt like Kami with that much power in his hands, it scared Ichigo. He didn’t want to be a god or hold power unfathomable, all he wanted was to save his friends and family. But he was so tired. Tired of pretending he was less than he was, seeing their faces every day knowing they didn’t know or understand him. The weight of the future both his own and the one he was shaping rested like the weight of the world upon Atlas’ shoulders.

Dropping his head Ichigo stared at the liquid, Zangetsu was strangely quiet at the back of his mind as Ichigo felt despair rise in him. He hated the situation he was in but he knew he had to suffer through it to save them. But he worried if it was all worth it? Would the Quincy destroy them all again, rip them from his grasp leave Ichigo a hollow shell? No. Ichigo would never let that happen… but he had.

Tipping the glass back Ichigo let the burning liquid slide down his throat, centering him in the present he wouldn’t let his future come to pass, he had to assure himself that already he was changing the world from it’s intended course of action. Filling the cup once more from the bottle resting in the dim light on the low wooden table Ichigo placed the glass down on the hard wooden surface. Drawing Zangetsu from his sheath Ichigo set the blade upon his lap feeling the connection at the back of his mind spark at the contact. Soothing waves of reaitsu flowed from the blade and the tense worry that knotted his eyebrows and shoulders faded leaving Ichigo feeling boneless and tired.

Reaitsu achingly familiar sparked across Ichigo’s senses sending a panging of longing through Ichigo’s heart. He couldn’t’ even talk to them, every move every word was cloaked in secrecy. They had no idea he knew them, knew their stories had traded them with each other over glasses of sake or in rubble covered fields. No one understood the horrors of war Ichigo had seen, perhaps the Soutaicho was the closest followed swiftly by the other elder captains but the future brought new horrors.

A cough startled Ichigo from where his thoughts had once again drifted down a morose path it seemed his mind was doomed to haunt him tonight. Looking up Ichigo could see a shadow in the doorway, the sparse few candles provided the barest illumination showing Ichigo that it was not Kukkaku probably posed to yell at him for not sleeping. Isshin stepped inside the sitting room and Ichigo’s breath heaved in his chest, he wanted to flee escape this room and run from piercing brown eyes centered on him. Ichigo wanted to but he didn’t he remained firm hands gentle at first but now tightly grasping Zangetsu’s hilt the fabric warm, familiar, and grounding beneath his fingers.

“Ichigo.”

His name was spoken into the silence neither a question nor an answer a statement, Ichigo looked up startled to hear his own name from those lips, it was different and yet so familiar that a lump settled in Ichigo’s throat and his heart thumped painfully in his chest. The man walked closer the candlelight illuminating dishevelled hair the likes of which Kaien proudly sported when waking up, faint lines of purple hung under his eyes nothing like the deep groves under Ichigo’s eyes.

“May I join you?”

He was quiet barely daring to disturb the silence broken occasionally only by the howling winds outside. Ichigo nodded before he could even contemplate the action, Isshin’s shoulders sagged seemingly with relief and the man sat across from Ichigo eyeing the sake bottle and its contents with a raised eyebrow. Ichigo shrugged minutely pulling a cup left on a side table he placed it in front of the man with a curious tilt to his head.

Isshin nodded and Ichigo placed the cup down gracefully grabbing the sake bottle and pouring the liquid into the porcelain shell. Silence hovered as the action was performed all the while Isshin’s coffee coloured eyes were trained on Ichigo assessing his every move in a soft way unlike the hard
stares he was familiar with.

“Why are you up so late?”

Isshin asked as he took the proffered cup sipping the liquid with the easy airs of a man familiar with drinking. Bitterly Ichigo’s mind remembered later years where the man had fallen into a temporary state of despair, his skills had only improved in that time. Averting his eyes so that Isshin couldn’t divine the truth and emotions swirling in Ichigo’s eyes he answered, “I couldn’t sleep. Night is a cruel mistress to one as unfortunate as I.”

Isshin frowned the movement peculiar on his young face but said nothing more. They sat drinking their sake in silence for a time a tentative peace resting between the two before with a sigh Isshin placed his glass down and asked, “Why are you avoiding me? Is it something I’ve done?”

Ichigo stared for a moment he knew the man was tactless but he wasn’t expecting such a blunt and sudden approach. Rubbing a hand through his hair in a tired and familiar motion Ichigo’s eyes strayed to the hardwood floor for a moment before he looked up into Isshin’s eyes. the man recoiled at what he saw there whether in fear or surprise Ichigo wasn’t sure they continued to stare at each other, Ichigo’s voice was a bare whisper as he said, “You remind me of someone I loved dearly. In the beginning, we weren’t close but over time… you look very similar.”

Ichigo tried unsuccessfully to keep the emotion out of his voice, he felt like he was drowning stranded with no sign of land in sight. Isshin continued to stare at Ichigo curiosity and sorrow waging war across his face.

“What happened?”

Ichigo flinched at the question no matter how much he expected it, the blow it left still sent him reeling. Standing up Ichigo held Zangetsu in his hands his grasp so tight that his skin was pinched white around the blade. Looking at the moon glowing in her place in the sky Ichigo rested his forehead against the cool glass and responded, “He died. Saved me and for it the damned idiot died.”

Ichigo voice stuttered with grief, behind him Ichigo could feel Isshin’s shock and sorrow emanating from the man in waves lilting in his reitsu. Turning to face the captain Ichigo blanketed the emotions welling up inside him and looked the man in the eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

Ichigo nodded his eyes never leaving Isshin’s he said, “It was long ago, but time hasn’t seemed to heal my wounds yet.”

Sitting down Ichigo winced as his bones protested the movement, reaching across the table he refilled their glasses and down his own with a grimace, Isshin repeated the movement. The man didn’t know what to say to Ichigo. Together they sat in the silence as the moon began its descent towards the fire touched horizon.

With a shudder Ichigo rose to his feet Isshin followed the movement his eyes heavy as he watched Ichigo. A reassuring smile splayed itself across Ichigo’s face, facing the man Ichigo said, “Give me time Isshin and I will speak with you more. Don’t blame yourself you couldn’t have known, it was time I faced the truth anyways. Goodnight I’d best return to bed before Kukkaku catches me I’d advise you to do the same.”

Isshin stared for a moment pensive before he smiled softly albeit reluctantly and nodded. Ichigo turned and paced towards the door, as his hand came to rest on the cheery wood frame Isshin called
out from behind Ichigo.

“Perhaps tea one day? In the company of daylight?”

Ichigo smiled and under his breath responded, “Okay I’d like that.”

Turning Ichigo passed through the doorway leaving a captain weary of the night behind him he climbed the ancient stairs creaking in protest and entered his room. Shiro’s arms wrapped around his chest before Ichigo could protest and with a laugh the hollowfied zanpaktou dragged the orangette towards the bed. Ichigo complied turning to see Zangetsu watch the proceedings with an amused smile.

The sombre mood that had hung over his head since the night began and had stolen sleep from him time and time again evaporated in the cherished presence of his soul kin. A light warmth accompanied the coolness of night in his breast and Ichigo smiled content even if weariness hardened his eyes slightly and a tired haze wracked his shoulders.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and the developing relationship between Ichi and his father or the Shinigami Women’s Association. Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Till next time!

Collateral!!
Abditory

Chapter Summary

Tinkering with Kisuke, a meeting with new/old friends. Talk with yourself and Unohana

Chapter Notes

Abditory

(n.) A place into which you can disappear; a hiding place.

Hello everyone here is the next chapter with a whole bunch of scenes and interactions I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The sound of clanging and smashing echoed around the room, Ichigo paused hunched over with a hammer in hand in an attempt to hit the nail which was at the moment eluding him. Kisuke's mint green eyes connected with Ichigo from across the small stretch of the lab they had claimed this evening, Ichigo's lips tilted upwards faintly content with the silent companionship. Shaking himself Ichigo looked back to the floor where their most recent project lay in a mess that they were valiantly trying to assemble, shrugging off amused curiosity Ichigo picked up the hammer and began again.

"Ne Ichigo have you noticed the sudden influx of souls in Rungokai?"

Ichigo looked up once more to tilt his head curiously in thought recalling the Shiba dinner not too many nights ago he nodded and replied, "Kukkaku was mentioning it, seems many of them are being pushed to the outer districts."

Kisuke frowned and heaved himself from the floor muttering under his breath as the scientist was wont to do and running a hand through wheat coloured strands. Kisuke strode over to one of his desks a mess of paperwork with more than a few jars holding dubious contents that glowed in the eerie lighting of the lab. He shuffled in a manic manner through the stacks shoving files off the desk to join other such cluster. Emerging with a triumphant smile Kisuke held a folder coloured midnight blue in his hands.

Ichigo shook his head in fond amusement at the genius' antics he turned his attention back to their latest project and waited for Kisuke to return to his previous spot. Kisuke settled down with a few pops and cracks from his protesting joints, placing the file on his lap he carelessly began to flip
through it as the sound of metal being struck filled the room for a moment. Looking up Ichigo set the hammer down seeing Kisuke's eyes alight with excitement he waved a few pieces of paper in front of Ichigo's eyes at a speed he could hardly comprehend the colourful imagery.

"That's just what's being seen, you see I developed a machine that tracks the general flow of souls entering soul society. The flow has been regular for the most part the points where we seek peaks or drops vary. Often a peak indicates a conflict within or outside Japan's borders, people lose their lives in greater numbers and we see a surplus. The interesting factor is a drop in the flow we chalk that up to developments in the modern world of medicine or of social and economic standing. Meaning people live longer or have better living standards. The thing that strikes me about this surplus is it's the greatest we've seen yet, and the souls are different too."

Ichigo arched an eyebrow at Kisuke's words wondering what the scientist meant when he mentioned the souls being different, he understood well the rest of Kisuke's message. The captain with a penchant for dramas wiggled his eyebrows teasingly and scanned the paper supposedly confirming his thoughts before he continued, "Many of the souls were fighting in a war, and they called it the Great War. We are not sure if the time between the mortal world and soul society has fluctuated again but we can assume there was a war of devastating proportions.

The soldiers all show hints of reaitsu which is not uncommon to see in soldiers as their life encouraged the increase or growth of reaitsu in the soul. However, the men are haunted and often jaded and prejudiced against an unknown foe. That is what our surveys have shown at least."

"You mentioned time fluctuations? Does that happen often in soul society? And if they have such power already why hasn't it been brought to the attention of the Soutaicho?" Ichigo asked his mind trying to process the information given to him, he had the inkling of an idea of what this Great War was and the thought frightened him slightly. Already they were drawing close to the main event the catalyst for where everything would start. Kisuke frowned staring into Ichigo's eyes assessing whatever he saw in caramel orbs, the man sighed and said, "Time fluctuations usually happen in the case of souls crossing over. Occasionally the soul can die in one year for example the Meji era and yet appear in soul society now, they seem to lose their way or the best way to put it is stumble. Usually it's only a few years' margin but we've seen greater.

The reason it hasn't been brought to the Soutaicho's attention or anyone for the matter is that they're trying to keep it under wraps. They being Central 46 the usual culprits and they're using the Onmitsukidō as their tools. They see this information as useless or at least that's the garble they spouted when I brought the matter to their attention. I've heard about the plans you proposed for a militia of sorts in Rungokai it seems they have as well. All these soldiers may not wield enough power to become Shinigami but the idea of defending Soul Society and being paid is likely promising.

Central 46 sees this of course. They're trying to weaken our ranks as they have been for years, they want the noble system to stay in place and for the poor Rungokai residents to be suppressed. The problem of the matter is if those men are left there they may use their strength for malicious deeds and we would have no way of reaching them, the outer districts would sink lower and the corruption would spread. It's what they want though, it gives them power."

Ichigo sat back to stare contemplatively ahead his mind processing the words spoken turning them over in his head. The central 46 had always been bastards' intent on withholding change in the world slowing their progress to a crawl. They were greedy senile old fools who wanted to gain power and to do so they had to strip some from the Shinigami. It was the one thing Ichigo did not lament or aggrieve Aizen for doing when he had murdered the old fools.
The mention of time fluctuations banged inside Ichigo's head also demanding attention. It did not explain Ichigo's own predicament, he believed his situation was more connected with the dangai precipice but all the research he had done proved the theory wrong.

Forcing his attention to Kisuke who was staring at Ichigo assessing and thoughtful Ichigo answered, "If this is true then what can we do about it? I can bring it to the Soutaicho's attention but the problem is overriding Central 46."

Kisuke nodded the scientist had likely already plotted all avenues open to him and the options seemed dark in his mind. The man sighed running a hand once more through golden locks before he said, "That's not the worst of the matter," Here the man pulled out a few sheets of paper filled with charts and cramped handwriting shoving them into Ichigo's laps the man continued as Ichigo's eyes remained glued to the sheets analysing the data, "I've only mentioned the soldiers. There's also the innocents, women, children, and the elderly. Most of them are frightened and traumatised but there are less of them in comparison. Word his heavy on the soldiers' tongues though that tension was brewing and the war has only just begun. I want to see for myself what they mean when they say that the sky is cloaked in poison, or the ground marred with holes. I fear though that I would recoil from what I see."

Ichigo stood up looking the charts over with a frown he placed them down and began pacing around the room for a moment head tipped back in thought it was only beginning the First World War this meant the timelines were already shifting. Taking a deep breath Ichigo considered the information before rounding on Kisuke to pierce the man with a stare full of curiosity he asked, "What do you plan to do?"

The man raised an eyebrow surprise flashing across his face before his mask rose up to cover the fleeting emotion, Kisuke shrugged his own gaze bearing heavily into Ichigo's. Releasing the tense cast to his shoulders the scientist looked down at the stack sitting in his lap and said, "Me? I don't know how to do anything of that sort. Why they made me a captain I'll never know… look at what I've done turned it into a science division. But do I govern and command my subordinates? Hardly. That type of action is suited to you Ichigo however much you attempt to deny it you have a hero's complex."

Ichigo stared at the man baffled for a moment before a sliver of annoyance and acceptance threaded his being. Ichigo acknowledged his hero complex it was what lead him to act as he did but he didn't need the scientist pointing it out. Shaking his head Ichigo asserted, "They choose a fine candidate look at what you've accomplished. You turned this division around made it special, made sure it contributed to the whole of Soul Society. Look what you've discovered because of this, greater lengths of reaisu manipulation, theories on the dangai precipice, studies of the anatomy of hollows! As much as you think you're not a captain to them you are. They look upon you with respect because you take the time to explain complex theories to them so they can further their work. You show up to training sessions and you never force them to be more than they are, only embrace it."

Kisuke stared at Ichigo in wide eyed shock trying to process the speech that had burst forth from the orangette's lips and stolen the breath from Kisuke's lungs. Ichigo no matter how much he wanted to deny it and hide from the limelight was a natural leader with easy charisma that drew you in and forced you to like him and follow his ideals, and a strength that came not only from his power (extensive as it was) but his heart.

"Thank you Ichigo."

The lieutenant blushed slightly at the thanks and turned away for a moment before uttering a soft "You're welcome." Kisuke stared for a moment more before standing up he strode to his desk and
"How about you continue working and we'll discuss a plan?"

Ichigo stared unapprovingly when Kisuke mentioned Ichigo continuing the work but shrugged aside minimal irritation and crouched down to begin tinkering with the object once more. They settled into a soft lull as both men thought the situation over in their minds trying to process all the information and devise a capable plan.

"I can bring this to the Soutaicho's attention show him the results, it would be your job to assemble the data into something coherent rather than your normal chicken scratch. We need to assemble what information we're bringing to attention and devise a strategy to deal with the influx. It could also help if we brought Central 46's treachery and planning to light though we have no concrete evidence he likely suspects as much. We then bring it in front of the senile bastards with the backing of the Soutaicho and a plan and force it down their throats. If that doesn't work, we enlist outside help."

Kisuke looked petulant about the incoming workload mentioned in Ichigo's words though sharp determination cut through pale green eyes. A smirk grew upon his face as Ichigo mentioned the evidence and only grew wider at Ichigo's nicknames for the members of Central 46. Kisuke made some quick jot notes eyes flickering up every few seconds to asses Ichigo before flickering back to the page already lined with Kisuke's messy script. Turning his attention back to their project Ichigo continued to work listening absently to the shuffling of paper and waiting for Kisuke's response.

What they were planning set fire to Ichigo's blood and sparked excitement in his heart if their plan was successful they would be taking a step closer in the right direction. By reinforcing Rungokai they would help to protect against future invasions and broaden their ranks as souls with high reaitsu would be unable to remain under the radar. They also achieved the more than satisfactory deal of reducing the senile old fools' power to near naught giving Soul Society the chance to advance. It was likely they were the ones halting many of Kisuke's already magnificent inventions.

"Why haven't they promoted you yet? Anyway your plan sounds good Ichigo I will assemble the information to the best and neatest of my ability. When are you meeting with Yamamoto?"

Ichigo snorted at Kisuke's unsubtle and near silent question before he tilted his head to the side mentally going through his calendar he turned briefly and responded, "Sometime two weeks from now. He's a busy man the Soutaicho and calls me when he's available."

Kisuke nodded letting out an amused snort and placed his paper down standing up with a tired sigh he settled opposite Ichigo and they began to work together once more. A soft humming filled his mind, Ichigo experienced often when he read or worked on something simple and methodical. Relaxing in easy and relative movements Ichigo's mind wandered as his hands moved.

"Have I ever mentioned the theory I had correlating reaitsu and the human study of matter?"

Ichigo cocked his head curiously before shaking it flaming locks swaying with the movement, light shone in Kisuke's eyes and as they continued to work he began to talk, "My theory is based on what we consider matter. Matter in the human realm serves as the building blocks for all things. In Soul Society reaitsu serves the same purpose. I was wondering if like matter it is made of smaller particles
and whether we can control them or not. The mortal realm is far more advanced in their technology compared to Soul Society and only recently are we beginning to catch up even as they began racing ahead again."

Ichigo pondered the theory for a moment such thoughts seemed beyond him at the moment but the idea had merit. Kisuke smiled at the slight peak of understanding in warm chocolate eyes before he looked at their project in sudden realisation.

"It's finished."

Ichigo looked down surprised as well before with a slightly sardonic smile and perhaps more snark than was necessary asked, "Perhaps now you could tell me why we are building a table?"

If Kisuke had a fan the scientist would surely be fluttering it in front of his face in that vague and mysterious manner that always annoyed Ichigo however fractional. Ichigo snorted an eyebrow raised in exasperation and the scientist smirked. Ichigo laughed however softly and before Kisuke could regain control of himself the two were cackling like a pair of witches.

"Well you see I needed a place to put my new invention?"

Kisuke sing-songed after finally settling the laughter that had viciously shaken him, his cheeks were still painted rose from the force and bright mirth hung in his eyes. Ichigo frowned though it was not in anger merely disapproving and yet teasing.

"And you couldn't have cleared off the three other tables you keep in this cluttered dank room?"

Kisuke feigned mock hurt his hand coming to rest on his chest as he gasped in fake indignation. Ichigo shook his head and restrained himself from laughing by turning his head to look at the far wall where a diagram displayed the complex inner workings of the human figure.

"Moe Ichigo so mean."

Kisuke pouted and whined, Ichigo turned back to the scientist who was acting like a petulant child and arched an eyebrow in exasperation. The man's playful demeanour fell away leaving a soft smile on sharp features, a smile akin to Kisuke's own settled on Ichigo's features. Together they lifted the table and slid it across the floor it protested the movement in loud screeches and groans as it was pushed against the far wall.

Panting for a spare second the two stepped back and regarded their work, the table remained standing and Ichigo counted that a win in his book even if the structure didn't look the most stable thing in the room. Then again Ichigo was far from stable himself so who was he to complain?

"Think you can spare me an hour more of your time?"

Kisuke queried turning to face Ichigo his hands still firmly poised on his hips. Ichigo considered the dying light and the spreading shadows, he was thankful he didn't have a curfew and Kukkaku's wrath wouldn't be too severe as he nodded. Kisuke beamed like a child told they were receiving a puppy and there was a certain bounce in his step as he said, "Good I want to show you my latest project."

The man began to walk out of the room impatiently glancing behind himself to ascertain that Ichigo was indeed following, shaking his head in fond amusement Ichigo followed Kisuke as he led him deeper into the lab. The Twelfth division by now was a patchwork labyrinth of dividing rooms and endless hallways and Ichigo doubted he would ever find his way out if he found himself lost inside the maze. Fluorescent lightning a more modern design sustained by reaiitsu flickered overhead only
adding to the already creepy aura of the place. Kisuke plowed on unaffected, walking with ease and comfort Ichigo didn't bother trying to mimic.

The room Kisuke stopped at was sealed by a door of heavy wood and bound with kido and hado three feet thick, the familiar pulse of energy from within the room sent apprehension coiling inside Ichigo's gut. Kisuke turned to Ichigo assessing the young lieutenant for a moment before he said, "This is where I perform and create my less than legal or entirely safe projects. Do I have your secrecy that what you see in this room remains private?"

Ichigo nodded without hesitation and the serious demeanour darkening green eyes disappeared. Kisuke turned around pulled a key hidden somewhere in the fold of his shihaksho likely his sleeves with the man's habits. The lock clicked twice before with a groaning squeak the door was popped open, pulling out a smooth stone like one might find by a swiftly running stream Kisuke held the object to the wards surrounding the room and they fell away.

Following Kisuke inside Ichigo felt awe course through him, the room was small and circular with half-finished metal contraptions sprawled in some corners looking like modern pieces of art. Other projects remained enclosed in cases of a thick material that seemed to suck in a light or scattered on tables and under microscopes. Kisuke barrelled forward after taking a quiet moment to indulge in the awe splayed across Ichigo's features.

Shaking himself from his stupor Ichigo followed Kisuke as the man led him to the very back of the room where underneath numerous wards a box rested. It was simple and cloaked in the same materials as the others with the ability to steal light and covet it. Kisuke bent forward whispering a few words to the box before with the grinding hum of gears turning the lid popped open.

An indigo haze seemed to bounce upon the sides of the box and reach out for Ichigo, drawing in a sharp breath Ichigo peered inside to see a pool of liquid purple in colour though shimmering with silver and other iridescent colours.

"It's not even close to finished. This is what one of my main projects has been that and the machine to process souls and reaitsu. What do you think?"

Ichigo stared his eyes tracing the box and then darting up to glance into Kisuke's hopeful eyes. Closing his mouth which had fallen open in the course of his amazement Ichigo coughed and replied, "Kisuke that's amazing! What does it do?"

A nervous and uncertain laugh followed Ichigo's questions and the scientist in question rubbed the back of his head before saying, "I'm not entirely sure, I've been testing its reactions with reaitsu so far. The results vary and are hardly the same."

Ichigo nodded trying to process what was in front of him. Kisuke smiled and closed the lid the aura of power and mystery disappearing as the lavender light was cloaked in darkness once more. Kisuke looked up after whispering the wards or something of the sort to the box and said, "Now come I didn't invite you down here to stare at a box of glowing liquid perhaps you can help me with some of the mechanical aspects?"

Ichigo smiled and nodded chocolate eyes connecting with Kisuke's own pale green once. A smile mirrored on both their faces as Kisuke put the project in its rightful place and they moved off to one corner where a heap of metal and wires were coiled around stone. Raising an eyebrow at the scientist Kisuke only shrugged unapologetically and bent down to begin working on whatever had caught his fancy at the time he began this endeavour. Following suit Ichigo settled into the easy manic motions of helping the scientist all the while his mind frothed with uncertainty and soon settled under the gentle hum of his movements.
The bar was busy far more so than Ichigo would expect on a Tuesday night, rolling his shoulders Ichigo questioned why he had ever agreed to come knowing Byakuya wouldn't likely show up. It had been a spur of the moment plan and neither knew if the other was working, it seemed time had slipped from their fingers like grains of sand. The potent scent of alcohol hit Ichigo's senses first as he slid open the shoji door a faded yellow in colour that spoke of long use, the next was the sound the roaring and heaving singing of the drunk and the accompanying sound of clay wear breaking. Sliding inside Ichigo sequestered himself in the shadows for a moment letting tangerine strands fall forward to shade his view, grasping the pommel of Zangetsu at his side Ichigo glance around the room warily.

Feeling his senses calm slightly even as they sparked upon familiar reaitsu Ichigo heaved himself from the shadows and strode forward across worn hardwood floors that had seen the soles of too many feet. A waitress bustled up to him a pleasant smile welcoming and honest on a soft featured face, her outfit was a pale yellow with faded stripes of juniper tracing the sides. Smiling in return the women straightened minutely and took another step forward a stack of menus balanced precociously in her hands.

"Hey Ichigo!"

Whipping his head around in partial surprise, Ichigo spotted Shinji accompanied by a few other captains. It was not Shinji's presence that surprised Ichigo as when his reaitsu first inspected the room it had alighted upon the small gathering. What surprised Ichigo was Shinji calling out to the orangette and even noticing his presence among the frothing mass of reaitsu curled about the room.

Heaving a world-weary sigh Ichigo tilted his head and smiled apologetically at the young waitress before he began the troublesome trek through the collection of tables and men sprawled about them. Upon drawing closer to the table centered near an open window in the far corner of the restaurant Ichigo could see the other captains gathered around the low table. Kensei's stark grey hair and harsh eyes judged Ichigo as he drew close, Rose smiled in welcome the flash of recognition in his eyes as the dim figure was illuminated by passing candles emitting heavy smoke, Love was settled beside Rose a curious expression marking his face.

Shinji quickly sprung to his feet bouncing over to meet Ichigo halfway he welcomed the younger Shinigami with a hug. Ichigo tensed in Shinji's grasp the familiar reaitsu washing over him and teasing his senses with loss and memory, awkwardly returning the sudden interaction Ichigo drew back a warm smile on his lips. The man's lips curled up into a familiar Cheshire smirk as he drew Ichigo towards the table.

"Rose, Love, Kensei I'm sure ya met Ichigo before in a formal setting but this is a bar so there is no need for any affixations or manners of the sort. Got that Ichi? Good, Ichigo this is Rose captain of the Third, Kensei captain of the Ninth and Love captain of the Seventh. Fellow powerful captains I introduce Ichigo Shiba co-lieutenant of the Eight division."

Smirking proudly at his introduction Shinji dragged Ichigo to an empty seat to the amused gaze of the other captains. Love shook his head in amusement at his friend's familiar antics his large afro swaying faintly with the movement. Rose regarded the cup in front of him for a moment before keen eyes flashed to connect with Ichigo's caramel orbs appearing appeased by what he found there the blond-haired man downed the liquid in the clay glass and said, "We've actually met before Shinji, a few years ago, though it seems longer than that in the passing of time."

Shinji arched and incredulous eyebrow glancing between the two with a near suspicious curl to his eyes before he accepted his friend's words and turned pensive cocoa coloured eyes on Ichigo.
Running his hand through orange strands Ichigo sighed faintly knowing that this night would be long already, his better judgement seemed to haphazardly throw caution to the wind on nights like this.

"It's nice to be able to sit down with you all without the ever-watching gaze of the Soutaicho."

Ichigo's comment earned him a snort from Kensei, followed by an amused smile. Love nodded pleased and Rose curled his lips upwards. Ichigo hastily leaned out of the way as Shinji peered forward arms ready to stretch out and flick Ichigo on the side of the head the man muttered under his breath, "Damn snarky brat and his eloquent speech."

Laughter rippled around the table on soft eddies and the tense atmosphere Ichigo's arrival had brought dissipated leaving the warm aura of the bar in it's place. A male waiter bustled over carrying a tray laden with empty glasses, he took stock of the members of the table before asking, "Can I get anyone anything else?"

The waiter received negative replies and Ichigo was inclined to join them as he knew if he relented and ordered a drink he would be staying far longer than he planned to. Before the waiter could leave Shinji spoke up and asked, "Ichigo what bout you? Ya just arrived surely ya can stay long enough to enjoy a drink?"

Let it never be said that Shinji was not cunning or manipulative as the man had that in spades. It was the reason Aizen and Shinji clashed, that and their ideals (or fashion sense though that was debateable). Shaking his head in knowing amusement Ichigo smiled apologetically at the waiter and asked, "May I please have whatever brew of tea available?"

The man nodded smiling in return before bustling off picking up empty plates and glasses as he made his way to the kitchen where a mess of steam and the sound of plates shuffling was centered. Returning his attention to the table Ichigo was faced with Love's curious gaze, the man seemed to weigh his options before he spoke, "So Ichigo there's many rumours floating about you? Care to confirm any?"

Ichigo scoffed at the man's unsubtle prodding, Ichigo acknowledged that in truth there where many things he had hinted at or mistakenly revealed. Kukkaku had relayed some of the souls of Rungokai's words and Ichigo was astounded by some of their thoughts.

"I can confirm that I am not an angel in the Western sense nor am I Kami walking among men. Other than that you may need to be a bit more specific Love-san."

Ichigo spoke easily in an assuring and teasing tone that didn't offend the large man, Love nodded amusement crinking his brow. Shinji scoffed regarding Ichigo in amusement he mumbled under his breath, "Speaking of snarky lieutenants."

Ichigo tilted his head curious of the meaning of Shinji's words he had an inkling that the man was speaking of Aizen who was well-known for his treatment of Shinji and how he managed to rile up the golden-haired Shinigami. Kensei smirked looking at Ichigo in approval before he said, "We were actually just speaking of our lieutenants in particular Shinji was whining about his 'damn' lieutenant and 'crazy' third seat as he so fondly calls them."

Shinji muttered a chorus of "damn right" at Kensei's words a small frown and troubled light entering his eyes he turned to regard Ichigo. Before the man could ask whatever question plagued his mind their waiter returned carrying a bottle of sake to refill the others glasses and a pale grey mug with thin wisps of silver rising from it. The waiter set the glass down with a practised ease, smiling kindly before he refilled their drinks and bustled off.
"Ya know Aizen right Ichi? I've seen the two of ya interact a few times though I wouldn't say you're the best of friend's Kami knows that's impossible. Have you noticed anything different bout him of late?"

Shinji launched into his questioning as soon as the waiter had ambled off and the comfortable veil of secrecy and warmth had descended again. Ichigo was subtly surprised by Shinji's observation of his lieutenant because as much as the man paraded around disdain of Aizen he had to care if only a fraction to notice such differences. Thinking about the man and the many times they meet for brief periods so that Aizen could ask his question, Ichigo could not see so much of a difference it was more seen in their more infrequent meetings under the eaves of the archives at high midnight or over a cup of tea for a philosophical discussion.

"You're correct in that I'm familiar with Aizen we occasionally meet up to discuss philosophy. Of late nothing too large seems amiss though he does seem unfocused and his emotions slips past his mask with a frequent ease. Though what the cause is I couldn't say."

Ichigo replied thoughtfully though in truth and inkling of the cause rested in the back of his mind. Shinji regarded him warily for a moment before he came to an understanding and the caution once prevalent in his eyes faded to a dim simmer, looking Ichigo up and down the man warned, "Just be careful Ichi, Aizen isn't someone to mess with."

Ichigo laughed at Shinji's warning the sound bursting from his lips before he could stop the clear ringing sound, controlling himself quickly Ichigo let the laughter fade away to see both cautious and amused looks directed his way.

"Now now Shinji do stop harassing the young man I'm sure Ichigo is capable of handling himself." Rose admonished in light tones not putting Shinji in his place merely making a casual remark, the blond turned to regard the musician for a moment before he came to an understanding and the caution once prevalent in his eyes faded to a dim simmer, looking Ichigo up and down the man warned, "At least you don't have to deal with Mashiro's kicks every morning I swear the lime-ball runs on sunlight alone."

Kensei's gruff humour brought forth laughter and Ichigo settled in his seat the tense line of his shoulders fading as they relented to easy topics mainly the happenings of Soul Society and the recent captain's meeting.

"Ichigo what is your opinion on the Soutaicho's proposal to instate new laws within Soul Society?"

Ichigo shook himself from ideal wanderings acknowledging Rose's question with a smile Ichigo smirked deciding to set caution to the wind and responded, "Well I have to agree with many of them as I helped the Soutaicho design them."

Ichigo received blank looks at first before Shinji was spluttering and attempting to regain control of his calm and controlled mask that Hiyori had found a way of cracking to a T. Light sparked in coffee coloured eyes and Shinji regarded Ichigo curiously questioning the mystery that he posed even as the other captains stared at Ichigo in continued surprise. Shinji coughed taking as sip of sake before he posed his question, "Ya mean to say you helped the old man with laws such as the proposition of a militia in Rungokai?"

Ichigo nodded and the man smiled for a moment regarding Ichigo he said, "Did anyone ever tell ya you're a bundle of mysteries?"

Ichigo paused thoughtful for a moment gazing at the ceiling before he shook his head and replied, "Somethings of the sort but never a bundle of mysteries."
Shinji’s lips curled into a Cheshire smirk he turned away from Ichigo sharing a knowing look with the other occupants of the table as if appeasing some hidden agreement before he turned to face Ichigo and said, "I'm glad I had the foresight to call ya over."

Ichigo scoffed but said nothing and Love took it as a sign to continue their discussion. Ichigo interjected a few points as the discussion became heated but otherwise was content to listen as the captain's discussed days long pass and the future of Soul Society.

X

"Good evening Ichigo."

Aizen's deep tenor floated on the breeze towards Ichigo, the orangette turned from the busy street vendor and crowded store windows to face Aizen. Smiling welcomingly Ichigo stepped closer to the man and they walked in pace towards a more secluded area.

"Good evening Aizen, how does your research proceed?"

Ichigo questioned leaning against the roughly textured wall behind him, Aizen smirked the light glinting off his glasses and catching the confidence in cocoa orbs. The man paused for a moment eyes glancing elsewhere in thought before he continued, "Research goes well, I've been studying external sources and the many texts the archives has to offer. But to more pressing matters. Were you born in Soul Society?"

Ichigo paused, looking into Aizen's eyes curious in the pale evening light of the stars, a smile of its own making slipped onto Ichigo's lips and he responded, "I wasn't born in Soul Society nor this realm but I am of Soul Society."

Aizen frowned obviously unexpecting the illusive answer Ichigo had given the lieutenant. The man continued to stare for a moment before with a promising smile he bade goodnight and swirled from the alleyway ebony folds billowing ominously.

Tilting his head in amusement Ichigo watched the figure fade into the distance before he returned to the vendors Ganju had given him a shopping list and Aizen be damned he would get the required ingredients.

X

Skyscrapers rose towards the sky in sparse clusters, folds of emerald peaking from within their cracked shells. The sky was somber and overcast rain falling in endless waves to collect below. Ichigo sprawled on one of the many buildings heaved a restless sigh, his heart was heavy in his chest gluing him to the cool metal below. Rain beat against his face in a dull thrum resounding in his mind and lulling him into a false calm.

White filled Ichigo's vision accompanied by golden eyes in a sea of ebony, Shiro pouted eyes mocking as he extended a hand and said, "What's got ya so blue kingy?"

Ichigo shrugged as much as one could while lying on the ground and reached up to take the proffered hand, familiar strength pulled him up till Ichigo was facing Shiro mirror images against a tempestuous background. Rolling his shoulders Ichigo's gaze searched the vast skyscraper they perched on, in the distance a shadowy figure of cloaked ebony stood green peaked up beside Zangetsu and curled around his spirit's feet. Padding over to the chocolate haired incarnation of a younger Bach Ichigo called out over his shoulder, "I'm restless. Though for what reason I cannot say, the future weighs heavily on my shoulders."
Zangetsu looked up from where his gaze had been drawn to the curling buds he studied Ichigo taking in his wielder's appearance with soft compassionate eyes hidden behind the yellow visors he always wore. Crouching Ichigo studied the encroaching plant seeding it's roots in the side of the building burrowing through soil of thick steel; it's leaves were a rich ebony with amber threads tracing it's skeleton. Shiro approached slowly instincts ingrained in the fibre of his being leading him to prowl as the prey stalks the hunter.

"Ichigo why are you uncertain?"

Zangetsu's deep baritone rustled along Ichigo's ears calming frayed nerves and clearing his thoughts of the hazy doubt that plagued them. Pushing himself up from the crouch Ichigo felt strong arms snake around his waist to pull Ichigo into Shiro's chest the hollow purred for a moment before falling silent awaiting Ichigo's answer. In the little mobility Shiro provided him Ichigo ran a hand through his hair accumulating his thoughts he replied, "All that has happened and will happen. The few experiments that we've seen conducted by Aizen were some of his first. This means the man has only started to dawdle in hollowfication, then what of the experiments recorded in the archives? They weren't performed by Aizen rather from what I gather he was inspired by such and having witnessed one himself not long ago, though he could not identify who, he became interested.

Who conducted these experiments. The more I decode of the ancient tome the more I wonder what my mind is seeing and if it is at all possible for there to be another.

He's planning it. The hollowfication, the Vizard and I know it must happen. It's one thing that I cannot save them from for if we do not let it happen what weapon do we posses against the Quincy. Even so I will not allow them to be banished, Soul Society will accept them. But will they ever accept me for what I am? I'm so far from Shinigami or anything normal. How do I even convince the Soutaicho to accept them?

For if I fail in that than Aizen will lose hope and see that Soul Society can't change. I've proven to him that he isn't alone my power is proof and the combined intellect of Kisuke and I should be enough. But if he goes through with this and he will, then what will he see? Acceptance? Does that mean that they will accept me? For the only way to convince the Soutaicho would be to show him…. But how much? Will Aizen feel guilt now that his emotions run rampant inside him?

I don't want to see hate on their faces, betrayal in their eyes. I've experienced that once already. They'll believe any lie but when it come to truth and change they are as stubborn as the planets in their rotation. Zangetsu how do I know this will succeed if it all falls to ruin I may lose them all."

Letting his fears and worries be said aloud Ichigo fell back into Shiro's arms boneless and tired in a way few could contemplate, he felt drained having spoken the words he feared aloud. Zangetsu regarded Ichigo warmly and Shiro's arms tightened around his torso providing silent support his spirit's reaitsu flowed over him assuring him and comforting him even as Zangetsu spoke, "Ichigo trust in yourself and family. Byakuya and Kaien those who have supported you and glimpsed the most of your soul will not leave you till they know the truth and even then, they would stand by you. The Vizard will come to be and you will show them what it truly means to have a part of your soul hollowfied. Aizen and Kisuke will see far more than they can understand at this moment and from that Aizen will seek the truth with conviction of your words and your soul; the man is already changed you only need guide him.

The Soutaicho will not throw aside your words so easily, he will seek proof and to give him that is a small matter. Stand resolute Ichigo you can do this if only you strive forward letting yourself wallow in doubt and hesitation will burden your soul all the more. All things will reveal themselves in time you need only be ready to face it as you have faced everything before you."
Zangetsu's warm hand rested against Ichigo's cheek piercing blue eyes staring into his own from behind yellow shades conveying his words even as reiatsu rose around the three figures so uniquely intertwined their bond would not be found among any else. Ichigo nodded eyes full of heavy fire lightening till they swirled with reiatsu the three's reiatsu curling and writhing around them as Ichigo nodded his determination and acceptance.

Zangetsu drew back after a few minutes a proud smile lingering on his face as heavy laden clouds dispersed to let thin rays of light dance brilliantly across metal. Shiro's smirked pulling the two away from Zangetsu he pushed his wielder a few feet apart and drew the matching katana at his side.

"What do ya say to a spar kingy? Have ta stay in shape somehow."

Shiro cackled bloodlust eager on his pale face, Ichigo smirked in return rolling his shoulders even as he complained, "We dueled two night's ago?"

Shiro nodded paused pretending to think on the matter before he shook his head and replied, "True kingy but that was only blade work ya gotta exercise ya Bankai and Shikai else ya get lazy in handling us."

Ichigo laughed the tension and strain plaguing him before faded he flicked his katana in front of him summoning his large reserves of reiatsu he channeled it into the blade dying it a deep ebony he called out, "Tear the skies asunder Zangetsu!"

Reiatsu swirled around Ichigo and he basked in the feeling of his powers free and uncontained in his inner world where they could run rampant. In his hands the familiar weight of his dual blades was comforting and he easily swung the smaller blade to the side sending a wave of reiatsu careening into the distance. Within seconds Shiro was in front of him blades clashing against the ones held in his hand with the jarring sound of metal against metal.

Excitement pulsed in Ichigo's veins, he missed the challenge of a fight feeling the exhilaration of meeting an opponent equally matched or of higher power sent his blood boiling. Bouncing back, he swung the longer blade calling out "Getsuga Tensho!" and watched as the arc of ebony and midnight blue reiatsu raced towards Shiro. The hollow raised his blades pale ivory and intersected them in a cross shape where the attack was repelled and absorbed into the blades.

Giving the hollow no time to recover Ichigo charged forward their blades a heavy clash ringing throughout the silence of his inner world. Back and forth the mirror images fought neither gaining ground nor giving to the other. Ichigo felt all ache and the tiredness that plagued his body evaporate leaving him feeling rejuvenated. Bringing the twin blades of Zangetsu in front of his chest Ichigo struck the smaller blade through the opening of the longer one. Channelling his reiatsu into the blades Ichigo smirked and let go the silent whisper of "Bankai" unheard in the roar of reiatsu.

X

"Unohana if you were forced to participate in war from a young age, found the need to go to unstoppable lengths to defeat an enemy, what would you do once it was over?"

Unohana glanced to the side where Ichigo was sprawled across a tatami mat the top of his yukata undone and resting in folds by his waist. Orange hair caught the light from shuttered windows and sparked like fire within a hearth. Unohana was surprised Ichigo had spoken first between the two. Ichigo after what was obliviously much debate had taken her offer to talk to her even if it was accompanied by the guise of a checkup.

He had paced outside the Fourth errant reiatsu tense like a coiled spring and Unohana had let out a
small breathless laugh at the anticipation and nervousness that plagued the young Shinigami before sweeping out of the fourth to confront the orangette and drag him to her office.

Focusing her attention on the teapot in her hands Retsu let the soft hum of reaitsu infused with the healing benefits of kido flow from her hands into the ceramic heating the water inside. Thinking over Ichigo's question as the tea steeped Unohana paced to the low set oak table and placed the tea pot onto the table with a gentle flourish. Looking up from where she had settled into place opposite Ichigo her eyes traced the patchwork of scars running across Ichigo's body.

The mere image of them sent spirals of protection and righteous fury at who ever had caused wounds curling through her system, calming rage unfamiliar to her in it's time long past Retsu spoke, "That depends Ichigo on what matter of war one fought in. To fight in a rebellion where one darts in and out from hidden covers and works in the shadows is vastly different from a war on open planes with two clear opposing forces."

The orangette bowed his head in thought a calloused hand reaching up to run through long strands a familiar habit of Ichigo's Unohana had noted one he often performed when his mind was occupied. Lifting the teapot in sure and steady hands Retsu tipped the heavy clay letting the liquid stained a deep amber trickle from the sprout like the roaring planes of a waterfall.

Ichigo muttered a thanks straightening fractionally in his seat he reached forward and grasped the clay mug shielding it in his hands he brought it to his lips and took a slow sip of the near scorching liquid. Placing the ceramic onto the table Ichigo let out a content sigh tense shoulders settling faintly he looked up warm caramel eyes connecting with her own calm as the tempestuous sea silver orbs he said, "I fought in two wars Unohana-taicho. What does that make me a broken soul?"

Ichigo's voice became bitter and he looked away hiding vicious pain deep seated in his heart, no anger or accusations did he direct her way his question was that of one who already knew the answer and was making a point. Retsu felt the breath catch in her lungs at such emotion and the truth Ichigo had revealed. The man held secrets wrapped in the very fiber his being rarely did he answer and often were they half-truths or vague. This was one of the first pieces of evidence that she could clearly identify and the information only burned her heart as she gazed upon his wounds in a new light.

"Surely those wars could not have been long ago? You are far too young you must have been a teenager when you participated… Ichigo did you die in those wars you spoke of?"

Laughter followed her words, not humours in nature rather jaded and sardonic he found her words amusing in a sense that Retsu doubted she would ever understand. Calming himself Unohana caught a glimpse of chocolate eyes soaked in pain and felt her heart stutter in her chest. Ichigo's reaitsu curled protectively around himself soothing away the frayed edges of his mask he took a sip of tea taking the moment to fortify his strength.

"I lived through those wars. Was captured, tortured, beaten, and wounded. These scars are a testament to how I lived and all my memories. Maybe I died somewhere along the way but I lived till the end where my comrades had fallen around me nameless graves and ashes on the wind."

Unohana with hands clenched around the porcelain in her hand and a part of her mind disconnected from the situation wondered if it was going to snap under the pressure she was exerting. Torture the word rang in her mind devastating her thoughts and drawing her eyes to Ichigo's torso once more. Ichigo stood up his legs carrying him as he began to pace running a hand through flaming locks in exasperation. Taking in calming breaths Unohana placed her mug down with none of the gentleness common in her actions and asked, "Have you spoken to anyone?"
Ichigo’s reaitsu pulsed and the young man turned to face her for a moment before he settled boneless in the pillows sprawled across the floor. Shaking his head amber eyes became unfocused and he replied, "I've spoken to my zanpaktou how can you not, their part of your soul. But otherwise when does one find time in war and in these times of peace few understand nor could handle my words. You've seen the beginning of Soul Society, and fought in the Blood War perhaps you understand better than I."

Unohana sat back stunned in a way she hadn't been for a long time. This enigma who hid behind endless folds of secrecy was suffering, a soul fractured and yet not broken, not close to it. He had pulled himself together for so long, the desolation in his eyes was only evidence of time past where no hope had existed. Only now had the healing of wounds scabbed but not healed begun, with family and friends slowly was Ichigo retreating from the darkness. He was wise in a way that one didn't see with age. Perhaps Unohana thought to herself it was a forced maturity and experience, or rather an accumulation of all that had happened.

Questions and sorrow flowed through Retsu's mind she wondered how this lone Shinigami could know of the blood war, where once white paved sheets had glimmered with a layer of blood that had rained near constantly. She then questioned why he was trusting her with this information so precious and dangerous. For if one could see the soul hidden underneath Unohana was certain they wouldn't understand.

"Why tell me this and not the Soutaicho?"

She questioned her mind dawning fondly on Yamamoto the old man was cunning and often played with lives of the Shinigami as if the world was one great chess board. But he cared for those taken under his wings and Unohana had seen their chess matches in passing. The old man looked on Ichigo with fondness born of unique understanding and care for the individual before him.

Rolling his shoulders in a vague shrug Ichigo looked up hastily seeing the fierce echo of emotions welling up in Unohana's eyes and said, "The time for that is drawing near. Everything is reaching its climax and the final outcome is what depicts my future. I find myself lost now and then doubts plague my every step and I falter for a breath. And then I'm reminded of myself in my blade, for if I hesitate then I will perish under the undulating sands of time.

Unohana-taicho I come to you as your opinion is unbiased by what you know of me, your heart sways with the guidance of a doctor, a healer. Therefore, you've already seen what few have yet to grasp. Please Taicho I'm healing, I know it's a slow process and I'm sure I'll never be whole again. But I'm clinging to hope like the candle flame on a cold winter's night."

Determination blazed in Ichigo's eyes like the fires that sprung to life when Ryūjin Jakka is released. Unohana understood now far more why this Shinigami was so powerful it was not in his power or his blade, it lay in his heart and the power of his will. Uncertain on how to proceed from such a fierce declaration Retsu gingerly took a sip of the now lukewarm tea, stillness hung in the air and one could hear a pin drop.

"Ichigo you never answered my question from that day in the Fourth, what do you plan to do afterwards?"

Ichigo slumped though a peaceful smile was now lazily resting on his face, leaning back the orangette caressed the pommel of his zanpaktou in thought tilting his head back to face the wooden ceiling above he said, "Live. Live well, age well, and see each dawn with a smile."

Unohana smiled the movement unsuspected as it slipped onto her lips. Ichigo looked at peace with the light of the sun casting his hair aflame and illuminating his face in warm tones caressing the light
in soulful eyes.

"Thank you Unohana-taicho."

Retsu looked up at Ichigo's words of thanks and accepted them with a nod noting the tension that had riled Ichigo's shoulders since he entered her office had left. The young man looked comfortable as if in revealing such things he had bared his soul to her afraid of rejection and she in accepting him had gained his trust. Quiet settled around them as they finished their tea no words leaving their lips.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the interesting revelations in this chapter. What will happen next? Only I know (evil laughter. Reviews/comments are always appreciated.

Sauce!
Chapter Notes

Sciamachy

(n.) A battle against imaginary enemies; fighting your shadow.

Hello everyone, here is chapter 17 sorry I didn’t post last week, I was in France so my time schedule was a bit (lot) messed up. But I am hear once again with many revelations and some emotions in this chapter. Enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The air was cool with a crispness that left Ichigo burning inside, pacing outside the Soutaicho’s office where he knew the old man still slaved over paperwork. Ichigo bit his lip trying to muster the courage to lift his hand and knock on the great wooden doors carved elegantly. The First was near empty in the quiet of night a select few dwelling in hidden alcoves. Rolling his shoulders Ichigo took a deep breath, slowly wasting every precious second Ichigo placed his curled fist against the door and knocked.

The sound echoed in the vast and quiet halls of the First. Silence held and Ichigo glanced apprehensively at the door, impatience and dread warring in his stomach. The doors gave a great heave before they slowly began to glide open the Soutaicho’s reaitsu curled around their frame. Taking a deep breath, the encouraging whisper of Zangetsu in his mind, Ichigo walked forward steps silent upon wooden floors accompanied by the faint swish of fabric.

Yammamoto was hunched over his desk candles flickering unendingly in clusters sparsely spattered around the room, paperwork seemed to encroach on him from all sides the stacks tilting and wobbling precariously. The old man looked up from his desk caterpillar like eyebrows raised in surprise, in a detached manner Ichigo remarked that he was likely coiling his reaitsu too tightly around himself if the Soutaicho could not sense him.

“Ichigo welcome. What can I help you with?”

Ichigo sighed at his seemingly innocent question and walked forward till he was standing in front of the desk, wringing his hands in front of him Ichigo pivoted slightly to look out the large windows that hovered on one side of the room. Yammamoto frowned at Ichigo’s silence but didn’t push for the younger Shinigami to speak, he had lived for years beyond measure a few moments of silence were nothing to him.
Ichigo stared for a few more minutes before he began pacing slightly glancing every few seconds at the Soutaicho. Yammamoto sighed and in his voice deep with age said, “You are anxious tonight? What troubles you? Come sit I will make some tea, though it is nothing to Chojiro’s.”

The old man pushed himself up from the desk with a huff and hobbled off the tapping of his cane echoing his movements as he moved to one of the corners of the room where water resided in a bowl and was placed beside a copper teapot and a selection of teas. Ichigo fell boneless into the chairs placed in front of Yammamoto’s desk his gaze returned pensive to the indigo sky. The moon hung in the sky, pale and full, a circle of glowing light like a halo.

The Soutaicho bustled back with the teapot in hand the metal singing beneath his skin as reaitsu the colour of burning embers glowed within his skin and transferred to the teapot. When a thin wisp of steam curled from the spout the Soutaicho set the large object on his desk and pulled out a small packet of herbs. The calming sent of lavender and chamomile floated around the room swirling upon heavy smoke from tall tallow candles. The herbs were dumped into the steaming water and the Soutaicho settled into his seat, gaze expectant but patient.

“You are correct I am troubled. The future weighs heavily on me this night and on my decisions, all the more so.”

The Soutaicho remained silent as Ichigo spoke regarding him keenly with coffee coloured eyes rarely revealed. Ichigo ran a hand through his hair, agitated and uncertain, he looked past the man old beyond count and let his eyes trace the wood paneling beyond him. Yammamoto poured the tea with practised ease, the hot liquid dyed a deep amber. Ichigo took the proffered cup and cradled it close to his chest letting the warmth seek into his soul.

“I’m from the future.”

The man stared at Ichigo eyebrows rising and cocoa orbs revealing themselves, the man paused before he took a slow sip of tea and nodded. Silence reigned and Ichigo let Yammamoto ponder Ichigo’s sudden revelation. Taking a sip of the scorching tea Ichigo felt some of his nerves settle while the rest flew like a collection of butterflies in his stomach. Finally, the old man looked up eyes locking with Ichigo’s own he asked, “Why are you telling me this now?”

Ichigo stood up hastily turning from the old man he ran his hands through his hair in exasperation and paced towards the window. Looking out upon the alabaster buildings and terra cotta roofs stretching as far as the eyes could see. Frowning Ichigo pushed down the bubbling fears of rejection and betrayal, the lingering sense of doubt and said, “Some time from now in the near future a select group of captains and lieutenants are going to encounter a mission they will not return the same from. Do you recall our talk of Hollows not many days ago? We spoke of the balance of life, for there to be a balance there must be Shinigami and Hollow. The reason for the genocide of the Quincy lies in their ability to disturb that balance.

You know he’s still alive. Gathering power, plotting from the shadows and amassing a force to destroy Soul Society, but he is still weak and that time is far off. Now something will arise and your choice, Soul Society’s choice will aid us or leave us in the dust.”

The Soutaicho frowned brows furrowing as he considered the pale spectre illuminated by moonlight, Ichigo was clearly distraught a mess of tangled emotions that Yammamoto had never seen in the young man. His thoughts drew to the boy’s revelation and he thought on the matter of it and the information given to him. Did he trust Ichigo? The young man had proven wise beyond his years with a weary soul hidden behind deep eyes that drew you in. Ichigo was quick and witty easy to smile in a friend’s presence but cold and uncaring in others. The man was strong, Yammamoto had
seen it all those years ago, when he fought the member of his squad all quiet grace and strong lethality hidden behind tough sinew. It was still apparent today in the katana at his waist or the reaitsu curling around him.

“What do you mean? You’re being illusive and riddle some as always.”

Ichigo snorted amused before growing somber once more. He turned quickly to regard the Soutaicho assessing what lay in his eyes before he whipped around and paced in front of the window for a few steps. The young man took a few deep breaths before slowly he walked towards Yammamoto. Once in front of the man who had become a mentor to him in their many meetings over tea Ichigo looked into his eyes and began.

“I was eighteen the first time I interacted with a Shinigami. I was powerful as a human with too much reaitsu and no knowledge of the way it leaked around me. It attracted a hollow to our house and the Shinigami tried to save us but was injured. To defeat the hollow, I stabbed their zanpaktou into the very center of my being and took on some of their powers. Then Soul Society found out and they were taken back to be executed. I couldn’t stand for it so I among friends who had developed their own powers invaded Soul Society to save them.

That was the beginning of it all. We fought against captains and lieutenants trying to race against time before their very soul was destroyed by the Sokyoku I was forced to gain my Bankai within three days. We succeeded in rescuing her only for the true villains to reveal themselves, powerful and among captain level they took a weapon of mass power and fled to Hueco Mundo. There the Espada were created or formed hollows who had taken on human like appearance and could seal their power within a katana.

Thus, the first war began. The Winter War it was called though for such reasons is debatable. Hollows fighting Shinigami on a massive scale as we sought to keep the powerful artifact from the hands of a madman, a megalomaniac who had lost all intelligence and had become corrupted with power. The war lasted three years, bloody and long the human world soon became temporarily sealed off.

That madman performed an experiment long in the past before I was born, he hollowfied Shinigami of high rank, corrupting one might say part of their souls. They were banned; along with a genius who took the blame, to the human world where they grew bitter with Soul Society yet their hatred for him was stronger. They fought with us and were invaluable as their power from such transformation increased tenfold.

To defeat the mad man when no one else could I embraced a technique that would grant me power to defeat them but at the cost of my powers. I stopped what he had become long enough for a kido to wrap around him and seal his powers.

For a year, I lived in a so-called peace with half of my soul missing as the world turned on without me. In time, I found a way to gain my powers back though it was false and it was after the ordeal that they were re-ignited within my soul.

Time after that dragged on too fast and another battle began, a war that had lasted over a thousand years and would last ten more long years. In this war the hollows, and the Quincy so desperately purified fought as mindless beast tearing at either side. But the hollowfied Shinigami were of great assets against the Quincy, their reaitsu tainted against the purity of that bloodline. The war that ripped everything I knew away from me.

I was the last survivor, the only one alive. I went back, how is a mystery I’ve been trying to solve. I found myself surrounded by familiar faces that didn’t know me, their deaths were flashing in my
mind and I could only smile because they wouldn’t understand, I couldn’t tell them if I wanted to. And now I’ve told you.”

Ichigo bowed his head after finishing his story eyes not daring to peak up and see the expression on the Soutaicho’s face fearing disbelief, rage, anger, betrayal or any number of things he had faced before. Curling hands into balled fists at his sides Ichigo listened to the soft murmur of Zangetsu in the back of his mind.

The Soutaicho sat there silent and more shocked then he felt he had ever been in his life before. This man in front of him was impossible his mind whispered even as instincts and his zanpaktou whispered that his words were the truth if somewhat excluding details and names. His mind a cavern of memories stored layer upon layer tried to comprehend the being in front of him.

So much made sense now. His remarkable power and bond with his zanpaktou spirits. The wisdom and knowledge he always seemed to possess; a certain foresight. And the age of his eyes unreflecting that of his body, Yamamamoto had known the eyes of many soldiers but none so like Ichigo’s. with such power the young man would have been put on the battlefield leading the charge far too many times, and to have to handle the so-called megalomaniac by himself?

Studying the man in front of him Yamamamoto could see tense shoulders and a head bowed whether in fear of his reaction or the weight of the truth the head captain could not discern. Ichigo slowly looked up to meet the Soutaicho’s eyes of smouldering coals warm and welcoming accepting the wayward soul for all that he had revealed and was. Ichigo smiled. The Soutaicho felt surprise curl inside him at the smile far different from the everyday one seen on his face, this was raw and open in a happiness Ichigo rarely displayed.

Standing up the Soutaicho left their cups of tea unattended by now they were cool to the touch, nodding to the lieutenant to follow him Ichigo responded in kind and followed the Soutaicho across Soul Society.

Great gales of wind blew across Sokyoku Hill in the dead of night picking up tumbles of dust to swirl around their feet. The whole of Soul Society lay before them and around them an awe-inspiring sight that left emotions welling inside his chest. The Sokyoku rested behind them ominous in the night a still figure of the past, and Ichigo a figure lost in time orange hair glinting under the moon’s pale beams.

“I remember this view well.”

Ichigo’s voice was soft a quiet whisper upon the breeze and Yamamamoto turned to regard the youth taking in eyes hazed with memory and fondness before turning to face the sprawling vista once more.

“These hollowfied Shinigami they are the incident you speak of?” Ichigo nodded appeasing Yamamamoto’s curiosity the old man continued, “How do I know they will be able to control themselves, be able to function in Soul Society? You said they had years in the human world to master such power.”

Ichigo turned with a smirk on his face eyes bright and glowing under the moon he pulled a hand over his face in once smooth motion reaitsu of deep ebony cloaking his hands. Yamamamoto’s hand instinctively went to the pommel of his cane ready to draw the blade before his mind caught up to him and he forced himself to relax. Ichigo was looking at him from under a mask of bone, sharp lines of crimson traced the mask and from underneath two golden orbs in a sea of black peered out at him.

“Give them a month with me and I can teach them I know a few scientists who would be eager to
help. The way they found to control their inner hollows was incorrect and therefore took longer, given time and training they will be able to control it with ease. The first month would simply be an introduction and way to ease them into this new change.”

Ichigo’s voice took on a dual tone as if two beings were speaking as one, with a swift jerk of his hand the mask was resting his palm. Golden eyes still remained surrounded by ebony sclera and he watched in disinterest as the bone mask broke into pieces drifting away on the high winds wiping the folds of their shihaksho’s about.

Yammamoto turned and regarded the Shinigami staring into eyes fading from gold to warm chocolate, his eyes were honest and open ready to accept whatever verdict with a jadedness few would see. Yammamoto sighed muttering about his age for a moment he turned a pensive gaze on all of Soul Society and said, “I trust you in this and will support you when the time comes.”

Ichigo smiled once more that smile that warmed Yammamoto’s heart and made him want to protect the young man just to see that smile once more. Turning to gaze at Soul Society he said, “If you ever need an old man to talk to my doors are open.”

Ichigo took a small step closer his reaitsu curled about his figure like a cloak he said, “Thank you. I won’t fail.”

Yammamoto had no doubt of the orangette’s conviction or words. Power dwelled within him, the power to change Soul Society for the better and the will to protect those he loved. Yammamoto could easily respect that which he saw in the young man similar to days of his own youth.

X

Byakuya paced impatiently standing in front of the worn path familiar to mind and memory. Glancing up his gaze roved over the collection of sentinels rising around him ancient and strong in their silence, letting out a small sigh of amusement Byakuya stopped the irrelevant movements to the pleasure of Senbonzakura who was nagging him for the agitated movements. The young lieutenant wondered where his friend was it was unlike Ichigo to be late even more so when the orangette had arranged the meeting.

Byakuya thought fondly of the time a few days past where Ichigo had appeared in the doorway of the office Byakuya worked in alongside his grandfather. Leaning casually against the frame a lazy smile had curled on Ichigo’s carved features. Underneath the front of relaxed amusement Byakuya could see the tense lines to his friend’s shoulders and the deep purple under his eyes seemed more pronounced. Ichigo had spoken swiftly and though appearing calm Byakuya could see anxiety in amber orbs, an emotion Ichigo rarely sported.

Even now his fingers drummed against Senbonzakura’s hilt concern weighing heavily on his heart, his friend was troubled and Byakuya knew nothing of his friend’s sorrow. Faint rustling from the trees snapped Byakuya’s attention from concern and brought his senses to high alert his fist curled at his side unconsciously resting near Senbonzakura’s hilt. As the reaitsu of the being hidden behind dark alcoves of the path became apparent Byakuya let out a sigh tense shoulders settling as a head of orange revealed itself.

Ichigo stalked from the trees long orange tresses swaying slightly with the movement, the ebony folds of his shihaksho flowed around his lithe form. A genuine smile appeared on Ichigo’s face and fondness shone in his eyes. Byakuya grinned in kind walking forward to meet his friend he clasped an arm around Ichigo’s form frowning briefly when the young man flinched at the touch before he pulled Ichigo closer against his chest. Trying to convey his support for his friend in the embrace Byakuya felt Ichigo settle in his arms slowly rising to mirror his own movements they clasped around
Pulling back Byakuya looked Ichigo up and down in closer vicinity taking in his friend’s appearance with a critical eye. Ichigo seemed weary but relieved in a way opposite to the state Byakuya had last seen the orange haired Shinigami. His eyes seemed bright in an emotion Byakuya likened to joy or relief it was strange to see Ichigo so carefree but it also lightened the unknown weight that always settled on Byakuya’s heart when he saw his friend in such a state. Ever since they had graduated the academy the pressure burdening Ichigo’s shoulders had increased, Byakuya feared the weight would crush his friend and yet Ichigo remained impossibly strong and determined.

“Well met Ichigo it has been far too long.”

Byakuya greeted his voice disrupting the blanketed silence of the forest, Ichigo inclined his head eyes casting about the place checking for invisible enemies or so Byakuya assumed. Ichigo returned caramel eyes to catch Byakuya’s own he responded, “Hello Byakuya. Shall we walk?”

His name was said with fondness, a peculiar light shining in Ichigo’s eyes before reluctantly he continued and asked his question. Weight seemed to descend upon Ichigo’s shoulders at his own question as if he dreaded what their walk among one of the many paths lost in the deep forests of Rungokai would bring. Byakuya nodded gazing speculatively at his friend asking a silent question that Ichigo denied responding.

Together they began walking along the path carved more so by animals rather than the occasional human it was overgrown with puffs of grass rising up to ensnare their ankles and stray weeds gathered in small clusters. Relaxed stillness hung about them as they walked comfortable and calm in the other’s presence no words were needed. Byakuya basked in the presence of his friend head tilting back to gaze at a sky of rich blue, on the horizon clouds were collecting ripe and swollen they promised fearful rain later; for now, they lazed laxly ominous but not threatening. The forest rising on all sides was like a curtain blocking out the outside world, with Ichigo beside him Byakuya felt as if they had left Soul Society far behind and entered another realm.

“Byakuya…”

Ichigo started disrupting the silence before he fell quiet, doubt plaguing his tone and choking his voice. Turning to face his friend in concern Byakuya noted a paleness to Ichigo’s face, his head was turned rebelliously to glance at the trees but Byakuya could see the doubt in his chocolate orbs. Waiting patiently the two stopped in their movement the stillness of the land around them hanging off their shoulders like a suffocating cloak. Giving Ichigo his silence Byakuya was rewarded a few moments later when Ichigo took in a deep stuttering breath his gaze furtively glancing to Byakuya assessing the ebony haired Shinigami he spoke, “Change is coming to Soul Society. I am… going to play a part in this change.”

Byakuya was relieved that the young man was not delivering devastating news of some imminent demise and yet his heart faltered in his chest at Ichigo’s tone. Hesitant and fearful it seemed to echo in his mind rebounding constantly and ensnaring his thoughts in desperate claws of protectiveness and fear. Taking a deep breath Byakuya’s hand steeled to rest against his sheathed blade seeking the comfort of his zanpaktou in the chill that rattled his soul.

Byakuya accepted Ichigo’s words not questioning why his friend was speaking of this to him. He had the vague notion that Kaien and himself were the two souls who knew Ichigo the most, some others may have known his turbulent past, or glimpsed the fiery inferno that raged inside his soul. But none knew who Ichigo was and how he functioned between the mask he presented and the front he cowered behind in company of family.
Ichigo glanced at Byakuya studying the open acceptance in silver eyes before with a heavy sigh betraying the calm tilt of his head he continued, “You may hear things, see things and I won’t be there to tell you why or how. I… can’t leave you in darkness, not when I’ve been in the shadows far too many times.”

Ichigo’s next words sent Byakuya’s heart racing his mind grinding to a stop and descending into a hazy mist of panic when Ichigo mentioned his absence and the trouble to come. Of his own accord, he turned to face the orangette his plaintive worry and concern apparent on his features. Ichigo stepped back eyes wide and the vast display of emotions sprawling across Byakuya’s features he stared guilty for a moment then said, “I can’t tell you everything not yet. You remember my promise to you? Made summers long past? I will tell you but for now I can only give you partial truths. Forgive me my friend.”

Byakuya cursed his inability to speak as his soul shivered in remembrance of the cool fire that had scorched Ichigo’s eyes, that expression was fixed in his mind the memory never far from hand when thoughts of Ichigo’s secrets troubled his head and weighed his heart. Mounting the courage to speak Byakuya regarded Ichigo and looked into eyes full of deep wisdom and age and whispered, “Ichigo my friend I understand and remember that day well. Tell me what you can and settle my heart as it beats like the rapid drums of war in my chest.”

Ichigo’s lips curled up in a faint impression of a smile at the dry humour in Byakuya’s words the teasing tones chosing away darkness that clung to Ichigo’s eyes heavy and shrouded. Shaking his head the movement sending a cascade of orange locks to hang in front of Ichigo’s eyes shading their light from view. The man took in a breath before he strode away from Byakuya pacing the narrow path in a dizzying motion. His reitsu curled about his form nearly visible in filtered sunlight it whispered assurances in Ichigo’s ears and Byakuya could see his friend relax slightly even as he frowned in thought brow furrowed.

“What I’m about to tell you is sensitive information, and what I show you even more so.”

Byakuya nodded determination filling his eyes. Ichigo stopped pacing facing Byakuya he stepped forward bringing the two closer the orange haired man stared into his eyes impassively for what felt like a millennium of time, he felt as if his soul was pinned to that moment in time and only Ichigo could release him. The spell was broken as Ichigo raised a hand to run through his hair hastily a scowl familiar flitting on his face for a brief moment.

“There is going to be a mission soon, lieutenants and captains will be sent to investigate. They will come back changed, far different and more powerful. And I will make sure that Soul Society accepts them even if it means drastic measures. When they are accepted, I will have to help them, and it has to be me… because,” Byakuya tried to wrap his mind around the tangle of words and the burning fire of Ichigo’s words. When Ichigo let, his sentence die he hesitantly raised his hand to drag it slowly and tentatively down his face ebony reitsu unique to Ichigo curling and pulsing in his hands.

A bone white mask was revealed akin to the ones the hollows sported but far more elegant in the curves of crimson that traced the mask, from within the holes where the eyes rested two glowing orbs of gold in a sea of black met his own. Inherently primal yet also Ichigo’s eyes a vast range of emotions and warmth only his eyes held. Instinctively his hand lurched to Senbonzakura’s blade his fist curling around the pommel. He took a deep breath beating down ingrained instincts to kill the pale creatures on sight. Attempting to look beyond the mask Byakuya was met with Ichigo’s humanity fear and hope waging war in his soul.

Tensely Byakuya released his hand from the blade eyes flickering up acceptance radiating in silver orbs. Ichigo continued, “Only I can help them. What you see is close to whatever you have likely
thought of in that inherently this mask is of hollow make. Yet it is of my own power, my own soul. I cannot explain it now but if you push, ask me I will speak. For how can I deny you this truth so harshly when you have already accepted me.”

Ichigo’s voice held a dual tone quality as if two were speaking through one channel. Byakuya processed Ichigo’s offer the mask disappeared as he finished his question leaving familiar features and eyes open and sparkling as he spoke of acceptance. It was here Byakuya could see the reason for Ichigo’s pensiveness and anxiety. The man feared nothing or at least that was the unwavering front he presented.

Byakuya knew the truth Ichigo feared the loss of his family and friends, he feared finding their corpses knowing he was powerless to save them. Now Byakuya could see that Ichigo also feared betrayal or rejection whichever was more prominent. The man strong as the highest fortified walls was scared of seeing bitter hate and disgust in his friend’s eyes. The terror that imposed in him was obvious now and Byakuya felt his heart shudder for Ichigo to feel such fear so deeply he had to have experienced it once before.

“I will not push you Ichigo for an answer. Know this I am beside you always whatever truth you reveal could not persuade me from my path nor deter me from the love I feel for you.”

Ichigo turned wide eyes of surprise towards Byakuya in disbelief his mouth flicking open for a moment before snapping shut. He stared at Byakuya before sweeping forward to enfold his friend in a grasp of ironed steel. Byakuya let out a tiny sound of surprise before he reached up pulling the two closer together he rested his head against Ichigo staring into deep chocolate orbs conveying the honesty of his words.

“Byakuya, Byakuya fate’s fool I may be but she was kind in allowing me to meet you.”

Eyes widening at the playful yet sentimental words Byakuya pulled back to see a lopsided smile curling Ichigo’s lips, it was faint and warm and sent Byakuya’s heart racing in his chest even as a smile slipped across his own lips. Breaking apart the two Shinigami looked up as thick drops of rain began a slow descent towards green encroached ground. The storm clouds so seemingly far away were now above them pregnant with the weight of the water they bore they looked ready to downpour on the two unsuspecting Shinigami any second. Trading an amused glance with Ichigo the two began a mad race towards Rungokai where they could hole up in one of the many restaurants to a warm cup of tea.

They were unfortunate and before they reached covered shelter the rain began in earnest, great peals of thunder rang above their heads and lightning splayed across the clouds alight. It pounded all around them drowning out all sound till all one could hear was the monotonous pitter patter of rain and the rush of their own blood. Ichigo turned to Byakuya a bright smirk on his face he reached behind him and grasped Byakuya’s wrist in his calloused hands. Before Byakuya could protest the inevitable they were gone, the forest a mere haze in his mind’s eye.

The village they arrived to was small with a dilapidated feeling of uncare, Ichigo charged forward unaware of the state of the small town where foreign glares chased their figures. The tallest building rose like some great giant it’s hulking frame stark in the mists of the weather. Ichigo strode forward unhesitant and Byakuya was forced to follow with a weary sigh.

Settled inside a booth where warm air hugged their skin and stuck the heavy fabric of their shihaksho’s to their skin Byakuya sipped the warm liquid feeling it race through his system like the twining path of a snake. Ichigo looked up form his own clay cup a content smile on his face the two regarded the other for a moment before breaking into quiet laughter filled with the amusement of their unfortunate luck.
“Really Ichigo we have to stop meeting in places like this.”

Aizen chided as he strode out from the ruins of the building they were inspecting, Ichigo had been asked (told by Lisa) that there were reports of strange sightings and flashing lights. Thus he was dispatched to investigate. Aizen was cool and collected, intrigued cocoa eyes flashing from behind spectres in the pale shafts of light piercing the crumbling roof. The building was a mess, though large in size it spanned a great property likely the home of a rich lord. Now walls lay in crumbled piles of debris and rafters were left bare cloaked in flimsy boards of wood.

“What do you mean Aizen? Do you perhaps mean decrypted places such as this cloaked in shadow?”

Ichigo queried smartly eyes glancing warily around his surroundings, the air was heavy with a bitter tint on his tongue making a sick swell of nausea rise in his stomach. Aizen looked how Ichigo felt no matter how valiantly the man tried to shield his thoughts and emotions behind a mask Ichigo could see through it. When entering one’s mind it worked both ways and Ichigo had seen the brilliant mind Aizen possessed perhaps less clearly than what Aizen had seen of Ichigo’s own head but still the memories lingered on the edge of his mind.

The brown-haired lieutenant laughed, the sound deep and dark in a way that suggested amusement born not of light material. Letting threads of tentative reaitsu scour the place Ichigo felt discontent at the stagnant reaitsu that plagued the place, the familiar foul reaitsu of hollows also lingering upon the waves of air. Looking up from where his contemplative gaze had been drawn to the floor Ichigo saw that Aizen had moved closer curiosity abundant in his eyes as always he asked, “Were you sent here Ichigo? Or did you stumble upon some new research that led your insatiable curiosity here.”

Aizen’s tone was slightly mocking even if genuine affection sometimes bloomed in usually stoic eyes. Ichigo shook his head long tangerine strands flickering with the movement he parted his bangs so he could stare into eyes of deep fire and said, “I should be the one asking you that Aizen. I will say that I am here on a mission, though the details are quite vague in what they entail.”

Aizen regarded Ichigo warily for a moment before his shoulders straightened in courage and he began to circle the room sandal clad feet leaving a resounding clack to echo around the room as he passed what had once surveyed as the large foyer where one might welcome guests.

“I came on the principle of curiosity I thought it might be another one of those cases where an experiment had been performed.”

Aizen held nothing back blatantly speaking of the experiments that often fascinated him to no end and left Ichigo bored beyond reason the many times the madman had ventured into the topic. Ichigo was also secretly pleased that the man felt no need to hide such things from Ichigo now he trusted Ichigo even if it was only a small fraction of his being. Sharing a nod the two began to stalk towards the staircase set deep against the far wall graceful curves rose in an unending spiral going both up towards the many viewing areas and down towards the dark refinement of the basement.

They began by heading down where the reaitsu was strongest and most potent. Wooden stairs spiraled ominously into the darkness and the two lieutenants traded challenging smiles trying to push the other first to descend into what waited below. Tired of the childish bickering (however silent) Ichigo sighed and began to creep down the stairs, they creaked and groaned under the lightest touch; old and rickety in a way that made Ichigo doubt their capability of supporting his weight for long. Dully in the background of his mind Ichigo acknowledged the sounds of Aizen following him. Far louder and obtrusive than the pale pad of Ichigo’s feet, it was to be expected the lieutenant had never
been trained in the ways of the Onmitsukidō. Instincts to preserve silence ingrained in one’s being and the crispness and cruelty of training resounding in his mind.

Light soon reached his eyes and Ichigo blinked frequently trying to adjust to the sudden burst of light that illuminated the pale shades of the large open room below. Overhead lights flickered ominously, powered by reaiitsu Ichigo reached out trying to trace whose reaiitsu but he could find none the creator of such long gone and with it any sign of their presence. Spread out before them in sickly hues of green was a lab, dividers portioned some sections off but the rest was left open. A plethora of metal objects twisted like living nightmares were suspended in the room glowing wickedly in false lighting.

The soft beep of machines permeated Ichigo’s ears and he stopped as dull shuffling soon accompanied the sound. Crouching Ichigo blindly reached behind him and snatched the lieutenant’s wide hand pulling him down to a crouch beside Ichigo. A creature of pale white lumbered past them it’s figure akin to that of a hollow but with more to it, it’s reaiitsu was twisted in a way Ichigo hadn’t experienced since the Winter War and the middle of the Blood War.

The creature soon shuffled out of sight pausing briefly to scent the air casting a suspicious gaze around the laboratory before it continued on its rounds. Taking the last few steps Ichigo stepped onto smooth wood a peculiar sensation seemed to cling to his feet as he touched the ground. Shaking away uncertainty Ichigo filed it at the back of his mind and stalked forward. Aizen paused at the stairwell his gaze became contemplative he slowly began to follow after the orangette, eyes alight with curiosity the brown-haired lieutenant glanced at the walls shuddering in their mortar and thick sheets of paper moulded and yellowed with age pinned to wooden frames.

The two lieutenants separated both casting off in different directions to asses and look at the many objects hidden in simple places or within complex puzzles. Ichigo shuddered at the many-layered diagrams recognizing many of the inventions and devices of Aizen’s hand. His mind whirled wondering if all of Aizen’s creations had come from within this lab cloaked in shadows. No, the man was far too intelligent to base all inventions off what Ichigo had seen. Stumbling upon a small journal placed beside a large steel box Ichigo carefully lifted the crumbling leather bound book, inside a mess of writing sprawled across the pages cramped and hidden occasionally by blots of ink. The writing seemed familiar and some distant part of Ichigo’s mind shuddered at the implications before he turned his attention to the tome in his hands.

Flipping through the pages Ichigo assessed a variety of languages ranging from Latin to Japanese. With varying levels of difficulty Ichigo decoded the languages fluent in reading some, and trying to recall passages from the many archive books for others. Before he could continue Aizen’s reaiitsu spiked with alarm and drew Ichigo’s attention, he hastily dropped the book on the desk and flash-stepped to where the lieutenant was sequestered in one corner of the lab.

Arriving with a huff Ichigo’s eyes were overwhelmed with the colour blue, it seemed to radiate and pulse covering all surfaces in it’s folds. Aizen was a shadow in front of a large rack of tubes stretching from floor to ceiling situated alongside each other. Drawing closer indistinct figures made themselves visible floating in a fluid that glowed pale blue likely the source of light illuminating the walls.

Ichigo let out a shocked puff of air as the figures became clear, eight souls suspended within the water attached to a miasma of tubes. Masks covered their faces but that was not all that attracted Ichigo’s attention white sprouted from their limbs and torsos in varying degrees of growth and number. As Ichigo drew closer he could see crimson and ebony lines tracing their bodies.

With dull horror Ichigo realised that these were hollowfication experiments done on souls. They
were incomplete and the test subjects were likely beyond living unable to pass on as their souls remained suspended in time. Turning to glance at Aizen Ichigo could see a mix of emotions swelling in cocoa orbs ranging from horror, shock, and sympathy to intrigue, curiosity, and manic glee.

Curling his hands in to fist Ichigo took a breath basking in Zangetsu’s calming reaitsu even as Shiro hissed bloodlust prominent in the Shinigami/hollow portions of his power. Aizen turned slowly as if tearing his eyes away from the sight was painful or a difficult task, his coffee orbs connected with Ichigo’s eyes and silence pervaded as they stared into each other’s souls.

“Ichigo… do you have any idea what this is?”

Aizen asked his voice a whisper in the dank lab shattering the careful silence and tensing Ichigo’s senses. Running a hand through tangerine locks in slight frustration at the situation at hand Ichigo turned his head to glance at the desk resting innocently against the far wall a stack of papers casually leaning on the desk.

“It’s Hollowfication Aizen. The process of dissolving the boundaries between hollow and soul.”

Aizen stared at Ichigo obviously not expecting Ichigo to know of the travesty before them, nor did he expect the bitter tone Ichigo’s voice had taken. Ichigo’s eyes shone with frustration and jaded bitterness.

Making his decision Ichigo stalked towards the far wall where a mess of wires were plugged into a large electrical circuit the likes of which spanned the whole wall. Ichigo stopped at the wall sharing a glance with Aizen challenging him to stop what he could clearly see Ichigo was planning. The man stared lost for a moment indecision weighing heavily on his heart with a shuddering heave he nodded allowing Ichigo to continue, not that the orangette wouldn’t without Aizen’s permission.

With a great spark of his reaitsu the circuit was fried sparks flying through the air catching on Ichigo’s hair and clothing as he stood illuminated by the light of the dying electricity. Aizen was awed by the sight, staring at the figure bathed in luminescence as sparks raged around him and blue light coiled around his form. The lieutenant swore he could see wisps of reaitsu curling around Ichigo’s form shades of crimson mixed with alabaster.

As the light dyed down the tubes containing the hollowfied souls flickered off one by one, Aizen’s ever curious mind wondered of the prospect of performing the experiment on those with an inner world otherwise known as Shinigami. Before his thought process could continue a roar cut through the air striking the instincts of the two Shinigami; alert Ichigo dashed forward grabbing Aizen’s hand he led the man through the maze of experiments.

A few times they nearly tripped over a sprawl of cables or stray pieces of scrap metal, always the figure lurked behind them drawing nearer. As they skittered into an open area Ichigo stopped turning to face the lumbering beast, Aizen regarded him ludicrously obviously questioning his sanity in facing a beast of unknown strength and powers. Ichigo turned a smirk light on his face and eyes alight with bitterness and glee in equal measures.

The creature entered the area and both were shocked to see its true height. It was massive towering over their heads with long beefy arms and thick stocky legs, its torso was a map of spikes, and the hole that marked it as a hollow was wide and deep. Its mask was large with two horns protruding from the front and back, its beady eyes crimson instead of feral yellow. Roaring the beast stomped its legs like a bull might and prepared to charge, turning to face Aizen halfway Ichigo yelled, “Hide I’ll deal with it. Go! You’ll only get in my way at the moment.”

Aizen wanted to protest Ichigo’s words but the command of his voice and power in his eyes
convinced the chocolate haired man to obey, with a nod he darted to the side watching from behind the broken segment of a wall divider. With slow drawn movements and the hiss of metal against scabbard Zangetsu was drawn the metal glinting in the pale lighting flickering overhead.

Ichigo took in a breath pushing down nausea and nostalgia that swarmed his mind and choked his senses. These hollows were far too familiar he had seen them many times during the Winter War a creation of Aizen modified more so than the beast in front of him. They had appeared again in the Blood War set loose from whatever hell they had resided in their great strength and resistance to dying had proved troublesome on more than one occasion.

The hollow looked down on Ichigo crimson eyes flashing Ichigo smirked Shiro’s bloodlust thrumming through his veins and casting his eyes golden. With an ear-shattering roar the hollow charged swinging large fists in an attempt to smash Ichigo. With easy grace Ichigo leapt out of the way using a quick flash-step to appear in front of the creature’s mask he slashed down trying to sever the mask.

A large arm came up to block the attack sharp spikes jutting out trying to pierce Ichigo, one scraped his cheek and another attempted to gut him but his hierro was already working and the attack brushed uselessly against his skin. The arm fell with a thump to the ground raising dust from the lab floor. Enraged the creature charged forward Zangetsu flashed out the blade stopping the creature in its tracks as a ripple of reaitsu charged forward; a low powered Getsuga Tensho.

His reaitsu cut through the hollow separating its torso in half, easily the hollow reattached itself the skin stretching and bubbling in its motions. Charging forward blade glowing and pulsing with reaitsu Ichigo sliced downwards through the bone mask feeling it shatter beneath his will.

Springing back Ichigo threw up a quick ward behind him shielding Aizen from the resounding blast of reaitsu. The hollow roared stumbling back, its body pulsed with crimson reaitsu before it exploded outwards. Ichigo stood firm against the wave of reaitsu, hair and shihaksho billowing wildly as it wrecked and crashed against the surrounding lab tossing paper and metal every which way.

Shaking slightly Ichigo took a breath calming raging instincts and an unsteady heart, turning Ichigo let the barrier fall so that Aizen could reveal himself. The lieutenant peeked out from behind the wall before he stepped out eyes wide with surprise he assessed Ichigo taking in the small cut on the orangette’s cheek weeping a thin trail of blood. The two stared into each other’s eyes for a moment before Ichigo spoke, “Come we should leave this place.”

Aizen stared for a moment pensive before he nodded. Together the two exited the dilapidated building to feel rain smattering their skin and wind billowing in fierce gales about them, Ichigo stared at the building before him in thought he couldn’t leave this building standing it would draw the eyes of Aizen again, his insatiable curiosity would lead him to investigate. If not that then what ever experiments resided within its broken shell could escape brining havoc upon Soul Society.

“Stand back.”

Ichigo commanded turning to Aizen with caramel eyes blazing with determination and the wrath of the heavens. The man stared thoughtful at Ichigo contemplating defying his words before with a nod the lieutenant of the Fifth stepped back a few paces leaving Ichigo a solemn figure in the rain. Channelling his reaitsu Ichigo raised his hand ebony and ivory swirling around his hand vibrant in the rain. Channelling his reaitsu Ichigo raised his hand ebony and ivory swirling around his hand vibrant in the rain Aizen stared in fascination. With wordless power Ichigo let his reaitsu flow forward in a great wave, it slammed into the house alighting the wood on fire and melting all metal before its power.

The fire roared and crackled accompanied by the sounds of breaking glass, snapping metal, sparks of
electricity, and the charred tainted smell of hollows. Turning to face Aizen illuminated by the harsh
glow of the fire and the collapse of rain around him Ichigo strode towards the enigmatic lieutenant.

“W-why did you do that?”

Aizen questioned frowning at his own uncertainty a bubble of emotions frothed in his eyes and the
megalomaniac looked confused. Ichigo sighed he was confusing the Aizen of his time with this
Aizen, younger, less jaded and far less insane. Duly Ichigo acknowledged that this Aizen was
already different, he was not planning the hollowfication of the Vizard because he sought to cripple
Soul Society no he was merely curious. Like a child following the examples of a parent ever curious
at the world around him. Even his bonds with Kaname and Gin were weak they followed him seeing
the power and loyalty he inspired to those of the same kin. Ichigo would show the man the truth of
his actions draw him towards the light. Aizen would have to walk the rest of the way himself.

Running a hand through soaked strands Ichigo let his reaitsu pulse around his form in the pale night
of rainfall he said, “What dwelled in that building was inhumane experiments the like of which you
are inspired by. Don’t deny it! You would surely go back there if the structure was left standing.

You understand nothing Aizen, of morality and consequence. Power you have along with
intelligence, oh do you wield it! But you are still blind, your glasses help you see naught but what
you wish. You want to see Soul Society as corrupt and broken with no way to be fixed when they
are stuck in their traditions. Change is coming your next experiment perhaps your greatest will show
you more than you think. I’ve seen what you’ve done, I know that you’ve been inspired you’ve only
begun dabbling.”

“And yourself Ichigo! Proud being hidden behind a façade, no one sees your soul! Soul Society is
trouble indeed and I see no aid but for now I content myself with passing follies. You are an enigma
Ichigo one that understands more than they should! Who are you to lecture me of morality when with
ease you burn what could have been founding’s incomprehensible.”

Aizen yelled back the two drenched in the rain staring at each other reaitsu curling around their forms
Ichigo huffed frustrated and replied, “There was nothing of value in there only experiments that
would set us back the wanderings of a madman. You don’t understand consequence, what you do
has repercussions, all those souls you’ve killed in the few experiments you’ve performed had
families. You could turn your genius to bettering Soul Society yet still you remain bitter! You say
nothing has been done to improve, change is coming and you will be a conductor of it whether you
live long enough to see it is up to you!”

They charged forward at the same times blades interlocking with a fierce ring of metal clashing upon
metal. Reaitsu raged shifting the land around them flattening it and raising rubble to suspend in the
air. Across their blades emotions and thoughts were channeled the two wielders locked staring into
the other’s eyes. Aizen stared back and muttered, “Y-you it can’t be!”

It seemed Aizen had recognized the powerful reaitsu floating across his senses Ichigo laughed
mirthlessly thinking of black bandages and the sense of right that accompanied him when he
achieved that form.

“I will answer your question Aizen. Who am I? A man determined to protect his family no matter the
costs I will defeat all who stand in my way. You don’t understand everything yet but in time you
will, know this. Soon you will have to make a decision and what you choose predicts whether you
live or die by my hands.”

Aizen stared before he sprung back sheathing Kyoka Suigetsu his eyes were wide uncomprehending
as Ichigo’s words resonated in his mind. The genius was trying to understand the ultimatum issued
Ichigo turned knowing their scheduled meeting a week from now over tea would still commence, Ichigo felt cocoa eyes on his back as he began to move away the lieutenant of the Fifth called out, “Ichigo how will I know when this decision comes?”

Ichigo turned at the foot of the path and called out, “You’ll know Aizen it will be glaringly obvious considering I will offer it to you myself.”

With those parting words Ichigo fled the scene, where rain surrounded the lieutenant a bubble of emotions frothing under Aizen’s skin just as fire cracked and burned all that remained of the ruins of some great experiment. Ichigo stumbled against a tree once he was out of sight breathing heavy and hands trembling he wondered if his efforts to aid Aizen were for not. The press of Zangetsu against his mind soothed Ichigo and he took a deep breath before continuing.

X

Chapter End Notes

Well I hope you all enjoy next chapter we are starting the Vizard yay! Reviews/comments are always appreciated and thank you to everyone for the very inspiring and kind ones so far. Till next time!

Map!!
Anagnorisis

Chapter Summary

The Vizard begin. Revelations are abound!

Chapter Notes

Anagnorisis
(n.) The critical moment of recognition or discovery.

Hello everyone, here is chapter 18! We have some exciting things coming for the next few chapters as we are beginning the Vizard arc. I will warn you all now that the end of the year crunch and exams are coming so my posting schedule may be a bit off but I will try my best to stay on top. Following that note enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The night was tense, the silence thick and heavy in the atmosphere as Aizen glanced around the clearing the captains and lieutenants drawn into his experiment were curled upon the ground around him. White bubbled from them covering their faces in bone white masks and rippling around their bodies. A grim satisfaction at the terror he’d inflicted sparked in Aizen’s system and a chilling smile slipped across his face.

Reaitsu sparked across his senses faint and dim in a way that suggested cloaking and years of training, the faint push of the wind and Kyoka Suigetsu’s whispers of all that hid in night’s caress drew his eyes to the far side of the clearing. A ripple of air and from the cover of trees menacing in the cold light of the moon Kisuke walked forward cloaked in the same coat that hid all reaitsu from his senses, the Kido Corps captain was as silent as ever his reaitsu seemingly nothing.

So Kisuke Urahara and Tessai Tsukabishi had come to confront him, it made sense that the captain of the Twelfth had figured out Aizen’s plot, he didn’t give the blond-haired captain enough credit. A tenseness coiled in the air ready to snap at a hair’s breath, eyes of cool grey stared into Aizen’s own challenging and accusing in a complicated mixture where grief and guilt lurked in the background. The two locked eyes the moment held in time for an eternity before another presence made itself known.
The hollowfied Shinigami who had been struggling pitiful moans splitting the air stilled all motion ceasing and tenseness struck the three figures in the clearing. The reaitsu was dark and instinctual and achingly familiar. Ebony reaitsu creped along the ground crawling along painted eaves and caressing still forms it writhed and curled in on itself before the owner made himself visible. Aizen recognized the reaitsu both in colour (for where else had he seen such darkness untainted) and feel, yet it was different this time changed from the figure cloaked in the clearing on that eve long ago.

The figure that padded forward had all too familiar orange hair curling along his back and resting on his shoulders, what drew their attention was the catch of light on a mask bone white in Ichigo’s hands. He stopped before the three Shinigami grim and silent though fire sparked in his eyes, Aizen couldn’t help but stare contemplating this revelation but also Ichigo’s appearance.

He was far different from the last time either of the two geniuses had seen him. Ichigo’s already pale pallor was the colour of death itself his features gaunt and stark in harsh lighting. A weight hung on his shoulders and head, bowing them however slight, and his eyes were the worst of all. Amber orbs were swathed in ache and weariness if the purple under them was any indication he likely hadn’t slept well. Honestly the young man looked like shit both Kisuke and Aizen winced at the shared sentiment all animosity forgotten for a moment as they shared knowing glances. It seemed no matter what divided them they both had gotten to know the eccentric orangette and grown fond of him.

“Good evening.”

Ichigo intoned hoarsely yet simply as if his comrades and friends were not suffering on the ground near him, his hands were shaking Aizen noted watching the way they curled and uncurled into fists as he tried to think of an answer to Ichigo’s words.

“I wouldn’t necessarily call this pleasant Ichi, considering our comrades are plastered on the floor hollowfied.”

Kisuke beat Aizen to it speaking with the easy nonchalance and tip of the hat ambiguity he had perfected over the years. Ichigo cracked a small smile at the humour it was broken and something dark twisted in Ichigo’s eyes but it was a smile. Ichigo nodded turning slightly to survey the clearing his reaitsu still snaking from his form it began to draw closer to the three Shinigami still standing, he turned to face them a lost expression on his face.

“I was prepared but this is still damn hard…”

Ichigo mumbled under his breath loud enough that their collective figures could hear the harsh words. Aizen coughed and spoke, “Ichigo why are you here?”

Aizen questioned wanting to know the reason Ichigo had appeared if only to taunt and watch the proceedings than he wouldn’t have interfered. Ichigo turned swiftly to face him a heavy gaze piercing Aizen’s soul bitter laughter filled the air before Ichigo turned regaining control of himself his voice lilted upon the breeze as he said, “Why am I here? To offer you a choice Aizen? To provide salvation?”

Ichigo turned and in slow deliberate movements raised the mask to his face settling it firmly on his features, once amber eyes were now feral yellow staring from a sea of black. But they were Ichigo’s eyes haunting and strange as they were. Kisuke’s katana was loosed in it’s sheath and Tessai raised his hands but Aizen remained still mind a whirring clockwork of gears as he comprehended Ichigo’s meaning. Before any could question him, the young lieutenant continued.

“The matter at hand is complicated and the situation dire. What has been done cannot be reversed, and left to their own devices they will shun their soul. I can aid them and I will. The question is
extended to you Aizen as much as Kisuke detests what you have done and however likely they will hate you if you run there will be no place that their blades won’t eventually find.

If you stay, aid them in recovering take the so-called gauntlet you propose change. Already your soul tears in half, revelling in the feel of terror and the succession of an experiment even as the other half cries at such pain. You don’t have to choose between the two halves of your being. But you don’t understand it never will and you can’t repress them any more. Here is the ultimatum what shapes all our futures. For if you flee now Aizen you control whether these beings live or die, and if you remain you stay my blade from tasting your blood this night.”

They all stared at Ichigo his dual tone voice echoing in their heads, tense silence filled the air and it seemed a moment before the fragile hourglass would shatter. Aizen coffee eyes wide needing a distraction from the catastrophe of his mind jumping from question to question whispered in shock, “But I’ve scanned your reaitsu it showed only Shinigami.”

Ichigo turned a cruel smile appearing on the bone mask before he reached up and took it off letting it rest easily on top of his head stark against bright tangerine strands his gaze challenged the two scientists to scan his reaitsu. Tentatively Aizen’s reaitsu reached out he recoiled in shock eyes wide starring at Ichigo the only presence of hollow radiated from the mask resting in tousled strands even before Ichigo’s reaitsu had been pungent with the feel but now it was the same as any other time they met.

“How?”

Kisuke murmured curiosity shining in tense gray eyes, Ichigo shook his head eyes bright for a moment his gaze landed on the two and he said, “I have mysteries wrapped within my skin that none shall see. Whether you see any and understand depends all on yourself.”

A glance was sent his way indicating that Ichigo wished for a response, Aizen turned from the group walking a few paces so he could think in peace. Here was the choice he had agonized over since that night at the mansion where fire had flown and blades had clashed. The soul and will in Ichigo’s blade was enough to take Aizen’s breath away. The choice seemed so simple put in words, stay and aid the hollowfied Shinigami repent for his ways, or leave Soul Society to whatever devices of his own making where he could experiment freely but would soon meet Ichigo’s blade.

His ever-cunning mind traced Ichigo’s words repeatedly easily noting that the young man had never indicated that Aizen serve Soul Society or relinquish his ways, no Ichigo merely asked that Aizen understand and feel remorse see how he had touched these people and help them. Looking back briefly Aizen caught Ichigo’s eyes their thoughts conveyed in one glance Aizen turned back coffee eyes staring far ahead into shaded foliage. Ichigo was not an idiot. In fact, if Aizen was being honest the boy was close to genius so those words had been meant to the last detail.

Ichigo was offering freedom of a different kind and Aizen had to wonder did he want to stay? He could leave the mystery Ichigo presented always haunting him along with the orangette’s thin countenance or he could stay broaden both mind and soul. The choice seemed easy put so simply and yet he hesitated; Kyoka Suigetsu whispered in his mind. Her presence calm and the voice of reason even as tremulous thoughts clashed together.

Turning Aizen paced back and nodded, eyes flicking up to catch caramel orbs, they were filled with joy and relief and Aizen realized that Ichigo wouldn’t have hesitated in killing him. Zangetsu would have cleaved the air with ease before slicing into him. Ichigo was the man who had killed not for pleasure but because he had to and he would do so again, it was evident within the fires of his soul and Aizen wondered how much blood lay on his hands.
“So, you’ve recruited our would-be executioner Ichi, what’s the plan?”

Kisuke broke the still silence that had fallen over them with easy words silver eyes peaking from beneath the cowl of his hood and the tangle of blond locks. Ichigo looked at the bone mask in his head in thought watching as it dissolved pieces drifting away on a sudden wind. The orangette sighed running a hand through orange strands tangling them he turned to Kisuke and said, “They will soon notice the missing captains, the Soutaicho is covered and I can deal with central 46. They will need at least a month to train, we will need a place with wide open spaces that is hidden, preferably with no one knowing about it.”

Ichigo smirked knowingly at the end of his sentence, Kisuke paled before nodding and Aizen could only wonder at Ichigo’s plans already thought out before he nodded his accordance to the plan born on the whims of night. Ichigo sighed before he padded over to one of the hollowfied Shinigami he slung the figure over his shoulder with ease turning to look at the three assembled Shinigami he threw a soft grin still broken and eyes fill of darkness he called out, “We’re going to have to move them somehow I can only keep them sedated for so long.”

With a sigh Aizen shook his head and began walking towards one of the sprawled figures wondering what he had gotten himself into. Two paths had lain before him one shrouded in darkness with a swift end and this new path covered in swaths of grey with so many twists Aizen couldn’t deduce light from shadow. Kyoka Suigetsu comforted him in his decision motherly tones of concern echoing along their bonds as she regarded the young Shinigami with sorrowful eyes.

Aizen Sosuke was many things and a man was one. This night had brought many revelations and his heart thudded in his chest with the chaotic thoughts of his mind but he understood the cause, Ichigo Shiba the very present enigma that deepened every time he saw him. Time would only tell what next would be revealed.

X

Ichigo walked into the council room of the Central 46 with fury in his posture and fire in his eyes, Yammamoto who he had spoken to of all that had trespassed the night before was seated in the corner eyes smouldering and intent on Ichigo. Coming to a stop in the center of the room Ichigo stared up at the senile old fools, maliciousness haunted their eyes and twisted already waxen and shrivelled figures gruesome in harsh candlelight. The Soutaicho had informed the Gotei Thirteen of what had passed in a quick and easy manner simply stating that the victims of the incident were being trained to accommodate their new powers and responsibilities and that they would be welcome within Soul Society no matter of their circumstances.

When Aizen heard the news, he had swung on Ichigo and smiled in a way Ichigo had never seen, it tickled his nerves and the pride and hope that sparked in coffee orbs was enough for Ichigo to be happy for the moment with all he had done. Of course, the old geezers weren’t going to accept such an atrocity to occur nor for such freaks to walk Soul Society’s prestigious and pure halls. It was useless propaganda and Ichigo bitterly remarked that they still had too much power even with what Yammamoto had managed to snatch from greedy clawed hands.

This would take some of the power from those hands and Ichigo would get the vindictive pleasure of being the cause of their defeat. It was strangely nostalgic standing in that room where he had stood many times before, though as the war passed on they were relied on less and less. Of course, he would always remember his own trial before them cold eyes and a swift unjust sentence. As much as he protected and preferred to think of the Soul Society of his past in kind light Ichigo was sometimes forced to acknowledge that they did indeed have faults. For how did one justify the death of an entire race?
Shrugging the thoughts from his mind Ichigo remained resolute and firm as mutters and whispers filled the air, after all he was the famous Shiba who had outsmarted his elders with ease and would not take their words lying down.

The chatter went on and on trying to encourage a reaction from Ichigo who stood still as stone mind drawing to their arrival at the training grounds of Kisuke and Yourichi’s childhood. The Vizard had yet to awake from the slumber Ichigo had easily induced, for now Kisuke was experimenting with the Hogyoku looking at Ichigo’s own notes and theories. He had been sceptical when he took them, before he flipped open the small booklet to see messy scrawl and a horde of diagrams. Aizen had conferred with the scientist for a quiet moment the tension and animosity that inhabited the air between them dimmed somewhat after their chat and Ichigo was sure he heard his name more than a few times.

The silence finally died down to the amused snark of Shiro Ichigo smiled pleasantly or what passed for it though the keen sharpness of a predator underlay it. Their petty tactics of trying to anger him and being disrespectful by making him wait would get them nowhere. With the sharpness of wood against stone the man at the head of the podium began to speak. He was bald with more wrinkles than a turtle and a voice that grated on your nerves. He questioned the safety of the Vizard, the science, the training among a million other questions that Ichigo answered with ease slipping in cleverly disguised insults with a fluid grace. Shiro cheered in the back of his mind even as amusement radiated from Zangetsu, Ichigo could sense the akin emotion resonating from the bearded Soutaicho. On and on the questions continued seemingly endless drawing on Ichigo’s patience until he assumed it was the opportune moment to strike back.

“Are Central 46 so incompetent that you must repeat the same simple questions over and over again expecting different answers that suit your own needs. You senile fools are useless! Time spent here could have easily been spent in the presence of the victims aiding them instead you insist on trying to stop this operation. You insist these Shinigami will be feral a danger to us all when I have provided credited sources and my own research to counter such reasoning.

It is the moral of a fool to continue even after they have been so thoroughly denounced. Central 46 you have proven this council useless! What do you achieve? Even now the Commerce of Equality pushes forward in advancing the state of Rungokai, even the Soutaicho has stepped forward when you have been neglectful. This council thinks it’s seats ancient and an honour to all who stand to be in their presence; such falsehood is laughable. Soul Society stood long before you and it will stand long after you. Give up this vengeful and simple-minded challenge or waste away what power you have. But know that they will be accepted in Soul Society no matter how much propaganda you spread.”

Shaking away the anger that clung to his form in tendrils of ebony reaitsu Ichigo turned from the doors nodding briefly to the Soutaicho before he swept from the room orange locks flying behind his head tailing the shocked silence of the council room.

X

He awoke disoriented and Shinji easily could amiss the feelings and soreness that plagued his body to a hollow fight or training with Hiyori, and then his mind caught up with his body and the cool mask that rested on his features was yanked off in a rush and held in his hands. Dark sockets stared up at him empty and accusing her wrathful voice echoed in his mind and Shinji wondered if his whole world had been tipped upside down much like Sakande’s powers.

Orange appeared in his vision just as darkness like a cloud seemed to descend on his mind a crushing depression that was ripping into his soul as much as Sakande’s pain. Chocolate eyes so full of
warmth and soulful fire gazed into his own and it took Shinji but a moment to place those eyes as Ichigo Shiba’s. Confusion still prevalent throughout the dizzying vertigo of his awakening returned in full force and Shinji tipped forward slightly uncertain. Ichigo’s warm hands met his shoulders pushing the captain up so he could look into those eyes blond strands hung like a curtain between the two blocking out the world that had turned it’s back on him. Looking down at Ichigo’s prompting Shinji watched in mounting confusion as a bone mask formed in his pale scarred hands it was all to remnant of a hollow like the mask held in his own hands.

Ichigo pushed back Shinji’s locks and belayed the kid’s age, it was the tenderness of a mother with her child. Shinji wondered where Ichigo found it within himself such light when darkness even now cloaked rich amber orbs. Turning his head to the side so as to observe their surroundings Shinji could see some of his comrades, victims of the tragedy that had occurred resting on mats in what appeared a small alcove. Turning his head to the other side Shinji spotted the others and the opening to a larger complex where the sky was blue as any summer’s day and spires of rock rose into the distance.

It all felt so much, his emotions welled under his skin, confusion ran rampant, pain engulfed him and Shinji just wanted it to be over whatever it was. Ichigo frowned the look familiar on the orangette before he leaned in closer his voice a bare whisper of the empty wind, “You are not alone, you are not deserted. Can you stand?”

The words were said with such conviction they teared what remained of his heart to shreds, he stared into those soulful eyes full of promise and hesitantly nodded grimacing at the sharp pound of his head received for the movement. With Ichigo’s aid and many a curse from his lips Shinji was able to wobble to his feet shaky and unsure he studied his surroundings once more. Ichigo’s reaitsu curled around his form soothing the ache of his muscles and calming the incessant shaking that was plaguing him.

“Hungry?”

Ichigo queried easily Shinji wondered if he was over the pain of his head, roughly he nodded and the orangette smiled leading the two in a small movement like a jig further into the alcove where it branched into different sectors and hallways. Ichigo confidently turned down one that looked the same as any other the two continuing their shuffle until they reached another room. Kisuke was sitting at a table a steaming cup of tea curled in his palms and morose thoughtfulness on his features. Tessai was hovering in the kitchen watching a few things on the stove even as keen eyes surveyed the room. It was then Shinji noticed Aizen’s presence to Ichigo’s muttered, “Shit.”

Rage seemed to coil in his form Sakande’s words growing louder and more horrendous he felt what control he had of his body slipping away until a small pinch on his arm and warm reaitsu chased away the fog of his mind. White material fell away from his face akin to the white of hollow masks dully Shinji realized what had occurred even as his mind was running in circles. Looking to Ichigo Shinji smiled in partial thanks understanding that his instincts were changed as much as Sakande was.

Ichigo led the two to the low table ignoring the staring glued to their forms, interest and curiosity heavy in the atmosphere. Ichigo set Shinji down across from Kisuke who mechanically reached over and poured the still steaming tea into a clay mug before passing it over. The scientist was in his own world eyes glued to the small notebook in his hands water stained and torn as it was. Ichigo bustled into the kitchen a whirlwind of movement as he tossed some ingredients onto the stove, Tessai stepped back and watched the young orangette work.

“You weren’t supposed to wake till tomorrow, then again you’re more powerful than many of the others.”
Ichigo mumbled loud enough for Shinji to hear as he continued to prepare the meal. Shinji let his eyes drift over the area trying to draw them away from Aizen. Looking at the genius brought fire bubbling in his veins and wrath upon his mind. Ichigo continued to bustle around the kitchen sharp eyes glancing up to assess the situation before flickering back to the meal he was preparing, expectant silence filled the air and Shinji felt curiosity and confusion continue to wage war within his mind.

“What happened?”

Shinji finally spoke breaking the tense peace, Kisuke’s metal grey eyes flickered up from the text he was reading serious and uncertain they stared at Shinji before he flinched and returned his eyes to the sprawling words. Tessai jerked where he stood in the kitchen watching the proceedings guilt seemed to flash in his eyes before it was shaken away. Aizen looked up coffee eyes so changed from the years before caught Shinji’s eyes before he turned looking away with strange emotions bubbling in those eyes. Ichigo flinched looking like a trapped animal for a sparse second before aggressively he ran his hand through his hair eyes alight like a tremulous storm.

The young man stopped pacing and looked at Shinji eyes heavy and hot like the heat of Ryūjin Jakka, Shinji’s breath caught in his throat at the sorrow displayed there. Ichigo sighed once more gaze swerving to look at his accomplices before he spoke, “You were hollowfied. The process in which the boundary between soul and hollow is destroyed. Thus, your zanpaktou was hollowfied and now within you is the powers of a hollow even while you remain a Shinigami.”

Shinji’s eyes widened and he stared in disbelief trying to process words slow and heavy as if Ichigo struggled to form even the thoughts. Sakande had been hollowfied, that was the reason for her pain and the screams that even now raged inside his head. It explained the bone mask on his face and the overwhelming rage that bubbled beneath his skin. Tentatively he felt his own reaitsu wincing at the sharp taint of hollow present even as it mixed and swelled with Shinigami creating something altogether new. Looking up as questions spiked in is mind Shinji asked, “Ya said I wasn’t alone, I don’t think ya mean the others?”

Ichigo nodded even as he cursed, curious eyes now rested on the orangette and with some reluctance he continued to prepare the meal eyes distant lost in the bowels of his mind. With a rough sigh the young lieutenant spoke, “My own soul was hollowfied though perhaps differently from yours.”

Finishing those words Ichigo reached up and in a smooth motion his fist was covered with ebony reaitsu clashing with crimson he drew it over his face. Resting on his features was a mask of bone white with lines of harsh red and black trailing from the sockets and running along the jaw. The eyes were the most prominent feature feral gold peaking out from darkness somehow still Ichigo’s eyes. Shinji’s reaitsu tentatively traced out to brush against Ichigo surprised to find a similar mix of reaitsu not present when Shinji had woken.

“How?”

Shinji questioned knowing that Ichigo had not suffered at the hands of Aizen with the rest of them, his experience and knowledge said differently. With his question, all eyes in the room swung to Ichigo and the man flinched at the attention his familiar tick presenting itself as he ran a hand through orange locks.

“My hollow is of my parentage and circumstances. My soul chain was cut and to save a friend I underwent training to regain my powers, for one such task I was dropped into a hole. The only way to escape was to regain my lost powers. The trick of the matter is that done too late one’s zanpaktou can hollowfy as you tempt the balance between hollow and Shinigami. I’ve had many years with Shiro and have come to understand more than most on the matter.”
Ichigo’s eyes were swimming with nostalgia, and loss, his gaze distant as if he wasn’t even in the room anymore mind treading familiar paths. Kisuke and Aizen shared glances filled not with animosity and challenge as Shinji had seen many times before now their gaze was knowing flicking towards the young Shinigami who had methodically began cooking the meal again. Silence filled the room accompanied only by the dull sound of the knife hitting a cutting board. Shinji closed his eyes centering himself he looked inside at his reaitsu and at Sakande.

She was furious her beautiful form now sporting white additions, it didn’t demote her beauty any less but Shinji refrained from speaking simply watching his zanpaktou with sorrow feeling their once strong bond shiver suddenly fragile. A cough pulled Shinji from his thoughts and he looked up to see Ichigo setting a plate down before him, the food was simple but looked delicious to his more than weary mind so he inclined his head in thanks and began eating.

The food was amazing! Shinji’s eyes whipped to stare at Ichigo as he offered some to the other occupants of the room, Kisuke accepted or rather mumbled something too focused on the work in his hands, Tessai nodded easily taking the proffered food with a smile, and Aizen tried to deny it but was met with Ichigo’s pointed stare and he reluctantly accepted. Shinji smirked at that, no one could resist Ichigo’s fierce determination and care.

Ichigo returned to the kitchen for a few moments before he stalked over and plopped in the seat next to Shinji between Kisuke, the scientist looked up then looked to his book before his gaze rose once more assessing the orangette who was sprawled in the chair. Ichigo ran a hand through his hair with a heavy sigh and Kisuke placed the worn journal down for a second looking to Ichigo with concern in grey eyes he said, “Your research on the matter is very in-depth Ichigo frankly it’s astounding and far beyond what I would have thought of.”

Ichigo let out a non-committal hum closing his eyes and tipping back his head. It was there Shinji noticed the deep purple under closed eyelids and the paleness that clung to Ichigo’s skin like that of the sickly. Kisuke frowned and continued, “Were the senile old fools that bad?”

Ichigo opened his eyes, weary and dark in the lighting of the cave Shinji frowned, instincts newly awakened curled within in his chest and he forcefully had to clamp down on the urge to comfort the young lieutenant. Rubbing a hand over his eyes Ichigo spoke, “Damn bastards as usual, but they refused to see reason no matter how brutal the evidence was. I made them aware that their time in power is swiftly falling. I estimate if they don’t take this situation well then, the Commerce of Equality will likely rise to power. And for the better as they are comprised of souls from all regions and of all stations. They are just too stubborn, refusing to see the truth and honestly Aizen if you tried to kill them I wouldn’t stop you.”

Everyone’s eyes were centered on Ichigo as he finished his last sentence it seemed unlike Ichigo to say such brash and blunt things but then rationality kicked in and Shinji remarked that Ichigo would likely aid the insane bastard. What Ichigo was saying did have merits and Shinji supposed he had gone in front of the useless fools to speak about them. The Commerce of Equality was new but he vaguely remembered hearing about it from the members of his division.

Turning to cast his gaze at Aizen Shinji noted a pleased smirk on his lieutenant’s features the man obviously imagining the scenarios. Turning back to face Ichigo he saw that the young man was resting his head in his hands he looked up to meet Shinji’s gaze with a tired smile before he leaned back resting on the palms of his hands.

“Ichigo you mentioned the name Shiro earlier when talking about your hollow I thought your zanpaktou’s name was Zangetsu.”

Reaitsu spiked in the room at Aizen’s question and Ichigo threw a faint glare at the man before he
shrugged his shoulders, head tipping back to look at the ceiling a mess of rock above he replied, “Like I said my situation is a bit different than yours but Shiro is…” Ichigo paused his head tilting listening to the words of his zanpaktou. An amused frown tilted across his features (only Ichigo could manage to frown while still looking amused) and his brows furrowed. Ichigo shook his head and continued, “Well it’s complicated but I think you’ll figure out the answer soon enough.”

With another shrug Ichigo finished leaving a question unanswered once more and leaving many more at the forefront of Shinji’s mind. Kisuke and Aizen traded quick glances and Shinji thought he was beginning to understand the meaning of those gazes as they flicked over to Ichigo who was heaving himself from the seat with a groan before collecting the plates. Shinji’s life had been turned upside down and yet somethings were still present and the mystery Ichigo presented would likely never be solved.

X

Ichigo paced back and forth to the amusement of the gathered Shinigami, he ran a hand through vibrant orange locks amber eyes flicking to glance at them for a sparse second before drawing away towards the horizon. The terrain of the hidden training area rose around them great spires of rock muted reds and yellows in the artificial sunlight, a faint wind blew through the area picking up dust and tangling hair.

Kisuke and Aizen perched in a far corner away from the clearing Ichigo had chosen watched on, curious and intrigued to see the actions of the young lieutenant, already the past few days had been somewhat revealing and equal parts confusing. The hollowfied Shinigami had all woken early yesterday morning under Ichigo’s careful watch he had handled their questions and led them to the kitchen where tea was served.

Kisuke had the inane sense of déjà vu as Ichigo went over the same questions Shinji had posed, the blond a silent and sturdy figure hiding in the shadows providing support. Ichigo had again spoken with hidden meaning near impossible to decipher but it had satisfied the Shinigami for the moment. Now they were gathered to begin training, or they would if Ichigo could muster the courage or whatever he was seeking to stop pacing. As if brought to will by the collective thoughts of the assembled Shinigami, Ichigo paused and let out a heavy sigh before he plopped onto the cool rock below. In one swift move Zangetsu was resting across his lap thin tendrils of ebony snaking around the blade.

“There are many ways to deal with being hollowfied, not all of them are correct. It took… me many years to find the correct way. We have at least a month to train you all to harmonize with the newfound instincts and powers dwelling inside you.”

Ichigo’s pause did not go unnoticed, Rose regarded the orangette with a peculiar glance equally curious and approving as if seeing the man before him for the first time. Shinji coiled against a section of rock regarded the proceedings with Cheshire keen eyes even as Hiyori stood brooding beside him likely to release her fury at any given time. Love shifted his gaze to Rose before it traveled around their small group noting Hachi’s frown even as the Kido master had hope rekindled in his hands. Lisa’s eyes were complex swirls of emotions as she stared at the lieutenant who had stood by her side as they became good friends, she thought she should feel anger at Ichigo’s revelation but only relief coursed through her veins.

Seeing a lack of questions Ichigo ran a hand over the blade before speaking once more, “To achieve this you need understand a few details. Your zanpaktou has been hollowfied, but their powers and shape remain the same. You need to find balance between and with your zanpaktou as a hollow seeks to dominate those weaker. To show signs of weakness will lead to a struggle for power, and
the correct way is not to force your zanpaktou into submission and lock them away from your thoughts and hearts. You are all relatively experienced Shinigami and thus understand well what the bond between Shinigami and zanpaktou means. You are taming and learning to control instincts and to harness powers that now rest at your fingertips.”

“How when they scream in pain?”

Kensei posed the question Mashiro seated beside the stoic captain a sorrowful expression though somewhat rekindled with hope residing on her normally smiling features. Ichigo nodded almost to himself before he sprung up and raised his hand channeling reaitsu until a mask formed. The same mask he had revealed to the shock of all gathered many nights prior albeit at different times.

“To settle this soul deep pain, you will have to battle your zanpaktou, prove to them your determination and will. Show them that the bond fragile as thread will not snap nor remain so. While doing this the outside world will be dealing with a fully hollowfied version of yourself. Instincts will run freely as all barriers your zanpaktou had been fighting against are released.”

They were openly gaping at him, or at least the few that had yet to master control of their emotions. Shinji sprung forward from his perch stalking over to stare into Ichigo’s eyes, even if no vocal confirmation had been voiced the others looked towards Shinji as the leader of their sudden band of renegades. Ichigo was promising salvation and Shinji who had tasted the blade of betrayal and bitterness of failure was both sceptical and trusting of the young man before him.

The mask in Ichigo’s hands was lifted between them black sockets empty yet frightening all the same stared between the two even as Ichigo held Shinji’s gaze. Nodding the blond man grinned it was a far cry from the wide curl of his lips but promising all the same he said, “And when we achieve harmony?”

Ichigo laughed the sound clear in the bare cavern of rock his soulful eyes scanned the faces of the assembled Shinigami before drawing back to Shinji he said, “Harmony isn’t so easy as a quick mediation. There’s kinks and forks in the road details to pave. Not to mention control, you think one can hold the hollow mask indefinitely? Or summon ceros to their fingertips? Training will kick your asses and then some you’ll come forth more than you were before.”

Ichigo words were the amusing lilt of sarcasm and endurance somehow managing to encourage and inspire just as much as to dissuade you from broaching the subject once more. Ichigo looked as if he wanted to continue before his gaze became distant and he entered a one-sided argument with himself.

“No. You can’t…. what will they think? I don’t care if you’ll behave!”

Ichigo continued on in the same manner for a minute to the amused and somewhat puzzled glances of everyone gathered before him, with a heavy sigh he quieted rolling his shoulders he looked up and with fond resignation said, “Shiro has ‘politely’ asked to come out, and considering he would be bitching all night if I said no I’m going to materialize him.”

With that quick warning Ichigo ignored the shock rippling throughout the Shinigami, to materialize one’s zanpaktou was no small fit. It required enormous amounts of reaitsu just to sustain the form. There was also the small fact that showing another one’s spirit seemed near taboo in Soul Society and was rarely done. All eyes were fixed on Ichigo doubting this would bring revelations rather another labyrinth of questions.

The air bubbled and popped with tension before reaitsu gathered beside Ichigo forming a being with indistinct features. slowly the figure solidified and even Aizen was left gaping as Ichigo turned to glare at a near perfect copy, the doppelganger was inverted all pale white and simple black with the
feral gold of a hollow in his eyes. The two twin like in appearance scowled at each other for a moment before Ichigo let out a heavy sigh and Shiro smirked.

“Damn King finally letting me free.”

Shiro’s voice held odd dual tones a deeper rasping voice that seemed to grate against the nerves. Ichigo scoffed and rolled his eyes in exasperation ignoring the weary caution prevalent in the assembled Shinigami as their hands were drawn to their zanpaktou. Shaking his head Ichigo replied, “Yes and look at the mess of problems this will bring.”

“Ah King just show them ya don’t need to hide us anymore. We’re getting bored with the pathetic imitation.”

Shinji stared trying to puzzle the overload of information standing before him. Shiro was apparently Ichigo’s zanpaktou spirit as he had never indicated otherwise and while it was strange (unheard of and something one could only expect of Ichigo) it wasn’t uncommon for zanpaktou spirits to take unique forms. Then there was their relationship they were like that of an old married couple or appeasing their like image a pair of brothers squabbling. But Shinji could see it was all in good fun with no hate or bite behind the words seemingly a well-practised routine. The title king was also a reflection of Ichigo’s own experience with inner hollows as evident by his declaration relating to subjugating their spirits.

Sighing heavily Shinji observed the other Shinigami who were starring and watching as the two continued to converse the amusing sight of Ichigo talking to himself belayed somewhat by their surprise. One of the many things that left him wanting to pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration was the hollow-like spirit’s words, he referred to it as if there were two spirits and an imitation. His eyes of their own accord drew to the two scientists hunched over muttering together like a band of thieves, if Ichigo succeeded in anything over this month it would be uniting the two megalomaniacs.

Ichigo coughed the two having fallen silent after letting the others absorb the sudden influx of twisting revelations that of course simply led to more questions. Ichigo paced a slight distance away from the group Shiro remaining where the two had once stood a smirk full of tooth curled on bleached features, he turned to the collected Shinigami and rasped, “Kingy here is going to show ya some of the techniques ya can harness.”

Ichigo raised one hand and with a slow breath out reaitsu gathered a swirling supernova of red and black that pulsed and radiated through the air, the wind picked up billowing dust like a storm cloud. With a quiet exhale seeming loud as a peal of thunder in the tense silence reaitsu raged from Ichigo’s hands swirling and rippling uncontained power. The land was decimated with a harsh crash debris was sent flying and Hachi quickly threw up a barrier the large pieces of rock some more akin to boulders bouncing against the shield and fracturing it.

“Che cero an attack in which one harnesses energy into a center point.”

As the dust cleared and the shield of glowing orange fell the spirit spoke. The destruction revealed left some of them swimming in surprise where once spires rose a deep hole was gouged into the land and debris collected on all sides. Kisuke frowned muttering under his breath about Yourichi even as intrigue lit metal grey eyes, Aizen beside the blond regarded the chaos of that one attack with eyes both fearful and understanding.

Ichigo stalked back towards the group eyes pulsing with power the Shinigami seemed a whole different person at that moment, one coiled with raw power in his spine and will in his heart. Then a small unsure smile hesitantly settled on his features and the image wavered so that they could easily see the Ichigo they had all come to know. Shinji wondered at the incredible power Ichigo displayed,
he questioned why the young man had kept such power under wraps.

Ichigo stopped beside his spirit who was now pouting at his wielder even as he tossed a blade of ivory coloured metal to Ichigo. It flashed catching the eyes of the gathered Shinigami as Ichigo reached up and grabbed the blade and in one swift movement rammed it against his chest, committing what could easily be called Seppuku.

Time seemed to stop as they surged forward far too slow to stop the orangette’s movements and watched in wonder as the blade shattered against Ichigo’s chest no wound visible or the worrying trickle of blood. Ichigo smirked teasing and taunting as he pulled the hilt away from his chest the shattered fragments falling to the ground before dispersing.

“Damn King breaking it ya know how that tickles. What was that the seventh time?” Ichigo shrugged innocently as if breaking the blade of his spirit was no small matter, Shiro turned to face the collected Shinigami and continued, “Hierro a technique in which one uses reaitsu to enforce or toughen their skin.”

Shinji absently wished the gears of his mind would start turning again as he was left in dumbstruck awe and surprise, whatever the young lieutenant threw at them Shinji doubted he would ever expect it or be prepared. Lisa looked ready to either slap Ichigo or combust into a small ball trying to comprehend the enigma before her, Shinji could sympathize and it looked like Rose was more than ready to pass out.

Ichigo’s amber eyes flashed to Shinji assessing the group before him, with a small shrug he brought the hilt up and drew the sharp shattered end against the skin of his forearm. Blood welled up from the shallow wound and trickled down Ichigo’s arm falling from his fingers in tiny droplets of crimson. Then white bubbled from the wound, the same bleached white that Shinji had seen bubble on his friend’s faces and felt on his own. Within a moment, the white liquid was gone and the wound with it. Nothing to reveal that a wound had ever been there.

This time Ichigo spoke voice soft yet strong in a way that pervaded the air but did not disturb it, “We are also able to access instant or accelerated healing. There is a final technique that I won’t show as it is doubtful any will achieve it. Resurrection for the Espada is when they release their hollow powers from their sealed blade, for us it would be a form of complete hollowification. This can occur when we are slain, if we have the will to live, or if we succumb to instincts.”

Ichigo turned to his spirit after he finished speaking and handed the hilt to the spirit who grinned and took the blade. He turned to the collected Shinigami and said, “Don’t think this’ll be the last ya see o me. Take care of King.”

With a wink and a feral smile the spirit disappeared drifting away to Ichigo’s inner world. Ichigo glared at where his hollow once stood even as the collective Shinigami felt shivers run down their spines at the warning of the spirit. Shinji easily caught the meaning behind the spirit’s words it helped that Shinji was already intent on helping the orangette, and if the conspicuous glances by the two scientists in the corner were any clue they were in easy agreement.

X

Ichigo regarded the collected Shinigami and wondered if he should so callously reveal something else while he was on a role. With a smirk boding nothing well for the Vizard in front of him Ichigo asked, “Well how about we start? We don’t need to try anything too deep today perhaps a little spar see how well you can control your instincts. I’ll fight two of you.”

They blanched at Ichigo’s nonchalant words as he slung Zangetsu from his place at Ichigo’s side
where he sometimes rested, the blade purred in his hands and Ichigo shook his head in amusement at Shiro’s glee. Old Man Zangetsu also seemed pleased at the prospect of their imminent release, they had stayed cooped inside their false form in front of others for so long that they hungered to battle against real foes not invisible steel.

Shinji stepped forward a cocky smile on his face even as his brown eyes were a storm of emotions confusion and curiosity waging war from underneath the crown of golden locks. There was some indecision among the group before Rose stepped forward challenge and promise in his eyes.

They drew their blades the sharp hiss of metal upon scabbard grating upon tense nerves and echoing some hidden gong. The others moved back crouching among pillars of rock and regarding the coming spare with interest. Ichigo could feel Aizen’s eyes tracing the blade could almost see the man’s mind running a mile a minute trying to calculate Ichigo’s next move or the outcome of the battle. Kisuke was silent beside him eyes alight with fire from within and a pensive frown on his features.

They charged forward blades swinging against Ichigo he smirked and deftly flicked Zangetsu up the blade already dyeing ebony with bloodlust and glee intercepting the two. A contest of strength waged the two pushing against Zangetsu just as Ichigo pushed back. Held for a precious moment they broke apart and blades began to whirl through the air like the spinning blades of a chainsaw.

Ichigo knew the captains he was facing were talented, they had years upon years of experience with their blades but that wasn’t to say Ichigo wasn’t a prodigy with the sword, it was in his blood. He gave as good as he got the three paced across the open plains darting near invisible in their speed. Shinji and Rose’s attacks gained speed and power as they moved a recklessness born of instincts strumming in their bones. Ichigo kept at the same pace Zangetsu sure in his hands and content with the battle.

The two released their Shikai in a blinding flash of reaitsu that sent dust spiraling like a small tornado around them, their voices were almost a duel tone akin to the one Ichigo sported when he dawned his mask. Ichigo could see the inner war raging in their souls as they tried to suppress sudden blood-lust and instincts totally new to them. The young Shinigami suspected that if the battle was prolonged their masks would appear whether of their control or their spirits’ was debatable.

Narrowly dodging the thin strings of Rose’s Shikai the nauseous sense of his world inverting overtook his senses as the world around them flipped. Taking a breath Ichigo closed his eyes well familiar with the art of illusion type zanpaktou. Shinji whined for a moment likely pouting straight gold hair swaying before they were flying forward again.

Ichigo remained where he stood letting instincts guide his hand he brought Zangetsu up in a harsh arc slicing outwards and feeling the pleasing sense of cloth being caught by the black blade. They circled around him like hungry sharks all thoughts of going easy on the younger and less experienced Shinigami gone from their minds as instincts bit at their nerves. Darting in and out Ichigo combated each attack with ease feeling the faint bite of a blade against his cheek he turned and raised his hands casting a quick byakurai in the direction of Rose’s reaitsu.

Shinji’s reaitsu spiked the taint of hollow becoming more pronounced with a smirk of excitement and anticipation Ichigo brought Zangetsu’s sealed form in front of him. Reaitsu frothed and channeled along the blade rising along his form in spiraling arcs of ebony.

“Tear the heavens asunder Zangetsu!”

The comforting weight of both blades in his hands distracted him for a moment as the reaitsu and dust cleared the inverted world broken by the tremendous power Ichigo had (tried to contain)
released.

All movement stopped and Ichigo could feel the piercing eyes of his comrades on the blades in his hands the ebony metal glinting and catching the light, Zangetsu’s Khyber blade pulsed with blue reiatsu and the longer blade representing Shiro swirled with angry red in a familiar cadence. Looking up from the tangle of feathers obscuring his sight Ichigo glimpsed Shinji and Rose’s dumbstruck expressions; they gaped at him incredulously.

Lisa looked close to murdering him while Mashiro was excitedly gushing to Kensei. Kisuke no matter how much he tried to hide it could not shield the shock from his face it appeared in his gaping mouth and wide grey eyes, Aizen beside the blond was not faring much better. A smirk of its own accord curled on Ichigo’s features both in glee at releasing Zangetsu and the mix of reactions that his blade brought forth.

After all it was supposed that only Jushiro and Shunsui had duel blades (excluding Shunsui who hadn’t even joined the academy as far as Ichigo was aware). Much the same his blade was also far from the normal saber seen by any Shinigami it heralded his complex heritage. The wild and reckless curves of his blade yet hidden within graceful curves, the hollow that represented both Shiro and the gaping hole left inside his soul as the war progressed.

Shinji started cackling doing an excellent impression of the manic laughter that sometimes left his hollow’s lips when things became all too chaotic for the blood thirsty being. The blonde shook his head for a moment locks swaying frivolously he said, “Of course Ichi, ya just had to be the one with a duel blade. I’m assuming it’s your Shikai?”

Ichigo nodded and he could feel Aizen’s triumphant smirk forming as the brown-haired Shinigami’s suspicions were confirmed. Rose nodded letting his zanpaktou whip out in front of him eyes still holding challenge his silky voice spoke, “Well now the playing field is evened shall we continue?”

Ichigo merely flicked his blades sparks of power coiling and bouncing off the metal Shinji tilted his head and raised Sakande. They charged forward once more the air seeming to grow tense and heavy with the pressure of their reiatsu. Ichigo suppressed a slightly irritated sigh in the knowledge that even now he could not show the might of his blade. The resounding clash distracted him from reluctant thoughts and he narrowed caramel eyes.

Striking and dodging at the same time Ichigo twisted to the left a low powered Getsuga Tensho surging from the blade in a heady arc of ebony and crimson it slammed into Shinji who hastily raised his blade. Rose disappeared from sight even as Ichigo’s instincts called warning he turned Zangetsu’s larger form rising to catch the thin piano wires gleaming gold, with a tug the curly blond was sent flying forward Zangetsu’s smaller blade peaked up ready to gut the captain. Rose twisted away at the last second the bare whisper of a blade on his neck Ichigo ducked and sent a quick hado in Rose’s direction.

White was beginning to bubble on Shinji’s faces and the overtaking ebony in his sclera was an indication that he was losing the battle to his instincts. A low growl sounded from behind him turning slightly so that he was facing the two captains Ichigo could see a like image on Rose’s own chiseled features. Challenge vibrant in his eyes their blades came at him with the force of a truck, he easily shouldered the weight throwing them back. It was time he ended this battle before their zanpaktou got out of hand.

A Getsuga Tensho ripped from his blade and he darted forward in the following waves of reiatsu striking their blades from their hands in the confusion. With ease Ichigo slipped behind their guards and pinched a nerve that would temporarily incapacitate them.
Bearing their weight Ichigo sunk to the ground where the eyes of the others had been riveted on the battle above. Lisa’s fierce glare was the first think he saw upon touching ground setting the two down Ichigo apoplectically rubbed the back of his head. He had accomplished more than he thought but he would now be dealing with a multitude of questions and plenty of accusing stares.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the whirlwind that was this chapter. Reviews/comments are always appreciated and I will see you all in the next chapter.

Cup!!
Mizpah

Chapter Summary

Dinner, revelations, flashbacks, and sadness.

Chapter Notes

Mizpah

(n.) The deep emotional bond between people, especially those separated by distance or death.

Hello everyone, we are back for chapter 19. This chapter is packed with many things from Ichigo’s Vollständig to tattoos. I also tried to deepen Mashiro’s character which I hope you all like.

I would like to bring to attention something that I have been considering and subsequently brought a bit of life to. In this chapter I played with pairings/couples they are more of a background focus but keep your eyes open. I think I will be adding more pairings they just will never be the center point of the story merely something to enrich the fic. On that note, I have been considering pairing Ichigo, this would also be in the background and hardly relevant in the story. In addition, if I paired Ichigo it would likely be with Byakuya as he (Ichigo) has not developed sound relationships with other women or men like he has with Byakuya (that isn’t to say in his past he didn’t get around ;). And I am not touching Ichihime or Ichiruki because that is a mess.

If I did do the pairing it would be something minor i.e. “Ichigo slipped out from under Byakuya’s arm padding to look out the window he wondered about the future.” I would not be shoving it in your faces because that's not what the story needs and Ichh doesn’t need a crap load of drama regarding relationships.

So, I would like to hear you opinions on the matter. Please tell me whether you are opposed or unopposed to the idea of Ichi in a pairing, it affects how I playout the future of the story and would be greatly appreciated.

On that note enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The kitchen (or rather what served as one) was filled with a warm atmosphere as common chatter drifted through the air accompanied by the deep scent of roasting meat and the simmering bubble of rice and water boiling. Shinji leaned back slightly on the well-worn cushion patterned a faint purple below him. Ichigo was in the kitchen once again to everyone’s insistence after they found his venerable skill with culinary dishes. Rose was beside him, blond hair bunched behind his head and the two worked in tandem throwing whatever spice was in reach into the pan held over an open flame.

Kisuke was curled up against a wall where soft curtains of silk coloured in sweet pastels hung down and collected on the floor. Tightly clasped in his hands was more than a few scrambled sheets of paper. Occasionally he looked up from the pages adding to whatever ideal conversation suited his fancy before returning to his research. Love and Kensei were seated at the low table with him the two chattering amicably about the training from earlier in the day.

It had been hard, gruelling and long in a way that held true to Ichigo’s speech on their first day when he had revealed his Shikai. Even now Shinji’s muscles were protesting the rigorous movement and a slight headache throbbed at his temples, the faint purr of Sakande both appeasing and calming. Hiyori appeared from the corner of his eye a flying turbulent force of doom that Shinji narrowly dodged thanking well honed instincts as she sailed past springing from rough hewn rock to land on her feet.

Lisa and Mashiro entered the cave behind her in a far more graceful manner damp hair curling around their necks. Kisuke had after a few prompting jostles and threats of telling Yourichi from Ichigo shown them the hot springs and given them a simple explanation of their healing properties. Mashiro seated herself beside Kensei practically curled on his lap bubbled light in her eyes and a joyful smile curled faintly on her lips.

Lisa stalked towards the tall kitchen table where Rose and Ichigo were preparing the meals with an amused flick of her long braids of raven hair she slid into the chair pulling a thin novel from the folds of her shihaksho she cracked it open and began to read; warm candle light glinting off the red frames of her glasses. Hiyori scowled and stalked over many of her familiar nicknames for Shinji heavy on her lips. With an irritated smile, Shinji in a fond but exasperated manner beckoned the blond to sit down. With great reluctance and more drama than necessary she plopped down between Love and Shinji.

Aizen looked up from where he was polishing his zanpaktou watching the following scene with detached interest he pushed up his glasses before he returned to running the blunt rock down Kyoka Suigetsu’s gleaming sides.

"Nee Ichi berry what’s that on your arm?"

Mashiro questioned, her chipper voice rising above the normal chatter a dull buzz registering barely on the end of one’s senses. Ichigo spluttered his movements grinding to a halt he stared incredulously at Mashiro for a movement before his gaze was involuntarily drawn to his own arms. The sleeves of his shihaksho that normally tickled the tips of his fingers were rolled back held together with a few pieces of string so the man could cook without dragging fabric everywhere.

Shinji’s eyes fixed on Mashiro’s point of interest noting thick charcoal lines nestled in the crook of Ichigo’s elbow. Ichigo sighed and with a shrug answered, “It’s a tattoo?”
Shinji could feel Aizen’s amusement from across the room at the young lieutenant’s uncertain answer. Caramel eyes bubbled intensely and with another small shrug Ichigo turned to start working on the food once more. Mashiro would not let the matter rest easily. With nimble acrobatic grace, she sprung from Kensei’s lap and flounced over to Ichigo leaning over the counter to better glimpse the work of art imprinted within his skin.

With a heavy sigh, Shinji cursed his curious nature and rose from his chair stalking over to glare at the tattoo on his friend’s arm. A faint blush was dusting Ichigo’s cheeks at all the attention and Shinji wondered how the man could resist Yourichi’s whims and charms and yet get embarrassed at the slightest of things. The circle was small perhaps the size of a sake cup inside a crescent moon shone over a lone desert where a black daito reached out from endless mounds of golden sand.

“Any special meaning Ichi or did ya get it when ya were drunk.”

Ichigo scoffed at Shinji’s ‘innocent’ question rolling his eyes he continued to prepare the meal with casual grace a pensive expression casting his features in half shadows before he replied, “It’s kind of a tribute to my zanpaktou?”

Ichigo answered half-heartedly it was amazing how seriously the man could respond to any normal question but pose one innocent question about his life and he was spluttering and blushing like a teenage whelp. Mashiro frowned and began poking the orangette in the arm a petulant expression on youthful features. Ichigo’s eyes flashed up heavy but calm he sighed and looked around the room as if seeking help from the audience now watching the interaction with rapt attention.

“The moon is a representation of the name of my blade, the katana is one of the forms Zangetsu has taken, and the desert is where many turning points have occurred in my life. Finally, a circle to represent the endlessness of our bond.”

Ichigo turned his head after explaining the tattoo his gaze fixed above the collective heads fixed on him, a nervous tic showed itself as he reached up and abashedly rubbed the back of his neck. Shinji smiled faintly it was just like Ichigo to have a tattoo so meaningful. The bond he showed with his zanpaktou was amazing to witness a trust and fluidity that came from working together in intimate ways and many years.

“Damn inquisitive Vizard.”

Ichigo mumbled under his breath Shinji barely catching the quick rush of words he quirked an eyebrow at the title that had slipped from Ichigo’s lips. Ichigo looked up slowly as if just blatantly realising that they had heard him he frowned at the playful light in Shinji’s eyes.

“No Ichi-kun what did ya call us? Vizard eh? What’s that mean?”

Shinji let out a rush of questions eyes gleaming as he drew in the attention of the others at the name Ichigo had unknowingly given. Ichigo squawked eyes wide he began cursing under his breath before a calming moment later he rolled his shoulders and said, “Vizard means mask?”

The young Shinigami answered uncertainly to the growing amusement of the gathered souls. Kensei looked up from underneath the hood of his hair and commented, “That’s quite the cool title Ichi. Mind if we call ourselves it?”

Ichigo let out a groan running a hand through tangled orange locks even as he nodded and mumbled, “Of course I just had to bring it up.”

Laughter rippled through the small crowd of people at the youth’s agony the newly dubbed Vizard
watching on with interest. The group fell into new silence the name running along their minds fitting and perfect.

“Dinner is served.”

Rose announced interrupting the thoughtful silence as the two chefs began carrying out plates upon plates of food fit for a feast setting them on the long and low wooden table. Everyone gathered around the table the warm atmosphere of the cave bubbling over into their hearts as gentle chatter began and the food was dished out. A chorus of approval and delight rang out and the two cooks blushed under the heady praise; Shinji easily agreed that he would forsake Soul Society for food this heavenly.

“Aizen can you please pass the salt?”

Ichigo asked his lilting tone calm and sure in the warmth of the caves stalactites and stalagmites hanging and peeking up from the ground around them. Aizen quirked a brow a small frown stealing across his face before a peculiar light danced in his eyes and he looked up catching Ichigo’s soulful chocolate eyes.

“You can call me Sosuke Ichigo I think we know each other well enough for that.”

Ichigo stopped in his movements of taking the salt from Aizen’s hand eyes wide in surprise his mouth falling open slightly. Aizen smirked and Shinji couldn’t help but join him at the innocent and open expression resting on the orangette’s features. Like a robot slowly coming to life Ichigo blinked and took the salt setting it before him he stared uncomprehendingly for a moment before with a shake a faint smile tilted the corners of his lips.

“Sosuke it is then.”

Ichigo responded simply among the near silent air of the table. The moment hung for a breath some movement of the gods before normal chatter resumed as Kensei nagged Mashiro for flicking rice at his face. Shinji settled back once more watching the scene play out fondly. He wasn’t the only one, his eyes always seeming to catch that bright flash of orange were drawn to Ichigo.

A strange smile danced across his lips fond but oh so sad like his soul was heaving under some great pressure contained only by his sheer force of will. Ichigo’s eyes were the ocean grey and overcast, a swirling mix thrusting with emotions. So deep and plentiful that Shinji felt he was drowning under the force of them turning his head away he caught sight of Rose. The blond was also watching Ichigo heart heavy in his eyes and a melody dancing from his fingertips.

Looking around the table at smiling faces flushed in the warm atmosphere it was easy for Shinji to see that they were family. Sure they didn’t fit together like any normal family but that was to be expected when they were Shinigami. The geniuses, the fighters, the peacemakers and many other labels woven together like a perfect tapestry. And of course, Shinji could see that already they had adopted Ichi into their group taken him under their collective wings.

Because as much as the young man had strength near unaccountable and mysteries wrapped into the very fibre of his being, he was young. Maybe old for his time but to the rest of them they could see the soft tilt of his eyes those chocolate orbs that hardened with experience of battle not age. They all saw the heartache and sorrow in those eyes and already it was rekindling urges and instincts of protection within their souls.

X
Mashiro crept out from the warm folds of their bed where Kensei had been pressed against her body an arm thrown over her figure drawing the two together. As much as the serious man denied it he was a cuddle bug and loved pressing the two together. Shaking errant strands of lime out of her eyes Mashiro began the treacherous journey through the dark towards the kitchen.

Passing through another room Mashiro was startled as two bright orbs made themselves visible in the darkness, the dull flicker of a candle burned to the stub caught the light of soft orange feathers. Padding over Mashiro squinted letting her eyes adjust to the dim lighting she could make out Ichigo leaning against stone of the cave walls wrapped in silk. His bed was nearby and a blanket was haphazardly thrown over his figure. Caramel orbs looked ahead unseeing, unblinking and Mashiro wondered for a moment if he was asleep.

Then he let out a soft sigh eyes blinking slowly as if it took an enormous amount of effort to do such a simple action. Caramel orbs focused on Mashiro surprise colouring his features even as open warmth trickled slowly into his eyes.

“Ichi berry you should be asleep.”

Mashiro scolded quietly aware of the Shinigami sleeping nearby. Ichigo had the decency to look bashful as he apologetically smiled rubbing a hand at the back of his neck he whispered, “Couldn’t sleep.”

Mashiro frowned warmth swelling in her chest she wished she could help the young Shinigami, her zanpaktou was practically asking her to sweep the man into a hug. Shaking away idle fantasies she smiled bright and open hoping to clear the darkness that hung over Ichigo like thick storm clouds. A faint smile curled upon the orangette’s lips and reassuringly he said, “I’ll try and get some sleep.”

Mashiro nodded happy with the simple promise she sprung up from the low crouch disoriented for a moment she blinked before turning to face Ichi once more. His eyes still glowed in the darkness twin peaks glimmering like crystals. Whispering a faint goodnight, she left the small alcove the faint sound of shuffling echoing behind her. As she stopped at the entryway she turned to see the glowing peaks of light vanish and the steady yet faint glow of the candle disappear.

The kitchen seemed larger at night she thought to herself as Mashiro padded inside reaching out for familiar objects to steady herself as she made her way to the kitchen. Summoning a tiny orb of reaitsu in her hands she flung it up like a rubber ball letting it hang in the air and illuminate her surroundings. Nodding pleased that she could see Mashiro gathered some water into the kettle letting it rest in her hands as she fed it reaitsu.

Once steam began to flow from the spout she took her hands away searching out stray tealeaves to add to the boiling water. With a triumphant smirk, she added a small bag of tea; jasmine by the scent into the pot. Letting it set her eyes traced the room craggy depths dark and mysterious with the cast of light from the orb above.

Pouring the tea into one of the clay cups Mashiro raised it to her mouth taking a deep inhale of the rich scent before blowing on the hot liquid and taking a tentative sip. Her mind gently wandered over the past few days floating on gentle currents as she continued to drink the flowery tea.

Her whole life had changed and yet it was all the same. Kensei was still with her, they were alive, and maybe they were different. Vizard, now part hollow but life was still turning. She knew once the training was finished that she wouldn’t be banished to the human world, her home still remained. The thoughts coiled inside her and brought petite shivers of happiness to her form when she imagined the alternative.
They all owed Ichigo. He stood up for them, brought forth the right evidence, and put Central 46 in their place. Now he was training them and if that wasn’t enough to be grateful to the man for Mashiro didn’t know what else he had done or suffered through.

She thought of the future how when she had woken a few days ago it had seemed so stark and barren. Oh there was still colour as long as Kensei was by her side and her blade in hand she could push forward. But that didn’t stop choking realizations. That fear had been swept away into acceptance and formed into a family. Mashiro thought the future was looking much brighter.

Aizen still tickled her nerves like a feather out of place. Yet his eyes were honest, the gleaming façade of the kind and scholarly lieutenant gone and replaced with this cunning and sly man who no matter how much he tried to stop it was starting to hope. She still wanted to tear his head off some days if just to see that smug smirk gone but other times she was thankful it had happened. They would never have learned what they did if it wasn’t for him.

Her gaze was drawn to the her zanpaktou resting beside her the faint gleam of the blade against hilt catching her eyes and reflecting the bright green of her hair. Tugging the scarf wrapped snugly around her neck tighter in the sudden chill of the cave Mashiro took another sip of tea and sighed. Letting all the weight of the day fall from her shoulders.

As much as she was energetic and childish (it was her nature) every once in a while, she needed to sit down and be still let the world turn on without her. Light seemed to thrum within her body at all time wanting to jump out and touch everyone she knew bright and catching entwine them in happiness. But still sometimes it was dim quiet and comforting in a way that was still so bright just not blindingly so.

Taking a slow sip of her tea Mashiro smiled looking around her feeling the waves of reaitsu of her family. Kisuke and Tessai’s tampered reaitsu quiet but murmuring, Aizen’s all cold silk and rusted daggers even though it held warmth, Hiyori and Shinji curled near each other boundless and playful sardonic seriousness, Rose an endless melody even as Love rested nearby quiet rhythm. Lisa sharp and witty but warm and kind, Hachi all mellow warmth like the sun in winter, Kensei gruff exterior sweet insides, and Ichigo finally drifting to sleep a vibrant candle fluttering in the wind.

Her own reaitsu pulsed in response and she closed her eyes taking in deep breaths of the silence of night. Her family near her and the calm purr of her blade spirit in the back of her mind. Night wrapped it’s chill embrace around her eyes for a quiet moment

X Flashback

They were holed up in one of the broken remains of a house familiar white brick streaked grey around them. Together. Ichigo wanted to crow for joy even as his mind praised warnings that the happiness couldn’t last. They had been separated, killed, broken over and over again losing each other only to gain the other for a fragile moment.

Kisuke and Mayuri had finally begun their large resurrection scheme or whatever the two insomniacs were phrasing it as a few weeks ago. Reviving all Shinigami, they could, the crux or problem presented was that a soul could only be revived so many times before their reaitsu floated into the ether their soul departing for happier fields. Yet here they were around him again his family in all but blood connected by the hollow portions of their souls and days spent training.

A hand waved in front of his eyes and Ichigo looked up slightly startled to see a familiar Cheshire smirk curled on Shinji’s lips the blond’s eyes were light with amusement and teasingly he questioned, “Falling asleep on us Ichi?”
Ichigo shook his head with a grin even as tired weight pulled at his shoulders. It would only be a few more days and then they would be regulated to the inner sect of Soul Society. For now, they were patrolling the borders more of a wasteland or no man’s land when one looked at the desolation that swept debris littered fields. A warm hand plopped on his head tangling the untameable mess of orange gathered around his neck.

Looking up with a faint frown Ichigo was met with Lisa’s cool blue eyes almost grey with amusement. Shaking his head and dislodging her hand he reached up swatting at her arm in an attempt to disturb the movements.

“Nee Ichi do we have rations for dinner again tonight? I miss your cooking.”

Mashiro questioned petulantly though far more subdued than before the war. Her energetic nature had simmered into something calmer all lethality curled within her body and those brightly stunning eyes. Ichigo shrugged in answer and after a prompting moment Kensei said, “You know the fire might attract unwanted attention.”

He curled an arm around her shoulders stiff in his movements and attempts at comforting the green haired Vizard. He settled slightly at the acknowledging smile dancing across Mashiro’s lips. Love laughed sharing an amused glance with Rose who was watching the scene with a lazy smile fingers lightly dancing over guitar strings strapped to a bare board serving as a guitar.

Settling back in his perch against one of the walls Ichigo let his eyes cast out into the darkness taking in the broken shells of trees and the muddy earth churned under the tramping of far too many feet. Movement lurked in the foreground and an uneasy prickle traced Ichigo’s spine. Hastily he turned to face the group reaitsu spiked and on the alert in the face of a new enemy. Shinji’s hand was on Sakande’s hilt the moment he noticed the tense cast to Ichigo’s shoulders, before the blond could move however a turbulent fury of malicious retribution appeared beside him a well aimed kick to the shins spilling curses from his lips.

With a nod the petite women was marching out the crumbling archway eyes heavy on her smaller form as it disappeared from sight. The comforting and jovial atmosphere from before was vanished drifting into the past like their souls.

A scream ripped through the air, female in nature and one full of pain and shock. A flurry of movement and a moment later Ichigo was sneaking out the back window Zangetsu strapped firmly at his side whispering comforting litanies.

They approached from all angles cautious and silent like predators stalking one’s prey. Hiyori was kneeling in the middle of the field hands clenched defensively to her chest. Before any could move towards her Shinji was in front of her worry plaintive on his features even as he reached forward shifting aside her hands and the folds of her tunic.

The bitter taint of blood filled his nose awakening feral instincts. Before he could acknowledge the movement, he was rushing forward and beside Shinji crouched in front of Hiyori. At a closer angle Ichigo could see the wound he let out a small hiss watching a familiar green glow surround Shinji’s hands as they were raised to rest along the heaving rise and fall of Hiyori’s chest.

“Shi stop it’s a trap!”

She yelled at him voice heavy with pain for more so than expected for her wound likely trying to conk him on the head but getting nowhere as the captain of the Fifth was far too focused on the wound in front of him. Horror filled Ichigo’s chest at her words and before his instincts could scream any louder he was on his feet Zangetsu in his hands revealing in the freedom of their Shikai.
They stalked from the trees six Sternritter leading them and a miasma of the Quincy hybrids following behind them. Some distant part of Ichigo recoiled as he faced their odds the other Vizard were still hidden in the shades of cover but it wouldn’t last. Shiro was beside him before Ichigo could ask the spirit knowing his King far too well he walked towards Hiyori crouching to whisper a few sparse words to Shinji.

The man reluctantly left Hiyori coming to stand beside Ichigo the two faced the sea of enemies. His voice bitter and sardonic still coveting that Cheshire smirk said, “We’re really fucked Ichi? Least I got ta live with ya for a little while.”

His words were spoken with careful nonchalance even as his shoulders tensed Sakande grasped in knuckles clenched white. Ichigo could only laugh softly in response eyes challenging the hordes of enemies around them.

The moment was held for a sparse second before the thread was cut and they surged forward an endless sea of white. The other Vizard cut a path through the roiling mass of bodies till they reached the center where waves of black reaitsu surged out cutting the enemies’ numbers in half, others stumbled in confusion slashing at the air or behind themselves. Together they formed a circle around Hiyori who slowly but surly stood the kido enough to allow her to draw her zanpaktou once more.

They were fighting, endless waves of blood coated Ichigo’s skin like a blanket, Zangetsu settled into the familiar rhythm of slaughter; dodge, cut, slash, and repeat the motions went on. One moment Shinji was at his back, Cheshire thin smirk on his lips even as darkness haunted his eyes. Then it was Love waving his (incredibly) large zanpaktou around sweeping away enemies like one might sweep dust with a broom.

He could feel Shiro at the other side of the circle his bloodlust and rage at the Quincy for daring to try and hurt his family. It thrummed along their bond a likely sentiment and Ichigo viciously let Zangetsu rip into the blank gaze of one of the hybrids. He regretted that they ever had the chance of being created. Sewn from whatever spare parts they could get their hands on and infused by the zombie Sternritter or Bach.

His instincts snapped at him before he heard it. Lisa’s yell cut short rebounding throughout the battle field his head whipped back so quickly he worried about breaking the speed of sound even as his attentive eyes locked onto her hunched over form. Raven hair tangled around her face and she cradled her side the bitter trace of crimson dressing her hands. Mashiro was already beside the injured lieutenant blade flicking up to stop a Sternritter (C? D? He can never remember all of them).

A red haze descended over his eyes like a veil and in the back of his mind he could hear Shiro yelling, “Stupid King! Not now it’s too dangerous!”

But the words fell flat barely tracing his thoughts as Zangetsu began to move faster cutting apart enemies with waves of frightening and cackling reaitsu he made his way to one of the Sternritter.

The battle went on Ichigo barely aware of the wounds that began to litter his body, no matter how much his hierro and blut vein protected him. The constant motions of battle were beginning to wear on them and already their numbers were falling it scraped dully at the back of his mind, reaitsu coursing through his veins and setting the world on fire. The enemies’ numbers were dwindling but a nagging suspicion suggested this wasn’t the end.

He was right no matter how much he wished he wasn’t. Kensei, Lisa, Rose, and Hiyori were in the middle of their circle on the ground bleeding out or far too injured to fight. That’s when two new Sternritter appeared with powers far different from their companions beaten into the dust, or the three that had fled with their tails tucked between their legs like cowardly dogs.
The Visionary and The Miracle two of the more compromising enemies. Ichigo took a deep breath and slowly let the red filter from his mind the soothing hum of Zangetsu returning from where Ichigo had shut him out, shut out everything but the battle. Now was not the time for reckless ventures and slaughter.

He shared a quick look with Shinji the defacto captain of their ragtag group the blond nodded his ascension. Sharing a quick glance with Mashiro the two broke off heading towards The Visionary they were better equipped to deal with his underhanded tactics. Love sidled over zanpaktou dragging behind him they turned to face the miracle.

Relentlessly they fought against him every attack thrown at the man failing and only bringing forth some new plight to the fields littered with corpses. Shiro standing guard over the four incapacitated Shinigami watched on pensive golden orbs shone in the glowing twilight.

Nothing worked, already Love had been battered aside into one of the few walls still standing crumbling to the ground like a rag doll. Puppet soldiers in white had surged forward sensing weakness but Shiro had already sported him away to their small sphere of safety.

Regarding the man in front of him Ichigo thought of what Zaraki had told him of his own fight with the man, he didn’t have the brute force nor resistance to dying that Zaraki seemed to possess. It came to him slowly even as Zangetsu ripped up to cut the man’s arm off sliding against diamond like skin. Spiriting away from the man for a small breath of space Ichigo let go of the tight grip of his Quincy powers blue reaitsu whirling around him in great spirals.

He had considerate control over his powers but even now he sometimes struggled, just so as he struggled with that portion of himself when he witnessed all his “kin” had done. He felt Shinji’s presence by his side a rush of black shihaksho and Sakande’s purring.

“Ya really thinking or releasing that Ichi?”

Ichigo only nodded, the man gave him a once over before he backed off watching with awe in his eyes. The captain of the Fifth had always been amazed to see Ichigo’s powers released, it was always a surprise considering the training the young man slipped in between their next meetings (and he had been dead for a few months so that didn’t help).

It curled around his form as Zangetsu’s smaller blade was rotated upwards coming to rest in the center of his eyes. Blood trickled from where the blade was pressed against his skin. Channeling his reaitsu he let it surge outwards Old Man Zangetsu’s cloak wrapping around his form before settling around his shoulders.

His skin was white fire, burning agony tamed just beneath the surface pulsing from beneath him. Familiar gauntlets wrapped his hands and a work of metal glowing bright in pale night’s caress surrounded his chest encasing his legs and coming up to curl around his neck clasping the flowing cloak in place. A hood was draped over his head hiding glowing eyes from sight and shining locks tangling along his shoulders. Heavy wings of reishi tangled along his back and brushed the ground the plumage stained a deep ash.

The Miracle was dumstruck staring at this figure the image of an angel descended to heaven in fiery wrath were once the enigma, the troublesome thorn in their side had stood. Before the large man could blink Ichigo was in front of him two different weapons in his hands.

In one a long pole of metal about the length of one’s leg it glimmered strangely hollow and thin, in the other metal arrows tipped with blue. Before the man could continue looking said arrow was being smashed into his face. The miracle could hardly protect himself against the sudden change in
pace and the vibrant and familiar reitsu striking viciously. It was like that of the Miracle’s King that well-known and regal reitsu.

Ichigo sprung back slinging the metal rod in front of his face it bent taking the peculiar form of a bow Ichigo notched his arrow and sent it flying a whispered, “Getsuga Tensho.”

It streaked towards the miracle piercing through the Quincy and obliterating every particle of reitsu it touched the tinge of red tracing the waves of reitsu far too telling. Before the creature of a man could re-assemble himself in any way Ichigo tipped back his hood. Light shone from him like a thousand suns blinding and scorching the earth before him the metal rod and arrow joined and morphed into a long sword of fifteenth century make before embedding itself in the center of The Miracle’s forehead.

Bright light pulsed around them the two locked in that moment Ichigo’s eyes smouldering pits of light locked onto the Miracle’s before the man was gone. Burned to ash and then nothing more in the fierce canopy of light that enfolded the two like a dying star.

Ichigo stepped back shedding his Vollständig with a world-weary sigh. He almost collapsed to his knees there on the field if it weren’t for Shinji supporting him. Together they hobbled back to the group most were sitting up now but the stench of blood was still poignant.

It happened so quickly Ichigo blinked and they were there. Modified hollows surrounding them beady eyes gazing at them in hunger. It was a regular Tuesday except they just kept coming and would not let them rest. Pulling Zangetsu to his hands Ichigo stood up swaying on his feet for a moment before with a breath reaisus was racing through his veins lighting him on fire. It looked bad and he would need all his power to stop the next wave. Already too many of the Vizard were injured and it would be through hell and high water if they made it through the battle all alive.

Ichigo overestimated their chances he thought bitterly to himself as his breath came out heaving in his lungs Zangetsu oh so heavy in his hands. Blood caked him like a second skin gluing one eye shut from a head wound and sticking his fingers together like claws. On and on they fought lingering in the dust till the sun peaked the crust of the earth. He wondered why Soul Society hadn’t sent reinforcements. They probably wanted to conserve their forces and thought they could handle it.

Screams rang up around him his heart tearing in two even as he kept fighting these hollows, so fast and with mouths that chomped and teared at everything. Lisa was beside him he could almost taste her exhaustion as she collapsed to the ground spent blood pouring from multiple injuries. Ichigo was sporting his fair share, blood heaving from his torso even as his healing weakly bubbled in a vague attempt at stopping it.

Finally it was done, on trembling hands and knees he crawled towards them hunched and curled upon the ruins a ragged group of weary soldiers. Hiyori looked from her position beside Shinji defensive of him her eyes scanned him bright and thankful for the moment. His heart seemed to collapse in his chest as he spotted Mashiro crying over Kensei his broken form mangled to his sight eyes vacant looking at the swift blue overtaking the sky.

Love and Rose rested side by side still as the stone hands clasped tightly together the air mourned their passing with haunting notes staccato and piano they twined his heart strings. Lisa coughed weakly blood streaming from her lips her chest a patchwork of skin and bone. Heaving a groan Ichigo crawled towards her a familiar green glow shuddering from his palms.

Healing her enough that she wasn’t critical Ichigo fell back, the gravity of his wounds only seeming to come to attention now to Lisa’s sharp cry. Darkness curled his vision, life struggling to escape his lips and for a moment he desperately wanted to embrace it.
Death hadn’t taken him yet and they were what five or six years into the war. He had come damn close too many times but he had always pulled through. Just as he would now because he couldn’t leave them all alone or at least the rest of them alone. Sometimes it was so tempting the thought of leaving it all behind to finally find peace.

Lisa’s cries became stark and he opened his eyes as arms wrapped firmly around his torso pain springing up his spine. He wondered if he had cracked it again that wasn’t a pleasant few months under Unohana’s watchful gaze. Looking up through tear filled eyes Ichigo caught sight of Uryu’s sorrowful eyes familiar reiatsu both comforting and disparaging wrapped around him. Ichigo was confused and it must have shone as the man leaned down to rest his head against Ichigo’s a whispered. “I’m sorry.” Heavy on his lips.

Then he was walking away Ichigo in his arms too weak almost faint to struggle against him just as the others were bound to the ground their injuries too devastating. The smell of burning flesh begin to fill the air and with dawning horror Ichigo realised what was happening. The Quincy left none of their dead behind the other Sternritter (those they could salvage Ichigo wished them good luck with The Miracle) were likely already gone. Otherwise the cannon fodder were worthless and they’d rather not have them fall into the hands of the Shinigami.

“O-old Man p-please!”

Ichigo’s voice was torn but the small whisper carried, he knew what would happen to his family if the flames reached them. Already Shiro was a quiet thrum at the back of his mind far too exhausted to even speak or warn Ichigo of Uryu’s approaching presence. Feeling a burning tug in his chest then fire cracking pain Uryu swept his eyes down as Ichigo let out a pain filled gasp. Old man drifted across the fields he could feel the press of flames against his spirit but it was too much, he was losing focus.

The darkness was approaching again he could see worry in those deep blue eyes that always made Orihime blush. There was yelling he was sure the screams of the burning? He felt their familiar reiatsu die scatter in the wind never to be traced again. A few escaped he thought? Was his name being yelled?

“’I’m sorry.”

Was that Uryu’s calm voice or Zangetsu’s baritone that spoke those words? Ichigo succumbed to the darkness eyes wet and burning just as his heart teared itself to shreds.

It began again.

Accusing eyes staring at him, burned flesh clawing at his arms, legs, everything there was no escape. Their voices came out broken rasping they yelled at him chanting his name over and over again.

He was choking. Crimson spilling from his mouth an endless waterfall as their blades pierced his stomach turning it inside out with friendly smiles on their faces their voices were like nails on a chalkboard an endless mantra, “Your fault. All your fault! Why did ya fail us Ichi. Save us! Failure! Useless. What can you ever protect? Your fault!”

Ichigo wanted to claw his own eyes out it felt like his head was boiling the lingering pain flaring up again all consuming conquering tearing into his flesh, soul and heart. When would it stop? Ichigo wanted it to end but there was only darkness and their eyes clawing and tearing. Skin falling off their bones the sickly smell of charred flesh rising to his nose. He felt sick Ichigo wanted to heave.

It began again their deaths each and every individual one playing over in his mind. Mashiro wailing
over Kensei. Kensei hollowfiying as both lieutenants were struck down. Shinji curling in on himself beside Aizen Hiyori all too far and too close at once. Rose a dancing corpse. Love clawing at his arms throes of death chasing his corpse. Lisa screaming endless as pain he couldn’t see flashed before her eyes. Hachi frozen in place a still statue cold as the ash surrounding him. Over and over a thousand different ways and each one his fault.

An endless rollercoaster that he couldn’t escape there was no way out. Ichigo heard screaming he wondered if it was the damned or his own insanity finally showing. Their blood was on his hands, his heart. Why wouldn’t it stop? Ichigo tilted his head no tears falling only blood spilling from his lips. Their laughing smiles fading into bitter chills the haunting dissonance of their death cradling his mind rocking it harshly.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! I apologize for the death scene and any sadness it may have incurred. Did you notice the subtle pairings? Please don’t forget to tell me your thoughts on Ichi in a pairing. Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Till next time!

Cup!!
Whelve

Chapter Summary

Ichigo wakes up, science bros chat, and a battle commences.

Chapter Notes

Whelve

(v.) To bury something deep; to hide.

Hello everyone! We are here for chapter 20… can you believe it 20 chapters? I would like to take the time to thank you all for the continued support, the numerous reviews/comments and every other wonderful thing as we have come so far on this journey. So, thank you all very much.

Moving on to the topic of last chapter in regards to a pairing. I would like to thank you all for your opinions as they contributed to my choice, in addition I would like to thank everyone for being both courteous and respectful. It really warmed my heart to see that when I know other authors have to deal with a spew of problems so thank you all once more. Regarding the likelihood of a pairing there is a pretty high chance that we will be seeing something develop but till then nothing is cemented ;)

I hope you all enjoy this chapter and the many prompts and hints put forward enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

X

Mashiro crept along the cave system silent as a ghost, the dim light of the sphere of reaitsu hovering beside her. Night’s slumber hung like a blanket around her and the weight of her own lack of sleep weighed on her eyes. A twist in reaitsu had her breath catching for a short moment the flicker of light on the wall eerie as the sphere shuddered at her shock.

As if a cord was tied to her chest she felt the incessant urge to follow that reaitsu, the tangled mix of emotions earnest and breath taking left her cautious but certain of her decision. Tracing her way back towards the mouth of the cave she entered one of the rooms where the others were sleeping. Fractures of illumination cracked and splintered on the cave walls like hidden fae lights the room seemed to glow from within the stone.
A piercing whine reached her ears and the spell was broken. Mashiro stilled like a statue head cocked attentive even as a concerned frown twisted her lips. Sound rumbled in the silence and she was striding forward her heart instructing her feet.

She came to the same spot she had stood maybe three hours ago looking down on Ichigo. He was curled upon his bedroll the blankets a mess of tangled linen around his legs, his bare chest glimmered in the pale lighting, his features were twisted in agony sharp orange locks matted to his face and casting him in sickly hues of shadow. Ichigo turned suddenly restless a hand grasping at the blankets fitfully. His voice pleading and indistinct trickled from his lips a cadence of reaitsu following the words.

Mashiro debated wandering forward and attempting to wake the young man for a tense few moments before she surged forward ever silent in the quiet of the caverns. She reached a hand out to touch Ichigo’s shoulder and was met with a potent shock of reaitsu; it didn’t hurt yet she was amazed at the pressure behind the muffled shield and the immense weaving that formed the shape clinging to Ichigo.

Mashiro stared pondering her options. She had no idea how to reach Ichigo from behind his self-imposed walls and the only light in the darkness of the cave seemed to be the threads of reaitsu clinging to the walls like spider webs. She didn’t know how to help him, they were family but they were all still strangers. Her mind swiveled to Lisa the lieutenant of the Eighth, all cold exterior but kind demeanour. Decision made she sprung from her crouch and stalked out of the room following the bobbing sphere of light as macabre shadows danced like those of the dead in front of the doors.

Lisa was curled against the wall a novel tucked against her chest and her glasses perched on her nose askew, she had fallen asleep reading again it seemed. Shaking away idle thoughts Mashiro rushed forward and began shaking the stoic lieutenant. Within a few moments, Lisa was sitting up the full force of her irritated glare directed Mashiro’s way under the heavy pressure of reaitsu.

“It’s Ichigo he’s having a nightmare and I can’t reach him.”

Lisa’s harsh expression disappeared in an instant replaced with concern and a sad tilt to her eyes. She tossed aside heavy sheets uncaring of the little clothing covering her body she marched through the hallways raven hair loose and untamed flying behind her and Mashiro timidly followed in her powerful wake.

Lisa made a sharp left before Mashiro could protest that she had entered the wrong room the woman was padding over silently to where a crown of blond peaked above a mound of green blankets. She leaned down beside Kisuke and whispered in his ear loud enough for Mashiro to hear, “Wake up Yoruichi’s coming.”

The man sprang to life like a well-oiled machine eyes alert and troubled hands flailing this way and that. Once he noted the two women in front of him a scowl settled on his face and he arched an eyebrow questioning them for waking him on their midnight gallivant. This time it was Lisa who spoke, “Ichigo is having a nightmare we thought we might recruit you for assistance?”

Kisuke nodded the frown deeper now a kind light replacing the irritation that brimmed in metal grey eyes. He stood up pulling Benihime to his side he nodded and they moved on swift shadows of the night. Mashiro hung back as the two rushed forward following them at a more sedate pace she had time to watch Kisuke reach over to touch Ichigo only to receive the sharp shock of the barrier.

“Kido should have known he would put up something like this.”
The scientist muddled under his breath eyes serious and sad as they stared at Ichigo tossing and turning sorrow deepening his brow and painting his features. Lisa stared for a moment contemplative before she said, ‘Shunsui mentioned something like this but I’ve never seen it anything close to this bad. I’ve caught Ichigo sleeping before but...’

Lisa trailed off uncertain her voice seeming as loud as rocks tumbling through canyons in the air heavy with reaitsu. Kisuke leaned forward reaching out to touch the barrier once more he let his palm rest against it gently applying force he pushed and the air trembled before a barrier warm orange like flickering flames shimmered into existence. Then Kisuke was pushed back.

He stared at the barrier for a long moment before turning to Lisa that manic light in his eye signifying he had an idea, she let out a long-suffering sigh before nodding for the man to continue. Kisuke smiled but it was a façade bitter and broken in the prevalent sorrow of their friend his voice was the soft rasp of steel in the echoing silence.

“You should try Lisa-chan he knows you better and so his reaitsu may not reject you. Whatever this barrier is for it mainly protects us and protects him. You know him the best out of the rest of us, I’m sure that’s why Mashiro went to you first and not Shinji or myself.”

Lisa nodded with a spine of determined steel she crouched and rested her palm against the barrier. It shuddered for a moment and Lisa thought about applying more force and pressure before she remembered Ichigo. The young Shinigami wasn’t one for violence as much as he was experienced with it, force would only cause his reaitsu to lash out. The lieutenant took a deep breath letting her reaitsu still like that of a calm pond only her presence resting above the well of her reaitsu. The barrier shuddered before like a curtain it folded on itself disappearing from sight still there only pushed aside.

With the disappearance of the barrier came waves of reaitsu like monsoon season they swam around the three Shinigami engulfing them and choking the breath from their lungs. It was heavy and suddenly they were wading through water or standing on top of a mountain breathing in thin air. The sounds that followed teared their hearts apart.

“My fault all my fault. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Lisa no don’t, please don’t. Why? Why am I so weak? Why can’t I be strong enough to save you? Goddamn it! No it’s my fault. Shinji stop don’t do this. Why can’t I save you?”

On and on the words spilled from his lips interrupted every so often by a pitiful moan or whimper. What calm the three Shinigami possessed dissolved at those heart-breaking words. Ichigo’s voice cracked with emotion raw in a way he usually tampered and tamed within his eyes. They were frozen where they stood still like statues listening as those words dragged on.

Finally Kisuke mustered the will to turn to Lisa gesturing with his hand that one of them might wake Ichigo from his torment. The raven haired lieutenant shook her head for a moment before her voice came out silent and soft she said, “It’s not that easy. Ichigo has instincts ingrained in his body and soul. I’ve seen them in action, a poor unsuspecting member of the squad reached over to poke Ichigo and suddenly they were on the ground spine aching with sudden impact. War has shaped the figure in front of us in more ways than one, but I will try.”

She crouched and slowly like the opening of the buds of flower in the coming morning rested her hand on Ichigo’s shoulder. He shuddered and tossed dislodging her arm his hand reached out towards Zangetsu before falling short. She tried again this time firm in her movements she called his name softly trying to pull him back from Morpheus’ realm the tangle of dreams hovering over his eyes.
Ichigo’s back arched rising clear of his bed mouth open as if feeling some deep pain before he collapsed eyes fluttering open slowly. Tired brown eyes were revealed hazed with confusion and misted with sorrow.

Lisa pulled him into a tight hug arms wrapping around his lithe form and cocooning him in her warmth and love. Ichigo blinked slowly coming to life he stared at Lisa not realising she was there in front of him or in disbelief and wonder at her presence. The orangette pulled back a hand dragging it up to rest against her cheek feeling her presence and the deep reaitsu like satin sheets.

Ichigo faltered hand falling to rest at his side he stared at the three Shinigami around him in partial confusion so tender and young looking. It was like a cloak obscuring this from their eyes had been stripped away by Ichigo’s sudden waking. Too wide eyes, the youth of his soul clear in amber orbs swimming and mingling with a thousand emotions but overwhelmingly sorrow.

Mashiro was there beside Ichigo from one moment to the next her warm hand, her presence resting on his shoulder as the other hand came up to idly tangle with orange locks. Kisuke stayed where he was sat in front of Ichigo reassurance heavy in his soul he asked solemn and still in the quivering night, “Ichigo do you always have such nightmares?”

The young Shinigami nodded of his own accord responding near instantly where under daylight he would have pandered for time letting the silence reverberate like the ticking of a timeworn clock. Something faltered in Kisuke’s chest at that answer the blatant acknowledgement of why Ichigo was always so weary the heavy lines of purple under his eyes seeming all the more stark.

The two women were suddenly engulfing the young man’s reaitsu clinging to his form warm and soothing just as their arms gripped his lithe form sharing what comfort and solace they could with Ichigo. It was Lisa that next pierced the silence assuring in a way that the others couldn’t quite be yet, she was familiar with Ichigo and shared a bond of friendship with him.

“You are not at fault for whatever happened Ichigo. We’re still here and we’re not going anytime soon.”

Those eyes brightened impeccably the message seeming to reach Ichigo through what ever haze his mind swam through and he nodded slowly. Then the mask was slowly resurrected from it’s hiding place his features became like carved stone. Embarrassment or shame crowned his cheeks in a faint blush and he turned his head away those amber eyes darkening once more. Kisuke wanted to understand why Ichigo didn’t believe them, rejected soulfully honest words. He saw it in the tight fist and trembling chest Ichigo was taut like a bowstring in their arms where once he was settled.

The girls pulled back sad but understanding smiles on their faces. Kisuke wished for the light to appear cleanse the sorrow that hung heavy on the air but there was only the nautical bob of Mashiro’s reaitsu orb.

“Thank you.”

It was the only words he’d spoken in the time of his waking and Kisuke could hear the honesty with a nod to Mashiro lime hair radiant as her eyes in the cavern he heaved himself to his feet ignoring the ache of an old man. Mashiro followed leaving the two lieutenants together for a moment.

Lisa was quick to follow, after placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder and whispering something in his ear, she appeared beside them shivering in the drafts of the cave. Kisuke tucked down the nostalgia of creeping through these hidden paths with Yoruichi and Tessai cloaks thrown over their shoulders and the cool earth and rock below freezing and tactile against bare feet. They were silent even as promise hung on the air encompassing all three of them.
With goodnight partings on their breath they went their separate ways even as Ichigo’s haunting words and the sight of his agony curled upon his features flashed in their mind’s eye. It occurred to Kisuke that very few saw this side of the young man and he had to wonder how Ichigo had struggled and survived for so long. He thought of those caramel orbs blazing with determination and found his answer lingering there in his soul.

X

Kisuke regarded the man in front of him with hooded eyes idly letting his gaze drop to the low table they were seated at studying the rich grain of the amber wood. The subtle smell of sake pervaded the air. Silence hung like a blanket though it was unoppressive; the two intelligent Shinigami content to sit in the presence of the other and absorb the world around them. Ever thoughtful minds travelling some hidden path.

The clear chime of dusk settled over the world and Kisuke rolled his shoulders looking up and across the table at Aizen. The man had changed in many ways since Kisuke had first met the sly lieutenant. Then Benihime had whispered warning in his ears and seeded caution in his heart. Now she purred content that the great force before them was somewhat subdued.

“It’s such an indicating phrase.”

Aizen’s comment drifted on the silence. Kisuke quirked a brow waiting for the man to continue and was patiently rewarded a few moments later, “Ichigo’s release phrase, ‘Tear the heavens asunder’ It implies many things about his character.”

Kisuke could see now what the man was talking about. Ichigo’s Shikai had been stunning, two blades of great caliber and a manner of fighting so raw and totally Ichigo that Kisuke had a hard time placing anything familiar.

“It seems young Ichi is destined to continue his path of havoc through Soul Society.”

Aizen scoffed at Kisuke’s casual turn of phrase eyes soft in a way they became concerning only a few things one of them mainly being Ichigo. The young Shinigami had grown on them both more so than some would like to admit, he knew Aizen likened it to some fungi silently creeping in before settling deep roots in the earth of their hearts. Curling his head back Kisuke looked up at the spires rising around them the artificial blue sky daunting and peaceful.

“He will rewrite Soul Society or heaven itself. That is what he is a man who stands in the face of heaven. I think that in this case to tear asunder does not mean reaping destruction merely a change from the current situation.”

Aizen’s gaze was sharp accepting the vague phrase and all it represented. Ichigo had already wrought change upon their tamed pastures he had convinced a man so old and set in his ways to change and accept the unique situation of the Vizard.

“What do you think he’s hiding?”

Aizen queried softly head tilted to the side gaze different contemplating some other frame of thought. Kisuke’s own thoughts took a turn towards the many secrets that surrounded the orangette. A large file of questions he had collected rested somewhere in the tangled clutter of his office but the likelihood of him finding it was closer to the sudden reveal of Ichigo’s Bankai.

The young man was altogether strange. Showing a fake Shikai at the academy, his sudden arrival in Soul Society, the mysterious manipulation of his reaitsu. The list could go on likely enough questions
to wrap around the whole of the training area.

“I don’t know it seems every time we draw close to the answer of even one mystery it is disproven and four more pop up.”

Aizen nodded and reached out taking a sip of the sweet sake he set it down leaning back on the low futon his eyes drifted to Kyoka Suigetsu’s blade the hilt an ever-splendid reminder of trickling water and morning light caressing dew.

“I think he is certainly more than he seems. Have you heard what captain Kyroraku has said? In his words ‘Ichigo was in a war none of us have seen’ the answer seems to hold more truth then anything else to be devised. The question remains what war? I’ve seen flashes but I could hardly identify the enemy from the ally.”

Kisuke listened with half intent to the idle musings of Aizen the man twirling a wayward curl of hair around his fingertips as he stared at the horizon. Captain Kyroraku was a wise man even if he hid it behind the persona of a drunkard and he was all to close to the matter at hand. Some Shinigami had seen the war with the Quincy but most souls were far too young, that doesn’t mean Shinigami hadn’t seen blood. Just so the haunted look that saturated any veteran’s eyes and wallowed misery in their hearts was heavy upon Ichigo’s brow. It was a war they could not place, because Ichigo didn’t tell them and until he revealed the information it would likely remain hidden.

“He had two sisters, Karin and Yuzu. Did you know?”

Kisuke shook his head surprised at the sudden revelation but the thought of Ichigo as a brother was wholly unshocking. The young man sometimes carried a maternal touch putting to rest with ease rampant thoughts of young Shinigami, or the gentle touch of a healer born of experience. The way Aizen intoned his words left far more unsaid and Kisuke caught the man’s cavernous meaning.

They shared a quick look easily full of understanding regarding their young friend already considered quite intelligent in their eyes. The two-scientist felt protective over the young Shinigami and Kisuke was quite unfamiliar with the sensation he was sure Aizen was quite lost as himself. For they had no idea how to aid Ichigo. He shouldered all questions about his past to the side and even then, pain radiated from his core like the burning suns of summer.

“He is the youngest of us all.”

Aizen arched an eyebrow at Kisuke’s sudden statement. Kisuke ran a hand through his mess of tangled locks sticking slightly to his neck with the faint heat pulsing along the air he continued, “I managed to analyse some of his soul when we were working in the laboratory one day. Right now, he’s barely close to one hundred.”

Aizen blinked in shock his mouth hinging open slightly before he regained himself. He shook his head in partial amusement eyes far too dark before his deep voice lilited, “Of fucking course. You know sometimes I worry about the protectiveness and concern for the orange haired kid but then I see those puppy dog eyes or the heartbreak… and I know they’re justified. No one that young, nor especially Ichigo should have to deal with so much pain.”

Kisuke listened in slight shock to Aizen’s mini rant the man finished by downing the cup of sake in front of him topping it up immediately after. The man smiled somewhat sheepishly and Kisuke let an indignant smile filter on to his features darkness echoing his own thoughts on the matter.
“I understand what you mean. Benihime sings for the blood of an enemy we can’t see, and as much as we want to help the young man we’re left floundering in the dark. I fear the day he cracks and the pressure becomes too much. Ichi is strong and it’s the strongest people who break the hardest and Kami will be there when he falls.”

Aizen nodded his head in promise the two sharing another look agreement heavy in their eyes. They settled into the silence fishing through the sake trying to temporarily drown the feelings that weighed heavily on their minds and hearts.

“What are your thoughts on the Vizard?”

Aizen questioned deciding to continue the conversation in the heavy atmosphere and tense silence that had pervaded after Aizen’s unfinished thoughts. Kisuke nodded closing his eyes and letting his thoughts collect before his spoke.

“I think it is lucky Ichigo was with us. Without him we would have been going in blind unknowing of how or why we needed to tame their zanpakutou. There would have been a positively large amount of stumbling and I doubt if Ichigo wasn’t here then you likely would be far away. Still it is fascinating to see the changes wrought to the construction and soul energy of a person.”

Aizen nodded pensive gaze drifting to the horizon he frowned for a moment before the expression cleared and he said, “Have you seen the reaitsu samples?”

Kisuke thought to their small station set into the wall of one of the caves a rough workstation of cluttered papers and experiments; except for one small corner. That was where Aizen had put his foot down and forbid Kisuke from encroaching on the only clean space of their area. In working together to discover treatments for the Vizard and the ever-growing complexity of the Hogyoku they had found a common ally in their love of science.

“Yes, it’s quite interesting the complexities of the DNA sample, the hollow reaitsu had entwined itself within the Shinigami reaitsu creating a whole new genetic pattern. Ichigo mentioned briefly that something like this occurs on the other end of the spectrum for hollows. It would be interesting to see how the reaitsu has affected the complicated make-up of a hollow.”

Aizen nodded eyes flickering with interest at the prospect of extensive research and the intended results. Before their conversation could continue subtle reaitsu swept across their senses tampered in the way that was uniquely Ichigo. The orangette appeared at the edge of their perspective he stalked through the forest of rocky spires, head in the clouds. Abruptly he stopped looked around in confusion for a moment before with a sigh that shook his shoulders he was walking over to them. Ichigo settled opposite the two scientists the light catching his hair and setting it on fire. Aizen fetched another cup from some hidden place (someone likely Shinji had taken to establishing irregular hiding spots for sake cups like some great hide and seek) and poured a liberal amount before sliding the porcelain glass over to Ichigo.

He nodded his thanks tipping the glass back like a shot with a slight grimace. Kisuke raised an eyebrow and with a playful demeanour said, “Bad day Ichi?”

The orangette shook his head gaze vacant and focusing on the broad plains before he shrugged and said, “Not bad overall just long.”

They nodded in sympathy having watched Ichigo instruct the Vizard like a drill sergeant with all the
fiery passion of the Soutaicho channeled through his glare. Ichigo rolled his shoulders eyes becoming
distant as they stared over the land. A bright spark seemed to catch in his eyes and for a few
moments more his hands began to wave in the air plotting some unviable course.

“I’ve been thinking.”

Aizen scoffed at the quiet words mumbling under his breath, “Always a dangerous past time.” To
Kisuke’s amusement and Ichigo’s ire the curly haired lieutenant received the full force of Ichigo’s
glare before the young man’s shoulders slumped. Kisuke’s eyes softened and he motioned for Ichigo
to continue. He was shot a slightly grateful look before Ichigo said, “The Hogyoku is not only
capable of dissolving the boundaries between Shinigami and hollow. It posses the unique and
altogether dangerous ability to grant one’s hearts desires.”

The two Shinigami stared at Ichigo wondering where this sudden revelation had come from. Ichigo
looked up eyes distant and calculating assessing their reactions before he continued, “I knew of a
weapon like this one, and a man who possessed it wishing to conquer all. But when I crossed blades
with him I found only loneliness and as such I became the one who defeated him. Just so the
Hogyoku posses that ability and as such is far more dangerous than originally thought, for one only
need wish from the depths of their heart for the fall of Soul Society and it would be upon us.”

The air was suddenly serious with the understanding of Ichigo’s words and they shared painted
stares before Kisuke spoke up, “I can understand wanting to bring this to our attention but I
understand there is more you wish to elaborate on?”

Ichigo nodded and turned his head to look at the horizon where the sky dipped and swelled with
colours, his voice was thoughtful and calm, “It can also be used for good. In the case of our own
Shinigami. Ukitake-taicho’s sickness will not find a cure within our reaches no matter how much the
two of you research but if Shu-Captain Kyroraku were to posses the stone and wish for the health of
his friend it could be plausible for his recovery.”

Aizen and Kisuke stared at the young man for a contemplative moment before a smile cracked
Aizen’s lips and a peaked frown settled on Kisuke’s lips he voiced his own thoughts, “The dangers
are still vast and even though we are souls we remain human. You’ve seen what’s happened recently
to the souls! Radiation poisoning that drifts into the afterlife. A crime so severe and horrendous that it
damages the cycle of life and death.”

Ichigo only nodded eyes morose and heavy with the weight of his understanding and it was those
amber eyes that let Kisuke’s words fall short breath catching. Aizen frowned a bit puzzled as he tried
to recall what Kisuke spoke of. Ichigo seeing his confusion said, “Recently we noticed a trend of
increasing souls within the outer districts of Rungokai. Some of the souls are soldiers of a war and
others are the victims; numerous chemical attacks and radiation. As much as Soul Society’s Twelfth
division is advanced the rest of Soul Society is severely lacking.”

Ichigo spoke with the cold clinical detachedness of one remarking on the weather. Light dawned in
Aizen’s eyes and he quieted, thoughts turning behind his eyes like well oiled machinery. Kisuke
looked up suddenly golden hair whipping around his head as he caught Ichigo’s eyes with his own
cool metal grey orbs.

“You want to keep it a secret, hide it from the common knowledge… just as much as your true
zanpaktou.”

Ichigo nodded slowly and surely and when next he spoke they were shocked by his words.

“Soul Society needs to see change. It’s already beginning the chain reaction that whips and coils
breaking all too strong and reforging those into what needs to be. We humans are far too foolish
takers of the Earth not understanding what it truly means to give. ‘The premise of the Taker story is
‘the world belongs to man’. … The premise of the Leaver story is ‘man belongs to the world’.”

Ichigo finished the quote softly to the suddenly very bright eyes of his audience as they struggled
through the fracture of his words he smiled then. Faint and barely there but more real than the
reassuring smiles cast their way when they questioned him on the haunting sadness.

“A stunning novel; Ishmael. not yet published I’ll lend you a copy when it’s out maybe you can see
more than the threads of society blindfolding us.”

Ichigo winked and descended into silence head tipping back to stare at the luminous skies above.
Kisuke and Aizen stared at the orange-head shock written on their features at the information, the
clue, the tease or whatever Ichigo made that left those lips. As always Ichigo had left them so little
and they felt as if all the clues were there they need only find the correct way to piece the puzzle
together.

Kisuke shared a slightly apologetic expression with Aizen before he was regarding the collection of
papers scattered on the low-end table half finished diagrams teasing them. Aizen nodded pleased
with the idea of returning to work rather than trying to wrap his mind around an endless circle. Ichigo
sighed contently leaning against the rocks beside him he closed his eyes chest rising and falling with
gentle breaths. Ichigo looked different with his eyes closed altogether a different man as if for the
world’s bafflement he was a teenager soaking in the sun.

“Aizen do you think there’s a possibility…”

Kisuke voiced the question silently wishing to leave Ichigo undisturbed knowing the young man
hasn’t slept a wink since they found him in the throes of a nightmare a few days ago. Aizen nodded
perceptive as always and they would compare notes theorize if the topic of their discussion was not a
few feet away.

“It would explain many things the power, knowledge, sorrow every time he walks down the street.”

Ichigo mumbled under his breath at Aizen’s soft words head turning to the side before stilling.
Kisuke nodded and the whisper of wind shuffled paper seemed to echo the truth of their guess. It
sent shivers down Kisuke’s spine as he stared at Ichigo wondering if it’s all true.

X

Rose wondered when he signed up for this hell. Then he reasoned probably the first moment he
entered the Gotei Thirteen as if his fate was written in the strings of time; a sheet of music all the
notes plotted out. Some scribbled and erased hastily others thick and clear. He believed that meeting
Ichigo was one of those notes clear and precise starting piano soft before a crescendo to a forte loud
and strong.

He thought this as he pushed up from where he was sprawled in the dirt, curly blond locks bunched
at the back of his neck and Love breathed heavily beside him. Rose honestly wondered how a kid
(because Ichigo is a kid) could defeat them so thoroughly without his mask on. But then they were
on their feet Kinshara teasing him in that sweet melodious voice that always stirred a certain
bloodlust.

Love was in front of him extending a hand and Rose gratefully took it letting himself be pulled up
the two locked eyes for a moment before turning to face the sudden bane of their existence.
Hiyori was hammering away at Ichigo her splintered blade whirling through the air as she yelled obscenities at the orangette calmly deflecting her attack. The other Vizard watched on in partial amusement partial hesitation knowing that inevitably they would have to rejoin the battle. Rose flicked his bangs to the side ignoring Love’s amused huff he hefted his Shikai and gathered his reaitsu the now familiar yet still foreign mask forming over features. He quite liked the look and shape of it, the feel of reaitsu condensed over one’s eyes sparkled like the grand finale of a piece and was altogether an intimate experience.

Beside him Love mirrored the movement and with a slight nod the partners charged into battle. Ichigo looked up from where he was flicking aside Hiyori’s sudden strike with cautious ease he punted the petite lieutenant away to her irritable screaming. That was when they struck.

The others surged forward the air acidic with hollow reaitsu even as it was chased away by gales of their power raging and coalescing within them as they sought to apply the techniques Ichigo had drilled into their supposedly thick skulls. Springing back from where Zangetsu’s smaller blade darted out to catch a wisp of his robes Rose raised his hand channeling his reaitsu focusing on Kinshara’s presence within him. Accessing the deep reservoirs of hollow reaitsu that now saturated his being.

As the cero formed in his palm he thought of the day where Ichigo had first shown them everything, the techniques they could master, and the stunning blade(s) he wielded. Rose’s thoughts drifted of their own accord to the tremulous feelings that Ichigo’s blades had broadcasted when they clashed euphoria and sorrow prevalent and a tremulous mix of other unnameable emotions.

Letting a breath out and the charging hum of his spirit Rose let the cero fly forward Love well attuned to Rose’s fighting swerved to the side as the crackling ray of red and black energy surged towards Ichigo. A pure ebony blade flicked up and caught the brunt of the cero the reaitsu pushing out on either side fanning behind Ichigo. As the attack dispersed and the air was left heavy with the electric charge of reaitsu Ichigo flashed Rose a proud smile before Ichigo flicked up one of his blades to block Shinji’s zanpaktou even as his other arm caught Mashiro in one of her supercharged Mashiro kicks.

Love nodded and the two flew forward bloodlust heavy in their veins. Kinshara clashed against Zangetsu with the bright flash of sparks and the echoing ring of metal against metal. Springing back Rose swung his blade up once more silently letting the blade switch back to Shikai the golden rope catching the light and flashing like a snake on it’s path towards Ichigo. The orangette smirked a sudden ebony wave of reaitsu surging in their direction and Rose wanted to curse his existence as he hastily brought up his blade to defend himself.

He hurtled towards the rocky Earth below with a pained groan crashing into rough terrain he felt every rock below him. Sometimes he cursed that day in the bar where he had looked at the young man with vibrant hair and seen so much more than an academy student. Pushing up from the small crater Rose heard a loud crash as Lisa’s prone form collided with the ground nearby.

Rolling his shoulders Rose heaved a (dramatic) sigh and hefted Kinshara once more flying into battle. Ichigo looked up at his approach eyes bright in a way they had never seen. As the days had progressed and their skill increased that light had grown brighter like a beacon or the headlight of the sun charged with purpose and entertainment.

They crashed heavily the weight of Ichigo’s blade biting to his shoulders he warred against the young man. Pushing back, he darted around feeling Shinji near by the golden whip of his zanpaktou snapped out in an attempt to ensnare one of Ichigo’s limbs. That was a mistake as electricity rippled down the golden rope sending shocks throughout his system. Folding to the ground Rose took in a few deep breaths batting away the pain and the taunting calls of Kinshara.
It had been hell the first few days their bond that had once hummed like the cities of music had fallen silent so cold and near broken. Then they had fought, for dominance, for freedom, for passion, for music. He vaguely recalled sensations of the outside world as inside the orchestra of his inner world notes were exchanged. A grand forte beginning to crescendo to far more subtle tones as the melody of blades ringing grew quiet.

Their bond had been forged anew dragged through darkness and taken into the grey where the light did not blind. There was another part of him now however reluctant they both were to acknowledge it sometimes. Instinct would snap and Rose had to face the darkness in his soul, but better a face and form then the endless whispers that haunt the night.

They all realized why they were united like this working as a team with ease born not of hundreds of years together but the few weeks that had stuck them together like amber and molasses. He was the center of it that glowing luminescent moon channeling the light of those around him and reflecting upon others so stark and bright one might think he was the sun. and with those orange locks they probably weren’t too far off.

As the sounds of battle drew near once more Rose shook off idle musings a quiet smile curling his lips and a faint melody dancing in his head light and airy. Ichigo had promised to share some music he was found of but the kid had yet to uphold a promise about later dates, accompanied by that cocky smile. Rising from the dust once more Rose wanted to laugh at how easy it was to shake off the pain and head the call of battle. Drums pounding loud and stiff, the string instruments lonely and morose heralding those fallen, the brass instruments calling out the joyful beat of victory. As always, the dancers swept across the field intricate movements flowing from one piece to the next.

X

They sprawled out on the rocky surface panting in the luminescent sun above sweat beading their brows, and bruises littering their skin. Ichigo felt no sympathy the shallow cut above his brow one of the few markers of the past battle stung slightly. He felt that flutter again the one that reminded him of Kisuke when he learned a new technique, or his father’s eyes when Ichigo rose from the rubble.

Ichigo dully acknowledged it as pride to Zangetsu’s pleased purr in the back of his mind the deep hum calming his senses. His eyelids fluttered closed blocking out the cool sky above and releasing some of the tension that bubbled and frothed beneath his skin. It was hard being surrounded by the one you considered family day and night; knowing you had caused their deaths. Seeing them die over and over again with no respite only the heat of battle and the quiet moments of company.

A growl echoed from his inner world and Ichigo could feel Shiro’s anger even as Zangetsu Ossan admonished him for the wayward thoughts chastising Ichigo in that deep baritone, “Ichigo it was not your fault.”

Ichigo tried to acknowledge them, the words were true. A hidden part of his soul told him so even as his war carved heart protested. He wanted to believe them that night cloaked in shadows where the flames of his mind had struck ruthlessly. But sometimes it was hard to acknowledge the light, think for a moment that he could be forgiven that it wasn’t his fault. Other times it seemed only a step away he just had to muster the courage and will to leave the damming thoughts behind.

A warm hand on his shoulders jolted Ichigo from his rather depressing thoughts and he tilted his head up to see a tangle of curly blond locks followed by Rose’s amethyst eyes, beside him Shinji was regarding Ichigo warily that fond yet blunt light in his eyes that warned Ichigo of an impeding talk of doom. Times when Shinji decided that either Ichigo needed the shit beaten out of him while yelling at him, or he stared at Ichigo before in a calm deadly tone of steel declared some perception altering phrase. Really sometimes it was the smallest things he noticed and jolted Ichigo out of. The
orange-head would be grateful to the sarcastic blond for a long time at least.

A hand was in front of his face flapping wildly and Ichigo chalked it up to sleep deprivation that he didn’t slap it away and let himself get so lost in his thoughts as if wandering through a labyrinth where a misstep could lead to a minefield.

“Got ya head in the clouds Ichi?”

Ichigo retaliated to Shinji’s sharp and witty question with raised eyebrows and a small glare. That Cheshire smirk appeared as the blond chuckled and beside him Rose looked amused fingers tapping some hidden rhythm on the pommel of his zanpakutou. Shinji plopped beside him like a cat albeit far less graceful than Yoruichi stretching out long limbs and watching his kin. Rose sat on the other side of Ichigo boxing the young Shinigami in between the two blonds. Ichigo squashed the irrational fear at the feeling instead settling into their familiar reaitsu patterns feeling the ebb and flow. Faintly he heard a sweet sonata lilting in Rose’s reaitsu and the contented purr of Sakande in Shinji’s.

Around them the Vizard were gathered. Mashiro was flitting around Kensei, uncontainable energy bouncing from limb to limb a bright smile chasing her features even as she toppled over into Kensei’s lap. Kensei startled, began nagging his lieutenant stiff and grim even as fond light shone in his eyes. Hiyori was perched high on one of the spirals watching the proceedings (Ichigo suspected something to do with her height complex) and likely keeping an eye out for someone new to harass. Lisa was resting against Love the two reading under the setting sun content in a way readers only were in each others presence. Hachi was talking to Tessai, the two gesturing in small aborted movements pointing every now and then in the vague direction of the labs.

Kisuke exited one of the caves a bottle of sake tucked under one arm and Ai- Sosuke following beside him. Kami, he was never going to get used to calling him that but Ichigo supposed it helped somewhat in erasing that haunting visage of the madman so closely associated with that name. it was like a new start, Sosuke was the one who had decided to change and see the future along a different path.

The two settled down and they were complete, gathered together in a way Ichigo hadn’t seen in a long while and his heart ached. But it was a good ache, relief and happiness overwhelming the fear subjugated for the moment.

“Ichigo?”

Shinji asked quietly and seriously under his breath. Looking at him Ichigo could see that charisma and natural aptitude for leadership shining through in the curve of his shoulders and determination of coffee coloured orbs.

“Hmm?” Ichigo responded listening intently even as his eyes flickered around the group noting their positions in an ingrained tactic of survival. Shinji demanded his attention with a slight flicker of reaitsu Ichigo looked into his eyes.

“We’re family now and any day we’d choose ya over Soul Society. Understand? We got ya back and we’re damn well good at protectin’ ourselves. Cause sometimes a protector needs to share the burden.”

Ichigo stared in shock comprehending and he stuttered out before his brain could process, “B-but you don’t owe me anything!”

Shinji frowned for a moment before he considered Ichigo’s amber orbs sincerity raging like an unkempt storm and said, “We owe ya our lives. But we wouldn’t follow ya for somethin’ like that.
We follow you because o here,” at those words Shinji pointed to Ichigo’s chest where his heart beat the drum of time, “Got me?”

Shinji finished and Ichigo stared lost for a long time before Shinji shook his head in amusement and said, “We follow ya cause of ya heart dumbass it’s in the right place, as much as ya wanna wallow and hide in darkness we know better.”

With a wink the man stood up flaunted his way over to Hiyori that subtle aura gone in the face of his usual dramatics. Leaving a stunned Ichigo behind he sat there for a long while Rose’s comforting presence beside him as he tried to process keen words and the fact that somehow once again he had managed to gain their loyalty.

In the end his gaze swept around the training grounds seeing his family and he acknowledged that Shinji might be right, they were strong and would be strong enough for the future. Rose laughed at something Love tossed over his shoulder and before Ichigo could question it Rose traded him a look and Ichigo couldn’t help but smile and then laugh as the humorous air becomes contagious. And Shinji was right had always been right, they were family they would protect each other and themselves.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! “The premise of the Taker story is 'the world belongs to man'. … The premise of the Leaver story is 'man belongs to the world'.” — Daniel Quinn, Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit is as states a quote from Ismael a novel I would recommend a thousand times over reading. Did you like the teases and revelations Ichih alcohol science bros? Reviews/comments are always appreciated and thank you once again for the numerous support! Till next time

Medusa!!
Alexithymia

Chapter Summary

Yoruichi enters, a fight occurs, and revelations are abound.

Chapter Notes

Alexithymia

(n.) An inability to describe emotions in a verbal manner.

Hello everyone! Here is chapter 21! I have some unfortunate news for you all, I’m very sorry to say that next week I will likely not post as this coming week is going to be very busy for me so many apologies but I thank you all for understanding. AI hope you all enjoy this chapter, though it is a bit more of a filler it has merit all the same. Enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

“Kisuke Urahara I am going to murder you!”

Yoruichi blurred into their training area electricity cackling and chasing her form, plum locks stood on end and furious golden eyes blazed like molten lava. In the background of her mind she could feel the others having scattered to the wind when the first lick of reaitsu registered. It was fine the cat’s prey was not the other captains and lieutenants she had eyes only for Kisuke.

The blond hobbled out from behind a collection of rocks, a placating smile on his features and a hand abashedly running through ghost blond locks. The sight did nothing to quell the burning rage swelling inside of Yoruichi and she let it show in the sharp peek of fangs glimmering in her smile. Kisuke had the decency to look afraid as she stalked forward, he also had the intelligence not to run knowing little to no one could out pace the Goddess of Flash.

Yoruichi stared into those apologetic eyes for a tense moment the air heavy as if before a storm. Lightning fast her hand whipped out making contact with Kisuke’s cheek the sound ringing through out the vast spaces of their childhood. Kisuke tottered for a moment swaying side to side before he fell to the ground, cradling his reddening cheek while his metallic grey eyes stared up at her.

“Kisuke how dare you! You just left; no word, no assurances just a mass scandal and one of those
silly little gadgets of yours. I had no idea where you were and when I tried to contact you I reached another dead end! Then to my utter shock and annoyance I find you here! Training the hollow-Shinigami in this place! Without even telling me! You might as well reserve the couch as your place of residence Kisuke!"

The scientist cowered before her might shame flooding his eyes and his head lowered in apology, Youriuchi scoffed waiting to hear his response. After a quiet few moments where Kisuke tried to gather his rampant thoughts he looked up into golden orbs, sincerity in his eyes and said, “I’m sorry Youriuchi.”

The storm settled within Youriuchi, she knew well that Kisuke was one to devolve into long speeches pandering for time as excuses came to mind. Or rather he would play some fanciful game deriving from what he meant to say. Such simple words quelled her doubts and anger assuring her that Kisuke meant well and truly what his heart echoed.

With a sigh, she hefted him from the ground by the collar of his shihaksho and regarded him with cold serious eyes, the kind only convicted criminals received. Her tone was frosty and warning as she said, “If you ever do this again Kisuke I will murder you.”

The blond nodded his understanding hands coming between them to rest placating and assuring of his conviction. Youriuchi nodded satisfied and turned her gaze around them assessing the many reaisuts signatures coveted behind the rocks.

Ichigo came walking out first a far too pleased smile curled on his features he walked over to the two. Youriuchi eyed him for a moment contemplative before a smirk curled on her lips and she questioned, “Ready for another race Ichi? Bya-kun’s not here to see you lose again.”

Youriuchi watched in satisfaction as her taunt sparked a hint of anger in caramel orbs before it was brushed away by an easy smile and a shake of orange locks. Youriuchi studied Ichigo it had been a while since she had conversed with the young Shinigami; she had seen him more when Byakuya has been there to tease.

He was different from his days in the academy not largely just small minute details. His orange locks that had caressed his lower back now coiled around his neck, his shoulders were tense muscle rippling from underneath his shihaksho where she noted with some surprise the sleeves were pulled back revealing faint crosses chasing his wrists and neck, it was then her observant eyes noted the two blades on his person. A short blade more akin to a large dagger rested against his hip and a larger blade’s hilt peeked out from behind his back. Then there were his eyes.

They had always been the focal point for her attention such expressive and deep eyes always drawing one in taking a piece of your soul just as willingly as Ichigo gave his own. They were bare now whereas before those eyes always reflected his emotions they were now utterly raw. As if Ichigo couldn’t put out what meager shielding he used before. She could see the ache and sleeplessness that clung to his eyes. But a soft light was also there kind, warm, and familiar in a way she easily recognized.

“As if I’ll let you win this time hellcat.”

Youriuchi winked at the nickname before an assessing gaze was shot Kisuke’s way. She had read the reports, seen some of the evidence but Ichigo’s position had been unclear and she now wondered if he too had suffered the curse that now plagued the others. It was then left to her thoughts that maybe Kisuke was running the kid into the ground because she had never seen that level of tiredness cling to his features.
As if sensing her concern Kisuke flashed a slightly assuring smile even while those metal eyes flashed warningly so full of an emotion she rarely saw on those sly features. Looking back at Ichigo the traces of weariness had disappeared under a mask. The others came out separating into small groups chatting amongst themselves. Yoruichi cast her eyes over them taking in these new... she still struggled for the word and the idea of what they were at times stirred instincts ingrained in her since the academy.

“Oi get back to training!”

Ichigo called over his shoulder at the collective Shinigami, a chorus of groans and grumbling followed his words but they drew their swords. Yoruichi flinched as she watched them draw hands over their faces the acidic tang of hollow reaitsu filling the air as masks materialized on their features hiding their humanity from view. Ichigo turned to face Yoruichi a calming look in his eyes.

Yoruichi had never been slow it’s what allowed her to become captain of the Second; that piercing wit and intellect. So, she inevitably connected the dots eyes snapping between the hollow-Shinigami and Ichigo and the bags under his eyes seemed a bit more stark.

“Would you like to join us for training Yoruichi?”

Kisuke questioned offering a tentative hand for her to take, welcoming her into the folds of their group. Yoruichi twirled plum locks for a moment before she nodded and Kisuke’s eyes lit up in that way they did when he was young, and they played in these same grounds. Ichigo smiled as well flicking a gaze to Kisuke before he affirmed, “We’re called the Vizard.”

She took in the name and his inclusion of them all with a nod before a wicked smirk curled Ichigo’s features. He was darting away a mirror image lightning fast and hard to catch even for her eyes. Yoruichi laughed traded Kisuke a wink and followed after the cocky orange-head.

They sped across the grounds darting from height to height the rocky spires mere dust beneath their feet. Ichigo had gotten fast she thought with a smile the changed shihaksho and dual blades (And when did he get dual blades- secretive bastard) leading her to believe that it was partially due to his released blades. The chase began in earnest her lungs heaving and her reaitsu pumping through her veins. Kicking into gear she began to pick up speed the air rent apart with great winds as she blew past Ichigo and tapped him on the shoulder a flash of purple in the distance signifying her passing. She heard laughter behind her rich and deep and the echoing burst of flash-step bursting off the cavern walls. The terror of the chase instilled itself in her heart rapidly picking up speed and widening alight gold orbs. A soft ripple of cloth had her tense as she spun on her perch high above the ground below coming to face Ichigo a short distance away. He was panting lightly orange locks a tangle around his form and eyes glowing light blue with reaitsu.

“Think ya can keep up Ichi?”

Yoruichi challenged flicking back errant strands of plum, mocha skin radiant in the warmth of the desert like climate. Ichigo scoffed and flashed his eyes full of determination and challenge. The young Shinigami blurred out of existence the afterimage fading in the quiet sunlight. It was only years of training and fighting that allowed her to maneuver out of the way of his hand swinging towards her shoulder for a ‘friendly’ tap.

They were off again back and forth their tag went on as below the Vizard trained the ringing of blades dulled over the pulse of adrenaline and the beat of her heart. Flipping back onto her hands a kick narrowly snagged the leg of Ichigo’s shihaksho, Yoruichi settled into a crouch, head cocked in challenge. Ichigo brushed back the tangles of his hair and raised an eyebrow. They shared a small
smile the game finished temporarily and Yoruichi rose from her crouch wincing internally at the slight burn of her muscles. She didn’t often find a challenge when it came to speed but Ichigo was an exception. Even Soi-fon and Bya-boo weren’t a match when it came to the chase.

Shaking out the kinks in her muscles like a cat, she sashayed over to Ichigo poised movement in each step even as her reaitsu chided her for the sudden strain. Leaning on the young man’s shoulder the captain of the Second flashed Ichigo a coy smirk and said, “I think I won again Ichi you’ll have to try harder next time.”

Her taunting and teasing tones sparked a reaction as amber orbs sparked with fire and a challenging curl of lips met hers even as it faded into a slight frown. Tangerine brows furrowed as Ichigo cast his eyes towards the horizon where the ring of blades still echoed out bouncing off rocky spires. Nodding her head Yoruichi pushed down the unease bubbling in her stomach. It was time she confronted the Vizard, captains and lieutenants she’d known for years who suddenly felt like strangers.

Looking at Ichigo she wondered, stared at those amber eyes and envisioned cold gold enswathed in black and the shivers that traced her spine weren’t imagined. But then he smiled and it was gone and so assuring that the fear threatening her sanity and composure dispersed.

They appeared in the training grounds to a miasma of dust so thick Yoruichi pondered cutting it with her zanpaktou before it dispersed and Hirako-Taicho was revealed two fingers held in front of him and a sizeable crater a few meters away. The blond was trembling hand shaking and the mask covering his features displayed a few cracks but it remained on his features even as he sunk to his knees.

Eyes flipping to Ichigo she could see a proud light in his eyes as he stalked over to Hirako and crouched in front of the Vizard words barely audible but travelling in the emptiness of the space.

“Finally, mastered cero?”

Hirako nodded and pulled his mask off dyed eyes bleeding out till those cocky coffee orbs flashed up to Ichigo a bit hungry and insane (but Shinji’s always been a bit insane or at least tilted) and he nodded before his sly tenor trickles out.

“Damn Ichi shoulda warned us bout the power it’s intoxicating. Never woulda imagined what it would be like if it wasn’t for ta control.”

Ichigo’s smile was short and sharp and she thought grief or guilt flashed in his eyes and painted his features for a moment before it was gone and there was only the warm pride standing stark against the plains of purple under his eyes. Rising from a crouch with Shinji’s arm slung over his shoulder Ichigo’s movements were stiff (and she incredulously wondered if he was already injured when she challenged him) and with a grumble and the teasing pokes of the blond he dragged the captain over to one of the patches of rocks nearby.

Shinji flashed Yoruichi that familiar smile all teasing and easy gait. She paused and wondered how this had changed everything, it took a moment before she settled her restlessness and decided that maybe nothing has changed. Flashing him the glint of teeth and a wink Shinji smiled at the acceptance and his eyes looked that much brighter underneath the waves of golden blond.

Turning her attention back to Ichigo she watched as he padded over to Love, zanpaktou sealed and resting in the simple katana at his waist; the tattoo’s and flowing crosses of his kosode were gone leaving the simple shihaksho that Ichigo always managed to make look regal. He reached out his hand to the man who accepted the grasp with a firm hold before the two conversed Ichigo painting a
diagram with his hands as he demonstrated the technique. Love nodded in understanding, curly afro bouncing with his movement he raised his katana centered it in front of him before with the acidic tang of hollow reaitsu he appeared a few feet away.

Ichigo stared with critical eyes for a moment studying his figure with a hand perched under his chin. Love fidgeted before Ichigo called the man over with a wave of his hand and an assuring smile.

“That was a good Sonido but you’re not balancing your reaitsu correctly in both feet. You need to feel the movement of your reaitsu as if you suddenly put on running shoes each step needs to be measured for maximum speed. But you’re doing really good you’ve come a long way from the first try so good job.”

Ichigo finished delivering his speech/lesson turned watchful eyes on the other Vizard eyes catching sight of Lisa’s form he stalked towards her. Yoruichi cast her own gaze around the training area trying to spot Kisuke who had likely in the desperate hope of easing her wrath hidden himself away in the labs. The captain of the Second remembered then that another scientist or genius or whatever the confusing man was resided in their little group and the two had likely spent days debating certain topics.

She wasn’t quite sure on her opinion of the lieutenant of the Fifth. Aizen had always rubbed her the wrong way. Underneath the polished gleaming coat of the scholarly academic his eyes had not been those of a genial man, rather they were like a cobra waiting to strike from the shadows. Yet they had changed from one moment to the next all with the appearance of a certain orange head (and maybe it took a while but she had no doubt of the cause). Oh, his eyes were still crafty peaks of amber but they had lost that cool strictness and to her (and others) astonishment the plum haired captain had seen warmth and a genuine smile.

It was conflicting as she couldn’t tell his motives. He was the one who had created the Vizard (and that wasn’t in the reports but she wasn’t stupid). One minute he was the mad scientist playing with Kisuke and likely plotting world domination together, the next they both had a forlorn look haunting the intelligence hidden by their eyes all focused on Ichi. But if Kisuke trusted the kid and if what she was seeing was any evidence the kid carried that kind of power. To wrap those around him in his soul, draw them in with a smile and make them want to stay for a while.

“Ichi’s a good teacher, got ta knack for it I guess.”

Yoruichi turned at Shinji’s innocent phrase honey orbs zeroing in on Ichigo as he manifested one of the masks in his hand. She could see what Shinji meant, Ichigo had always been that way even with Byakuya. When they were younger and still attending the academy, she had stumbled on more than a few of their impromptu lessons. He carried a maternal touch in the honest way he cared for people, that and his subtle charisma which twisted around one’s soul and easily swayed whoever to Ichigo’s new cause.

“Yeah he is, kid’s done great so far from what I’m seeing.”

Shinji stared for a moment and nodded eyes bright and protective as they chased the speckle of orange hair almost testing Yoruichi. Ichigo blocked an incoming Mashiro kick with ease whipping about to defend against the next attack. Mashiro back flipped and drew her hand over eyes a mask forming with a swirl of reaitsu, Ichigo grinned and raised his zanpaktou waiting for her attack.

“He’s a damn scary kid too. Can hold ta seven of us without his mask on, then again, he usually reverts ta Shikai though I think that’s more showin’ off.”

Yoruichi processed the information wearily eyes tracing that silver spark slicing through the air. It
disappeared in a flash as Ichigo disengaged from Mashiro with a gentle word and a light push towards Kensei he began his path over to the collection of rocks they were seated at.

A few cuts adorned his skin, one raced across his cheek and the other teased his elbow. But his eyes were different and it had taken some time but she thought she was coming to realize what she was seeing. Ichigo was happy granted this wasn’t the happiness he displayed in Byakuya and Kaien’s presence, this was a joy in the challenge. Beneath that burning light of pride and battle it swirled a dark undercurrent waiting to catch and take under any who looked for to long. A guilt so deep and accompanied by sorrow that if Yoruichi could she would wipe it from those soulful eyes.

“Are you lazy bags of bones going to join us?”

Ichigo questioned and Shinji began whining teasingly. Ichigo’s tense shoulders settled and the darker emotions haunting his amber orbs were subdued as a quiet smile settled on his lips. He offered a hand and with a last look around them at the family surrounding her she took it. They had already welcomed her into their folds the moment Ichigo smiled at her and showed her the truth of their little play.

X

Thunder rumbled and bounced caught in leaves dyed a faded green. Ichigo looked up into the rain where it poured and collected around his figure tracing his features with the familiarity of a lover’s caress. And really Ichigo thought he was all too familiar with the rain. The air was heavy with reaitsu and Ichigo only sighed as it snaked about coiling around his form teasing the breath from his lungs.

The water kept rising and Ichigo knew if he let it his inner world would flood again. A sudden rush of warmth chased away the chill haunting his bones and froze the thoughts of his mind. Old Man Zangetsu sat beside Ichigo wavy brown locks floating on some invisible breeze dancing with the rain. Shiro rested at Ichigo’s feet killer yellow orbs watched their surroundings noting the lack of life in the flora; trees burdened with the sadness of their king.

“Ichigo.”

Zangetsu spoke softly eyes heavy from behind the yellow visors perched on his nose. Ichigo looked up seeing the unspoken words their bond thrummed beneath his fingers as pulses of reaitsu surged along the cracks in the skyscrapers. They were prompting telling Ichigo to go forth and open his eyes.

Ichigo knew he would have to but he savoured the silence of his inner world and the presence of his soul. There were times traces of that wound like a ghost came to chase his limbs. When he had been alone, so utterly despairing in the loss of his soul, powers, and far much more than he cares to think about.

Shiro growled startling the thoughts away his gaze landed on Ichigo seeming to say, “Damn pansy King.” Even as the cadence of Shinigami reaitsu ruffled his locks fondly. Zangetsu Ossan looked Ichigo in the eyes and the young Shinigami nodded wearily. Outside their world secreted from view time was frozen blades raised challengingly against Ai-Sosuke. Ichigo had fled at the terror in his heart and mind as it overwhelmed him for that one moment, ran to his spirits and the haven of skyscrapers blossoming trees.

Amber orbs were revealed as Ichigo dissolved from his inner world reaitsu chasing away the lingering dredges of memory he gazed into Sosuke’s coffee coloured eyes calm and ready to fight. They were different from the crazed eyes of a madman and Ichigo cemented his thoughts in that focusing on Sosuke not Aizen as he had come to differentiate between the two. They nodded minute
and perfect to the only viewer of their sudden battle in the twilight hours of the morning; Kisuke nodded from where he was settled in the distance eyes shadowed under a cloak of darkness.

They sprung forward blades sealed within their hands and the wisps of air around them. Like the toll of a clock they clashed blades ringing and Ichigo settled into the motion banishing all thoughts of that colossal form, sweeping wings, and white everywhere choking his sight.

Kyoka Suigetsu swept out towards his head and Ichigo ducked, Zangetsu whipped up to defend even as his fist shot out was an attempt to render his opponent incapable of moving. Sosuke slid back Kyoka Suigetsu falling short beside him they regarded each other tensely cast before shooting forward once more. Ichigo swung overhead as Kyoka Suigetsu winked into existence stopping the blade on it’s path Ichigo switched trajectory aiming for the pale column of Sosuke’s neck. Sosuke whipped around blade a peak of light as it cleaved a path towards Ichigo’s legs. Flipping back the two paused and Sosuke intoned, “Quite restless tonight Ichigo.”

The comment was a jest at Ichigo’s strength raging behind his shields and the tampered reaitsu of his blade. Ichigo merely raised an eyebrow Zangetsu purred in his hands as they shot forward.

Back and forth across the deserted land cool winds of night nipped their cheeks and pulled aside their heavy robes. Ichigo settled into the motion feeling the tense weight of the pass few days settle as the familiar motions of swordplay ingrained themselves within his movements.

It had been altogether strange teaching the ones who had first drilled the lessons into his head. He sometimes mused that he could hear their voices in his head correcting the same mistakes he saw in their youthful figures that they saw once upon a time in him; and they were younger. During a war your eyes aged a thousand years in one night weighing the lines of one’s face and casting starkness to all features. They were captains and lieutenants so of course they carry that with them already but it was nothing to the visage of a veteran that had seen hell itself frozen and survived.

Shaking away the thoughts Ichigo swirled away from Ai-Sosuke and swept Zangetsu out to catch some of the Earth he flung it towards the temporarily stunned lieutenant. Sosuke appeared from behind, instincts snapped at him as he protected his back crouching and pivoting on one foot to bring an elbow towards his jaw.

They’ve changed so much already his mind supplied as he thought of their earlier training session. Maybe he thought it was because he never knew them in the beginning but some part of his heart whispered that he helped change them for the better. When he first met, them he was young and brash, unknowing of the world inside himself and around them, they had been jaded and bitter with both Soul Society and Aizen.

They had become so ingrained with one another in their isolation that in some respects it was like Soul Society breeding stagnation with no room for growth. Then they had been pardoned rejoined the Gotei 13 and both sides began to see change in measure. Ichigo wondered if that was the plot of Yam-jii all along because as old as the man was he wasn’t an idiot, you didn’t find warriors that old dull of mind or without some strategy always at hand.

It sometimes bit at his heart and head when Ichigo thought of all the manipulations sustained throughout his life, the deceit and blatant lies from his family, friends, even his enemies. But that was the past as much as it was the future and Ichigo had learnt to let it go he couldn’t hold grudges against the dead and it was pointless when the act was not yet committed. Still a part of Ichigo knew that it wasn’t only Kisuke and Aizen playing the chess board.

Swinging his thoughts back to the Vizard even as Zangetsu jerked up to block an incoming strike, Ichigo thought of this new bond they shared. It was as Shinji said they were family. Moulded and
glued together through their experiences and the training they had undertaken. The Vizard were vibrant and happy, even though they now had to contend with a dark side, and they had welcomed Ichigo taken his training and words to heart.

The thoughts warmed his heart and helped brighten his eyes because he knew this was only a stepping stone and there were many more trials ahead of him. The mere idea of all he would have to soon deal with gave him a headache and weighed his heart like the sorrow of his past only could. Because it would always bite at his confidence, the thought of once again failing those he loved.

The thought of the future weighed heavy on his mind and stirred a restlessness in his heart that he couldn’t seem to subdue even with the warmth of their reaitsu. It was near bliss he thought quietly to be in a room with them feel their like reaitsu full of raging instinct and the quiet mould of Hueco Mundo. For years as he had stood behind Shunsui at meetings and other social gatherings. He had felt their presences empty and lacking like many others that he had known in the future but all the more so in comparison to the Vizard he knew.

It wasn’t that restlessness that had dragged him from his false imitation of slumber. He knew the others would worry if they saw what he did at night; stare at the empty cave walls and reminisce like an old man without sake. But to close his eyes and let the warm wash of sleep cover him was akin to submerging himself in the icy vestiges of water dark and murky that formed his mindscape when it was left to run free. There was no way to tear himself from those clawed grasps and he didn’t want to burden the others, not when it was them he saw over and over again as pale bloated corpses or charred figures.

This time it was a presence strange and yet familiar like cool oil it brushed against his senses. Choking the breath teasingly from his lungs not for it’s overwhelming power but the strange malignance that resonated with undercurrents of empathy. It had chilled Ichigo chased away any lingering sense of calm that his semi-meditative state had introduced and left him feeling as if the room had dropped several degrees.

Before his mind could catch up with his body he was embracing the days of his youth; the constant brashness and running headfirst into what ever situation, and was on his feet Zangetsu clenched firmly in his fist. He had swept out of the caves into the cavernous training area where night’s shadows cast the forest of rocks like that of the menos forest. Ichigo pushed down the bitter tint of bile that those memories sometimes stirred even as an aged scar pulsed at the center of his chest.

That oily reaitsu had swirled rising around him and chasing the shadows of night wishing to supress Ichigo, or embrace him? The orangette couldn’t tell the dizzying mix of emotions and will represented so alike to his own turbulent catastrophe of emotions. He had let his reaitsu respond rising around him in faint peaks of red that sparked with the deadly flint of night. Then it was gone with a whisper on the sable cloaked sky and a bright cadence of reaitsu that had Ichigo gasping sliding down to rest on the ground before his head tilted forward to rest against his knees orange locks shielding his eyes from sight.

The young lieutenant had sat for who knows how long shivering not from the chill of night but the unidentified presence that had shaken him so, felt their reaitsu far before they actually appeared, their soft murmurs drifting on the breeze as Kisuke exited followed by Aizen. It was likely that the two had finally pulled themselves from their latest craze in the lab but Ichigo found the alternative far more truthful if the sly glances from under the brim of a cowl were any indication. Lifting his head up so he could tilt it back he looked at the sky wishing for the reassuring presence of the moon.

The soft hum of Zangetsu dispersed that longing and he had with some relucatance turned his gaze to the two men seated a short distance away. Zangetsu’s sealed form rested in his lap Ichigo took a
breath to calm his racing heart and settle the irritant bud of instinct that sparked like adrenaline in his system.

Sosuke had smirked tipped those glasses that he still kept perched on the bridge of his nose away and handed them to Kisuke (he had learnt that the man did actually require them when it came to the lab work). Kisuke had only shot the man a cautionary look and a little hand gesture that was lost on Ichigo before he took the black frames perched them on his nose and settled back to watch the show. Ichigo had contemplated denying the challenge but he was still restless after the events not long ago and Zangetsu was practically baying for blood at the thought of fighting Sosuke.

His reminiscing was cut short as Sosuke’s blade swung a deadly arc towards Ichigo’s neck, swinging up with wind breaking speed the two pieces of metal intercepted with a loud clash. Dust was kicked up into the air flying on heavy gales as carefully controlled power began to unravel. Springing back Ichigo panted for breath drawing life into his lungs he looked up from shadowed bangs to glimpse Sosuke’s figure. The man was also hunched over gaze locked onto Ichigo deep satisfaction haunting coffee orbs and the pale beads of his effort dotted his forehead.

“I am now quite certain that I don’t regret my decision to accept your offer Ichigo.”

The words were a gunshot in the ensuing silence and Ichigo accepted the words with a raised eyebrow. He knew that this was a far better alternative to Aizen’s delusions of grandeur and becoming a deity. For now, Sosuke had found companionship in both intellect and strength, Kyoka Suigetsu no longer howled her loneliness instead she was content with the will of her wielder.

“Though I can’t help but wonder at your own happiness Ichigo.”

It was a simple statement but struck Ichigo all the same. Was he not hiding this ever-present sorrow? He tried to shield those potent emotions behind high walls so that they wouldn’t hurt the others. But it was all together too hard, when day after day relentlessly he was forced to see the dead walk. To live, breath, eat, sleep, and talk with them stirred memories both fond and horrifying.

Aizen took Ichigo’s silence for an answer and hefted his katana in challenge eyes bright he said, “Allow me to distract from your sorrow.”

Ichigo smiled a tiny bit sharp and feral as he accepted the challenge, his insomnia-crazed mind was tired of hiding. With a nod, they were charging forward once more the ringing clash of blades resuming the deathly orchestra.

Ichigo swung overhead flowing away even as his strike was blocked he twisted and ducked narrowly under the sharp slice of air. Channeling his reaitsu through his fingers Ichigo aimed at Aizen from under where Zangetsu was locked with Kyoka Suigetsu and let loose a low powered byakurai. Sosuke twisted away from the kido and disengaged their blades before darting in once more Kyoka Suigetsu gleaming like a celestial force.

Ichigo flicked his blade up to catch the incoming attack and swirled to the side Zangetsu followed his movement. He swung at Sosuke’s unprotected side eyes keen on the swirl of brown eyes he flipped back to avoid a cut aimed for his chest. Letting Zangetsu rest in front of him Ichigo channeled a large portion of his reaitsu into the blade watching as tendrils of ebony heralded his devastating attack.

“Getsuga Tensho.”

A whisper before the oncoming storm of reaitsu that surged forth with the howling fury of a god. Ichigo registered the widening of cocoa orbs before Sosuke was enswathed in folds of ebony filling the midnight blue sky with darkness. It dispersed with a pulse of light blue reaitsu as Sosuke
staggered from the attack panting for breath but still standing eyes alight. There was challenge in those eyes as if he wanted to see more of the power Ichigo kept behind a seal. Ichigo wondered if the lieutenant was going to faint before with a whisper of steel the figure in front of him was gone.

Ichigo blinked before a smile lilted on his lips and Zangetsu shot up to intercept the blade crawling towards his neck. Reaitsu lapsed around Sosuke’s form rising and curling in challenge, Ichigo’s eyes brightened with determination and hues of crimson and ebony began to dance around him.

Back and forth they shot across the sky blades whirling with the combined might of will and reaitsu. Kisuke watched from below keen eyes analysing the battle and reaitsu even as Benihime cajoled him to join in. Bloodlust began to rise in his ears overtaking the marching beat of his heart.

Ichigo didn’t flinch as Kisuke appeared behind him blade unsheathed and Benihime’s familiar call of bloodlust crowing throughout the air in heady gales. Zangetsu rumbled in content echoing Ichigo’s own thoughts as the blade flicked down Ichigo tilted back to avoid a side sweep from Sosuke.

Ichigo darted behind Kisuke and flung his blade toward the blonde’s neck, Kisuke swayed to the side Benihime flowed up with casual grace to intercept the metal. Sosuke had a small frown tilting his lips before those eyes lit up manically and he charged forward blade swinging towards Ichigo. Pushing down the pressuring instincts that pulsed within in his blade Ichigo slipped away from Kisuke keeping the captain in his peripheral view even as he braced himself for Sosuke’s attack.

The brunette crashed into Ichigo with the force of a building waves of reaitsu crashing against him with the devastating power of a tsunami Ichigo balanced precariously against the sudden force, arms heavy with tiredness shook with Zangetsu to divert the power. A devious light tickled his thoughts and before Sosuke could prepare himself Ichigo was gone, the man was left unbalanced and tilted forward slightly. Kisuke gave Ichigo no respite and was instantly in his space Benihime sailed towards his chest, Zangetsu zipped up to intercept the insatiable blade slower than Ichigo would have liked. In reward a thin mark of red traced his collarbone the dull feeling of liquid registering against his senses even as he flicked back the oncoming assailant.

Pushing back the tangled mass of sweat soaked bangs Ichigo gazed out upon the two scientists and they regarded each other with light animosity. Ichigo’s muscles burned chiding him for the strain he was near constantly putting them through with the training and this battle.

Channeling his training forged in the mud and times of fire, from behind his back Ichigo charged a Getsuga Tensho. With a sharp flick the blade was in front of him a wheeling arc of power surging forth to slam into the surprised Shinigami. From within the cloud of dust Ichigo charged the tangy and playful reaitsu that was Kisuke’s stark as Benihime’s shield fell away in the gales of power her release had ensued.

With a chiding smile Ichigo shook his head in amusement and continued on his path. Sosuke reacted quickly Kyoka Suigetsu snapping up to block the lethal blade even as Ichigo’s reaitsu surged from his fist coveted behind his back it drilled towards Kisuke. Benihime caught the energy and redirected it towards Ichigo. Sosuke took that moment to began chanting a high level kido while Kyoka Suigetsu surged forward to cut Ichigo.

Ichigo bore the brunt of the attacks with little damage, his hierro and blut vein absorbing and transferring the pain to where he could continue to fight. Panting for breath at the large expenditures of energy Ichigo had released from what the seal permitted, Ichigo tilted Zangetsu to face the ground surrendering to the elder Shinigami.

Ichigo flopped upon the rocks boneless and the thrill and rush of battle faded from his body and he was left with the burn of muscle and the coolness of night touching damp skin. A nameless terror
instilled itself in his mind for a moment his slowly calming breathing picked up erratically before the
soft hum of Zangetsu sealed the rampant feelings away. Kisuke and Sosuke touched down beside
him the three sprawled upon the rocks and gazing upon the night skies above.

The two began talking in quiet whispers lulling and soothing to Ichigo, it reminded him of days in
the lab with Kisuke where they would hunch over their next project. Grease would cake their skin
and mat their hair, and spare pieces of junk would dig into their sides. Kisuke would begin to ramble
about whatever invention or theory would catch his fancy and he would talk; for hours on end the
man could go his gravelly voice pulling Ichigo into slumber.

It was the same now as he felt the weight of the day and their training heavy on his eyelids. He
thought that they likely plotted this knowing the two, and he acknowledged that it was likely with the
best intentions. Tire him out with a fight so he could get some sleep, Ichigo wished it would work
but he knew that it would take a whole other level of exhaustion. The kind he saw when they trained
in the King’s realm in between the fighting. Because as much as one could patch a hole in the fabric
that separated that world from Soul Society it would never be the same, and it didn’t help that
Haschwalth was damn good when it came to barriers. With a soft sigh Ichigo surrendered for a
moment darkness overtook his vision and the content hum of chatter became a lullaby.

It didn’t last. He could feel the sharp pull of nightmare threatening him if he let himself drift further in
the currents of Morpheus’ realm. With a peal of reaitsu Ichigo opened his eyes and took in a few
deep breaths washing back the dredges of faces scarred with death. Kisuke and Sosuke share
concerned glances but said nothing and for that Ichigo was all the more thankful.

“Ichi would you consider taking a sleep aid?”

Kisuke questioned softly concern in his voice and a paternal or brotherly warmth in his eyes. Ichigo
paused and considered his answer thinking of the multiple remedies that had been developed in the
future, he had tried them in a wish to escape for even a surreal moment. Instead he was trapped
within his dreams, no way of escape. Shaking his head eyes filled with gratitude he responded,
“Thank you but I’m alright I’ve had bad experiences with sleep aids.”

Kisuke slumped and Sosuke looks slightly disappointed but Kisuke gazed into Ichigo’s amber orbs
and seems to accept the honesty for what it was. Sinking back against the hard surface Ichigo eyes
travelled to the constellations above following the familiar figures of his childhood he drifted into a
relaxed state. His thoughts came and went on soft currents and he let them acknowledge the
whimsies of his mind but not dwelling or forcing on them; thoughts of their training, the familiarity of
their interactions.

“Ichigo what do you believe will happen when we return?”

This time it was Sosuke and Ichigo regarded the man who was displaying a rare case of hesitancy
before he replied, “The Vizard will be accepted as the Soutaicho has decreed, there will be unrest
and likely rebellion but on the political scale having one of the Shiba’s main family members tilts the
odds in our favour, not to mention the grace of the Shihōin clan head. We will settle into life but it
will be different than before, for one the Vizard have increased power levels. Some might see this as
a challenge and begin training. Others might choose to leave our ranks. It is the future and as
unpredictable as our own lives.”

Sosuke nodded and Kisuke looked minutely shocked at hearing Ichigo speak so much before he
shook the expression away. Silence descended one more, though this time a thoughtful silence as the
three pondered the words spoken. Sosuke looked up and stared for a moment before he leaned in to
speak to Kisuke, they talked for a hush moment all the while at random intervals their gaze landed on
Ichigo suspiciously.
“Ichigo… are you from the future?”

Sosuke questioned softly albeit hesitantly staring consciously at Ichigo eyes bright. Ichigo paused eyes wide, and his heart stammered in his chest. He knew he had given them more then a few clues as to the truth behind his façade but for the normally manipulative man to be so blunt was a slight shock. Quiet reigned for a time as Ichigo pondered his answer Zangetsu sending assuring waves of reitsu through their bond.

“That’s your second question Sosuke,” Ichigo flashed Sosuke a teasing smile calming the man’s worries before he continued, “I am from the future, or rather a future.”

“What happened?” Kisuke questioned solemnly with only a glimmer of the normal curiosity peaking through the dark metal grey of his eyes. Sosuke’s eyes were sharp as they locked onto Ichigo seeing the sorrow prevalent in warm chocolate orbs hidden under a crown of orange.

“We-I lost... in the end.”

Ichigo tilted his head back to look at the sky taking calm from the starry sky above as his emotions rustled beneath his skin. Their understanding was almost tangible at his freely given confirmation. Brushing his hair to the side Ichigo gripped Zangetsu taking a breath of the crisp night air he rose to his feet.

Finally turning to face his companions of the night Ichigo saw the two sprawled on the rock a bottle of sake resting between the two already half drained. Tipping his head in farewell Ichigo parted the silence, “Goodnight.”

The two Shinigami looked up eyes dark and pensive saying their farewell with a nod. Shedding the hard shell of his façade he let the torrent of his emotions shine through his eyes for a brief moment. With a flutter of thick cloth around his ankles Ichigo turned and returned to the darkness of the cave stealing one last glimpse at the sky.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! I’m once again very sorry that next week I will likely not be posting so many apologies. Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Thank you all for reading!

Carpentry!!
Chapter Summary

Chill time, impulsive decisions and the end of training.

Chapter Notes

Rame

(n.) Something that is both chaotic and joyful.

Hello everyone, *rises from the dead* I am still alive! I apologize for not posting last week and the likely future of uneven updating that will be prolonged till the end of June. With exams and culminating activities, I struggle to find the time to write, but I will valiantly try my best!

In other news, we are here with chapter 22 the final chapter regarding Vizard training. In addition, some fanart had been done for the Moon’s Tears by a friend on the site Zaraki Jaegerjaquez (whose Deviantart is under the same name) so many thanks sent his way. I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The music drifted out from the turntable it was a newer model with the broad disc of shining sable, the sometimes-scratchy quality accompanying it. They all turned a blind eye as to how the device appeared knowing well that Shinji had one in his office (and that it was likely still there) which seemed to indicate an unpermitted view to the human world. But as was said before no one seemed to care about the small breach in protocol.

A male singer’s voice bounced and echoed off the cavernous walls magnified a hundred times over and adding an altogether interesting quality to the music. It was some musician from America if Ichigo recalled correctly, from what little he knew of the time there in America. The jaunty tune accompanied well the content atmosphere of the quiet evening after a day spent training with fruitful results.

Ichigo was curled in one of the corners where a swath of silks and fabrics were thrown around and over him so that he felt partially obscured like the living dead residing in the tombs of Egypt. Love
was sitting at the end of a sofa within arms reach, a magazine in his grasp and his head tilted to listen to the music. Rose was curled beside him lightly strumming the strings of his guitar to the rhythm of the singer’s voice. Shinji was curled like a cat perched on one of the alcoves set in to the walls he looked on from above watching over all like a god. A content look rested in his eyes even as Hiyori whined at him from below her perch on a myriad of pillows precarious.

Lisa let out an irritated huff flashing a glare at Hiyori from over the rim of her horned glasses before she returned to her novel settled beside Hachi. The large man with bubble-gum bright hair was holding his hands in front of him spirit energy like the delicate strands of gossamer threads that a spider wielded stretched out in front of him. The glowing green threads formed intricate mandala patterns, the lines seemingly never ending as they flowed from one form to the next.

Ichigo could almost read the purpose in Hachi’s reaitsu at the script presented to them. Each ring or pattern was enforced with a kido of some kind, though Ichigo suspected it was far more likely for them to reside in shielding. The intricately woven threads of the kido formed a strength uncommonly seen in a normally cast kido. Tessai watched on from across Hachi his braided hair caught the light of the oil lamps in a way that drew the eyes as he stared pensively at Hachi’s creation.

Ichigo had never thought on it before in his own timeline but it was quite obvious now. The Kido Corps were not to be underestimated. In Aizen taking the two high ranking members from Soul Society he had effectively crippled their ranks more than most would know. The orange-head kindly thought of his many and vast attempts at learning kido, from training with Jushiro, to construction with Hachi, and high level spells with Tessai. He humourlessly thought of their dumbstruck expressions at the multitude of ways kido had failed him.

Mashiro let out a happy bubble of laughter drawing Ichigo’s eyes towards her. The lime haired lieutenant was seated on Kensei’s lap the grey-haired man looking distinctly uncomfortable at the close contact. The childish lieutenant was babbling on about whatever inane subject in a way that reminded Ichigo fondly of Orihime. His heart let out a pang in his chest when he thought of the ditzy brunet and her many astounding food combinations, her death had hit him hard but Uryu even harder.

Ichigo pushed away those thoughts and the vile twinge of bile that burned his throat and heart. He cast his eyes over to Kisuke who was flipping through a thick stack of paper while every once and a while lifting his head to confer with Sosuke. Yoruichi was draped over Kisuke, the man expertly moving about even as a wave of deep purple locks tickled the back of his neck. Sosuke was leaning back against one of the seats a worn tome in his hands and his reading glasses perched on the bridge of his nose taking away the sly look from his figure.

Ichigo gazed upon the scene with a small smile twined on his lips and bright eyes, he felt calm in a way that had been absent during the heavy dust of the daylight. This content aura of community and family was something he had missed. The solace one found in a friend was quite different from the kindling of unity; each was valuable in their own way. Zangetsu purred contentedly in the background of his mind echoing the harmony of his soul.

Letting out an inaudible sigh Ichigo flicked his eyes back to the novel in his hands, the tome had a dusty red cover faded with age and the pages were in some areas smudged. It was one of the books he had recently ‘borrowed’ from the vast archives, in which to be truthful he had made another midnight visit to the grand palace of books, much to Sosuke’s chagrin without the enigmatic man. The lieutenant had been soothed when Ichigo had pulled out a few thick tomes that he knew the scientist would like and tossed them into the spectacled lieutenant’s lap. Hence the man absorbed by the book in the corner only able to spare a minute for Kisuke to converse about whatever new founding or theory.
Translating the text as he read Ichigo frowned as the letters began to dance across the page becoming slightly blurry. Rubbing away the sleep from his eyes which made itself noticed dully in the ache of his muscles and the heaviness of his eyes; where it felt a valiant struggle to keep them open and read the next page. Ichigo contented himself for a moment with the thought that their training was nearing it’s end and with it Ichigo could hopefully try and gain some rest. Shiro growled his affirmation of the plan; already the orange-haired Shinigami had spent just over an hour listening to his two spirits nag him about taking care of himself.

Ichigo even agreed with them, sometimes though it was hard to break old habits. It didn’t help that he had been recovering (however slowly) but that had all been thrown back in his face the moment he had damned himself to spending a month in close proximity to the Vizard. A shudder passed his spine at the thought of Unohana’s wrath when she found out how well he had taken care of himself since their last visit.

The rush of adrenaline that the mere thought of the terrorous captain of the Fourth induced, allowed him to open his eyes where they had drifted shut. Turning the page Ichigo began reading the sprawling script that seemed to bounce across the page. The novel detailed from what Ichigo could gather, ways in which one might manipulate the barriers of reaitsu regarding the tricky state of time. Soft chatter rose up around him accompanied by the musician’s deep voice and Ichigo sunk into quiet state of relaxation.

Some time later, Ichigo set the novel down a pensive look cast on his features as he thought over what he had just read. It took his mind a few minutes to comprehend the complexity of the words and absent he opened their yellowed paged once more. Raking amber orbs over the words akin to chicken scratch Ichigo waited for his mind to catch up. Within one second and the next he set his book down with a small peak of dust and was on his feet with a whirl of orange locks.

His quick flurry of movements garnered a few looks but they soon turned their attention elsewhere, all that is except for Kisuke whose metallic grey eyes were pinning Ichigo in place for a moment. Flinging aside the man’s curious gaze Ichigo swept away on a mission to find more than a few resources hidden somewhere nearby.

His return a few minutes later gathered no more attention then his exit except he could now feel Sosuke’s inquisitive stare from behind the frames perched on the bridge of his nose. Pushing aside their gazes Ichigo settled once more into the nest of silks and spread the collection of papers and leather bound books in front of him. Flipping at random through the pages Ichigo began mumbling under his breath as he tried to recall where he had seen the information before.

Absently he brushed away stray strands of orange as he picked up one of the journals he used to record ideas and thoughts. Or at least that was what he replied with to Kaien’s incessant questioning. In reality they often contained parables of the future or speculation upon things that were far reaching even for this time.

Letting out a sigh Ichigo’s gaze was drawn to the one tome he hadn’t yet opened. It looked the same as the day he had found it in the antiques shop, with rusted yellow pages, a cracked spine, and a heavy reaitsu submerged in it’s skin. Eyes flicking up hurriedly to gaze at his companions Ichigo settled whatever irrational emotion was tingling at the base of his skull and cracked open the book.

“Find what ya lookin’ for Ichi?”

Ichigo’s eyes raised from the heavy scratch of ink to lazily drag along the cave walls before landing on Shinji. The captain was starring curiously eyes wide and the smirk so cheshire in nature curled upon his lips. With a responding tilt of his lips Ichigo shook his head and returned his focus to the pages leaving a non-verbal response in his wake.
After a time of silence Ichigo let out a pleased hum settling the book on his lap he picked up the red bound book and compared the two novels side by side. The evidence was there and Ichigo was both pleased in proving that he was indeed still sane of mind, and confused by the meaning of his findings. Slowly as the strands of an idea began to connect his hands weaved in front of him.

The text suggested plausible ways for one to traverse time and space and as of yet Ichigo could still not see reason behind his appearance in this timeline. It resided at the tip of his tongue as if right in front of his eyes but no matter what he could not yet see it. Shiro’s coarse laughter echoed teasingly in the back of his mind and Ichigo shook his head fondly at his spirit’s actions.

So preoccupied by his thoughts and the still drifting currents of reaitsu Ichigo was blind to the approach of the two scientists in the room. It was only after Sosuke flared his reaitsu that Ichigo deigned to look up at the curly haired lieutenant, crouched beside him was Kisuke staring intently at Ichigo rather then the collection of volumes placed before Ichigo. Releasing another sigh Ichigo met determined grey eyes before catching Sosuke’s own.

With a deft flick of his hand he reversed the novel, so they could see the pages Ichigo had been gazng at for an undetermined amount of time. Knowing it would be unwise to let the two gaze at the works for too long else they embrace their inner kleptomaniac Ichigo closed the books together with a soft snap starling the two out of whatever meditative state of wisdom they had entered. There was a peculiar look in Kisuke’s eyes as if he was asking Ichigo a question yet at the same time begging silence.

With a faint roll of his eyes Ichigo settled back and lifted his hands in front of him. In slow movements with a regulation of carefully controlled breaths Ichigo allowed a thin beam of reaitsu to rest horizontally in front of them. The bar of reaitsu divided until in a skewed perspective it formed a shape similar to a cube, accompanying the raven lines of reaitsu a thin bead of red danced along the cage.

It was a simple method to display what he was beginning to grasp but the message was received, even as admiration at the technique Ichigo showed glimmered in Sosuke’s coffee coloured eyes. Deciding to take their little diagram to the next level he allowed the beam of red to bounce out of it’s boundaries, in some cases dividing and multiplying. From these beads of red spirals of blue reached out to touch beads of green.

Thin lines of blue seemed to suddenly stretch around them, reaching over their heads tangling around their hands and tickling their noses. The faint prickle of Ichigo’s reaitsu underlaid the faint scent of something indescribable. Then they were gone in a colossal fade of small sparks as the single red bead at the center blinked out to that of an ember.

Hachi and Tessai were gazing at Ichigo appreciatively a speculative light in Tessai’s eyes. It was likely they had sensed Ichigo’s rather ‘unique’ way in which he wielded his reaitsu to form such imagery. Pushing aside those idle thoughts and the confusion of the other Vizard he turned his eyes on the two men in front of him who were beginning to comprehend the message behind Ichigo’s impromptu story.

“Fortune surly has picked a favourite Ichi-chan.”

Ichigo smirked at Kisuke’s chiding yet teasing tone, knowing the man could barely understand the truth of the matter but was beginning to grasp its concept. Sosuke tangled a hand through his hair eyes still pensive even as he shifted restless where he stood.

Ichigo collected the miasma of papers that had sprawled everywhere from the neat stack between one moment and the next, just as a female singer came on. Her voice was light and airy in a way that left
that sensation of flying, or perhaps falling.

“Ichi-berry how come we never see your kido skills?”

Mashiro questioned suddenly lime locks bouncing around her ears as she sauntered over to gaze down at him bending at the waist. Kisuke took that as his que to make a tactical retreat and slipped into the chair nearby where Yoruichi proceeded to wrap around the man like a cat; ghost blond hair disappearing under a curtain of plum coloured hair. Sosuke looked contemplatively at his seat set an ample distance away before with a slight tilt of his brow he reclined against one of the walls waiting for Ichigo’s answer.

Rubbing a hand behind his head in slight abashment Ichigo thought of his many attempts to even wield the ability to cast kido. Brushing back traumatic memories of days spent trying to learn Ichigo answered, “It’s really not my forte? I’m better suited to cast higher level kido with my levels of reaitsu and they usually take too long if I want to cast them correctly.”

Mashiro nodded happy with the answer and retuned her attention to Kensei once more. Much to Lisa’s disappointment at the ensuing bubble of noise, the lieutenant flipped a page in her magazine rather loudly in her typical passive aggressive manner.

Tessai looked like he was considering strolling over to talk to Ichigo and the orangette in question thanked the heavens when Hachi intervened. The large kido master pulled his commander to the side where they proceeded to speak in hushed tones.

Sinking back against the walls Ichigo felt the ebb and flow of the reaitsu around him. Closing his eyes, he could almost see the particle soft light dancing and swirling like brilliant grains of sand carried by the wind. Colours swirled and weaved interchangeably the very being of the souls around him intermingling, dancing, and following the endless flow of life. The sight kindled his own reaitsu to reach forward from where it hovered around him always aware of what they possessed. The light behind his eyes grew brighter still as reaitsu peaked with the warmth of their souls, radiating happiness, a kind smile faintly traced his lips at the sensation.

Opening his eyes, he blinked adjusting to the warm glow of the oil lamps he let his eyes rest heavily on nothing, the rough walls of the cave serving as a simple canvas for his thoughts. They came like spears poking and prodding asking him to think and to ponder. So much was happening, beginning and ending within such short time. They would soon disembark from their ‘sabbatical’ with powers new to Soul Society or rather the three worlds. Just so this time of peace, lazy contentedness was drawing to a close and the thought left a pang in his heart.

Idly fingering a lock of orange in his hand Ichigo winced thinking of the Shibas’ reactions when he returned. The young Shinigami grimaced at the thought of Kukkaku’s spoon which was wielded with force alike to the Captain Commander’s Bankai. Ganju would probably cast those puppy eyes the ones that instantly stirred guilt in his heart, so like his own sisters’ attempts (which always succeeded). It was Kaien who was the variable. He would either be a blubbering mess, or iced fire ready to sink Nejibana into his thick skull.

Thinking of his ebony haired double reminded Ichigo how much he missed his family. As much as spending time with the Vizard was healing in its own way (that sense of community and their reaitsu surfacing from the dust kindled his heart like fire), it was also terribly lonely in a way they couldn’t yet comprehend. It sometimes stretched his pride to admit that he depended on Kaien and Byakuya but he was grateful none the less for their presence.

Pushing aside the adjacent feelings to Zangetsu-Ossan’s slight disproval Ichigo comforted the older spirit. A reverberating growl sounded through his mind and Ichigo raised his eyebrows in surprise as
the dual tone voice trickled along the seems of their bond.

“Damn King. Ya need ta take better care of yaself look at ya moping like a lost teenager.”

Ichigo winced that was a low blow even for his zanpaktou, then again, he could expect nothing but honesty from them in the end. For one’s soul did not lie to them. Pushing aside the slight swell of bitterness those words dredged up, Ichigo responded “Once this ordeal is over I rest. Then again they do say ‘I’ll sleep when I’m dead” though that might not apply in this situation.”

The orange-head could almost sense the albino spirit’s disbelief at his words but Ichigo shook it off. Turning his mind to Zangetsu-Ossan Ichigo waited to hear what the older spirit would say having remained quite during their common spats.

“Ichigo remember what has happened before, the worry you caused your family. Even so you need to prepare yourself to return.”

Ichigo accepted the older spirit’s words watching all the while as life passed on around him. As he reached to push a stray lock behind the shell of his ear an impulsive idea struck him, something almost heralding the days of his youth. The orangette could sense the wave of amusement simmering within Zangetsu-Ossan and the gleeful cackle that bounced around his mindscape was all to indicating of Shiro’s position.

A piercing would certainly be a change of pace however minute, and maybe he needed a change. It would certainly be indicative of his time with the Vizard, and of his own history. For however much he would like to deny it, he was once considered a punk. Whether it was the scowl or the constant street brawls was a debateable topic but relevant none the less. It certainly didn’t help that the decision to get a piercing was rather impulsive and all too much like his youth.

For as much as Ichigo would like to say he was that brash kid who rushed into everything head first but heart in the right place it was different now. Oh, he still held that stubbornness (hence the determination to receive a piercing) and his loyalty to all he considered under his protection. But he also took the time to plan, think about the consequences and sometimes he wondered when he had truly lost humanity and naivety to have it replaced with this fractured soul.

Tilting away from the precarious danger that his thoughts all fell to eventually, Ichigo considered his idea in depth. He wondered for a brief moment if it would reflect negatively on the clan before the thought of the geezers (who by now had very little power due to something of a coup; the cause remained unknown) sparked a carnivorous smile to curl on his lips. No, the real matter would be Isshin who served as the clan head and Kaien.

It sometimes weighed on him that he had to make decisions and consider the clan. By the third quarter of the war the nobles had been nothing, no one had cared if he decided to curse up a clan head for being an idiot. It elevated him in a balance as well, having a whole clan and family was far different from the small bubble he had known all his life; and such a family as the Shibas (no matter how overbearing they are) was far better than the Kuchiki family stuck on poise.

Tilting his head to the side with a slightly devious smirk curling his lips Ichigo let his gaze cast around the room before landing on Love. In his own timeline, he had found out the man was a closet genius when it came to matters of fashion, he could sew, cut hair, and apply make-up in astonishing ways. Ichigo had chalked it up to the Vizard having far too much free time and their inherent eccentricity before dismissing the notion.

The thought pervaded and his gaze sharpened in interest regarding the man. He could always do it himself having performed more than a few hasty surgeries on the fly he held finesse with a needle to
rival Uryu (no matter the man’s fierce argument against such). But he would much rather have someone else try rather then glimpse into the image of still water.

As if feeling fiery amber orbs Love paused in his conversation with Rose angling himself slightly so that he could face Ichigo. Rose peeked from the side curly blond hair framing his features as his fingers drummed the beat of the music. In a slightly abashed manner Ichigo tilted his head and shrugged. An easy smile slipped onto Love’s features the calm man shifted into a relaxed position ignoring Rose’s squawking as the abrupt movement tilted the dramatic blond slightly and he struggled to regain his balance guitar tipping like a beam on a scale.

“What’s got such an intense expression on your features there Ichi?”

The black-haired man questioned the shades covering his eyes glinting in the glowing atmosphere of the room. Ichigo didn’t hesitate, knowing Zangetsu would chide him for it if he did he blinked before saying, “I was considering having my ear pierced, as we all know Rose loves the sound of his own voice,” Here he winked at the blond suggesting a joke, even as the man squawked in outraged, with a teasing smile, “and he has preached rumour of your skills.”

His words brought silence to the room and the orange-haired Shinigami wondered when he began to have that effect, maybe it was after commanding so many battles, or leading too many war councils. Conversation burst out within a second as the others spoke of Ichigo’s sudden declaration. He caught quick flashes of their words, echoing surprise, just as much as the acceptation of the lack of sanity within his head.

Love smirked at the quiet uproar Ichigo’s question had brought forth however unknowingly before he considered the kid’s question. The fiery haired kid was regarding him with those chocolate eyes brimming with determination, the kind he had come to recognise meant Ichigo had his heart set. Nothing neither heaven nor hell could stand in his way when those eyes appeared.

“Sure, no problem Ichi. Though we are going to need a needle?”

Love’s answer brought forth more conversation and Shinji a natural leader among their group piped up, “Ichi ya sure bout this?”

Before Ichigo could answer Lisa let out a sigh and placed her novel beside her piercing teal eyes centered on Ichigo and her whip like voice said, “Really Ichigo? Imagine how Taicho’s going to react.”

Ichigo bristled before blanching at the thought of their captain. Shunsui was unpredictable even more so than Kaien but it wasn’t like the man would raise that much fuss… right? Shaking away the demurring thoughts that left Shiro giggling (which was never a good sign) Ichigo revealed those eyes burning with determination and silenced any protest that may have leaped forward.

With a swivel, amber orbs landed on Kisuke who blanched at the sudden gaze piercing his soul. Really the man thought he needed some sort of cover especially in regard to Ichigo perhaps a hat would serve his purpose well. That gaze was all-knowing and Kisuke sighed, the knowledge Ichigo was from a future (however terrible) did nothing to alleviate his disappointment at all his secrets being known.

The needle caught the light of the oil lamps and attracted the attention of the other residents, in comparison to Ichigo’s triumphant smirk which remained hidden in the shadows of the cave walls. With a flick the needle was sent sprawling through the air much to Ichigo’s amusement and the incredulity of the others. Hiyori stomped over to whack her stupid captain over the head even as that thin pinprick of metal was caught between Ichigo’s fingers.
Love rolled his eyes at the rather dramatic display even as Rose nodded in approval. With a flourish of ebony robes, the young shinigami handed the needle over to his sudden accomplice in crime. Love took the moment to pin Ichigo with one more questioning stare before he slipped from his seat on the futon. Crouching beside Ichigo Love raised an eyebrow in question, with a silent nod Ichigo gestured to his right ear.

“You know this is gonna hurt right Ichi?”

Ichigo nodded a tilt to his lips betraying his amusement. With bated breath, the rest of the Vizard waited like an audience for the final act. It was over between one moment and the next with the sharp coolness of an incision accompanied by a pop that seemed like a gunshot near the orange-head’s ear. The tingling sensation of blood welling up from where the hole in his cartilage was, and left Ichigo pleasantly surprised.

“There done.”

With that the abrupt and unanticipated tenseness that had filled the atmosphere dispersed as swiftly as storm clouds beneath the sun. With eyes incredibly bright and a smile small but true Ichigo looked at Love and said, “Thanks.”

It was simple but far more meaningful then a long-winded speech and really Love thought simple honesty suited Ichigo more then whatever crafty games he sometimes played. The young Shinigami with nonchalance rubbed away the blood beading against his ear, and stared at the ruby liquid staining his fingers for a moment. Ichigo paused staring unseeing at the cave wall, Love recognized that stare; was well familiar with having seen the other scientists of the group wearing it.

Within one split second and the next Ichigo was on his feet once more. He flashed a wink in Love and Rose’s direction before he disappeared into the shadows only the bobbing head of orange like one of the will-o-the-wisps in the darkness.

Ichigo appeared again in a swirl of black fabric lined with white, a gleeful and overly pleased smile like a content cat was settled on his features and Love, like any sane man, felt slight apprehension at seeing such an expression. Ichigo tumbled down into the mess of fabric one hand clutched tightly to his torso he shifted and settled for a moment before stilling. Curiosity struck Love and with a perched eyebrow he leaned over to glimpse whatever Ichigo was hiding.

The orange-haired Shinigami unfurled his fingers slowly to reveal a loop of thin metal that clasped together to form its shape, connected to the metal was a strange object pearly white in colour. Staring for a time Love squinted trying to realize what Ichigo was holding.

“It’s a hollow tooth.”

The young Shinigami’s words turned some heads even as Love raised his brow in surprise at the nonchalantly spoken words. Sosuke seated on the other side of Ichigo regarded the lieutenant pensively for a moment before asking, “How is that possible? Wouldn’t the tooth like the rest of the hollow dissolve upon it’s death?”

Ichigo smirked softly and shook his head reaching up to his now pierced right ear he unclasped the loop before sliding the thin rod in place and connecting them once more. The picture it presented was oddly fitting adding a wild feralness that well already inherent in Ichigo was now more pronounced. It suited him in a way that raised nostalgia and brought on images of ruggedness that the Shiba clan all seemed to posses.
“Hmm? Oh that’s simple, our masks.”

A burst of surprise echoed throughout the room at his simple statement as the others considered the implications of his words; Aizen frowned for a moment, tilted his glasses and stared before with a nod apparently satisfied he turned his attention to one of the tomes nearby (and how it appeared there was a mystery).

“What is it?”

Rose blurted out with a swish of blond curls and that melodious voice. Ichigo looked lost for a moment at Rose’s question, before with a shrug he answered in a slightly unsure tone, “It was an impulsive idea… and I thought a change would be nice.”

The Vizard sweat-dropped at the nonchalant reasoning their youngest member had delivered. It was both unlike the Ichigo they had known and somehow completely expected of the Ichigo they were leaning to see. For the young man presented rather differently to those he was close to than to others. They all had noticed as Ichigo had slowly started to open up and be at ease around them.

It was there Love saw the brash decision making that was never prevalent under the command of Soul Society. He had settled within their group as if they were meant to be together, fate’s hands had been busy in constructing their fate. It was like a puzzle that when apart was far reaching and altogether near impossible to see the whole picture, but put the pieces together and a new harmony would be found.

Ichigo’s lips twisted into a faint smile more genuine then the smiles he plastered onto his features to assure others of his calm state of emotions. That was another difference, Ichigo’s emotions. Whether it was the small smiles truer than few he had known, and those soulful eyes. They hadn’t been the most defining feature when he first met Ichigo, no the kid’s bright shocking orange hair had taken that pleasure.

However as one came to know the young man it was easy to see it was the eyes that were far more defining. For the rest of the world Ichigo displayed a mask, granted it was nothing like the famed Kuchiki mask of carved stone. No this merely softened the whirlwind of the orange-head’s heart so that others would not have to see the contrasting brightness and darkness that danced constantly.

Rose tugged on Love’s hair bringing the man’s attention away from his musings. Gentle chatter had started once more and the music, a male quartet that was far too harmonious, jaunted from the turntable. The warm atmosphere that had wavered and wobbled under the face of Ichigo’s sudden decision had stilted. Looking over at the source of his thoughts Love could see Ichigo resting against the cave walls, a curtain of orange locks casting his features in shadow. From a close distance, Love could see that the man was awake and was merely staring contemplatively at the empty space around him. A smile traced his lips but for a second those amber orbs flashed as dark as moonless night so full of some deep sorrow, and then it was gone and Love wondered if he was imagining it.

Before any of them could react a crown of lime green was making itself known. Love thought the lieutenant likely need a bell as to alert the others of their imminent demise as she sauntered towards Ichigo. The orange-haired kid took a breath, more of a sigh, at whatever plan Mashiro had whipped up. She bent at the waist flashing Ichigo curious amber hues and in that innocent yet condemning tone asked, “Ichi-berry do you have any other tattoos”

Ichigo blanked for a moment in a slow ascent from where his head had been buried in the clouds. Mashiro’s question once again raised silence and Ichigo held a moment of silence before he responded, “Just one… no I’m not telling you the story.”
Mashiro pouted in the childish manner of her nature before like a joyful sprite she questioned, “Can you tell us where Ichi-berry?”

The young Shinigami debated answering her inquisition, before with a nod he pointed to his left thigh. Mashiro giggled eyes bright and Love was debating the merit of retreating when Lisa leaned towards them novel placed beside her and sharp teal eyes gazing out from behind red spectacles.

“When did you get another tattoo?”

Ichigo blushed suddenly as Yoruichi’s coy golden eyes winked over to the small gathering that had clustered together at the conversation that had ripened into being. The plum-haired captain was likely pondering an intimate relationship between the two, however unlikely it was, the head of the Shinigami Women’s Association always had one eye open for the latest gossip.

“Uh a few years ago in the summer?”

Ichigo answered in a slightly questioning tone, only to receive Lisa’s frigid stare. A slight frown perched on her lips but it was one more of long term suffering rather than annoyance, touched with a hint of fondness. The way one might look at a slightly irritating sibling.

“Did ya get it when ya were drunk Ichi?”

Shinji piped up from his little alcove watching the proceedings with a smirk that seemed to split his features. Ichigo scoffed as if the mere idea of such incredulity was absurd before in a challenging tone he responded, “As if, but I’m sure you have more than a few drunken mistakes Shinji.”

The blond squawked as if having taken a particular jab from Hiyori when in fact the midget lieutenant was rolling on the floor with laughter at the other captain’s plight. Lisa was still staring pensively at Ichigo as if trying to recall the sudden appearance of a tattoo one her co-lieutenant.

The bone of Ichigo’s new piercing caught the oil lamps and Kisuke jokingly piped up, “My we should have known all along that Ichi-chan was actually a punk!”

It was said in that gleeful teasing tone that was both light and slightly spiteful enough to provoke Ichigo. He cast his rather infamous glare at Kisuke before in a shrug with contemplation on his visage he commented slyly, “We all have our pasts, no?”

And if that wasn’t a confirmation of some kind Love would play Rose’s guitar, everyone took Ichigo’s teasing words with much the same reaction; startled expressions and wide eyes. Then everyone considered it truly. Because as much as Ichigo presented the image of a stern, hard-working lieutenant, he was loyal to the death, far more foul-mouthed in good company, had a stare to rival Kami, and a certain roughness one saw in the likes of a fighter of the streets.

Looking around at the Vizard gathered around Ichigo, Love felt amusement rise. Ichigo was like a magnet and he probably didn’t even realize it, drawing people together in one conversation alone so that they were a settled company. The air was warm with the light atmosphere of friendship and the common teasing that took place between everyone. Even Kensei the normally stone-faced man was smiling, and Aizen had even set his book down to play part in their light banter.

Shinji blanched as Hiyori aimed a rather teasing jab at him and the two began fighting to the continued amusement of the others. A new song began to play and light conversation began to flow as Mashiro began peppering Lisa and Yoruichi with questions about their next meeting and the new gossip they would receive. Love settled back beside Rose his partner content to continue strumming his blasted instrument with a melodious tilt of his lips. Ichigo was nestled into his little alcove once
more speaking quietly to Kisuke and Aizen with a content smile. Reaitsu buzzed and swelled with the familiar flow of family and their souls were far brighter then Love has ever thought possible.

X

The air was clouded with dust as Kensei tussled with Rose. The acrid taint of hollow saturating the air as the two dueled with their hollow masks firmly on their features. Ichigo leaned back against his perch of a rocky tower, Kisuke crouched beside him keen metal grey eyes assessing the battle in front of them. Ichigo was doing the same only his eyes constantly flicked between their battle and the other Vizard monitoring their training as they waited to duel.

“We’re going back tomorrow aren’t we?”

Kisuke spoke softly with a touch of mourning in his voice, Ichigo blinked and peered at the scientist. The man’s ghost blond hair shone like the stars in the afternoon sunlight radiating around them, the scientist’s eyes were soft in a way that was usually masked. Ichigo took a moment to think on those words acknowledging the truth to his words with an inaudible sigh and a strict nod.

Shinji who was sprawled above their heads on the peak of the spire hung over the edge, blond hair longer then Ichigo had ever seen in his own timeline hanging like a curtain of gold. With a nimble turn the captain flipped over to land firmly on his feet in a crouch, he rose with fluid grace to look at the two before with an audible sigh he plopped down beside Kisuke.

“I don’t wanna.”

Shinji spoke petulantly a frown curling upon his lips and casting his features in half shadows of sorrow. They nodded their agreement, the sentiment shared among them. Ichigo’s heart felt heavy in his chest even as in his inner world the familiar clouds were crowding the horizon. Zangetsu’s deep hum of reaitsu swelled beneath his skin and soothed the rush of nerves that bit at his emotions.

“Do you think we’ll be okay Ichigo?”

Shinji spoke again a tad more serious as deep coffee eyes stared into Ichigo’s own amber hues. Those words cut him for a moment before the pride that had instated itself in him during the days of their training remerged from whatever dark covenant. Ichigo ran a hand through orange locks in a common tick he had developed and said, “We’ll be fine… you’ve harmonized with your hollows the only matter now is training and mastering the techniques; that falls under the broad category of self-improvement. Everything else, well it will come as it will. We’ll just face it head on.”

If they were surprised by the icy determination hardening Ichigo’s voice and sharpening his eyes they said nothing only nodding with akin expressions mirroring his own. Slumping against the wall Ichigo let the strength of his persona fade so that the tired weight that clung to his soul was revealed for a fraction of a second. His thoughts on the matter of returning were complicated in nature.

While he missed his family (and he was relatively struggling to admit that, it had taken Shiro beating it in to his thick skull for him to accept it) and all the other residents of Soul Society. he knew he would lament the time that he had spent with the Vizard, the fond memories and kinship that had budded between the group in the month they had spent together. Idly fingering his new earring Ichigo smiled fondly thinking of all the times that occupied their days.

From Mashiro’s antics that bounced from one thing to the next and sometimes drove them all crazy. Lisa and Love in the corner sometimes accompanied by Rose reading their pervert magazines. Kisuke and Sosuke hunching over their worktables only the glim light of a candle illuminating their work of the early morning hours. Hiyori and Shinji bickering with the other and flinging names back
and forth. Tessai and Hachi dwelling in the kitchen to sometimes explosive results.

Working together under the faint sun of the training grounds, tackling, wrestling each other into the earth, and the ring of blades clashing with sparks. The sheen of sweat that would bead their skin and dampen their hair, the empowering rush of hollow reiatsu and the accompaniment of the others.

But to all the light there was the scale of balance. It ached in some deep part of him to live, breath, eat, sleep with the dead. They had been close in his timeline bonded by far more than just battle, their hollows and the instincts of family that came with it had emboldened their connections. Now they only knew one side of him not the facet of a man who had seen war and lived, if the afterwards could be called living. It led to sleepless nights like the sun never set behind his eyes and his inner-world was crumbling like the state of his soul.

There was also healing to be found. Their presence was soothing, calming the raging fires and towering tsunamis that sprung up a bitter mention of names and times. Even now he found himself thinking of their fates with a simpler ease, thinking of the war with still a laden heart but one that did not drag him under the earth. To be away from them all for the first real time since he had appeared some seventy years ago gave him a chance to breathe.

Now his heart was echoing the familiar dissonant call for his family, the Shiba’s antics, Byakuya’s calming presence, and the comfort of his mentors. Thinking of them traced a smile onto his lips.

“Ichi?”

Kisuke questioned softly pulling the orangette from his thoughts he turned to see like expressions on his friends faces as they watched the duels proceed. Blinking in acknowledgement Ichigo answered, “Hmm?”

Kisuke turned to Shinji who was rolling his eyes at Ichigo’s non-committal response before with a nod Kisuke turned back to face him. Those calculating grey eyes stared at him for a moment assessing all he saw with that lightning quick mind before having silently come to a decision he opened his mouth to speak.

That was when a ball of blond and black came flying towards them with the speed of a torpedo in water. Shinji stepped forward with a sigh having pulled himself from the ground far before they had noticed the incoming projectile, and caught the assailant otherwise known as Hiyori by the back of her shihaksho. The lieutenant hung there like a stuffed puppet swaying from side to side, arms crossed and a determined frown gracing her features.

“Baka Baldy!”

Hiyori taunted the long-haired captain, with a twitch Shinji turned annoyed eyes on the blond who laughed and untangled herself from Shinji’s iron tight grasp before darting off in a burst of Sonido. A laugh stilted from Ichigo’s lips and he watched amused as the two chased each other around the training area, some things would never change no matter the timeline.

Sosuke appeared from around the corner nose raised from it’s position in the spine of his latest reading material to watch the proceedings for a moment. A smile settled on his lips however faint and Ichigo heard Shiro’s content purr as a similar expression painted Ichigo’s features. The brown-haired lieutenant tucked his book into his robes securing it somehow (Ichigo suspected that the two scientists had sown multiple pockets into their robes. The idea had merit ad Ichigo was considering asking for their aid).

“Yo Sosuke.”
Ichigo called out in lieu of a greeting, brown eyes scanned the scenery before landing on their covert forms he paced over. Looking to the side and down Ichigo watched as Kisuke fidgeted with a stray mess of wires and metal all the while focusing on the approaching figure.

Sosuke settled beside Kisuke and in the quiet lull between the battles Ichigo could hear the haunting melody of Rose’s Shikai the notes floating on the breeze of power-induced winds. In another habit, he had unknowingly picked up Ichigo fiddled with his piercing garnering an amused cast of eyes from Sosuke.

Turning to Kisuke he recalled that the man had been attempting to initiate conversation earlier when Hiyori had appeared. Lightly kicking the man’s thigh from where the scientist crouched Ichigo waited for the man to look up. Grey eyes gazed up with a huff, and Ichigo felt the scene was almost wrong without a certain striped bucket hat but pushed aside the nostalgia and gestured for Kisuke to continue.

Kisuke blinked owlishly for a moment before those eyes hardened into two blades of steel and he asked, “Ichigo do you have plans?”

The orange-head stared for a moment before he started laughing the movement shaking his shoulders and stealing the breath from his lungs. Sosuke looked on in slight worry for Ichigo’s sanity as the young lieutenant started to calm himself from the sudden fit of laughter. Eyes cool as the ice residing in the poles Ichigo caught the attention of the two scientists and replied, “I have plans upon plans. Hardly any of them are masterworks like the two of you are capable of thinking up but they will work.”

Kisuke nodded apparently satisfied and the silence interrupted only by the ringing of blades. Sosuke however pierced Ichigo with those deep brown eyes and asked, “And we will play a part in these plans?”

Ichigo shifted slightly so that he was facing Sosuke and Kisuke he nodded and whispered, “Yeah… you’ll see.”

It was an unsatisfactory answer if the irritation glimmering off Sosuke’s frames were any indication but they could see the honesty in his words and the soul in Ichigo’s eyes so with reluctance they didn’t push the matter.

“In your future Ichigo, were the Vizard ever like this?”

Kisuke phrased the question tenderly as if wondering whether they could ask such things even when Ichigo had gone over the matter with the two a multitude of times. He would answer their questions as long as they stayed relatively far away from sensitive topics or incriminating information (for example Sosuke didn’t yet need to know the full extent of Aizen’s actions).

Sighing softly Ichigo ran a hand through his hair and considered the question for a tense moment before looking at the crystal blue sky filled with puffy clouds above Ichigo said, “In a way… they had their powers but were bitter and unable to truly connect with their inner hollows. They were still strong and a family but their bond was different less… vibrant it didn’t flourish and bloom like this. It was cultured through years stuck together with their mutual hate and shared history.”

Sosuke took the information with a slight somber cast to his reitsu. The control over his emotions that Ichigo had wreaked havoc on was beginning to develop once more, except this time it wasn’t so much as wall of stone as a thin veil of cloth. The man underneath the megalomaniac had turned out to posses a sharp sarcastic wit, a faint charisma, and a mind that went beyond madness and into the realm of thought provoking ideas often enough to make Ichigo lament the Aizen of his timeline.
Kisuke nodded eyes shadowed by his bangs and Ichigo thought that made the image a slight bit more fitting. Tilting his head back Ichigo shoved away the heaviness that was beginning to cling to his heart and head, as much as he could now reminisce with less pain they still drew on the strength of his soul.

The peace of their trinity was disrupted as Shinji barreled into existence beside Ichigo slumping against the orange-haired lieutenant with a low groan. The blond was panting lightly with bright cautious eyes as he gazed warily around the training area trying to spot the little terror that was Hiyori. Having caught no sign of the midget he continued to lean into Ichigo first flashing a questioning gaze at amber orbs, when Ichigo had nodded he had proceeded to let out a sigh and settled against the younger Shinigami.

They settled there for a time watching as the sky began to paint itself in sweet hues of gold and orange fading to a soft hue of pink. Love and Rose appeared first, dragging an irritate Hiyori behind them they deposited the blond at Shinji and Ichigo’s feet before plopping on the ground a short distance away. Ichigo heard Mashiro’s loud bubbly and childish voice before he saw the young women dragging Kensei towards the group much to the man’s annoyance. A prickle of reaitsu like a teasing tail brushed against his senses and the vague pop of shunpo resounded before Yoruichi dropped down to curl around Kisuke.

Tessai and Hachi emerged from the caves carrying plates of food much to the surprise of the others (that and the other plates floating on a bed of reaitsu). The food was set down in the middle of the semi-circle they had formed. Before Ichigo could defend against her attack Lisa had appeared and proceeded to mush Ichigo’s hair into more of a bird’s nest then it already was before she settled down beside Rose.

Shinji pulled himself from his resting place at Ichigo’s side to regard the group of Shinigami instantly catching their attention he smirked that smile that stretched his lips and said, “Tomorrow’s our last day, ya’ll have done well.”

The others let out sad hums at the news of their last days gathered together before similar smiles twitched their features at Shinjii’s rough praise. Shrugging back the emotions that were suddenly clouding his throat Ichigo spoke, “You all have done amazing and should be proud of yourselves. Don’t worry about the future it will come as it will, worry only about how much you’re going to improve before you come and battle me. Keep in mind always what has happened here but also consider that this information and times are between us only. Remember we’re family now and in the end, we’re not formed of blood or water.”

Kisuke smirked at Ichigo’s play on words as well as the honest pride shining in the orange-head’s eyes, the faint but true smile more then enough proof of Ichigo’s soul. As they began to eat sending many thanks to the cooks over the pleasant chatter of dinner Kensei’s chastising voice rose among the common tongue chastising Mashiro before her voice too was heard.

“Let’s have a huge bonfire and make the world go boom!”

Mashiro suggested dizzily eyes happy and bright as she tugged on Kensei’s robes pulling the stern man’s attention to the rest of the group. Ichigo and Shinji conversed inaudibly over the merit of the idea before with a nod Mashiro broke out into cheers.

“We should celebrate tonight, if we had sake it would be all the better.”

Ichigo was fractionally surprised to hear those words from Kensei (especially supporting one of Mashiro’s ideas) but shrugged and accepted them even as Shinji flashed everyone a promising smirk. The man turned walked towards the stone pillar, he tilted his head for a moment before with a crouch
and flash of the light he reappeared with a sake bottle in his hands and a collection of cups riding the
crown of his head.

A collective chorus of happiness rose among the group as the alcohol was poured. Tessai appeared a
few minutes later a smile slipping onto his usually stone-like features under his shades. With a flick
of reaitsu a fire began, the food continued to be devoured, and the sake was passed along seemingly
never ending.

Ichigo smiled resting his back against the rocky spire. Tonight, would be a wild time under the
moon’s careful watch, tipping back the cup of sake Ichigo watched as Mashiro corralled Lisa into
dancing with her as Rose provided a light and airy tune. The aura of good whether it be the
happiness, food, entertainment, wind or whatever else saturated the area around them was a buzz and
Ichigo thought it was a perfect way to end their training. Sosuke flashed a bright smile in Ichigo’s
direction and Zangetsu purred firmly content with their situation and the moon rose to her heavenly
position in the sky.

X

Chapter End Notes

Well I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, once again apologies for the uneven updating.
Reviews/comments are always appreciated and I will try my best to update on time!

Bottle!!
Hello everyone, I’m back with chapter 23! Once again, I will apologize for the schedule of one week that has now taken a detour to two weeks. Life has been busy with school but I’m almost out for the summer so please wait patiently and accept my apology.

Moving on I am both sorry and happy that this chapter is well-over 9K many apologies to my editor. In addition, in a word document the story is over 300 pages, it’s crazy to consider how far we’ve come. I hope you enjoy this chapter where we have finally reconvened in Soul Society. Enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo
X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Kukkaku hesitated before the doorway a pensive frown splayed across her features and her gaze resting heavy on the wooden frame. She could sense his reaitsu pulsing and humming in that particular way; she might not have become a Shinigami but any day she would be able to identify the presence of her family. Ichigo was waiting on the other side of the door and it stroked a chord of emotions that swirled tempestuously inside her kindling a burning fury, and releasing a damn of relief that her baby brother was alright.

They had been sick with worry when the news of the incident came in; Kaien with sorrowed eyes, heavy brow, and the solemnness that always accompanied death. Captains and lieutenants had been lost, but not in the traditional way. They had received a statement from the Soutaicho declaring that the Shinigami who had been “hollowfied” as the term was, would return. He had given no time frame and stated no names.

Granted the proof was there in the crippling of their ranks. But she had read the reports and they mentioned nothing of a certain orange-haired individual. What they did instigate was the cause however subtle, and Kukkaku was a noble, she wasn’t blind to the print between the lines. Which was likely the reason that when she next saw Kisuke and Aizen they would be receiving her wrath and fury.

First though was Ichigo. She was worried about the kid, he hadn’t contacted them, left them hanging by a thread gnawing at it with worry. She knew now that he was different, wasn’t one of the scientists that had tagged along to experiment and further their training or whatever hogwash the
report spouted, because as much as Ichigo hid a brain behind those amber orbs he wasn’t one for socializing. She was fine with whatever Ichigo was now, because he would always remain the same soul-eyed kid she had met in the guest room. All patched up and so very broken but even then, determined.

His reaitsu, which now pulsed with a certain feralness and the acidic tang of hollow, shifted restless for a moment before it seemed to take a breath in and with one moment and the next the door to the Shiba family home slowly slid open. It was a tantalizingly painful few seconds in which Kukkaku’s nerves wracked her gut and mind before her little brother was revealed.

When the figurative dust cleared and he was standing in front of her with eyes cast towards the ground she took in his appearance, like the men of the desert took in an oasis. Sensing her kindling gaze Ichigo slowly looked up, hesitance in every specter of his movement but he resolutely held her gaze. Ichigo looked weary, it was the easiest word to describe the soul in front of her when such a myriad of things registered upon her mind.

Amber eyes seemed to be swimming in a sea of purple, as the bags under his eyes contrasted sharply against the weak pallor of his face, and the vibrant orange bangs that cast long shadows. The eyes themselves seemed ying and yang two forces so contrasting always interlocked together. There was a deep tiredness and ache that spoke of sorrow and loss, the kind that wasn’t at all fresh rather the one that’s been there for a very long time. Then there was the content, the seeming joy at being reunited with his family that sprung forth like a fountain the moment Ichigo truly set eyes on his older sister, there was some paler shades of it and Kukkaku blithely thought that perhaps his absence was not all bad.

She let her gaze fall away from his eyes to take in that hair that gathered around his neck always so eye-catching, and paused as a thin glimmer of metal seemed to catch the light. Hesitating to scrutinize this sudden sight she could almost taste the wave of apprehension and nervousness that rebounded along Ichigo’s reaitsu as Kukkaku reached up and pushed aside tangled tangerine locks.

Ichigo was truly a punk she thought with a somewhat amused smirk even while the rest of her was claiming that the brat was in deep trouble. He had always been rebellious, oh he hid it well under the persona of a hard-working lieutenant, but the kid craved chaos and it seemed to follow him wherever he went.

There was a certain feralness that had only now become so apparent when Kukkaku looked at Ichigo, she thought it might be in part to the reaitsu swelling full of instincts and crimson inside her baby brother’s soul. But another part of her said that the Ichigo they’d known for so long possessed many masks and the air of refined grace that the nobles presented like gods was far to easy an example. Blinking Kukkaku thought of a younger Ichigo, one without the shadows in amber orbs, she could see such a rebellious determined smirk curled on those lips and wondered where it had been for so long.

Kukkaku took a moment to admire the piercing and the earring hanging in a simple loop with an almost iridescent white tooth dangling from the wire. Leaning back, she assessed Ichigo once more, he looked older now as well but the piercing seemed to tip that assumption in favour of the kid’s apparent inherent punk. It suited him she thought privately, suited this Ichigo who was already fractionally more open and less like the stone wall he had presented when they first met.

Taking a breath before the Shiba princess began her diatribe she thought that it was good to have Ichigo home. Some unsettled part of her calmed like the tranquil waters that Kaien would stare at for hours when meditating. Then the Shiba princess was off and she spared only a shred of pity for the sudden victim of her fury.
“Ichigo Shiba,” She started off deceptively quiet and watched pleased as the man ensnathed in ebony flinched before she pounced like the venomous viper, “Why couldn’t you have even sent us a message?! We were all worried sick about you! I mean seriously a month, no contact, no word, only the report! And a piercing! What will the elders think… don’t give me that stare, I know we all care jackshit about the geezers but that doesn’t excuse the piercing no matter how well it suits you.”

Ichigo gave her a slightly reproachful gaze before the soft eyes came out. The ones that can guilt you into most anything and seemed a unique talent of younger siblings. Feeling the anger drain from her form in a tired sigh Kukkaku swept forward and pulled the young Shinigami to her chest much to his struggle. Ichigo continued to writhe in her arms for a minute breathing a quiet and erratic rhythm, amber eyes wide. Then his reaitsu purred throughout him the sensation scattering and dancing like wispy boughs of thread over skin, Kukkaku smiled knowing her younger brother was home, just as his own soul knew.

They stayed there for a quiet moment, the evening light of the oil lamps glimmering off skin making it appear golden, the air held their breath and stilted their thoughts so that all Kukkaku could feel and see was Ichigo. Pulling back slightly Kukkaku tenderly swept a stray strand of orange away from Ichigo’s eyes so she could peer closely into their fathomless depths.

“I’m sorry Kukkaku.”

He whispered quietly and solemnly the first words he’s spoken since he came home. They were so filled with truth and honesty that Kukkaku wanted to bash the kid’s head in for making her eyes water. Placing a chaste kiss on his brow Kukkaku pulled back and absent-mindedly rubbed at the tears collecting in her eyes.

“Damn brat just don’t do it again or I will bring out the frying pan.”

Kukkaku bit out fondly eyes glimmering, Ichigo laughed and the heavy weight of the moment disappeared in a flurry of reaitsu that playfully chased their forms. It was kind hearted like the tender saplings of the forest and so inherently Ganju that Kukkaku only shook her head and flashed Ichigo a promising smile.

The young Shinigami tilted his head like a lost puppy in confusion before a smile as bright as the sun but so small it was barely noticeable settled on his lips and Kukkaku felt that inner warmth of family radiate from her core.

“Ichi-Nii!”

A blur of green and black appeared following the call and Ganju was suddenly wrapped around Ichigo. The orange-head’s eyes were wide in surprise and instinctively his hands wrapped around Ganju’s smaller form cradling the youngest Shiba to his chest. Shaking away the dazed look Ichigo looked down into Ganju’s wide grey eyes and released a hand to ruffle feathered ebony locks.

Laughter trickled from Ganju’s lips brightening up the room all the more while Ichigo smirked before hefting the kid up and swinging him around in a small circle. When Ichigo finally set Ganju on the ground the two were breathless with laughter and bright smiles were settled on their lips. Ichigo’s eyes were tender and so full of light in a way that they only shone with youthful souls.

He seemed a thousand years younger as if he wasn’t a veteran of Soul Society and some war unknown, just a kid with too much heart and far too many enemies in a cruel world. Kukkaku smiled fondly at the scene as the two settled on the ground Ganju curled up in Ichigo’s lap like a cat.

“Ichi-Nii why were you gone so long? I really missed you.”
Ichigo winced and a guilty look painted his features. He was quiet for a moment and Ganju stared at his older brother in worry not expecting the silence from Ichigo who always had a response. Kukkaku turned so that she could hear Ichigo’s answer watching keenly the rush of emotions that flicked across carved features.

“Some friends and I had to go away so we could train, because there was an accident and we wanted you all to be safe.”

Ichigo spoke slowly and sincerely amber orbs staring into Ganju’s own. *Ganju nodded wide eyes understanding and bright as Ichigo wrapped an arm around the kid’s waist and lifted the two to their feet with a quiet sigh.

“Ganju why don’t you go and grab Kaien-nii and Isshin-Jii?”

Kukkaku asked knowing that Ichigo could use the time to acclimatize to being home once more, and additionally that any Shiba could be a bit overwhelming especially as children. Ganju nodded a determined look twisting his lips before he sped off flashing one more beaming smile at Ichigo with a little wave.

Ichigo responded with a small wave, chocolate eyes bright and a fond smile curling his lips before he turned to Kukkaku and nodded his thanks. The Shiba princess chuckled and wrapped an arm around Ichigo’s shoulders. She barely caught it in the fleeting and flickering light of the oil lamps but darkness as deep as the oceans surrounding Japan and beyond covered Ichigo’s eyes.

She wondered if it was because of Isshin. Because that same look had sometimes haunted his eyes before, she remembered well the first time Ichigo had been dragged into having dinner with Isshin when it was just them. He had been a wraith of himself throughout the night, mind somewhere distant, and heart shuddering in his chest. Kaien had been beyond concerned about the reason and had met Kukkaku in the early hours of the morning.

Kaien had wondered if it was because Isshin might have reminded the orange-head of his own father. He had recalled with some fondness one of their “sake sessions” as her enigmatic brother had dubbed it. Ichigo sometimes shared things then in the quiet cover of night where it was just them and the silence that would never speak.

But that darkness had faded slightly the next day, and more so as time went on and Isshin interacted all the more with the semi-estranged orange-head. Why now was that darkness so passionate she wondered. Shoveling away the pensiveness that was filling her mind Kukkaku smiled and guided the young Shinigami out of the entryway and further into the Shiba household.

They settled in one of the sitting rooms where the others could easily find them, it was covered in a swath of deep blue silks embroidered with metallic detailing, plush cushions that cluttered together endlessly, and oil lamps with mosaic like pieces of glass that made the room glow. It was one of Ichigo’s favourite rooms and many times Kukkaku stumbled upon the kid curled up with a book enshrouded in silks and looking for the life of her like a piece of the room.

Ichigo fell back onto a gathering of pillows with a heavy sigh followed by a quiet moan. Flicking her eyes over in surprise as Kukkaku settled into the swaths of fabric an amused smile played her lips as she glimpsed Ichigo. In complete careless disregard to nobility and presenting a poised façade, Ichigo was sprawled across the pillows horizontally, his gaze was focused on the ceiling before it swung to rest on Kukkaku at the light laughter that fell from her lips. He looked like a fallen angel, bright flame hair sprawled around the crown of his head like a halo and pale skin shimmering radiantly.

There was no reason to wonder why he was one of the most sought-after men in Soul Society.
“What are you moaning about Ichi?”

Kukkaku questioned innocently watching as the orange-head shifted slightly so that he could raise himself up onto his forearms and gaze at Kukkaku. Ichigo let out a small sigh and ran a hand through tangled orange locks in his familiar tick before responding, “Just a lot of training, and not enough sleep.”

Kukkaku nodded sympathetically even as a frown began to form, she was really itching to knock some sense into those scientists’ heads. Because her kid brother shouldn’t look so tired but here he was and there was nothing much she could do about the past but she would damn sure make it that Ichigo could get some rest.

“How was the training little brother?”

Kukkaku questioned that famous insatiable Shiba curiosity sparking beneath her brow. Ichigo’s amber eyes flicked towards Kukkaku slowly, absent-mindedly before he tilted his face towards the ceiling once more and replied, “It was long but good, I think we’ll be seeing a lot of change in Soul Society.”

Ichigo spoke quietly in the comforting aura of warmth that surrounded them. Kukkaku quirked a brow at Ichigo’s answer wondering what change the Shinigami meant but resolved that in the end she would see soon enough. Pushing back an errant strand of ebony Kukkaku curled her arms beneath her chest and leant back so that she could gaze at the same ceiling as Ichigo wondering if they both were gazing at the same image.

The tranquil silence was interrupted by the rebounding sound of feet pounding along the floor, before the sliding door was flung open and a familiar blob of green and black re-appeared and attacked Ichigo. The orange-head let out a huff as the breath was knocked from his lungs by the flying projectile that was the youngest Shiba. Kukkaku laughed at the helpless look that settled on Ichigo’s face and the deep ruble of Isshin’s laughter joined her own.

Letting her eyes swivel from the rather amusing sight the two youngest Shiba’s were presenting Kukkaku’s eyes alighted on the doorway. Isshin was there, broad frame seeming to fill the space and that goofy grin settled firmly on his features. Kaien was behind him sea grey eyes warm and alight at the sight of Ichigo and Ganju playing together, and Kukkaku was beyond happy that her eldest brother was out of his funk.

The Shiba men could be so melodramatic, her elder brother had been moping and depressed the whole month, as if Ichigo had died rather than gone away. As much as the man presented the usual Shiba antics Kukkaku also knew her brother man was genuinely worried about Ichigo and had greatly missed their younger brother.

Isshin strode in with that confident swagger and settled beside Kukkaku content to wait for a better time to greet Ichigo. Kaien on the other hand rushed in and decided to add to the growing dogpile of limbs on the floor. Absently Ichigo’s groan of displeasure and subsequent squawking echoed throughout the room accompanied by Kaien’s usual prattle of words that followed whatever cruel rebuttal Ichigo had delivered.

Turning to Isshin, Kukkaku offered the clan head a soft smile noting the man’s chocolate eyes watching the scene with tender fondness. The kind that only appeared around his family and even then, rarely, the head of the clan was through and through an enigmatic man-child.

Laughter suddenly burst into existence drawing Kukkaku’s attention, her eyes flicked back to the group of boys to watch as Kaien and Ganju double-teamed Ichigo nimble hands roving over the
orangette’s chest and eliciting the light bubbly laughter that Ichigo so often hid. Kukkaku almost forgot how Ichigo’s laughter sounded but when she heard it she couldn’t help but smile, those two when they teamed up were one of the few occasions in which Ichigo could be elicited to laugh.

In a sudden turn of the tables Ganju was the one under merciless hands and the bright airy laughter of his youth bounced across the air as his two older brothers attacked. The three settled down Kaien and Ichigo flopped back against the gathered pillows Ganju tucked in between them and the air free with their happiness.

“Welcome home Ichi.”

Kaien chirped rolling over slightly so he could gaze into deep amber orbs, Kukkaku smiled and echoed the sentiment watching those amber orbs glow for a moment before the flame fell to a simmer. Ichigo pushed himself up so that he was in a sitting position his back against the wall as was customary for how he liked to sit (and didn’t that say something about instinct and strategy). Kaien remained flopped on the ground sea grey eyes connecting with Ichigo’s while Ganju pillowed his head on Ichigo’s lap.

Isshin coughed as if trying to draw the attention to himself (which was all too likely) and Ichigo’s head swiveled in Isshin-Jii’s direction soon followed by the others. A flurry of emotions passed through Ichigo’s eyes feather-light and fleeting like shadows, before like always they were tamed beneath the soulful amber.

“Hey Isshin-Jii.”

Ichigo spoke nonchalantly knowing it would likely strike a reaction from the clan head. A teasing smile rested on the orange-head’s lips and Kukkaku could see that mischievousness that he always hid in the curve of his features.

Isshin began frowning for a moment before with a wink he turned to Kukkaku and dramatically flung his arms over her shoulders pretending to sob all the while wailing, “Oh Kami! My nephew hasn’t seen me for a month and all I get is a hey!”

Kaien looked like he was considering joining in on the dramatics, face lit up in that silly Shiba way before he decided against it with a quick sweep of Ichigo’s face, as if trying to memorize every detail that had been absent for the past month. Isshin continued to whine in the background and Kukkaku let out a soft sigh as the man continued to blubber on her shoulder. Before the Shiba princess could whip out her favoured frying pan Ichigo called out, “Oy old man! Stop whining all over Kukkaku-nee.”

That was different she thought with a bit of surprise, usually Ichigo didn’t resort to calling out Isshin-ji, normally Ichi would just ignore the man’s crying and leave whoever was the unfortunate victim to their own devices. Then again Ichigo was different, at least since last they saw him. Granted they were minor differences in one’s eye but in the grand scheme of things Kukkaku saw that it accumulated. Ichigo seemed more comfortable in his own skin and moreover he was much happier and open. Oh, he was still that kid who wanted to hide away from the world but perhaps a little less now. She wondered if before whatever trials had befallen him, in the time before they met, if he had been like this.

Kukkaku hoped so, because it meant the kid was healing. It led her to think of the reasons for this new healing and maybe it was the release of the truth regarding his powers, maybe it was the time away from Soul Society with a small group of people he could call his own. Kukkaku didn’t know for certain but she was thankful nonetheless.
Isshin paused for a moment before like a cloud of darkness had formed over the man’s head the clan head was silent as death. Then the whispers under his breath started and the man began to move in whimsical ways eliciting laughter from the gathered members of the family. Ganju rose from his perch on Ichigo’s lap tugged at the long strands of orange hair before he sauntered over and landed on Isshin’s lap.

Those innocent wide grey eyes flashed up towards Isshin in the crippling, and debilitating stare that Ichigo and Ganju had down to a t. The stare that could bring down a nation and make one surrender their heart. With a fond sigh Isshin re-emerged from his cloud of depression and ruffled Ganju’s ebony locks.

Kaien in a flurry of uncoordinated movement (which is how it always was with her older brother Zanjutsu excluded) came to rest beside Ichigo the two twin-like in appearance leaning on each other. Ichigo presented an irritated front with his trade mark frown for a minute before with a simple shake of his head that sent orange cascading like fire the expression slipped away replaced with warm calm.

“So Ichi what was training like? Did anything naughty happen?”

Kaien piped up beside Ichigo, loud enough so that everyone was drawn into the conversation, Ichigo ruffled like a bird eyes prickling like lightning he turned to Kaien as if to vehemently deny such claims before a smirk curled his lips. It was a smile that carved one’s features and reminded her of a certain blond with far too much hair.

“The last night was interesting Kaien.”

He ended that simple statement with a wink and a slight tinge of rose dusting his cheeks. Kaien stared for a moment dumbstruck, eyes wide and uncomprehending before a blush dusted the ebony-haired lieutenant’s cheeks and he squawked, “My baby brother has entered the world of manhood!”

It wasn’t a moment before Isshin with a jovial and ill-forbidding smile for Ichigo joined in.

They were like a choir of screeching cats and Ichigo sighed rubbing a hand over his eyes before a glimmer of mischief entranced amber orbs though the same light of honesty remained and Ichigo spoke above the rambunctious din.

“Kaien, Isshin-jii I haven’t been innocent in that way for a long time.”

Kukkaku debated covering Ganju’s ears as the kid gazed on in confusion lost on what the adults were discussing. Ichigo flashed her an assuring wink even as the two men fell dramatically to the floor as if stuck by supernatural force. Short laughter escaped Kukkaku’s lips and Ichigo joined her accompanied by Ganju who though lost was caught in the contagious laughter.

As they all settled into a silence once more the question that Kaien had phrased entered their minds once more and curious eyes stretched towards Ichigo and the man ran his hand through bright orange locks before he asked, “How much do you guys know?”

Kukkaku thought about the young Shiba’s question. She had read the reports (and they really needed to work on a report writing class at the academy because that was plain chicken scratch) however unclear as they were usually presented.

It had stated that the Shinigami who had disappeared in one night, leaving a flurry of commotion and turmoil in their wake had been hollowfied. The news had reached them the next day that Ichigo had been seen in the First division storm on his brow and fire in his heart, together Ichigo and the Soutaicho had entered the chamber of the Central 46. But those were only rumours and she lamented
Ichigo’s time if he had to deal with the senile old fools.

The report continued to speak of the disappearance, in addition to the Shinigami sent on the mission, of lieutenant Aizen, Kisuke Urahara, and the captain of the Kido corps. Yoruichi had appeared like a cat drowned in water the third day in, plum locks frayed and golden eyes edging on feral touched with worry. Kukkaku had comforted her long-time friend even as her own thoughts had turned to her younger brother because no one had seen him for three days and he hadn’t been sent on the mission.

After the report came out Kaien had marched towards Shunsui-taicho’s office. Kukkaku heard that he had been the epitome of calm lethality, like the still lake waiting to erupt forth with the power of a tsunami. The Shiba lieutenant had entered the Eighth; dim and clouded with a somber air and the scent of sake as the captain lamented his two lost lieutenants. Kaien had pushed Shunsui against a wall, eyes blazing and voice low, had questioned the man how Ichigo who hadn’t been assigned to the mission could be missing.

Yoruichi had remarked it was only Jushiro-taicho’s intervention that calmed Kaien down, because as much as Kaien cared about the genial white-haired captain, family would always come first for Kaien and he wouldn’t hesitate to kill for them. The same could easily be said for Ichigo it made up the core of the Shibas and that of the orange-haired Shinigami’s being and was reflected in that deadly cleaver of sunlight.

The report had detailed the names and yet Ichigo’s was not there, the curiosity had plagued them just as grief haunted others. Kaien had slumped in his office that night and drained a bottle of sake eyes dark as a ravine. The simple paper merely stated that they would be trained for a month in how to manage these newly given powers. It had barely covered the concept of hollowfication stating only that the victimized Shinigami now possessed the capabilities of hollows.

Coming back from the blanket of her thoughts at the heaviness that invaded the room she realized Kaien had briefly covered the report. The darkness in his eyes had returned and it reflected in kind within Ichigo’s own eyes. Ganju looked up at Isshin in concern brow furrowed and a slightly petulant curl of his lips, Kukkaku shook her head in slight amusement at her little brother’s antics and beckoned the youngest Shiba towards her even as Ichigo spoke.

“To have an inner hollow is to have all you fear, hate, anger everything dark about you personified with golden eyes. You want to fight that, push it away and lock that darkness up so you don’t have to face it. But that isn’t cohesive, it torments your soul and rips it apart without you knowing it. The only way to become stronger truly, is to find harmony. Hollows are creatures of instincts and if you defeat them in battle with the intent of partnership you can achieve such.

That was what we started with. Forming the bond between the beings of one’s soul, what can be difficult is that in the process it is the zanpaktou spirit that is hollowfied. It can be like trying to find that bond from the beginning all the while a thin thread of the former union hangs in the balance.

Once we achieved that we moved to the actual training of using the hollow techniques we were ‘gifted’ with. Because in the higher echelon of hollows there are techniques alike to those Shinigami posses and some belonging only to the residents of Hueco Mundo.”

Ichigo spoke softly and earnestly his voice one that told of experience yet echoed some hidden uncertainty. In the candlelight, his eyes flicked golden and Kukkaku felt shivers trace her spine even as her soul echoed her confidence in Ichigo. Ganju shifted slightly in Kukkaku’s lap and Ichigo sent a small assuring smile in the boy’s direction before with a quiet sigh he slumped resting his head against Kaien’s shoulder.

Isshin and Kaien were silent, of the occupants of the room they were the ones who understood
Ichigo’s situation and his words the most. For they were Shinigami the opposites of hollows and balancers of their world. Sometimes she lamented her family’s role within Soul Society, knowing that they could lose their lives for the role they fought.

It was Kaien who broke the silence, refraining from turning to face Ichigo and disrupting the younger Shinigami where he rested eyes at half-mast with gentle breaths escaping parted lips.

“Ichi can you demonstrate anything?”

One amber eye opened fully to gaze up at Kaien with partial loathing and the question why. Ganju perked up eyes bright and Ichigo with a frown at Kaien heaved himself to his feet swaying for a minute before gaining his balance, for a pensive moment Ichigo stood there debating what to show them before reaitsu began to gather. It snaked along his arm crawling along his features in arcs of crimson and ebony, with slow drawn out movements Ichigo dragged his hand over his features. The last Kukkaku saw of his eyes held hesitance and weariness a certain fear lingering like the last dredges of night.

Bone white and inherently terrifying Kukkaku wanted to recoil at the mask decorating her baby brother’s features. It was cold and primal with sharp black lines and spiked teeth, through the eyes sockets gold enshrouded by black sclera swept around the room connecting with her eyes and assuring her of Ganju’s safety. Her fears were settled as she saw those eyes. Because even behind that burntcaramel colour there was Ichigo, his soul and heart couldn’t be hidden by a mask and she felt ashamed of the fear that had swept her away.

Ganju’s laughter dripped from the air as he placed the too large mask over his own features and Ichigo jokingly stated, “Far more terrifying then I could ever be kiddo,” Here he flashed his eyes towards the adults in the room and continued, “Though it’s normal to feel a bit of fear that’s just Shiro’s nature.”

His eyes though Ichigo’s held a distance as if he was preparing himself for an impact they couldn’t see. There was a raw old pain throbbing there like a vein of melted gold and Kukkaku wanted to comfort her little brother, assure him of whatever fears chased his heart. But she couldn’t because her own doubts and fears, however quelled by Ichigo’s soul, still reared its ugly head in her direction a frothing hissing mess of confusion.

At the silence that greeted Ichigo’s statement the darkness lingering became keener in a way that was all too much like a black hole sucking into it the light around them and quenching all thoughts of escape.

Isshin-jii was silent and cold the expression on his face as blank as stone and possessing nothing except for the amber hue of his eyes. Kaien appeared the same though as always, the lieutenant was different from the clan head. Sea green eyes bubbling with concern were heavy with thought and indecision, it was the look her brother donned when he warred with some part of himself, whether that be Nejibana or his own moral dilemmas.
As that dreadful silence began to choke the life from the room Kukkaku wanted to yell at the two Shinigami to do something as she felt helpless as if watching the scene from far away. Ichigo was drowning in a wave of hurt, she could taste it in his reitsu heavy on the air with the acrid taint of hollow and ash.

Isshin was the first to move like an automated man springing to life for the first time with disjointed movements he stepped forward drawing the attention of the occupants of the room. Decision made, serious fire blue as the darkest embers haunted Isshin-jii’s eyes and the captain swept forward to embrace his young nephew wrapping him up in that bone-crushing soul assuring hug.

Ichigo let out a shocked gasp of air at the tight arms encircling his waist, fear and panic and the other hundred emotions that would cascade over carved features when contact was thrust upon the orange-haired Shinigami flashing like lightning. Then Isshin’s warm reitsu like summer heat, or the burning sensation of a hot drink traveling through your core enveloped the duo locked in a tight embrace. Ichigo deflated muscles falling limp his eyes once two dark bubbles of emptiness were vibrating with a tender and fragile hope.

“Ichi we will always accept you, we’re family.”

Those assuring words whispered yet still carrying sent pangs through Kukkaku’s heart. She watched as at those words the ebony sclera fled and Ichigo was in strong corroded arms understanding this acceptance with a watery smile. They remained in that tight embrace for another minute where Ichigo’s eyes were distant and nostalgic grasping onto some familiar shred, before that faulty smile curled his lips and he pushed away from Isshin-jii with a huff.

Kaien laughed and stalked over slinging an arm around his brother’s shoulder his other hand reached up to ruffle orange strands while the lieutenant leaned in to whisper something in Ichigo’s ears. The atmosphere that had hung like a coming storm dispersed and the calming lull of Kaien’s reitsu hummed throughout the room. Ganju peaked out from under Ichigo’s other arm a childish smile curled on his lips and eyes bright.

With a laugh, the three brothers began to toss and tumble around the floor the mask that had been clasped in Ganju’s hands hidden from existence. Isshin smiled bright and assured that his nephew was no longer in that danger his own soul always submerged him in. With a holler of glee fitting the man-child, he joined the growing pile of limbs flaying like a rolling mess of seaweed, Kukkaku laughed at the humorous sight raising a hand to cover her mouth as light sparkled in the air.

“Kukkaku-nee join us!”

Ganju called out as he rolled out from under the tangle of limbs breath leaving his lungs in heavy pants and a beaming smile stretching across his lips. Kukkaku laughed at the kid’s demand knowing that entering that mess was tantamount to an apocalypse so she only shook her head and shushed the kid to keep playing with a small flick of her hand.

Kaien slipped out from beneath the mass of bodies between one moment and the next, just as Ichigo’s laughter burst from his lungs from his position crushed beneath the clan head and Ganju’s nimble fingers.

That stupid Shiba grin was settled on Kaien’s face and he settled beside Kukkaku with a sigh tipping his head back as he continued to gulp in heaving grasps of air like a man without water. His hand calloused from hours spent wielding Nejibana’s worn hilt curled into her own in a silent show and ask for support, tightening her hand reassuringly within his larger one Kukkaku let her head turn her own blue eyes staring into the swath of sea that was her brother’s eyes.
“Tomorrow he returns, they all return. I wonder if it’s going to be the catastrophe that the weather seems to instill its belief in me.”

Kaien spoke in that wandering tone the one that dragged him through the deep blue and was a far cry from the overly jovial Shiba front he usually donned. Kukkaku nodded the knowledge having lingered throughout her mind, during the return of one of their youngest members.

“He’s happier.”

Was Kukkaku’s reply sage and soft knowing that she could hardly assure her brother in this matter. Ichigo had already declared that the Soutaicho had taken care of it and who was she to doubt the head of Soul Society or to ask fate of her plans. Kaien turned his attention to the group of boys (because Isshin was hardly a man) fond smile tilting his lips, the expression was mirrored on Kukkaku’s own mouth.

“Yeah but he’s also dead tired… it stings a bit that we weren’t able to bring that warmth back, weren’t able to heal him. But Kami it makes my heart sing seeing him like this. I want to thank them, then let Nejibana free for what they dragged my brother into.”

Kaien replied with melancholy a hurt in his voice that belayed his will, but it lightened when he spoke of Ichigo before it resounded to a growl. His eyes flashed dark as the stormiest sea, cloudy with flashes of lightning sparking that protective flare and warning danger to any unwary sailor. Kukkaku nodded in agreement, knowing that the fools who caused all the trouble that happened would be receiving a mixture of responses.

Tucking a stray strand of ebony out of her eyes Kukkaku gazed at her older brother for a moment, the future seeming to stretch out before them in that moment where orange caught flame and his laughter bounced like an echo.

“I’m damn glad he’s home. You can finally tell him about Miyako”

Kukkaku phrased softly striving to draw that darkness from her brother’s eyes. Because Kaien was terrifying when he wanted to be and even if her soul knew better that wouldn’t soothe the irrationality of it all. So, she mentioned the women he’d found, she was sweet and kind but with the determined resistance of iron. Kukkaku thought they’d be a good match but she wasn’t tempted to intervene and would let life decide it.

“Oi Kaien-nii help! Ichi-nii is escaping!”

Ganju called out over Isshin-jii’s uproarious laughter, Kaien flashed her a sort of sad smile that was determined underneath the aches and pains that haunted his thoughts before with a familiar flourish he bounded up from the mound of cushions. Ichigo’s head peaked up along with an arm bursting through reaching towards a hidden sky. Panicked eyes though light with the fun flash towards Kukkaku pleadingly but the Shiba princess laughed and in a way totally unhelpful to her younger brother sat there and listened as Isshin-jii continued to spout some nonsense.

X

His nerves prickled and drove beneath his skin and Ichigo resisted the urge to shift at the heavy and oppressive reaitsu that pinned the Vizard where they stood gathered in the meeting room of captains. The Soutaicho was directly in front of Ichigo in his position at the end of the two lines staring into amber orbs without opening his own blazing inferno of pupils. Shinji was on his right and Kisuke on his left (because the scientists aren’t always right and Ichigo wanted to make a point) Sosuke was hiding somewhere with the others masking his presence as the spectacle wearing lieutenant often
favoured.

Ichigo was never normally nervous when it came to facing the Soutaicho or even the imposing presence of a united front of captains and lieutenants, but this situation sent sickly nostalgia through him choking his breath and calm. This reminded him all too much of when he was condemned, reminded him of the solemnness that the next death report would always entail.

And it’s different when you are standing there for the people you’ve taught, trained, taken under your metaphorical wings. Their life depended on him without them even knowing it in the beginning, and now maybe it was their pride or the sake of peace that was riveted throughout Soul Society. A ravine stalking throughout the paved ivory streets that all dwelled on the now hollowfied members of it’s sanctious regality.

Ichigo knew he would have to speak with the Soutaicho at a later time probably after the meeting adjourned. The old man would want to talk to his protégé/grandson/friend or whatever the old man considered Ichigo. Because the orange-haired Shinigami was a noble and Ichigo could be a master of manipulation even of his own feelings in front of others, Ichigo knew that the Soutaicho could see how Ichigo struggled to hide such truths from the old man, not when he’d revealed the circumstances of his presence.

Then the lieutenant would have to march to his division, and confront his captain. He was relieved that Lisa would see the drunkard first because Ichigo didn’t think he could deal with that heated and accusing stare.

Oh, it had been lovely coming home the night before, but his older siblings had pinned his form with heavy stares and Ichigo wasn’t sure what he was supposed to feel. The guilt had been expected just as Kukkaku’s wrath, but it had been Ganju’s hurt expression like a kicked puppy (and goddamn didn’t his sisters give him the exact same look when he came back from the campaigns during the war) and Kaien’s solemnness.

Still the warmth of the Shiba’s had been unparalled and the Shiba house was nothing but home to him now. The laughter and Shiba antics had settled his fears and wrapped him up in their bubble of family once more.

Yet even still his traitorous heart yearned for that freedom again. The ability to wake up at three in the morning and wander into the training grounds undisturbed (except for the pesky scientists) and fling Zangetsu around in a way that released that tense cast to his reaitsu. Now he was here in Soul Society again, he both dreaded that and welcomed that. Because there was no routine in that dusty ground just the camaraderie, the easiness of family. But Soul Society was order (and sometimes he welcomed that) granted it was more of organized chaos but it was the thought that counted. It was the press of familiar yet strange reaitsu bearing down all around him every moment of every day and he couldn’t escape. Sometimes it was comforting other times it stirred his soul restlessly.

The standstill of silence was drawing to a close as Yammamoto thrust his cane upon the ground in that jarring sound that drew everyone’s attention. Ceaseless muttering grounded to a halt and everyone waited with bated breath for the head of Soul Society to speak.

“We welcome the Shinigami hollowfied into our ranks once more. They are different, and we cannot change that. We must accept it and learn from it.”

The man always one of few words said only that opening, one crackling eye to consider the members of the chamber one by one. Considering their souls and drawing them to listen and heed his words.
The current captain of the Eleventh scoffed (Ichigo still didn’t know his name and hadn’t bothered learning it Zaraki would always be the captain to him even if it took a few years) that familiar bloodlust gleaming in his eyes. Ichigo wanted to sigh or laugh but remained impassive all too familiar with the Eleventh division’s tactics- or lack thereof.

There would be challenges and fights to see the merit of these new powers but Ichigo thought that fine. Let them show Soul Society their power, their might, and the abilities that have been stowed in them and accepted because of his will.

Yoruichi from her position close to the Soutaicho winked at Ichigo and Kisuke, a coy smirk tilting her lips, Ichigo smirked as beside him Kisuke blushed slightly while Ichigo only debated with Shiro the impact that her new information would have within the ranks of the Shinigami Women’s Association.

The young lieutenant could feel Isshin’s eyes on him, they were warm like a fire and Ichigo who had experienced the cold of the Reichenbach fortress wanted to bask in the heat, like he did the sunlight. Instead he pushed back the overwhelming waves of exhaustion that pounded on the borders of his mind. The man’s actions yesterday had shocked him to the core, sent lightning flashing throughout his inner world in spirals that descended on the greenery only to enliven it. It had been unexpected but nonetheless important. Because when had he last been held by his father? Even if this man was a far cry from the older man the sensation was there and overwhelming.

He had been drowning in doubt, in fear, in a thousand other thoughts of rejection, made all the worse by his exhaustion driven mind. Because this was his family and what did he have to fight for if not family. Their acceptance had empowered him, it felt like when his Shinigami powers had been revived (though perhaps less soul consuming). That wound had never healed and every acceptance was a step in the right direction or so Zangetsu-Ossan would drone with fond eyes hidden behind yellow visors.

“If no one has anything they would like to voice…”

The Soutaicho began sensing the thoughtfulness that a meeting did not need to host was prevalent as no one had stepped forward with their input. Shinji coughed smiled that cheshire smile and stepped forward so that he was between the two groups a figurative bridge he began.

“Now I don’t expect ya’ll to understand, or even accept it immediately but I want ya to recognize a few things. We’re all the same people ya knew a month ago so don’t be afraid of us, challenge us, or test us, we aren’t afraid of ya either. Three, this red head over here shoulda been promoted to captain cause he’s the one we have to thank for our lives.”

Shinji spoke a touch grandiosely (what was it with geniuses and dramatics) with feral yellow eyes that heightened everyone’s attention. Ichigo blushed at the blond’s words when he intoned that Ichigo should be a captain. He did not want that responsibility nor the praise, he was content to remain a shadow hidden in the background of the whole issue. Then Shinji had gone and thrown him under the figurative bus.

The blond with a sway of short blond strands (because they got up to way too much mischief their final night) shot a smirk over his shoulders directed at Ichigo. A chorus of voices responded to Shinji’s declaration, some humoured by the captain, because they knew this man and it was exactly like him, and others grumbled but resigned to accept their fate. More than a few pairs of eyes swung towards Ichigo and he wanted to shoulder himself behind Hachi but declined that gratuitous idea and remained there.

The Vizard’s reaitsu surged around him muted in the atmosphere of Soul Society but comforting all
the same, he let his own reaitsu untamed and wild urge from beneath his skin to entangle with theirs. It was funny how they could now sense when discomfort brewed beneath his skin, they were connected like that. The uneasiness of the afternoon passed like a fleeting shadow and Ichigo was glad they were here with him.

The Soutaicho nodded though he flashed a stare full of sunfire at Shinji before dismissing the captains and lieutenants. That amber eye flashed towards Ichigo and with a slightly weary sigh he turned to Lisa and nodded. The lieutenant flicked her glasses, shot him a glare, and even then, it was accompanied by a fond smile before she was gone with the others.

Turning his head to the ceiling shrouded in shadows above, Ichigo allowed himself to imagine the sun shining on his features. He took the moment to bask in the all that had happened even if the events were tremulous and the weight of the future before as present as ever, feeling the heavy gaze of the Soutaicho he let out a sigh and paced forward tipping his face to gaze at the old man.

A smile unconsciously slipped across Ichigo’s lips and he glided forward so that he was in arms reach of the Soutaicho. The bearded man stared impassive for a moment before a smile circled his lips as well and the man reached out to ruffle Ichigo’s vibrant locks with a mumbled, “Damn brat.”

A beaming smile split Ichigo’s lips and the two began pacing outside of the regality that the meeting hall imposed and out into the lustrous gardens of the First. The sun was bright and beaming in the spring air. Ichigo felt a fondness for the old man bubble up and realized dully that he had missed the Soutaicho, who had become something of a grandfather figure in the time he had known the bearded old man. He hadn’t talked to the old man since the first week of their ‘exile’ when they teamed up to combat the senile members of Central 46, it had been explosive and Ichigo could understand Aizen’s like of such situations. It almost made Ichigo lust for his youth.

The adrenaline rush and the power that came from standing up to authority incited him; Kami he wanted to do that again, march in and create chaos wherever he went with a smile on his face. But that was his youth, and the world wasn’t always kind enough to grant him the fortitude to conduct such ventures.

The feeling of nature embossed around him comforted his spirit and he could feel the hum of Zangetsu-Ossan’s pleasure at the greenery around them. They settled on a stone bench under the eaves of a willow tree that draped around them like a lover’s limbs, in a silent comfort born of their many meetings surrounding them.

“Are you happy with the results of their training?”

Yammamoto asked eyes peaking from beneath the caterpillar of hair that were his eyebrows. Ichigo nodded thinking of the days spent under the sun with the dusty air, he trusted them, and trusted in the abilities and character of the Shinigami. They weren’t masters of their powers, few of them probably would reach such a level without determination and effort. But they had found balance and harmony, and in change gathered power that would be essential when the Quincy finally came.

“Yeah they’re ready.”

Ichigo responded assuredly head tilting to glimpse the sun on it’s slow canter across the sky on it’s path to midday. He wanted to nap beneath that sun, but of course sleep would have to wait. He meant it, though what they were ready for he wasn’t sure, maybe it was Soul Society, maybe the future.

“Are they better then your timeline saw?”
Yammamoto questioned with a bob of his head that sent that white beard trailing across a canvas of ebony. Ichigo flinched slightly speaking of those times so freely always sent alarm bells ringing and raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Considering the Soutaicho’s question Ichigo thought of their power, the duels they had engaged in. it was hard to compare them to his own timeline where the range in their powers was hardly close.

But they were strong, almost close to the point where the Thousand Year War began, after the fiasco of three years that Aizen had subjected them to. That war had strengthened them, turned their bones to iron, and broken something inside of Ichigo.

“Their strength is greater then when I first met them in my timeline and that was after years of training.”

The Soutaicho nodded a somber thread to his reaitsu as Ichigo spoke about his past. The lieutenant knew the man carried some guilt or grief towards the young soul for what Ichigo had gone through and seen. Because in his heart the old man knew just as much as Ichigo and Kisuke and all the other proprietors of the war that a child shouldn’t have been their saviour.

“Kisuke was mentioning something interesting.”

Ichigo began cautiously as the thought entered his mind reluctant to focus on the Vizard and his past any longer, shifting slightly so that the sunlight only partially glimpsed his form. The head captain turned slightly and hummed permitting the young Shinigami to continue.

Ichigo thought of the enigmatic scientist with a fond smile, the way his eyes would light up whenever he talked about whatever invention planted itself within his mind. Running a hand through his orange locks Ichigo said, “The man was mentioning the benefits of expanding ventures into the Mundane world. Their technology is a far cry of advance compared to ours. He thinks it would be beneficial to instate a force of Shinigami within the Mundane world, and I agree with him.”

The Soutaicho opened one eye and assessed the brave Shinigami sitting beside him because Ichigo knew few others would project ideas so freely; that was usually left to Jushiro and Shunsui. The old man was thoughtful and considered Ichigo’s proposition. Ichigo waited slightly impatient soothed only by listening to Zangetsu’s softer hum that underlain the flow of nature and wrapped around him in the faint trace of an embrace.

“What does this idea entail?”

Ichigo smiled at the man’s interest and continued, “Kisuke suggested placing a team of Shinigami, some from the Twelfth and volunteers from the other divisions, in a reishi dense city. We would choose one located in Japan as other cultures are unfamiliar to us. The scientist then instigated that the teams sent would interchange and the data could be transferred to and from Soul Society.”

The man hummed considering the idea and Ichigo unconsciously gripped Zangetsu’s pommel resting at his waist. He wanted just as badly as Kisuke for the Shinigami to expand their knowledge by venturing to the human world. They would see not only an expanse in technology but if the other divisions contributed the whole of Soul Society could benefit. Unohana could gain immense knowledge from the medical knowledge alone.

The thing that struck him most though was the thought of change within Soul Society’s hierarchy and systems. Ichigo wondered if they saw the sprawling urbanism that was barely beginning in Japan yet had already peaked in other foreign countries that they wouldn’t try to tweak their own realm. Because as much as Soul Society was a blast from the past (quite literally) it represented feudal Japan a little too much. The common souls could benefit immensely from an improved economy or even
It was like the militia that had been instated in Soul Society on Kisuke and Ichigo’s recommendations. Already they had seen a drop in the crime rates and a rising number of entries within the Shinigami Academy.

The thought also chased his mind restlessly as he was torn over seeing his world change for the better, and watching everything familiar disappear once more. Inherently he knew that they would never forsake the way of the zanpaktou and hand their souls over to the cool metal of gunpower and technology. Yet it still dragged snaring hooks into his heart and it was only Zangetsu-Ossan’s words that calmed that torrent.

The older spirit had smiled that assuring smile that Ichigo rarely saw, the one that also said the spirit already knew the answer. He had laughed that deep baritone and rumbled, “Ichigo you have already changed Soul Society. It is inevitable you are a harbinger of change, let it be and see what comes forth.”

The Soutaicho coughed disturbing Ichigo of his thoughts and musings he turned to face the old man who was considering him with those burning orbs. His voice brittle with age but nonetheless powerful rippled in the space between them and he said, “We shall see, I will consider this proposition. Soul Society will always remain such but change in small quantities are not always unwelcome.”

Ichigo beamed at the man’s answer and seeing that the sky had tipped the crown of blue and settled at it’s peak rose to his feet. He still had to brave Shunsui and the rest of Soul Society and he felt a miniscule portion of that weight and worry slide away at the Soutaicho’s demeanour.

“You still owe me a duel young one, and don’t think I haven’t considered Shinji’s words.”

The old man commented watchful eyes tracing Ichigo’s form as the lieutenant took a step forward. Ichigo pivoted to regard the man who had amusement curled like a dragon upon his features. Ichigo laughed and nodded before continuing on his way, he looked forward to the day he could truly challenge the old man, test their blades and will. The old man also knew there was little chance Ichigo would rise to such a position much less change division but it was the teasing thought that mattered.

As Ichigo exited the First Division he sighed and shouldered once more the burden that his travels had instilled upon him. The orange-haired Shinigami winced at the thought of Byakuya’s reaction when they finally met again, not to mention his captain’s own reaction. Grasping Zangetsu’s pommel Ichigo started forward eyes determined in the next step of the journey.

X

Chapter End Notes

*Note: I picture Ganju’s age to be around 13-15 but I think he’s also quite immature and can be childish when it comes to his big brother.

Thank you all for reading and I hope you all enjoyed the Shiba reunion as well as the captain’s meeting. It will defiantly be interesting to see what changes will be brought even further to Soul Society if Kisuke’s plan is commissioned. Reviews/comments are
always appreciated and till next time!

Drop!!
Ostranenie

Chapter Summary

Ichigo meets up with Shunsui once more, and some trouble appears.

Chapter Notes

Ostranenie

(n.) Encouraging people to see common things as strange, wild, or unfamiliar; defamiliarizing what is known in order to know it differently or more deeply.

Hello everyone, we are here for chapter 24! School had finally let up so I will try to resume my regular update schedule. I’m really excited for summer and all the time to write so keep your eyes open as I have a few Bleach time travel ideas in mind.

For those who are worrying about the fate of the Winter War and the events of the next few chapters, I remind you that Isshin still dwells in Soul Society and that this author has many evil plans. I hope you all enjoy this chapter and read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo hesitated outside the familiar rice paper door, it seemed hesitation was his main medium these days. Zangetsu’s rumble of agreement sounded like thunder crashing in the background of his inner world and Ichigo pushed aside the irrelevant feelings. He could sense Shunsui and Lisa in the room in front of him, it was near tantalizing for Ichigo. The cramped office however much it often constituted his ire was a home, he had missed his captain; missed the teasing smiles, the heady sake, the lax personality and feel of it all. Just like his presence once gone had left an absence in their ranks during the war.

The man had grown to fill the role of a father or mentor to Ichigo. The many days spent dueling or training Ichigo how to use his dual blades had formed a strong bond, cords wrapped irrevocably around Ichigo’s heart. Shunsui had been the one to show anger along with Shinji at Ichigo’s circumstances, that a kid had to fight their wars, and had to deal with the effects of losing his zanpaktou for a year alone.

In the times when it was quiet and the lull between battles was complacent, he would pull Ichigo aside. Sometimes they would voyage to the division kitchens and trade recipes moving through
mechanical motions to prepare food as they reminisced or discussed the war. Other times under the eaves of sentinel elms they would share sake and Shunsui would speak of the past, ask Ichigo about his dreams and what the kid had once wanted.

And as was the bond of Shunsui and Jushiro the white-haired captain was never far behind, or always accompanying on whatever escapade they had embarked on (that one time in Rungokai had been killer). The two were like ying and yang inseparable and Ichigo sought comfort from them on more then one occasion. But he would always feel a deeper bond with Shu, because they had spent those summer nights of hazy heat with the ringing of blades, barring their souls to one another.

With a sigh of nostalgia and the ache of his circumstances, Ichigo slid open the thin door frame and stepped inside. The pungent smell of alcohol that was always present, so much so that it seemed embedded in the furniture, hit Ichigo like he was walking through a cloud of tear gas, as he walked into the dingy office. Lisa’s sharp eyes flicked up from behind the rim of her red horned glasses, she shot him a glare full of malice from over the lip of one of her many novels. Ichigo knew she didn’t really mean such spite it was just how the lieutenant functioned, because underneath Ichigo could see a spark of fondness even with the chastising hues of blue.

Shunsui craned his head up from under the brim of his straw hat warm chocolate eyes blinking in partial surprise before a gentle smile curled his lips. The man stared at Ichigo like he was one of the paintings the sellers in Rungokai displayed, eyes brimming with warmth assessed him taking his appearance and health with a nod.

Ichigo was unsettled feeling half fooled knowing or maybe expecting rightful anger. Ichigo still possessed that instinctive and rash mindset, the one the led him to charge after Rukia and defy what could amount to a government. Granted he had tamed it somewhat, seen the negative consequences of rushing head-first into a battle with enemies possessing unknown skills and powers, it had cost him in the end.

It had led to a surplus of wounds and one too many experiences he didn’t want to relive; it almost led some to doubt his will to survive. So, he had meditated, Ichigo had drawn from Zangetsu-Ossan’s seemingly unending reserves of patience and learnt tactics under Kisuke and Aizen’s watchful gaze, spoke with Jushiro about how to take that instinctive reaction, (and it had been a surprise to learn the calm man had once been like that in their academy days) and turn it elsewhere.

He had seen Shunsui’s anger because of that rashness, experienced the wrath of the laid-back captain. Ichigo knew it was nothing close to the fury that their enemies faced in battle, but Shunsui had been stern and unyielding with his words in his lecture. War changed them all in the end but it couldn’t change the core of one’s being and it was slightly ironic that the words that threaded his soul into existence dwelled on a lack of hesitance.

Ichigo swept his amber eyes around the room avoiding his captain’s eyes for the moment, he observed the lack of cluttered papers (some of the work he knew had been foisted on the lower seats), Shunsui no matter how much the man could be lazy, knew when it was necessary to deal with work. That or he had burned them which seemed the more likely option.

Ichigo swung his eyes to connect with Shunsui’s, knowing that he could delay it no longer with his complacent musings and reminiscing. Smouldering brown locked onto his own and their souls were bared like animals clashing.

“For a little while there Ichi, I thought Yam-jii finally got his hands on you.”

It was a tentative bridge between the two kindled in the tense atmosphere, and Ichigo was desperate to cross it. Wiping away the lingering shreds of hesitation and doubt that roiled in his gut like a
serpent, Ichigo wanted to settle into that familiar role. Ichigo wanted to take back if only temporarily
the normality of working in the office, the gentle hum of paper being filled out and the light tangle of
their reaitsu.

“Not yet Captain, though the Soutaicho was particularly convincing this afternoon.”

Ichigo responded gaily shrugging through his words with a sheepish smile, he glided into the office.
Shunsui cracked a brighter smile and tipped that worn hat in greeting ambient reaitsu circling Ichigo
in playful gales. with a sweep of his calloused fingers through orange locks Ichigo slid forward so
that he could plop himself on the worn couch layered with a variety of coloured blankets and pillows
assorted like a mountain worn and faded with age.

“Ma Ichi-chan,” Shunsui voiced with that sweeping baritone of his. Ichigo looked up at Shunsui’s
words, eyes tracing across the room before landing on the man in the flower patterned haori, with a
nod Shunsui continued eyes earnest and bright, “We’re glad you’re back.”

Ichigo felt a light blush dust his cheeks at those words and he pushed it away with a slight scowl
marking his features in a trademark defense against showing his emotions. Ichigo composed himself
for a moment before his eyes danced around the room and he responded, “Glad to be back though I
could do without Kaien and Isshin-jii’s wailing.”

Lisa smirked and Shunsui guffawed at the statement, both well familiar with the Shiba family antics.
Ichigo grinned and settled once more, the reaitsu of the atmosphere comforting and echoing its usual
sensations.

“Captain has agreed to take us out to lunch, to as he says, ‘catch up’ though I doubt that’s his sole
reason,” Lisa said, wit sharp as her tone, she flashed those devil eyes in Shunsui’s direction. The
captain made to protest Lisa’s accusation, but that wicked glare appeared and he slumped in his seat
tamed for the moment. Ichigo thought it would be nice to go out to lunch with his fellow lieutenant
and Shunsui.

Over the years they worked together, they often set out on such ventures stopping at whatever
restaurant heeded their fancy within Rungokai’s bustling streets. It would be a good opportunity to
escape Seireitei’s cloistered air where the walls had ears, and gossip flew like the wind. In a
restaurant, they were secreted from the world and though still members of a government system they
were able to speak with ease and without rank.

Often Ukitake joined them, adding to their little bubble his deep insight and the calm he seemed to
walk around with like a cloak adding to the flowing atmosphere. Sometimes he dragged Kaien (in
which Ichigo was sure Kaien was usually not in the know) along, then their lunches were all the
more energetic as the hyper members of their party detailed whatever daring story was the topic of
discussion.

Thinking of his brother brought a question to mind and Ichigo asked, “No normal Shibas? I don’t
think I can deal with more of his blubbering, I think he mentioned the words ‘miss you’ over ten
times in one minute.”

Shunsui laughed at Ichigo’s teasing, knowing that the eldest Shiba sibling would always likely
receive such taunting from the orange-haired Shinigami. Lisa muffled her laughter behind her palm
raven tails swinging with the force of her amusement. Shunsui took a sip of the sake cup resting
innocently on the desk, Ichigo watched mildly surprised as Lisa ignored the affront to her work
standards.

“No ‘normal’ Shibas as you’ve so fondly put it, though I think you would be hard-pressed to
categorize that clan as anything close to normal. Though Ju might come, he missed my lieutenants as well, after all who was to fetch me?"

Ichigo chuckled at Shunsui’s lilting teasing and Lisa shot their captain a knowing stare and shook her head softly. Ichigo sunk into the mound of pillows for the moment head tipped back, and eyes sliding shut. He basked in the feel of the office, the feel of Soul Society; familiar presences pulsing around him that had been absent for quite some time. Ichigo felt the weight of his body and the dance of the reaitsu around them.

The ambience of Soul Society was stunning when one opened their inner eyes. To see that materialistic regality that the afterlife possessed was only a portion, the sprawling streets that shone like carved ivory in sunlight, the Sokokyoku rising up like a beacon and warning. Both paled in comparison to what happened when Ichigo closed his eyes and looked with his reaitsu, colours swam and intermingled endless hues twirling and interchanging with each other; some were faded or soft pastels statues of kind souls, other were vibrant and sometimes garish, fighters and those filled with life.

It was strange that the others couldn’t see it. The young Shinigami knew the old man did, they had spoken of it before in one of their many conversations, gazed at the wonder Soul Society filled you with and mentioned the lights. But others they didn’t understand what Ichigo meant when he spoke of such things.

Idly Ichigo fingers played with the threads of the surrounding pillows, the crackling shuffle of paper ruffled by the spring breeze drifting from the open window, and silent breaths the only disturbance to the warm silence that was hovering over them.

Opening his eyes at the approaching spiritual presence, Ichigo tilted his chin down and faced the door with a raised eyebrow. Having noted the younger Shinigami’s attention, the two residents of the room let pensive gazes slide to rest on the trembling door frame.

Ichigo couldn’t seem to clear his mind of the paper-thin doors, always helping him to hide and take that moment a pause and a breath before entering, and yet in the end they had irrevocably sealed his fate, had been the last sight to greet tired eyes when Rukia had been taken and his life within the realm of the dead only beginning.

With a huff, the doors crashed open and the fourth seat appeared in a hazy mess of panting breaths and wide eyes. The petite woman bowed, took a breath of air and calmness, straightened her position and waited for acknowledgement. Ichigo openly smiled at the display appreciating the woman’s control over her actions and emotions, few could contain whatever urgency was plaguing them, the way the young Shinigami did with such ease. Shunsui nodded for the Shinigami to speak with an easy tip of his hat settling the female, reaitsu peaked in slight worry at the cause for concern.

“T-taicho sixth seat Kenshin has challenged lieutenants Shiba and Yadōmaru! He is causing a disturbance in the outer training areas centered in the main sequence of the division.”

Lisa frowned whip sharp, and Ichigo let out a heavy sigh; this was only their first day back and already they were facing trouble. Granted Zangetsu was correct in that chaos was more than attracted to him, even infatuation would be putting it lightly. Shunsui scrubbed a hand over his features and sought his two lieutenants, sending them an appraising gaze before he nodded.

“Did he say anything, or indicate the cause for such an attack?”

The older man’s deep baritone rumbled throughout the crowded space filling it with his presence and words, the fourth seat flinched nervously wringing her hands for a moment, before that hidden spine
of steal showed through (and Ichigo always knew it was there he had helped Shunsui pick her of the other initiates).

“He mentioned something about the vileness of your hollow sides.”

Ichigo scoffed while Lisa choked back a chortle of laughter, a tinge of snark crept from Ichigo’s voice as he commented, “And the idiot thought he could beat two lieutenants when he’s only a sixth seat?”

Shunsui chuckled under his breath at Ichigo’s words, tipping the brim of his hat as he pondered the situation. Feeling the questioning gaze of his two lieutenants the man looked up and locked onto their wild will and determination before he inclined his head. Lisa sent Ichigo a knowing stare and with a nod the two stood up reaitsu pulsing a warning to all who could sense it. It was heaving with the heavy ominous tilt of their acrid reaitsu that now resonated always with their Shinigami origins.

“Taicho we’ll deal with the problem then we can head out to lunch.”

Lisa stated nonchalantly eyes radiating from behind red horned rims. Ichigo grasped the pommel of Zangetsu’s hilt for a moment, taking comfort from the blade’s humming reaitsu, before he levered to his feet following the female lieutenant on her path of terror. As much as Ichigo wanted to stand up for the Vizard first and foremost, wield that righteous fury for them, it was their job to gladly show the world what they were made of it. If Ichigo wanted to help on the side, well that was his choice.

Shunsui moved to protest for a moment before he sighed and said, “Ma should have known that the training and hollow would have made you two more reckless. Though Ichi-kun here had always been a bit reckless.”

The captain paused after sending the two a knowing look. Meanwhile ignoring Ichigo’s soft glare, he whispered comforting words to the small fourth seat, and directed the young woman to the hallways. With a sweep of his palm Katen Kyōkotsu was in his grasp and the brim of his straw hat had fallen low over his eyes casting them in dangerous shadow.

Together the two lieutenants pushed into the hallway their reaitsu blazing around them like an aura of mal-intensive fierceness and staining their pupils’ gold. The Shinigami gathered in the hallways watched on in surprise eyes wide and mouths hanging open, as the two lieutenants thundered by presenting a united front in a passing flurry of raven cloth. They were followed by the captain a blazing calm inferno that presented a chilly smile. The fourth seat timidly trailed behind the three most powerful members of the division and questioned the sixth seat’s ignorance.

Ichigo breathed in the sweet spring’s taunt of outside as they stepped into the courtyard. Spring showers had dusted the area in a miasma of droplets that gleamed like liquid mercury in the light’s rays. The division had remained the same through their absences, only the everyday flow of life and the occasional fresh face dissuading Ichigo from believing that the whole event was a dream.

A crowd bustled and weaved in the corner like a mound of ants, tense reaitsu poured from that area in waves and a din of shouting carolled into the air. Connecting eyes with Lisa the two lieutenants glided over silent as the brush of air against the new buds of spring.

The sixth seat was a hulk of muscle squashed into a square jaw with wide dull eyes. Ichigo wondered how useless men such as these even gained a seat, in the long run the orange-haired Shinigami suspected they were likely from a wealthy noble family.

The cause of the disturbance whipped around, only when Ichigo let Shiro’s bloodlust swell from him on heady gales towards the unfortunate Shinigami. Beady black eyes stared at the two lieutenants for
a moment assessing, before he guffawed in a rough cruel sort of sound that was akin to choking.

“Look at these worthless Shinigami! They joined with da hollows.”

The man announced in a voice full of bravo instantly attracting the crowds of Shinigami, who had been cowering away with sly steps, attention whether willingly or not held. If the man had any skill it certainly was gaining the affirmation and attention of the gathered watchers.

The bystanders of the incident watched on with varying reactions, some were horrified by the man’s gall and couldn’t tear their eyes away from the fast approaching train-wreck, others watched on with vengeful glee in their eyes. The pack mentality of the group was hostile and Ichigo bit back a curse at the thought of how even now simple minds were swayed by others.

“Lisa is not worthless. The only people who are worthless are venomous scum like you,” Ichigo challenged shifting to run a hand through wild orange hair, he grasped the pommel of Zangetsu and let his reaitsu spike in warning.

The large man flinched even as Lisa shot a concerned gaze in Ichigo’s direction at his word choice. Lisa’s aquamarine eyes promised that they would be discussing whatever self-worth issues he had stumbled upon at a later date; for now, they would focus on the imbecile basking in the attention of a few of the members of the Eighth division even as he shot glares at his challengers.

The man puffed hic chest up and Ichigo wondered how one could have so little intelligence, and no fear in the face of their combined reaitsu which swirled and thrashed like caged animals.

“That bitch? She couldn’t kick the twelfth seats ass, we all know she’s just there to please Taicho. Like all women, worthless and only there to serve men.”

The man growled out in jeering tones beady eyes staring at Lisa in the typical way one saw on the streets; the eyeing up and lust that was rotten and left any one beneath that vile gaze chilled. Ichigo felt anger bubble within his chest like a raging stream of lava coursing through his veins.

Taking a deep breath, Ichigo let Zangetsu’s calming reaitsu submerge him for the moment. There were many things that could anger him but misogyny, it curled his wrath like an older sibling who despaired their younger. He had sisters, a mother, and female friends, he knew what they were subjected to all their life. Ichigo was a man so he knew he would never truly understand what it was like to be in their position but he could care and listen and try.

Lisa bristled beside him and from behind they could feel the sharp snap of Shunsui’s reaitsu at the derisive words, the poor sixth seat would not likely see tomorrow. Reaitsu furrowed around Lisa whipping her hair making the very air seem chill and overcast.

The sixth seat only then winced at the visible traces of their power, as tendrils of crimson reaitsu curled along Lisa’s form in powerful arcs. The man took a hesitant step back and the few members of the division who had decided this man was quite the intellectual for his views made to hastily scatter.

Ichigo darted aside lightning fast, taking down the bystanders who had become accomplices and were trying to flee. With a press to their pressure points, five members of the Eighth division dropped to the ground. In a blur of motion and a soft flick of air Ichigo appeared beside Shunsui leaving Lisa to face this battle with his support.

The man (his name wasn’t Kensei, but it started with a K of that Ichigo was sure) seemed to have regained his bravado and with a challenging roar that sent the watchers fleeing he unsheathed his
katana. Ichigo scoffed as the spirit of the blade, like the rusting guard it’s cries rang out for anyone with a decent skill with reaitsu to sense, he wondered if the man had even attempted to make contact with the spirit after proving he could.

Lisa narrowed her eyes and in an arc of light glinting from the sun her katana rested loosely in her left hand. For a moment, she considered the blade staring at it in contemplation before she looked up and into the dull half-lidded eyes of her opponent and said, “I don’t even need my katana to beat scum like you.”

The lumbering giant stared uncomprehending for a moment, before with a guttural howl he charged forward. He moved like a landslide, uncoordinated, a mess, and with great force. However, his opponent was Lisa and he was doomed to failure the minute he challenged the Vizard.

Lisa kicked off from the ground a reaitsu induced jump boosting her high in the air where she landed behind the man. With an open palm strike into the back of his neck that sent him stumbling Lisa slid back and raised her hand.

“Hado number thirty-one Shakkahō! “

The lieutenant yelled out as an orb of charged and pulsing crimson energy slammed into the challenger’s chest as he turned around. The man tottered for a moment before he swung his katana overhead in a quick pivot and charged at Lisa.

Idly Ichigo summoned his hollow mask holding casually in his hands where all the remaining viewers could see; a light gesture of intimidation and support. With a soft chortle of amusement Ichigo watched as Lisa donned her mask pulling it over her features with wicked curve to her lips and a sharp jolt of reaitsu.

“Oi Lisa no using cero! The destruction of to the Eighth would be too great, and we don’t want to cause too much trouble on our first day back.”

Lisa looked back eyes bright and radiant with bloodlust, she acknowledged Ichigo’s words with a smirk though it was hidden by the alabaster of her mask. Ichigo could hear her zanpaktou purring at the battle and Shiro reverberated in response at the back of Ichigo’s mind.

The Shinigami who were unfamiliar with this new reaitsu which was predominantly Shinigami with hollow undertones flinched eyes wide and hands drawn to the hilts of their katanas. Even Shunsui beside Ichigo looked awestruck at the mask Lisa now sported and the waves of power that were like an electric current shooting by and enlivening what it touched, whether that be with fear or excitement depended entirely on the conductor of that current.

“Ma Ichi-chan the Vizard have achieved something truly amazing.”

Shunsui’s baritone rumbled quietly beside Ichigo, he looked up to his captain and nodded; the power that was flowing from Lisa in waves was heavy and instinctive, and Ichigo’s own reaitsu rose in response. The very air seemed to waver and shimmer like a mirage beneath the force of their power. Shiro purred content as Ichigo’s own heart, that Shunsui spoke with no malice and his voice held honesty and a soft fondness. The curly-haired captain cared little about the hollow-portion of his Shinigami, only happy to have his lieutenants back.

“Hollow scum, you shouldn’t be breathing! Central 46 should have executed the lot of you when we had the chance.”

The man bellowed stopping mid-charge to gaze at that mask some intendant terror haunting his
features even as his voice resounded through the courtyard touched by spring. Ichigo smirked knowing the man had made a crucial mistake. To insult Lisa based on he gender was one thing, but in insulting their family he had taken a step to far.

“Hey, asshat, Ichigo the lieutenant of this division alongside me, a woman who is far more powerful than your pitiful existence, talked to those shitty geezers. he convinced them to accept us so don’t think you know anything!”

Lisa responded furiously defending Ichigo and stabbing the man with her words. Ichigo felt a warmth bubble inside his chest at Lisa’s actions, he wanted to profusely thank the lieutenant then and there but refrained from the action. Shunsui beamed proudly gaze languidly drawing from Lisa to Ichigo with a lazy smirk complacently curling his lips.

Lisa flicked her katana so that the dull side of the blade was facing the man. She shot a smile to Ichigo, one so full of promise and a returning one kindled his lips before he could stop the muscles of his features. Swinging her blade to the side she considered the man for a moment before she quietly voiced, “Insolent fool gender defines nothing, it is only your actions upon the world.”

“Senmaioroshi!”

The hum of Lisa’s zanpaktou blade repeatedly contacting with flesh with brutal force resonated around them and Ichigo glanced up apprehensively knowing well that Lisa would be fine, he believed in the Shinigami he had trained. He still wanted to glimpse her in that glory of the battle where with the Vizard it was different, primal and carnal full of raw bleeding instincts.

When the figurative dust cleared Lisa marched out from the ordeal katana sealed at her waist, and the lugged giant was being dragged by the nape of his shihaksho. With a huff, she dropped him in front of Shunsui leaving their captain to deal with the man who had suddenly sprouted false propaganda, offended practically every woman ever, and caused endangerment to members of the division. Lisa’s hair tangled around her neck in soft feathered waves of raven as she came to stand beside him the sharp demeanour of her eyes fading as she glanced at Ichigo.

He nodded pride radiating in his own amber orbs, just as he knew the same wold be shining in Shunsui’s eyes. Lisa awkwardly held up an elastic band indicting the missing hair-tie. With a short laugh Ichigo took the offending piece of equipment and when Lisa was turned around he whipped her hair into a messy bun.

Ichigo had never possessed any fortitude in hairdressing whatsoever, but as an older brother with two female siblings and an older man child of a father who was practically useless Ichigo had picked up on a few hair skills. Shunsui’s gentle laughter rung out from behind them and Ichigo craned his head from where he was finishing tucking looping strands of raven into the bun.

X

Shunsui shook his head in amusement and fondness at the sight of his two lieutenants even as they broke apart under his minstrel eyes. The laid-back captain had already noticed the changes prevalent in his lieutenants.

Lisa and Ichigo were both more open in a strange sense, now he could see that their eyes had been like doors with cloudy panes of glass so that the light could shine through but never fully. Those doors had been blown wide open and with it a sea of deeper emotions had been revealed. Their reaitsu was also different; where Lisa’s had always possessed that clinical seriousness with a gentle touch of amber and honey it now seeped with undercurrents of something darker. That darkness wasn’t bad (because dark never amounted to evil) it was simply a brush of reaitsu that was untamed.
Ichigo’s reaitsu had always been constricted to tight bonds whenever they strolled throughout the paved streets of Soul Society, it was only in the comfort and solidarity of presences he knew that the reaitsu that simmered like the vast sea roamed and tingled across Shunsui’s senses; feral and wild yet tinged with the quiet caress of early mornings in the spring. As the years had droned on the young man had opened more from those masks he wore to cover the hurt.

It was like meeting a new person each day as one factor or experience was revealed and changed Shunsui’s view of Ichigo once again. He had come to see the fire-haired soul for more than he presented. The captain of the Eighth had seen the hurt and pain that always wearied him like heavy weights or chains imposed upon his shoulders, but he had also seen the determination and undying will that Ichigo possessed, one to match the Soutaicho.

Now the young man seemed lighter as if those chains while not gone had been shaken lose so that they hung by a narrow margin. He was bright and open as if he had de-aged, become a youth again like his appearance stated. Shunsui had been surprised when Ichigo had stepped inside and instead of whatever cool tactic he could have employed he had waited and had let his reaitsu soar and intermingle.

Looking at the two as they joked under their breath with beaming smiles painting their features in radiance, Shunsui couldn’t help but see the deepened bond between the two. They were like siblings, they had connected well after the first week, Ichigo possessing some delicate touch that appeased Lisa’s sense of duty. That relationship was alive like the summer crops, growing and thriving.

There was of course the alternative to the light revelations. Possessing hollow powers was no small matter and Shunsui could only guess the struggles they had gone through to reach the level of comfort they displayed with their powers, not to mention the trust and the bond they shared with their zanpaktou.

Though fate always seemed inclined to construct trials for the fire-haired kid, that mysterious force had let Ichigo suffer before any of them knew. He had dealt with this for years on end and they had been none the wiser. The report had detailed former instruction, and from Ichigo’s testament in front of the senile bastards of 46 it had been difficult and in the end the hard road, compared to what could have been the easy choice to let the captains and lieutenants fall from grace.

Thinking of central reminded him of when the report had first been delivered. Kaien had burst in like hell fire incarnate and Shunsui even though possessing many years more than the young Shiba heir, felt fear. He had been swallowed by guilt, the crushing defeat and loss of his lieutenants left him feeling hollow. Kaien had snapped him out of his funk whether that was his intention or not.

The Shiba heir had slammed Shunsui against a wall, eyes and choking reaitsu soaring and raging like monsoon season. It was only Jushiro’s intervention that stopped Kaien from acting on the threats beading his eyes. Shunsui didn’t hold it against the younger man, they had all felt desperate and angry in the following confusion of the mission and Ichigo’s lack of presence within Soul Society boundaries.

It had been striking how the world seemed so changed without their presences. The warmth Ichigo possessed that flew along the currents of his reaitsu had been sorely lacking and it was only then that Shunsui realized how much he had become accustomed to it. Lisa’s task-managing ways had always guided him and without those chaste smiles and the teasing banter the office had seemed cold and empty.

They were changed from the Shinigami he knew before. While Lisa seemed content and at ease with a newfound maturity and calm, one that displayed itself in the way she glided with a new grace and only narrowed her eyes at the sake in plain sight. Ichigo was much the same possessing a warmth
and maturity that was one who had settled into their own skin, like they had been walking in the wrong form. Though his eyes always held a great weariness and Shunsui was tempted to guide the young man back to the office for a nap. What truly mattered in the end was that the Shinigami under his command who he held dear were safe and while maybe not completely sound they were alive.

Shaking himself from an old man’s musings cocoa orbs crawled down to rest on the form of his former subordinate. Katen Kyōkotsu growled in his mind urging him to unsheathe her and spill blood upon the splendent grass of the inner sect of the Eighth division. Tamping the urge down Shunsui breathed deeply and sighed. It both saddened him and angered him immensely to see incidents such as this.

Raising a hand, he let his reaitsu pulse calling for the delicate Jigokuchō. The pale ebony creature fluttered from the sky and landed on his outstretched palm in that silent dance of movement. Leaning forward Shunsui imparted his message for the Second division captain Yoruichi and let the creature flutter on it’s merry way.

Turning his attention to Tsuki the fourth seat Shunsui noted the surprise on her features, and underneath a light smattering of awe. A smile painted the curly-haired captain’s lips at the thought of more members for his lieutenants’ fan club before he beckoned the young women over.

“I’ve called the Second division to take care of the instigator can you remain here till they come, we don’t want him having any ‘bright’ ideas and trying to run away. I’m sure you can do this, you’re an excellent Shinigami.”

The brunette bit her lip for a moment before Shunsui flashed her those assuring eyes and she nodded with a small smile. Ruffling the chopped locks colliding like a mop on her head, Shunsui straightened and turned his attention to his lieutenants. Lisa was poking Ichigo’s chest with a giggle, glasses perched on the bridge of Ichigo’s nose as the man attempted to look offended or mildly irritated.

The two remained in that position for a split second before laughter burst from their lungs in great peals that drifted on the spring air and elicited laughter to coil from Shunsui’s own lips. Rouge tinted their cheeks and Shunsui tipped his hat forward to shade his eyes as he watched the two playfully banter breathlessly before he padded over.

“Ne are we still going out for lunch taicho?”

Lisa questioned with a quirk of her head, Shunsui nodded and a brighter smile replaced the curious curve of her lips. Ichigo’s eyes sparkled for a moment and he settled slightly reaitsu stilling like the calm oceans of the mortal realm.

The breeze lifted the branches in greeting shuffling emerald leaves, and Shunsui made a soft shooing motion with his hands gesturing his lieutenants forward. Ichigo shot a petulant frown over his shoulder before the orange-haired kid shrugged it away and beckoned Lisa onwards. Following at a more sedate pace behind the two, Shunsui did a quarter turn flashing the Fourth seat an assuring smile before following the two restless Shinigami.

His floral-patterned haori billowed out behind him like an echo and he could almost hear Ju’s chastising tone lecturing him for leaving the division in a such a state. Shunsui knew his division through and through, and while evidently there were some bad spots he knew they could handle themselves.

Departing from the division Shunsui let his reaitsu and the aura around him settle fractionally, as he increased his speed to a brisk pace so that he could reconvene with Ichigo and Lisa. The ebony
haired lieutenant smiled at him over her shoulder warm and sweet like summer nights and rich sake, before she turned to face Ichigo discussing the lieutenant’s apparent skills in the kitchen. Shunsui smiled to himself content to listen to their conversation as they entered the bustling streets of Rungokai.

The streets outside of Seireitei were a maze of old buildings, that no matter how precarious they appeared remained steadfastly standing, they were a miasma of boards and wood with whatever other material thrown in for good measure. The spring air had prompted some sort of festival and banners of colourful cloth streamed from eave to eave, draping with their weight and catching the sunlight like a deep wine.

Vendors called out their wares displaying a variety of items ranging from produce, to bejewelled sword hilts which served little purpose other than beauty. The senses of the little world outside of Seireitei was heavy and vibrant. Noise churned and rose, the yelling of markets, the soft chatter of accomplices gliding through the crowds, bells shimmered and tinkled like fae laughter rising above the muted hum of life.

The sultry fragrances of passing ladies wafted on the heavy air, accompanied by the roasting meats that sent smoke spiraling like wisps of heaven against a clear blue backdrop, men lumbered with the weight of the humid air, and a fruity undercurrent of sweet berries was potent enough to draw Shunsui’s eyes to row upon row of berries coloured crimson, purple, dark violet, and pink.

Catching a spark of orange drifting ahead once more Shunsui sighed and ran a hand through curly strands wondering how anyone had ever attempted to stay with the kid. Narrowly dodging the cloying press of bodies as people shuffled to and fro, large ox carts meandering through the streets. Tilting the brim of his straw hat to shade his eyes from the ponderous sun, Shunsui followed the bobbing path of reaitu Ichigo had left like a trail of wil-o-the-wisps.

“Ichigo do you honestly think Byakuya will hate you? You warned him about your absence so don’t worry, I swear sometimes you fret like a teenage girl.”

Lisa commented slyly as Shunsui came up behind them flashing Ichigo a teasing wink from behind the crimson of her glasses where they had been returned to their rightful position on the bridge of her nose. Ichigo blushed the colour close to his hair as it painted his cheeks, and the man made to vehemently deny her words before thinking better of it he turned and waved to Shunsui.

“Captain where are we eating at?”

Ichigo questioned with a curious tilt to his head, and Shunsui paused for a moment trying to remember the name of the pub. He could picture it in his mind with that swinging sign and roaring grate fireplace, and in the back the small sunroom with misty windows that opened and swayed like a gentle breeze.

“The Ivory Dragon, Jushiro has been wanting to visit again, he favours their jasmine blend.”

Lisa nodded familiar recognition flipping her features, Ichigo on the other hand cocked his head eyes going distant in the way they usually did when he was searching for information before he blinked and it was gone. He shrugged a motley mixture pf confusion hidden under the shadow of orange locks.

Sidling between the two as they let their captain take the lead, Shunsui considered them for a moment before he asked, “How was your training? Am I allowed to ask that or is that strictly Vizard information?”
Ichigo blinked dully for a moment, processing the question before a pleased smile originated on his lips. Feeling a slight speck of confusion at Ichigo’s beaming pride he turned to Lisa and arched an eyebrow.

“Ichigo thought of the name, though we didn’t know it was in common use already,” Lisa breathed with a laugh twirling a strand of jet black between nimble fingers. The information gave Shunsui pause, and he thinks he was beginning to see what Shinji meant when he voiced the need for Ichigo to gain captaincy.

It had seemed in the beginning as if Ichigo had left only to oversee the training that was required, but now if Shunsui opened his eyes he could see the respect and quiet understand that all the hollowfied Shinigami presented when they gazed at Ichigo.

The name Vizard was also unique and Shunsui wondered how they had come upon it. He had heard the name used the night before when Yam-jii had called his two oldest students to his office for a bottle of sake and discussions regarding certain orange-haired Shinigami.

Ichigo having shaken himself from wherever his mind usually wandered in the moments of lull between conversation perked up and replied completely oblivious to Lisa’s words.

“If we tell you we’ll have to kill you,” Ichigo spoke in a totally serious voice, body hunched low and a whisper coating his voice, releasing himself from the crouch with a light spring he winked and flipped around before continued, “The training was great, I feel the Shinigami who experienced it definitely developed their powers, but I feel they deepened their cores. Nee Lisa do you think I’m right?”

Lisa rested a had under her chin pensively at Ichigo’s words, while a fond grin curled her lips. Shunsui shook his head in sweet amusement at Ichigo’s teasing. After a minute of contemplation as they strolled along under the eaves of leafy boughs that reached to trail against their cheeks Lisa nodded and said, “You’re right Ichigo, we feel like a family and I feel free in a way I didn’t think I could feel, and it’s all thanks to you Ichi.”

Lisa ended her tirade on a light note reaching over to ruffle Ichigo’s mess of hair that collected like bird feathers around his neck and ears. The young man blushed and spluttered for a minute to the amusement of the other two Shinigami before he half yelled, “What? You guys would have been fine on your own, there’s no need to thank me.”

Lisa only shook her head in exasperation knowing that her words and the honesty behind them would not likely reach Ichigo, when it came to Ichigo’s self-esteem and accepting gratitude he was as thick as an iron wall.

Repeating Lisa’s earlier dangerous action, Shunsui ran a hand through Ichigo’s hair marveling at the softness even as the kid squawked and jumped away hands vehemently swatting at them before coming up to defend his skull.

“Jeez my hair is already enough of a mess as it is (stupid Shiba genetics) I don’t need you two messing it up even further.”

Shunsui and Lisa laughed at the petulant pout planted firmly on Ichigo’s lips. Deciding to steer the topic away from whatever melancholy Ichigo would inevitably sink into regarding the Shibas (because he was one though the melodramatics were slightly more tamed) he turned to Lisa and said, “Would you two be willing to demonstrate some of your new powers?”

Lisa instantly nodded, before with a hesitant cast to cerulean blue eyes she locked eyes with Ichigo
awaiting his nod. The young man sighed with an amused curve to his lips before he nodded.

“Some of the stuff we learned was amazing, but you should see Ichigo’s resurrection.”

Lisa babbled excitedly ignoring Ichigo’s long suffering sigh as the lieutenant tipped his head back to gaze at the sky. Shunsui wondered what a resurrection was and contented himself with the idea that he would find out soon enough. Besides if it was something Ichigo possessed it was sure to be unique at least. Kami Shunsui remembered the shock of seeing the Shinigami’s Shikai, only an academy student at the time, wielding that Shikai so uniquely shaped. The spirits of the blade had roared and Shunsui had felt shock like a ship plow into his system along with a trace of awe. Because it had never seemed like Ichigo possessed two spirits (and was that really his Shikai) but he had felt it then. Two points of light infinitely different one teaming with feral instincts, the other like a pool of cold ice.

In the distance, a head of white perched next to a wooden sigh swaying with the wind caught their attention. Shunsui felt a smile blossom on his lips at the sight of his partner. Jushiro was crouched along a narrow wall, eyes serene as he watched Rungokai’s busy hustle of life whirl around him, those calm sea green eyes widened when they glimpsed the two lieutenants.

“Lisa, Ichigo it’s lovely to see you both again!”

He greeted as he beckoned them into light hugs always aware of Ichigo’s discomfort with contact, which had settled somewhat in the time Shunsui knew him. Lisa looked at the genial captain with a fond quirk to her features as she reached up and pecked the man on the cheek. Shunsui laughed as a blush dusted Jushiro’s pale skin and Ichigo joined him while the others were left to catch their breath. Laughter soon rang throughout the group and Shunsui felt Katen Kyōkotsu purr in the back of his mind.

Ichigo beamed light and airy like a wild sprite and didn’t say anything the silence speaking his joy, like the waves of reaitsu that curled around them. Shunsui connected with Jushiro’s deep eyes, like the fathomless coasts finding the slow-burning love that always seeped teal orbs when he gazed at Shunsui. A thousand words passed between them as they stared at the two lieutenants gaily talking beside the sign.

With a wave of his hand and a gentle push they entered the restaurant and Shunsui flashed one last glance at the midday sun as it painted the land in hues of deep gold and amber wine, before he turned his head. Jushiro caught his hand and pulled him inside following the bouncy laughter of the younger Shinigami Shunsui felt the world that had stopped start turning once more.

X

Chapter End Notes

So Ichigo has finally reunited with Shunsui and the division is complete once more. Did you guys like the scene with Lisa and the character Kenshin? Well I hope you all enjoyed, reviews/comments are always appreciated.

Bucket!!
Gezellig

Chapter Summary

Ichigo wakes up from a nightmare. Byakuya reunites with Ichigo (and is pining)

Chapter Notes

Gezellig

(adj.) Cozy, nice, inviting, pleasant, comfortable; connoting time spent with loved ones or togetherness after a long separation.

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 25. Can you believe it’s been 25 chapters already? In this chapter we finally have Ichigo and Byakuya’s reunion (which in my mind was titled: Byakuya pines). I hope you enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo woke with a gasp, shooting forward from the heavy warmth of the blankets that felt all at once suffocating in the wake of his sleep clouded mind. He was trembling, choking on invisible blood, and the words that could never leave his lips. Night furrowed it’s wings around him as the curtains swayed precariously sending eerie shadows to chase at his heart. Drawing his knees into his chest Ichigo attempted to calm his shuddering form, watching with a distant apathy as his hands shook in front of his eyes.

His breath continued to rattle from his lungs and Ichigo hastily wrapped his arms around his knees tucking his features into the small crevice as he continued to try to breathe. Zangetsu’s calming waves of reaitsu hummed around Ichigo, but the young Shinigami was numbed to the sensation.

It was his fault, their deaths every single one of them. The thought was swirling in his mind an endless vortex, his own mind turned against him as it constantly tormented Ichigo with their last moments played over and over in gruesome detail. How could it not be his fault? He was too weak to save anyone in the end.

Kami he felt sick, some part of him deep inside was aching pounding in his ears, forcing him to live even as the excruciating pain of loss rattled every bone within his body Ichigo was falling apart. Every day spent seeing the dead walk by him, feel their touch upon his brow. Knowing that they
would never be the same as the ones he knew, they would never be the people he had given his life to.

He had changed the timelines, changed their fates. The world was screwed up because of him and the young lieutenant had no way of predicting what would happen. It snagged at the borough of his mind that he would lose them all again, hold limp corpses in his arms because he had failed once more.

What meager attempts at regaining his calm faded as Ichigo’s breath became ragged, reaitsu tearing around the room and ripping at whatever it touched. Glazed amber orbs were slowly revealed as Ichigo lifted his head a low keening sound left his lips. He needed fresh air, the cloying heaviness of the room was chasing like the darkness of his soul, what greedy clawed talons dragged him down.

But he couldn’t find the strength to move, as if suspended in that moment by invisible marionette strings, forced to hear their last words play and rattle in his mind. Kami he was so useless! It hurt deep within him and Ichigo duly thought that he deserved to have to deal with the nightmares for what he had let happen to his family.

A light seeped from the thin shoji doors at the far end of the room, a small orb of sunshine bounced along and illuminated sharp features. Reaitsu leaked out from the man standing there rushing forward to envelop Ichigo and tame the swirling miasma of emotions that bubbled out violently. Ichigo felt the tenseness evaporate slightly as Kaien’s familiar presence danced around him soothing away the pain in his heart and reminding Ichigo of what he was here for.

Their assurances became heavy at the forefront of his mind, their voices humming with honesty as they told him it wasn’t his fault, as they carded through soft hair and soothed away his fears. Kaien’s reaitsu hesitantly drew back and Ichigo let it, grounded in the moment and pulled from the veritable hurricane of disaster he had been rolling in.

Ichigo’s older brother’s presence whispered against the shell of his ear, softly brushing stray strands of orange in a comforting gesture and soothing restless nerves. Then Kaien continued on his way a soft sigh leaving his lips audible even to Ichigo, one not of exasperation but the weight of the hour.

Summoning strength from Zangetsu whose worried calls echoed resonantly in the back of his mind, along with the curl of their reaitsu. Ichigo slipped from the covers and dove towards the window flinging open the heavy frame, he stood there panting illuminated in the moonlight and chased by night’s errant winds.

Stealing once last glance at the shadow enslaved walls of his room Ichigo in a rather gale movement slipped onto the roof. The crisp night air teased feathered orange locks and brushed away the dwindling sense of panic. The sting of cool air as it brushed his lungs helped Ichigo to reign in his erratic breathing, and with slow and controlled movements he lifted his head to stare at the moonlit surroundings.

With a pulse of Zangetsu’s reaitsu his two spirits were resting on either side of him. Zangetsu-Ossan’s calming and steadfast presence was wrapped around Ichigo’s still lightly trembling frame and a large warm hand carefully brushed aside stray orange locks and settled ochre glasses on the crown of Ichigo’s head. Zangetsu-Shiro wrapped his arms around the still slightly trembling frame, drawing a sharp breath to Ichigo’s lungs at the cool skin even as comforting waves of reaitsu emanated from the contact.

Ichigo tipped his head back for a moment realigning his thoughts as he steadily cleared his mind of the fog of his nightmares. The sky was dyed a deep indigo and the lady moon was luminous and full in her starry canvas winking down at Ichigo.
In a controlled manner of deep breaths, with fists clenched in the available fabric imbued with his spirit’s presence, Ichigo slowly went through a small mantra. He assured himself that he was not weak, that it wasn’t indeed not his fault, and that in the end he didn’t kill them.

It was a routine that had instated itself on Unohana’s and (surpassingly) Shunsui’s advice, even if Ichigo usually didn’t believe the words he muttered under his breath it helped to settle his heart and mind. Shiro purred contently waves of reaitsu open in the bleached spirit’s way cocooning around Ichigo and easing the strain of his body.

“Damn King and we were doing so well.”

Shiro muttered under his breath lacking any mal-intent and possessing only a concerned sincerity. Ichigo had to agree, the nightmares that had ruthlessly chased his dream while they trained with the Vizard had eased as the month drew to a close leaving him able to grasp some much-needed rest. Yet here they were again in full terrifying force, Ichigo wanted them to stop but could see no viable option.

Instead he reached out taking Shiro’s cool hand in to his own feeling a matching mirror of callouses and scars. Zangetsu-Ossan hummed thoughtfully long spindly fingers trailing through vibrant orange locks.

“You did well though Ichigo, you managed to calm yourself. You are healing, though perhaps it is taking a time, I believe you can.”

Zangetsu-Ossan spoke softly and deeply reassuring Ichigo’s own thoughts on the matter. Ichigo sighed softly gazing up warmly through tired fluttering lashes in gratitude at his two spirits before he settled into their forms eyes gazing at the horizon around them.

The Shiba compound stretched for miles on end, a vast rolling plain of green where forests steeped themselves upon the land. Ichigo remembered times when Ganju and he had embarked into those forests, run wild beneath limbering boughs for hours chasing their shadows. The memory brought a faint smile to his lips and quelled the simmering discomfort of his soul.

In the distance, the land stretched on fading into shadows and soft blues, Ichigo sometimes stared at the horizon and wanted to just go. Walk along those paths and see what mystery they held, embrace the world for all it’s wonder. It was a deep spark within himself that he had carried all his life, always repressed but for that one year when he had been free, itching beneath his skin and urging him to embark.

Kami how he would love to leave it all behind. The responsibilities, worries, lies, power struggles, and everything that made up this mundane life of his (mundane was a relatively loose term). But he couldn’t because he had family to protect and so he stayed, as he always did.

He contented himself with the thought that one day he could grace those roads and never look back, maybe even with Byakuya by his side; tasting the fruits of other worlds, interacting with complete strangers.

With a wistful sigh Ichigo blinked and tilted his head to gaze at the moon once more, settled with his thoughts of the future. One day everyone would know or at least understand and it would be worth it in the end, but for now he would tame that infamous Shiba wanderlust and merely stare at the deepening sky

X
Byakuya craned his head up, slightly startled at the familiar reaitsu that caressed his skin warmly, a heady evanesce of night fluttering about the room in the familiar grace of Ichigo’s reaitsu. His presence had flared into existence once more only a few nights prior, after nearly a month without it and the Kuchiki heir felt a touch of spite like simmering spices that only now was he seeing his friend. Those weighted emotions had been accompanied by the unaccountable relief that Ichigo was back. Now in the quiet moments of the afternoon where lazy pastimes occurred and the mind wandered, the orange-haired Shinigami was waiting there in front of him.

Ichigo leaned against the doorframe of the office, a casual smile settled on his lips and a relaxed easiness in his posture even as it was underlain by the sorrow and guilt painting his brow. It sent Byakuya’s nerves ringing around his head in glee or some other sparked existence. Whatever control he possessed of his emotions was lost the moment he appeared, though the Kuchiki mask remained as impassive as always.

Ignoring ensnaring amber eyes, Byakuya glanced at Ginrei, his grandfather who was by now familiar with Ichigo’s untimely appearances, the old man sighed as if having expected this interruption to their schedule and knew that Byakuya would not likely return.

There was something deeper in the movement, a sharpness that struck Byakuya as distrust or some instinct hit like the gongs of war. The older man looked up at his grandson with that softer steel of his eyes that was reserved for very few. Then his captain shook his head in an amused manner before gesturing with a fond push of his reaitsu that ruffled Byakuya’s locks.

Byakuya let his head rise once more to truly glimpse Ichigo, see what he had passed over in his accessory glance. It had been a month since they last saw each other, and time longer since they spoke in that grove; Ichigo’s word like the desperate cry of a mad man as he spoke fevered sentences to Byakuya.

The young man before him was Ichigo, yet there were changes that he easily grasped, having known Ichigo for far too long. His hair was longer since it was last cut, curling upon the nape of his shoulders, and it was always the first thing to attract Byakuya’s attention because that colour was so eye-catching and defying like an embodiment of chaos and Ichigo’s soul. Next, he noted the way Ichigo’s body was tensed, not in the typical alertness he carried with him everywhere; this was a nervous kind of tense, pushed aside for the false display of calm and ease.

Byakuya observed the bright catch of light as it hit ivory, and crimson stained silver orbs widened, because he knew Ichigo sometimes went to extreme lengths and was as stubborn as mule. To see a piercing though, was shocking enough to leave a smile stretching Byakuya’s lips because that was something so inordinately Ichigo.

From there his eyes traced the familiar structure of Ichigo’s features, the ones he had spent countless hours staring at. Whether that be training when their breaths mingled like their will, or under the curtains of stars on a bed of soft glass, where soft whispers of the future pervaded.

His roaming gaze centred on Ichigo’s eyes and what was found drew the breath from Byakuya’s lungs and made his heart skip a beat. Ichigo’s eyes had never been so open, at least not in broad daylight. When they had crashed together in one of the dorm rooms after whatever project had nabbed their attention. There were those moments in the dead of morning, when Ichigo would jerk awake panting and heaving. His pupils would be blown wide and Byakuya felt he was looking into a void unable to pull back.

It was almost that feeling, except this wasn’t a void pulling and tearing at him, this was the sky. That blue arc so tempestuous could cloud over and rain upon the world with thunder and lightning, and yet at the same time clouds would lazily glide burnished in soft hues of the sunset.
Emotions swelled there as they stared into the other’s eyes and Byakuya could see the recognition and soft fondness that always hummed beneath the layers of uncaring stoniness. There in great waves of sloughing weary could Byakuya see a deep tiredness, as if Ichigo’s time away from Soul Society had not served to recuperate his strength. Merely drain him all the more so. It clanged furiously in Byakuya’s chest and he wanted to command the younger to spill his ire but he refrained.

Byakuya realized then considering deep eyes full of sentimental emotions that he had missed Ichigo. Time as always seemed to drag on incredibly slow and be gone in the blink of an eye. The month had whipped by, yet occasionally Byakuya would find himself looking for a presence that he knew wasn’t there, there had been a tugging in his soul. A fraction of pain like a splinter that relentlessly pestered him and grew sharper with each day. Soul Society without Ichigo’s presence had been hollow and devoid of some other worldly touch.

He had missed the laughter and subdued touch of his friend’s reaitsu, the way they curled and mixed together, their spars and the sake under moonlit nights. Looking at Ichigo seemed to bring those emotions into center so that he was suddenly breathless in understanding; there had been a feeling of wrong for so long and only now did Byakuya guess as to what it might be.

The lieutenant’s heart thudded in his chest as if painfully aware of the faint burning in his eyes, he could almost hear Senbonzakura’s chiding laugh and feel the reassuring press of reaitsu from his zanpaktou spirit.

Byakuya swept his eyes over Ichigo once more, taking in the appearance of his friend as his reaitsu tentatively snaked out to entangle with the fire-haired lieutenant’s. Ichigo’s surged out in a mess of excitement and eagerness and crashed into him like waves breaking upon the shore. It was feral, with the tangible taste of the night, and it was Ichigo.

Stealing one last glance at his grandfather, who had been watching their reunion with amusement (all the while managing to direct half-glares in Ichigo’s direction as if the Kuchiki Head couldn’t be decided whether he was the caring grandfather or clan head). The old man shared a look with his grandson before he nodded and Byakuya bounded from his seat striding across the short interval of space between them.

They shared a loaded gaze heavying the weight of their brows and furrowing the corners of their lips, they were going to speak, and likely walk but for now their main goal was to leave the office. Ichigo turned first a step ahead of Byakuya the tails of his clothing and locks of feathered orange whispering out of sight a step ahead of Byakuya. In an awkward half-pivot Byakuya waved to his captain and darted after Ichigo.

Ichigo stood at the entrance to the secluded gardens of the Sixth division, seemingly immobilised in the moment set in stone. The sun in it’s hasty retreat across the sky fawned over Ichigo embossing him in gold, tangling his hair into actual flames. For a moment Byakuya’s eyes deceived him and the man before him was like a being of pure light, tall and firm with a will that was radiating like the luminescent beings of the sky.

Then Ichigo turned and the eminence of the moment was lost to be replaced by the pure curl of Ichigo’s lips. That invigorating smile was directed in Byakuya’s direction followed by a beckoning hand.

Byakuya never one to be able to resist those eyes, came to stand beside Ichigo the two stared out upon the garden, where the koi pond soothed the world around them with it’s methodic melodies.

“So, a piercing?”
Ichigo choked out a laugh, head whipping around to catch the light airy bubble of Byakuya’s own mirth. Subconsciously or not the Shinigami lieutenant moved away the locks of orange so that Byakuya could clearly glimpse the new addition to his friend. Tentatively reaching forward to grasp the irregular shape clinging to the shell of Ichigo’s ear Byakuya shuddered at the presence coating the bone like material.

“Needed a change… and it was maybe an impulsive decision.”

Byakuya wanted to retort to that subtle wording, change indeed like his disappearance from Soul Society but he let the matter fall to where it simmered in his heart; they would discuss it all eventually. Letting his hand drop to rest at Senbonzakura’s pommel Byakuya let a fond chuckle escape his lips, Ichigo was impulsive and it was nice of the younger male to finally admit to such, it was something he could only expect of Ichigo.

Silence lingered between the two undisturbed by the roll of reaitsu against their skin, as they realigned themselves with one another, fitted into the slots they had carved into the other’s soul. Ichigo shamelessly reached out to hold Byakuya’s hand drawing strength from the contact.

Ichigo wasn’t a man for touch, or at least outwardly it didn’t appear so, but Byakuya knew sometimes the orange-haired Shinigami needed to feel that confirmation that it was all still real. His pulse hummed beneath Byakuya’s fingertips fluttery and fast like life itself, and the familiar callouses of the long days spent with katana in hand made themselves known.

Eventually Ichigo sighed and released Byakuya’s hand before slumping to the wooden steps, amber eyes looked up from a hood of tangerine into Byakuya’s own eyes. The Kuchiki heir let out a soft sigh before joining his friend on the wooden deck, the air between them was calm and serene and they both took the time to bask in the other’s presence.

Words were hard when for them it had always been the telling press of reaitsu and their profound understanding of the other, so the words like a multitude of choruses remained within Byakuya’s lungs as they watched the endless skies stretch on.

“What next? Any other adventures I should be warned about?”

Byakuya questioned softly turning to gaze at his friend with a deepness in his own eyes that thrashed like a sea beneath his skin. Ichigo stared assessing before he shrugged in a nonchalant manner, the wind blew around them suddenly ruffling their clothing and tearing at their hair. Ichigo tilted his head back and laughed, it was a wild soft kind of laugh that incited Byakuya’s lips to turn in a knowing smile.

“Who knows… according to my zanpaktou I am merely an instrument of chaos.”

Ichigo spoke after taking a calming few breaths, his eyes were alight in the outside air and so very open that Byakuya felt he could drown; like a man cast adrift into the wide plains of the ocean.

Ichigo shoved teasingly at Byakuya’s shoulder and under his breath mumbled, “Missed ya.”

Byakuya nodded the words caught in his throat dying to be replaced with an exasperated huff and a ruffle of feathered orange locks. Like that the anger that simmered at the emptiness inside was gone. They were together once more and even though the worry and chaotic nature of being friends with Ichigo was there, so was the fiery Shinigami’s smile and presence.

Ichigo swatted at his hand an annoyed expression playing across his features, before with a wink of sunshine mischief took over his visage. Duly in the back of his mind he could hear Senbonzakura’s
groan mirroring Byakuya’s own. Before the ebony-haired lieutenant could dart away Ichigo’s hand zipped in lightning fast and tapped him on the shoulder and in a blur of ebony and orange he was springing away with a yelled. “Tag!”

Never one to let such a challenge hang between them, Byakuya darted to his feet and sprang after Ichigo reaitsu circling through his body as flash-step brought him closer to the beaming figure.

They darted around the lush greenery with bright soaring reaitsu and laughter light on their lips. Kami Byakuya hadn’t felt this alive and exhilarated in a long time, because as much as Soul Society was what he fought for (on a lower level perhaps than family) these times were quiet and only the incident with the Vizard had sparked action. So, to have mindless fun with his friend soothed that restless part of him.

Springing forward from the low crouch Byakuya had dropped into, he flicked his eyes forward sharp as a hunter. Ichigo’s head shot up like a deer caught in the eyes of a predator, the innocent expression remained for a half second before Ichigo was darting away like a gazelle. With a huff Byakuya picked up speed always one step behind the trailing tails of Ichigo’s shihaksho.

Ichigo had gotten fast, or maybe he had always been fast and had stopped holding back on his monstrous reserves of power. The latter option seemed the likeliest choice as Ichigo always had secrets tucked up his sleeves and threaded through his hair, along with a sense of power that just swamped his form. Byakuya narrowly thought this as he ducked out of the way of a sweeping jab to the chin. Somewhere along the way of their ‘friendly’ game of tag had devolved into a half spar.

Where they weren’t rathe throwing punches so much as trying to tackle the other into the vibrant earth below. Ichigo stumbled as Byakuya swept out his leg intercepting the other’s attempt at a kick. The orange-haired lieutenant wobbled for a moment thrown off balance before he righted himself, or appeared to. Because the next thing Byakuya knew his arms were full of Ichigo and he was firmly pressed to the earth with the air leaving his lungs in a parted gasp.

Ichigo looked down upon him innocently, eyes glimmering like a fae spirit, and oh Byakuya was a little uncomfortable with their position but he shrugged it aside in an effort to throw the demon off his body. Ichigo just grinned down at him laugh laughter bubbling from his lips and Byakuya couldn’t help but join in.

Senbonzakura purred deeply in his mind chasing Byakuya’s thoughts incessantly, and he pushed those tangling words aside. Instead with a bright gleam of silver Byakuya reversed their position so that Ichigo was the one sprawled in the long grass. Orange sprawled like a halo, and Ichigo gazed up at him wonder and fondness glimmering brightly in his expression. They rolled around in the grass for a few moments, trying to topple the other as the sun beat down upon their figures; And if there were a few grass stains and breathlessness to accompany their play-fighting they were none the wiser.

Panting Byakuya settled into the firm earth below, his breath escaping his lungs as the exertion of their tussle caught up with him. Ichigo was right there beside the black-haired lieutenant, a peaceful smile that was small but sincere freed his lips and Byakuya wanted to immortalize that smile; it stirred his heart and coiled his own lips. Not to mention seeing Ichigo happy just brightened the world around him. The skies were endlessly blue above them with nary a sign of puffy white clouds in sight, it reminded Byakuya of their days in the academy and he felt familiar nostalgia thinking of those days.

Everything always seemed so much simpler in the past, there wasn’t the endless paperwork (rather essays and reports but those were less numerous), there wasn’t the overbearing weight and responsibility of the division weighing one’s shoulders. Byakuya knew and acknowledged
somewhat reluctantly at the back of his mind that he would have to assume captaincy within a few years, the thought both terrified and invigorated him.

The recent meeting still stood stark in his mind, like Hirako-taicho’s words. Byakuya could only agree with the blond, Ichigo would make a damn excellent captain, he possessed some unnatural charisma that turned one’s enemies into allies. The older lieutenant had seen it before, saw it at that meeting; because while Byakuya was far from the loop of information he understood what Ichigo hadn’t said that day in the clearing.

Lieutenant Aizen had always rustled Senbonzakura the wrong way, even while he appeared as a benign and caring man. Yet the reports had detailed things from behind the lines and though an instigator wasn’t clearly named Byakuya could draw conclusions. Seeing that man standing with the Vizard (primarily near Kisuke) was only evident to Byakuya’s belief in Ichigo; the cunning lieutenant was now allied with Ichigo and that devotion they all possessed in regard to Ichigo had radiated.

There was also Ichigo’s presence; one that commanded and drew you in. It was like that at the meeting, all eyes riveted on the orange-haired Shinigami as he spoke through the report and challenged them all with wide chocolate eyes that stared into his soul unerringly.

A rustle and shift of the presence next to him dragged Byakuya from his trailing thoughts that the serene atmosphere had captivated. Turning his head, a fraction Byakuya was met with wide chocolate eyes that stared into his soul unerringly.

Rolling over so as to better face Ichigo, Byakuya let an amused smile dance across his lips. Soft laughter left Ichigo’s lips in the space between them and kindled Byakuya’s own laughter. It was the kind of laughter that could occur when two friends stared at each other; for absolutely no reason at all.

After settling down some after their sudden unplanned laughter with breathless glee and ache in their stomachs and cheeks, Byakuya considered Ichigo and asked, “Are you happier now?”

Ichigo quirked at an eyebrow, a small frown furrowing his brow as he thought over the question before with a slight shrug he answered, “I think so, the time away from Soul Society was good for me. It’s… cloying… choking to be in the same place for so long, surrounded by the same routine. I’m also allowed to be free now… everyone accepts that we have a hollow nature within us.”

Byakuya nodded and grinned at those words, the infamous Shiba wanderlust lingering in Ichigo’s voice; they all carried it, some held onto it stronger than other clan members. Byakuya remembered with a slight tinge of fondness that was overwhelmed with the other vibrant emotions of the memory when Ichigo had just disappeared. They had all awoken between one day and the next to find Ichigo gone. He had appeared a week later with a beaming smile and a lightness to his step, and when they questioned him he had only winked and carried on humming some new rhythm under his breath.

The later half of Ichigo’s words resonated with Byakuya, because it was true. Oh, there had already been complications but that was much the manner of Soul Society, Byakuya himself found no ire or trouble with the concept of the hollowfied Shinigami. He knew others struggled with it, but when Byakuya had known Ichigo through thick and thin, held him in the darkness of the night and shared their demons, it was easy to settle into the idea.

“That’s good. How was training?”

Byakuya grinned and questioned wanting to know more about the month that had been lost between them. Ichigo laughed blinking slowly and in a relaxed manner, idle fingers carded through his hair as
he stared at Byakuya.

“It was hellish but fun. We first had to make contact with their zanpaktou spirits and reignite their bonds, which were quite tattered and in danger of collapsing. Then we had to move to technique—which I’ll show you some eventually— and then master that.”

Ichigo laughed and then spoke tone light and Byakuya knew the man could go on for days and talk about all the experiences he had gained, so Byakuya let him continue to speak. He listened as Ichigo detailed the captains and lieutenants who had been hollowfied (and some of them he knew, but others he was unfamiliar with). He talked about the scientists and their midnight discussions (because Ichigo was an insomniac through and through—though that didn’t bely the weariness in his eyes).

The dinners and breakfasts and all other manners of conversation and humour that would drift between them on whatever wispy thoughts occupied him.

The flame-haired Shinigami’s eyes sparkled in that brilliant untapped happiness that was rare but bountiful as the plains when it was left free. Byakuya was happy that these Shinigami could bring such emotion to Ichigo’s eyes, even as he wished he could have done the same. But Ichigo thrived on people, protecting them, cherishing them, living with them.

In Soul Society, he could do that but he was far from close to everybody, too many people and clashing personalities. It was different when one was crammed into a living space for a month and told to get along Byakuya supposed.

“What about you Byakuya? Get up to any mischief without me?”

Ichigo asked having fallen silent as the lulling hum of the world surrounded them, Byakuya rolled his eyes slightly racking his mind for thoughts of the past month. Had he done anything interesting? It had seemed routine as usual just empty, but then again nothing was normal or ever stationary within Soul Society.

“Nothing half as crazy as what you whipped up but…” Byakuya paused wondering if he should speak about her or just whisk away to the antics of the Eleventh division. But Ichigo was pinning him with those curious eyes and Byakuya with a resigned sigh began again, “I met a lady. I doubt you recall that time some many days ago when we exited a restaurant and bumbled into a woman?”

Ichigo gave him a blank stare, though Byakuya felt he could see touches of recognition within amber orbs. Shaking his head in amusement Byakuya thought of her and began to speak again, “Her name’s Hisana and we met again when I was on patrol. We went out for tea and it escalated from there.”

Byakuya turned his head gazing into Ichigo’s fathomless soul, asking if the man wanted him to continue. A tiny smile was painted on Ichigo’s lips one that was both content and distant eyes hazing in that thoughtful way they sometimes did. But Ichigo nodded wanting his friend to continue, and so Byakuya with a half-sigh spoke of Hisana.

“She’s from Rungokai and I doubt Ginrei will be happy with her, but she’s… wonderful and beautiful, and so kind. We’ve only gone out twice but I feel as if I’ve already fallen…. Or at least I think I have? Have you ever fallen in love Ichigo?”

Byakuya’s eyes were dreamy as he spoke about Hisana, the young soul who often occupied his thoughts as much as Ichigo often did. Yet Byakuya was relatively unexperienced with these kinds of circumstances. As a noble he had been introduced to droves of women, all emblazoned in kimono’s and the epitomize of grace and refinement. They had never interested Byakuya, always seeming two-dimensional and lacking personality; few people caught his attention like that in any case.
So Byakuya was left somewhat confused, and Ichigo his confidant and friend seemed to be one of the veritable sources to turn to (even if Ichigo didn’t strike him as an overly amorous person).

Ichigo blinked somewhat surprised before he cocked his head and giggled quietly into his palm. Then he was staring into Byakuya’s eyes with that lingering sadness that always haunted his past even if it was tamed under the happiness of their reunion.

“Yeah… many times I guess. But each time was different, and each level of love is different. Sometimes you love a person for what they represent, like freedom, or even love itself. Other times it’s the person who has your heart, their smile, the curve of their features. In the end, sometimes it’s their soul and you can’t escape so much as you wish to run to them. Love is fleeting and fragile, yet contradictory in that it is unmovable and tempered like diamonds.”

Ichigo spoke in a kind of fervent tone as if desperate to get his message across to Byakuya, he paused at the end as if considering continuing speaking of his own experiences, before he dismissed the idea. He looked at Byakuya eyes taking in his form with an intense wonderment and Byakuya felt a light blush dust his cheeks at the heated gaze before he was staring at Ichigo in return trying to see the meaning behind Ichigo’s carless choice of phrase.

“If you ever want to hear about my exploits, well let’s just say sake will be involved. Otherwise you’ll know, there will be that fluttering in your chest, and you want to be with that person all the time. And usually your zanpaktou knows before you.

Ichigo spoke in a laughing tone as he glanced at the sky a wry sort of longing and nostalgia clinging to his brow. Byakuya thought on Ichigo’s words considered them and listened to Senbonzakura’s own hum that resonated along the back of his mind. The spirit was chuckling in amusement, though for what reason Byakuya couldn’t say, he could feel Senbonzakura’s laughter and mumbled words distorted by the fact that they weren’t speaking face to face (or his spirit’s intentions).

“It’s all rushing so close, live currents surrounding me and passing in the breath of a moment.”

Ichigo was quiet as he spoke, drifting into that tone of voice where his mind was far elsewhere but his heart was weighted to the earth below. Byakuya shifted slightly so he could stare at Ichigo, the Shinigami was staring up at the skies above features soft and open. The moments hung between them silence drifting like the lazy waves of air that playfully ruffled their locks and chastised their clothing.

Ichigo’s reaitsu like the warmth of the sun above snaked around them and Byakuya felt the familiar presence of his friend brush over his hands and trail hesitantly over his heart as if assessing that the organ still stuttered out a familiar rhythm. Byakuya let his own reaitsu surge from his skin, tangle with Ichigo’s and assure the man of whatever his soul was asking.

The stillness was broken as faint laughter left Ichigo’s lips before it grew louder ringing throughout the empty courtyard. Byakuya felt resounding laughter slip from his own lips, in the way the Ichigo so often incited. With a cocked eyebrow Byakuya turned to his friend catching amber orbs fluttering under the press of heavy eyelids, for a moment Byakuya paused reluctant to disturb Ichigo before he shoved it aside in the face of curiosity.

“What were you laughing about Ichigo?”

Ichigo hummed for a moment as if debating whether to answer Byakuya before he flashed the startled lieutenant a small smile and shrugged. Orange locks were shadowing amber orbs between one moment and the next, so that Byakuya couldn’t glimpse the tell of his soul, and Byakuya sighed acknowledging the rather flippant mood of his friend. Ichigo seemed to sway from happy to
contemplative between the span of a second.

“Just happy to be alive, and here.”

Ichigo responded with his normally cryptic message, that Byakuya steadily over the years had come closer to decoding. Still the ebony-haired lieutenant doubted anyone could truly guess the more than two-fold meaning behind Ichigo’s statements. He could empathize with Ichigo’s words though, sometimes a chase of nerves chilled his spine and there was a darkness clouding his heart. Then he would see the sun, or the markets crowded with laughter, and life would snag away that pain.

Byakuya guessed it was much the same for Ichigo, though perhaps on a deeper level as Ichigo possessed a knowledge or wisdom that allowed him both deep insight and great sorrow. That was just the way Ichigo was; mysterious to the last drop but as open as a child at other times. Senbonzakura sometimes nagged him to search deeper for something he couldn’t see beneath all the layers of his friend.

“Think I’ll still be able to keep up with you in a spar? Though I doubt I ever came close to challenging you.”

Byakuya spoke pulling the two friends away from the contemplative hush that settled as it usually did between them. Ichigo scoffed in an amused tone (one that was bereft of the pride the nobles usually carried with such a gesture), and turned to consider Byakuya.

“Hmm I don’t know… last I remember you were pretty close to Bankai no?”

Ichigo spoke in slightly teasing tones with that razor-sharp grin that carried only a light mischief. Byakuya considered Ichigo’s words, it was true that he was able to manifest Senbonzakura in the outside realm, and he had been training extravagantly to reach Bankai (because damn did Ichigo provide competition), but he doubted he was anywhere near that state with the blade.

Byakuya had long ago accepted the fact that he would hardly ever reach Ichigo’s level no matter how much training they completed (but that didn’t mean he didn’t try). Yet he still strived to grow stronger for his friend, he wanted to be able to stand by Ichigo’s side, spar with him and lock their blades together, feel their souls through the screeching metal. Ichigo had always been kind enough to encourage Byakuya to do such, always placing limits in their spars or helping Byakuya grow in whatever way possible.

Now though he worried that the divide between them was too great. Ichigo had been training for a month straight, pitting Zangetsu against lieutenants and captains. Not to mention his (relatively) new hollow powers. The changes from the training were already evident within Ichigo, there was a new grace to his steps (because Ichigo had always been graceful and poised) as if he had finally settled into his own skin. Not to mention the ambience of his reaitsu, it was like a well deep and seemingly endless with dark shadows playing at the sides.

Ichigo slid to his feet hand resting on Zangetsu’s pommel with an inviting grin lining his lips. Byakuya sighed, though inside his chest his heart leapt at the chance to fight against Ichigo once more, and accompanying that was Senbonzakura’s rustle of agreement; the faint scent of cherry blossoms that always seemed to surround him growing potent. Heaving himself to his feet Byakuya glanced at Ichigo with a raised brow.

There was a brush of air and then Byakuya’s instincts were snapping at him and Senbonzakura was in his hands flicked up to defend against Zangetsu’s heavy clash. Lengthening his stance Byakuya pushed back against Ichigo’s force with a swell of reaitsu, the sharp crash of metal against metal fading in the intensity of their joined blades. Byakuya sprung back feet sliding in the slick grass, he
flicked Senbonzakura in his hands settling the katana in a firm grip and angling the blade forward.

Ichigo smiled eyes catching the light and like a mirage in the desert he was gone, the image wavering in heated sunlight. Byakuya swung up as Ichigo aimed an overhead strike towards Byakuya, deflecting the blade to the side Byakuya ducked low and side-stepped so that he could slash at Ichigo’s exposed spine. The orange-head made a chiding noise as he whipped around intercepting Senbonzakura with Zangetsu’s own silver blade.

Ichigo leaned in close their breaths mingling in the space between them, voice breathy and rough with exertion he said, “I can’t show you anything here, would give your grandfather quite the conniption but some other time?”

Byakuya nodded understanding well Ichigo’s reasoning, the abundance of hollow reaitsu that would come from such ventures would surely worry not only his grandfather but likely half of Soul Society. Ichigo smiled and pushed back swinging Zangetsu towards the ground and sending the air swinging in heady vortexes.

They pushed forward once more blades batting at each other in rapid movements that would leave any viewer awestruck and straining to even catch a whisper of metal. Byakuya could sense the difference in strength, while Byakuya perhaps possessed a body slightly more muscular than Ichigo. The fire-head was always quick fleeting movements accompanied by blunt force. Now it was backed by an easy fluidity and reaitsu enforced movements.

Snapping his wrist forward to deflect Ichigo’s incoming strike he darted away and raised his hand to hastily cast a byakurai. Byakuya ducked under Zangetsu’s sweeping graze and pushed himself flush against Ichigo their blade locked tightly between them. Ichigo smirked and reaitsu gathered along his blade in great heaving crescents that sent shivers of warning down his spine.

Byakuya darted across the small outdoor sect and hastily raised Senbonzakura to deflect the incoming wave of screaming energy. The crescent shaped arc of power slammed into him bodily and Byakuya struggled against the current drawing on the tranquility and sentience of the sakura petals furrowing through his spirit and power.

Byakuya was left panting heavily as the crashing storm of energy finally dispersed and with it a large portion of his strength. Before he could think to raise a blade to counter Ichigo’s strike the cool touch of metal traced his neck. Looking up through parted ebony strands that cloyed around his sticky skin like honey, Byakuya could see Ichigo’s eyes from under the crown of orange. They were vibrant and raging with a soft joy, it was there Byakuya noted in the strands of grass that it was okay that he didn’t necessarily pose a challenge to Ichigo. It was instead the clashing of their souls that excited them both, the kinship and ease of blade like a dance with no one else.

Ichigo extended a calloused palm and with a returning smile Byakuya grasped it and pulled himself up, at eye level he could once more see the weary ache of sleeplessness in Ichigo’s eyes but it was muted and hidden from Byakuya’s prying gaze. Wrapping and arm around Byakuya’s shoulders Ichigo pressed himself against the ebony-haired lieutenants frame and asked, “Should we head to Rungokai, you can tell me all bout the new stores the latest gossip?”

Byakuya laughed and nodded at the light tones, feeling the ache that had wormed its way into his heart in Ichigo’s absence settle disappear. With a ruffle of orange locks Byakuya fled towards the gates of the Sixth ignoring Ichigo’s cheerful yelling behind him.
Thank you all for reading. I hope the pining wasn’t too obvious and that their reunion lived to it’s expectations. Reviews/Comments are always appreciated and I will see you all in the next chapter.

Tombstone!!
**Advesperascit**

Chapter Summary

The captains decide to go out for dinner, suffice to say things happen and Ichigo appears.

Chapter Notes

Advesperascit

(v.) The approaching dark; the evening draws near.

Hello everyone, we are back with another chapter. I’m very sorry that I didn’t post last week it was crazy busy with Canada day events happening (on a side note happy belated 4th of July and Canada day). This chapter can be considered more of a filler chapter, but we’re leading up to something really exciting (apologies in advance) so I hope you enjoy!

*To the guest review left on chapter 25: Thank you so much! Your words mean so much to me and left me gushing over them for 10 minutes, so once again thank you very much.

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The light curtain of evening hung about them with sweet scents of lilting blossoms and the ever-present hum of Rungokai. Shinji brushed aside the still unfamiliar strands of short blond hair, his eyes lazily cast about observing the street sparsely travelled after the long day of festivities. It was one summer fair or another that Rose had sung about in that softy breathy voice he reserved for love songs.

The musical blond was currently to the left ambling along beside Love and humming a jaunty tune under his breath, or at least Shinji assumed it was a jaunty tune sometimes one couldn’t tell with the musician. While Love seemed to be contemplating something if the furrowed brows and wandering eyes were any indication.

Shunsui and Jushiro were talking in soothed whispers behind the rest of the group, ambling alone with fond light in their eyes, the sight of the two elder captains always brought a grin to Shinji’s lips.
He had known the two since his days in the academy, granted they had already graduated at the time, but they had been lieutenants to look up to. Seeing their happiness today always kindled a kind of nostalgic and soft warmth in his chest, accompanied by Sakande’s purr of agreement.

Isshin was spouting some hypersensical nonsense, bouncing from one corner of the street to the other in his typical manner, eyes alight like a child. Kisuke was the lucky (read horribly unlucky) bastard that got to deal with Isshin.

It was quite obvious already how much Kisuke was regretting it. A dull shade of displeasure cast his eyes sharply and the brim of his hat (one Ichigo had tossed at the captain out of no where with a wide grin) was tilted to shade the other emotions of his visage. Ginrei had the fortune of being excused from this forced little frolic (as much as something regarding a collection of captains could be forced) because of his age or something of the sort. And well the other captains had excuses or some other bull that excused them from the lovely evening stroll.

In any case Kensei was pacing alongside Shinji, mood sour in that he was missing a spar or joust that he had been vying to watch. They made a motley sort of crew, a collection of captains strolling down the streets of Rungokai. Sakande purred her agreement writhing strands of ebony wrapping around his wrists and tapping the steady rhythm of his heart against his pulse point.

In an effort to… what was it Lisa had said? Shinji thought over it for a moment trying to grasp his thoughts that tumbled about like dust on the plains. It had something to do with diplomatic relationships and reassuring bonds of that Shinji had no doubt. The matter of it was that there was still a divide between the Vizard and the regular Captains, so they had proposed a dinner (though that was more assumptions than fact).

It was also to assure the moral of the common souls, as well as the canon fodder Shinigami (dully he heard Lisa chiding him for calling them that). Tensions were still running high and it seemed everyone was waiting for an inevitable fallout with heavy hearts. So, they were here to prove that the Shinigami who had been hollowfied could cohabitate with the ‘normal’ residents.

A chill wind blew through the narrow alleyway carrying with it soft shivers of ominousness that straightened his spine like ice and had his senses on high alert scanning their surroundings. A wooden sign clacked harshly against a base board and their small band of merry men ground to a sparse halt eyes keen for shadows in the darkness.

Crime rates had been low in Soul Society recently, thanks to Kisuke and Ichigo’s plotting, so Shinji doubted it was any idiot with the gal to try and attack them. It left the question of the muted presences and the chill of the breeze for a summer wind. With one breath and the next the presence was gone and the enshrouding heat of summer was around them once more, enlivening the chilled sweat of their bodies and cloying the air with heavy bursts of roasting meats and fragrant sakes.

The group resumed their gentle unhurried pace in quiet, until loud raucous laughter picked up behind them and Shunsui’s deep throaty laughter bounced around them. It was enough to disperse the tense atmosphere and kindle smiles on the other captain’s faces.

Kisuke hurried to walk beside Shinji casting paranoid eyes over his shoulder as Isshin amused himself with one of the women at the street corner. While Shinji didn’t necessarily doubt the man’s sense of direction he worried slightly about the man-child getting lost. A warm hand clasped his shoulder and Shinji glanced into Kisuke’s simmering gun metal grey eyes, underneath the tame façade of the calm egotistical scientist unease lingered and Shinji erringly recalled that Kisuke was never one for social interactions in the first place.

Shinji flashed the scientist a reassuring smile sending out fragile stings of reaitsu to comfort the other
blond. Kisuke smile gratefully in return before he drifted into the crowd once more, likely trying to uphold his promise to the Shihōin Princess to try and keep Shiba Isshin out of trouble (however futile an endeavour).

The haunting caress of a string instrument’s voice resounded around them, and Shinji brushed a hand through short locks in slight exasperation, knowing Rose had likely picked up an instrument from Kami knows where, the man had the disturbing ability to find an instrument anywhere he went; The man had even found one in the forest of the Seventy-Eighth district of all things.

The glowing sphere of the restaurant loomed out above them, the hustle and bustle full of good cheer that always accompanied a place such as that drifted out in a welcoming wave. Shinji felt himself relax slightly knowing the night was nowhere near done but that they had at least arrived without incident (if one didn’t count the near run in with a furious woman and her shoe).

A vague shape appeared in the distance doing a rather impressive job of appearing drunk, with the way the figure tilted and stilted its way towards them. Caution bred itself in Shinji’s lungs accompanied by apprehension and he cursed his earlier thoughts of an incident-less walk. The figure swayed in front of the restaurant for a subtle moment before stepping forward to rest against the daub earthy toned walls of the Split Eel.

As they drew near and the muffled presence of the figure became clearer Shinji let out a slightly relieved sigh, before another sigh followed, this one an amalgamation of emotions that always swelled inside his chest when it came to a certain Shinigami. Some were negative like the worry that swelled with the kid, and the others were positive like the relief of being reunited with kin.

Ichigo tilted his head from under the crown of his bangs eyes sweeping the area, he flinched slightly as if seeing a shade of the night before his gaze landed on their merry crew and a fond smile settled on his lips.

As they drew under the covenant of the lamp light, Shinji could see Ichigo’s figure clearer, and damn did the kid look bad. Ichigo had always carried a weariness with him, it clung to him like a second skin. Heck even when he first met the kid in that dingy old pub he had been tired, it had been stark on his features then and it was all the more so now.

Those first few days of training Shinji had been perpetually worried about their youngest, but Ichigo showed no signs of his insomnia other than the midnight wanderings and the purple hills beneath his eyes.

For the first week or so it had gotten worse each night (and Shinji had wondered how far it would go before the kid collapsed) till the point Ichigo had been swaying on his feet when they weren’t looking. Then Aizen had pulled the kid aside one night talked to him by the light of a dying fire. Ichigo’s sleep had improved after that in a gradual manner that took some of the worry lining Shinji’s brow away. But then Shinji hadn’t seen Ichigo for a few days (it had only been a week!) and he looked like death decided to skinny dip up north.

Everything about Ichigo seemed pale as if the life was literally drained from him, his skin was paper white (when dammit the kid should have a tan! He had seen him after one of their beach excursions and the kid had glowed). His hair hung around him, and dammit the kid’s hands were trembling, then there were his eyes. It was always the eyes that gave it away and drew Shinji in like a whirlpool.

They weren’t dead which was some reassurance, but it was like that day where Ichigo hadn’t slept properly for five something days. They were utterly raw as if Ichigo couldn’t muster the strength to
cover up the pain and sorrow that always dwelled in the kid (and it was mildly horrifying that this was after Ichigo had healed some, this wasn’t even the worse it could be). Not to mention the weariness that went hand in hand with the torrential downpour of emotions.

Kami Shinji wanted to drag the damn kid to Unohana’s so she could put him in a sleeping coma, or alternatively so he could get some rest and face Unohana’s wrath. Maybe then it would aid the kid in getting some actual sleep.

Shinji wondered if he had ever seen the kid not look tired, it had always been there however minute in their last few days. It was as if the kid was running himself into an early grave and wasn’t even aware of it (which was totally likely considering how obtuse Ichigo could sometimes be). It was hard to say he hadn’t known the kid that long (and what a pity because the youth was quite interesting), he would have to talk to Kaien or Ichigo’s ‘friend’ the Kuchiki heir.

“Ev’ing Ichi!”

Shinji called out in lieu of greeting, Ichigo cocked his head for a moment as if the sound came distorted through water before another smile stoked his face and he half-heartedly waved at the group. Shinji’s eyes hastily cast back to the rear of the group catching Shunsui’s burning cocoa orbs he directed his gaze between Ichigo and the elder captain. The man stared for a quiet moment much as Shinji had been doing as Isshin finally bounded up behind them.

“So Ichigo what are you doing here?”

Jushiro asked, polite curiosity in his voice even as it was belayed by the concern the man felt for the young lieutenant, that same concern was heavy in the hearts of the assembled Shinigami (because somehow the kid had half off Soul Society wrapped around his finger without even realizing it). Ichigo shrugged running his hand through his hair taking a moment to think about it before he replied with a shrug, “I don’t much know myself, guess I needed a bit of fresh air.”

Shinji idly thought of the time as he stared at the shimmering disc sinking low on the horizon. He wondered if Ichigo had been attempting to sleep and was disturbed by nightmares (and didn’t he remember some of those nights in the caves). Shunsui caught Shinji’s eyes and shared a solemn nod obviously seeing what Shinji saw and likely more having known the lieutenant for many years now.

Isshin burst through the gathering of Shinigami at that moment, boundless Shiba enthusiasm elating his every step as he seemed to skip towards Ichigo and before anyone could have thought to stop the bat shit crazy captain he slid an arm around the young male. Ichigo tensed fiercely as if resisting the urge to brutally stab the older Shiba, before Isshin’s reaitsu was wrapping around the kid like a hoard of blankets.

Ichigo abruptly settled, all the tenseness deflating from his form till he appeared much smaller in Isshin’s large form. One hand was shakily fisted into Isshin’s shihaksho as if Ichigo was trying to ground himself. It struck Shinji deep inside to see their kid like this, see Ichigo hurting and being unable to do anything for him. Sakande growled her agreement waves of protective instincts drumming against Shinji’s careful barriers of control.

Rose rested a hand on Shinji’s shoulder a strange parallel of their earlier walk, Shinji looked up into Rose’s now gold eyes and could see the mirroring emotions that were haunting Shinji. Their reaitsu tangled for a few minutes settling the other’s hollows slightly and placating the desperate need to help their own.

Turning his attention to Ichigo once more, Shinji could see the kid was starting to get antsy again. It was rare to see Ichigo take comfort from someone in public even more so to see him display what he
would term weakness. Ichigo really must be out of it Shinji thought with a sigh as he ran a hand through short blond strands.

Ichigo’s eyes were darting around as if he was trying to plot an escape and with a slightly rueful but mostly gleeful smile Shinji interjected, “Well now that the gang’s all assembled. Ichi how bout you join us for dinner.”

There was the familiar vengeful glare that had normal souls quaking in their boots, or shoes, or whatever. Then again, no high-ranking Shinigami was normal so Shinji brushed the glare off with a laugh while sending a slightly apologetic cast of his head towards Ichigo. The orange-haired teen frowned knowing he wouldn’t escape before he shrugged and sighed restless reaitsu scraping across his skin.

It was wild tonight but thick with the undertones of the older of Ichigo’s two spirits’ presence, Zangetsu-Ossan if Shinji recalled correctly. The one who was calm and collected like a deep spring of maturity, and the one who balanced Ichigo’s more instinctive side.

Isshin finally released Ichigo on account of willful tugging on Kisuke’s part as he dragged the (slightly) younger male into the restaurant to actually get their table. Kensei smirked softly the one he reserved for Mashiro on a particularly whimsical day and ruffled Ichigo’s locks. The kid hissed like an upset cat and batted his hand at Kensei but remained otherwise immobile as if still debating the merit of escaping.

Then Shunsui and Jushiro ambled up on either side of Ichigo loosely boxing the younger Shinigami in. Ichigo sighed in defeat flashing his captain a knowing smile before the rest of them conglomerated at the doorway. Isshin cheerfully waved from the back, while Kisuke was doing an excellent impression of a sulking teenager, likely annoyed that he had been stuck with man-child duty.

Ichigo spared one last glance at the outside world before following them in coming to stroll beside Shinji. The blond captain idly fingered Sakande’s hilt and sent out soft waves of reaitsu to meet Ichigo’s own volatile force. At Shinji’s touch, the concussive force (like a defensive pet striking out protectively for it’s master) simmered to a faint pulse of animosity before being submerged by the warmth of Ichigo’s soul.

Taking in a deep breath rich with the spices of the restaurant Shinji let his eyes cast around the place Shunsui had recommended and Rangiku (Isshin’s lieutenant with a lovely personality) had seconded. The place like most of the restaurants in Rungokai was a mess of tables and cushions, accompanied by simple rice patterned walls, from the ceiling oil lamps encased in amber coloured glass hung, and the smoky soothing scent of incense was in the air.

A few people were chattering aimlessly but otherwise the restaurant was near empty. This festival seemed to promote early sleep or something of the sort and it was quite late for dinner, Shinji thought with a half smile eyes dully watching as the waitresses scurried about the place.

“Nee Shinji?”

Ichigo questioned softly as they followed the boisterous shouting that could only ever be Isshin Shiba. Shinji cocked a head while Rose sent a curious glance at them over his shoulder, Jushiro and Shunsui who were still behind the rest of the group looked up at Ichigo’s question doubtlessly wondering like the rest of them what Ichigo had to ask.

“Why are you all here?”
Ichigo questioned with a curious tilt to his head (damn kid should not get to be that cute) and a sway of untameable orange locks much like their owner. Ichigo’s question promoted laughter at the honest confusion in Ichigo’s voice.

“We’re meeting up for ‘diplomatic’ reasons as the Soutaicho spelled it out.”

Shunsui interjected with that puppy dog smile of his accompanied by familiar goofiness. Shunsui had gotten it mostly right in the end even if Ichigo was looking a little confused, before Shinji or even Shu could interject Love ruffled the kid’s hair and said, “Don’t worry we can explain it better when we sit down.” Here he paused casting his gaze to the other Shinigami who had managed to loiter around the entrance for a good long while if the head hostess’ irritation was any indication. Then Love continued, “But first we need to sit down.”

Ichigo chuckled quietly a faint blush appearing stark on his cheeks, Jushiro taking pity on the near unmovable cluster of Shinigami clogging up the front began to horde them towards the one table at the back still accompanied by two Shinigami and large enough to fit their impressive numbers. One Shinigami who would be fairly annoyed, and the other would be well…. Isshin.

Once everyone was seated, with Shinji to Ichigo’s right (take that Rose) and Kisuke on Shinji’s right, the waitress came out to take drink orders. Ichigo stared at the menu as if he was contemplating burning a hole in it, that or if he really wanted to drink alcohol.

Shinji had met a drunk Ichigo (though where they even had the quantities needed to get the kid drunk he wondered) and boy was it an experience. The kid was like a swing when it came to emotions flipping between happiness and sorrow in a split second. The kid had also been amorous and far too willing to account various adventurous acts he had prepared. Yet the kid never shared a word about his past, seeming to have locked them up somewhere so far in his mind that only he could reach it.

Ichigo in the end had decided against sake, which well likely the wiser decision left Shinji pouting at the lack of entertainment that could have been gained from that venture. Light chatter started around the table as the comfortable atmosphere seeped into their bones.

Shunsui had his head on his shoulders that morning in suggesting the place, it was quiet and relatively secluded, with a few customers and incredibly delicious food. Plus, the overall presence of the place was refreshing not filled with the thick blanket of reaitsu that smothered the whole of Soul Society. Ichigo looked better as well, there was a freeness there that the warmth of family always released in him.

Chatter picked up along the table, amiable subjects such as the rather dramatic amounts of paperwork, or a lieutenant’s newest crazy scheme. All the while the waitresses bustled back and forth ferrying their drinks with an even grace and fluidity. Shinji settled back against the wall and watched everyone interact, happy to see his family (being both Vizard and Shinigami) interact so well.

Rose and Love were chatting with Isshin about one daring mission or the other accompanied by the rhythmic hum of Rose’s guitar. Shunsui and Jushiro were in their own little world but they deigned to chat with Kensei and Kisuke (though Jushiro was the one leading the conversation of the four, anti-social men). Ichigo had a content look on his face though his eyes were still shadowed under drapes of hanging orange his reaitsu had settled.

“So Ichi how’re ya settlin’ in?”

Shinji questioned wanting to include the youth, and knowing that if Ichigo had his way he wouldn’t
have to speak for the whole night. Sadly, for the kid Shinji was a well-known crusher of dreams, or at least that was what Aizen mockingly snipped. Ichigo startled as if lost in thought, blinking owlishly at Shinji for a moment before he took the chance to think over Shinji’s question.

“I think things have been well, though there was that incident with the jerk and Lisa on our first day!”

Ichigo started quietly before finishing with a faint exclamation and swift shake of his head. Shinji recalled hearing about the incident and how of course it had happened to Ichigo’s division. It had occurred strange for a few minutes that an incident could arise so quickly, before he had resolutely acknowledged that this was Ichigo and things like that were bound to happen.

Love cocked a head diagonal from Shinji and Rose noticing his partner’s interest flicked his eyes over to the two. Ichigo shrunk back slightly in his seat unused to the excess attention and Shinji rattled his head in slight exasperation.

“Hmm that may be the reason for the dinner.”

Love mused under breath, garnering the attention of the whole table with a simple turn of phrase, because really, they were all half-wondering why they were here. Rose although always one for dramatics ran a hand through curly blond locks in a familiar sign of exasperation at his partner’s tack or lack there of.

Ichigo tilted his head in curiosity amber orbs a touch wide with confusion, Shinji wanted to laugh at how youthful the expression made Ichigo seem but refrained on the bases of receiving a firm punch to the solar plex from Ichigo if he dared. Love noticing Ichigo’s confusion made to amend his statement and in that chill rumble said, “Well it’s just how things are right now.”

When that statement incurred a lack of understanding from Ichigo, the Captain slumped afro shaking with his movements. Rose hid his amusement behind a dainty gesture eyes bubbling with amusement, and in a half joking half serious matter he patted Love on the shoulder. A series of glances passed along the table as the gathered adults debated who would be the one to try and explain the fiasco of a situation to Ichigo.

It was funny that of all things the kid didn’t understand it was politics. Ichigo had a good head on his shoulders, hell he managed to keep up with the scientists on their mad behest and spurn of words. But it seemed that Ichigo just didn’t have the mind for the tricky stuff, heck Shinji hadn’t for the longest time but dealing with the Central 46 bastards smacked some of the sense into one’s head.

Then again Ichigo seemed to be one more for handling the situation bluntly with as little plotting as possible, for example how they dealt with the afore mentioned bastards. Ichigo didn’t have the heart nor the patience (but few had the very great patience required to deal with the bastards, most of them got by through sheer force of will) to sit for hours and debate so he had silenced them and made demands.

It was a bit clearer now what Ichigo had instigated when he spoke of what might have happened when they returned to Soul Society, the kid could acknowledge well enough what would likely happen but the tricky behind the scenes stuff wasn’t Ichigo’s fling. He knew the hearts of the people, not the minds of the madmen.

It seemed a consensus had been reached and Shinji sighed knowing that he would be one of the ones to attempt to explain politics to the clueless orange-head, along with Jushiro who would veritably do a better job.
“Are ya really sure ya want me to try? Have ya seen me at the academy?”

Shinji pointed out with a low drawl in a last bid to escape his fate but also generally telling the truth. While it was amusing to see the confusion on the kids’ faces, what wasn’t so amusing was trying to go through an explanation in six different ways.

“You know Shinji isn’t half wrong, I’ve had to sit through a few of his lectures myself… no offense.”

Shunsui spoke up with a teasing baritone and an easy smile, he flashed one of his knowing grins at Shinji before turning his attention to Jushiro’s prodding. There was anther round of glances exchanged and while they debated (he knew he would still be chosen in the end) Shinji glanced over towards Ichigo.

The kid was staring at the far wall a bit zoned out after having waited so long for an answer. His hazy amber orbs were focused on nothing and the hand not grasping Zangetsu’s pommel was shaking again. Damn the kid was in a funk tonight, Shinji thought sadly as he leant over and gently jostled his shoulder against the youth. Ichigo startled but remained quiet eyes widening in surprise before they swung around to land on Shinji.

Questions lingered in Shinji’s own eyes, asking Ichigo if he was okay, and if the kid would please talk to someone because it hurt them all to see him in such a bad state. Guilt flushed Ichigo’s cheeks and he tipped his head forward so that flaming orange could shade his eyes from sight. It was true they were all worried about him, and some part of Ichigo would feel guilty about that but the kid also wasn’t willing to talk.

A light cough and push of reaitsu pulled him from his musings, and he turned his attention to the rest of the group having already made peace with his fate. Reassuringly he wrapped his reaitsu around Ichigo letting his presence comfort the kid and pull him out of his own guilt as much as he could.

“Well ya see Ichi, the thing is right now whatever we do has consequences. So that battle where Lisa totally and rightfully kicked that guys ass raised the tensions in Soul Society.”

Shinji started catching the kid off balance and brining his attention to the rest of the group. Ichigo half-nodded once simmering amber orbs blazing up with that familiar faint spark of determination as Ichigo resolved to try and understand what they were speaking of.

“The thing is Ichigo, right now everyone is worried because one wrong move could lead to the two forces of Soul Society clashing. That would be bad for both sides as well as the citizens. As such everyone is watching our movements, it’s why we had this dinner to assure the public that we are all getting along well.”

Jushiro took over speaking in that soothing lull of his that managed to comfort any Shinigami willing to listen. Ichigo looked up catching Jushiro’s warm cocoa orbs and he smiled softly encouraging the older captain to continue.

“That’s why the fight from earlier in the week had negative connotations, it portrayed the worst outcome of our situation. But as it didn’t amount to anything but a demotion of the Shinigami it didn’t correlate to too much damage.”

Jushiro finished with a smile as the waitresses returned laden with a multitude of steaming plates, the heavenly scent that wafted through the air was like the gardens of lore spoken paradise. Conversation stilted to a halt as the gathered captains (and lieutenant) began their meal, digging into the vast and rich resources of simple cuisine.
Shinji looked up at a slight shuffle beside him to see Ichigo a contemplative gaze perched below his brow, in a rather mechanical motion he was slowly eating eyes elsewhere seeing something on another plane.

“Nee Shinji?”

Ichigo questioned softly likely feeling the blond’s inquisitive stare. Shinji nodded his head signalling he had heard the youth a wide and easy smile splitting his lips. Ichigo paused for a moment more as if collecting his thoughts before he continued, “So it would be bad for a fight to occur even between the Vizard?”

And the attention of the table was focused on them once more. Shinji wondered if either of the two of them were part magnet with the way the others’ gazes always seemed drawn to the orange haired Shinigami and Shinji.

“Yep, probably cause load of concern and paranoia. People thinking we’re crazy savage beasts that are going to snap, that and the reaitsu alone would be enough to send people into fits if they’re not exposed to is slowly.”

Love interjected easily speaking in that voice that soothed the nerves like honey, he had flipped the lens of his shades up so he could glance at Ichigo as if to get the message across. Ichigo pouted and muttered under his breath, “Hey I’m not Hiyori.”

Shinji chuckled under his breath at the kid’s mutterings because it was true and they had been lucky that the violent blond hadn’t already departed on a reign of terror throughout Soul Society. Laughter drifted through the air at the kid’s petulant expression and Ichigo brightened faintly reaitsu stirring to coil around Shinji in a vaguely fond way.

“It would probably even be bad if one of us got sick.”

Kensei stated lacking any sense of the situation or how to read it, but that was normal for the sometimes block-headed captain (or at least that was what Mashiro insisted so the information was questionable at best).

Ichigo frowned right along with Shinji at the statement, turning to his side he wanted ruffle the kid’s hair so that the demur panic would fade. Kami it was always an emotional rollercoaster when the Gotei 13’s strongest gathered, too many crazy personalities under one roof.

“Hmm why would it be a problem?”

Isshin asked unusually serious eyes darting between Kensei and Ichigo before firmly resting on his nephew. Kensei frowned gaze sharp as he assessed the Shiba, he made to answer when Rose interrupted fluently sliding in to the opening in the conversation.

“Well the more simple-minded might think we had fallen ill because of our Hollow sides, or that we possessed some strange contagion. In any case I say it will blow over in…”

Rose spoke eloquently before pausing thoughtfully and casting a meaningful glance at Shinji. The short-haired blond frowned and thoughts for a second contemplatively stroking his chin before he spoke loud enough for the table to hear, “Two weeks.”

Rose nodded with that musician’s smile before he continued, “It will settle down eventually, in a gradual manner so all we need to do is refrain from getting sick or engaging in fighting which will be the harder of the two.”
Possessing his ever-present flare for dramatics, Rose finished by tilting his sake cup against Love’s, the afro-haired man grinned before clinking his own with Shunsui’s. The macabre atmosphere that had drifted over their heads dispersed, and Kisuke called out in that saccharine sarcastic tone the one that somehow sounded both serious, and coy.

“And no visits from the science division.”

There were some who chuckled easily at Kisuke’s joke, while there were a few uneasy laughs hidden beneath the mirth of the others. Shinji sensed what the captain was implying underneath his jovial tones he took with the penchant for dramatics he possessed. There was a sharp warning that while Kisuke would try to keep his division in line, some namely Mayuri might try anything.

Sensing a slight shift in Ichigo’s reaitsu that was hardly perceptible Shinji glanced over to see the kid. Ichigo had closed himself off as if a dam trying to hold back the might of the world’s waters. Instead that force came rushing through his eyes.

Kami dammit they had scared the kid a little and likely traumatized him… okay Shinji was being a bit over dramatic in those respects he doubted the kid hadn’t heard worse. But it was clear Ichigo was worrying, some internal debate flashing through his mind’s eyes and translating itself to the snaking wasps of reaitsu that fluttered lightly against the orange-haired Shinigami’s skin.

“Hey, Ichi don’t worry everything will be fine.”

Ichigo looked up at Shunsui’s hushed words, the chocolate haired captain wrapped his reaitsu around the kid and flashed him one of those sincere bubbly smiles that always brought one to Shinji’s face.

Ichigo nodded faintly though Shinji wondered how much the youth believed of their words, Ichigo’s eyes glimmered a bit brighter all the same and underneath there was a wicked flash of pain. Shinji felt short-lived relief that his favourite orange-head (because where could you find another orange head) was okay, because he doubted what he had seen was a trick of the iridescent oil lamps, but he decided not to push a likely snappy Ichigo.

“Though what we really need to worry about is your night life!”

Isshin interjected happily all bouncy wide grin, Ichigo tensed at that swaying between annoyance and worry at the older Shiba’s words. Isshin’s declaration caught the attention of the others and ever a man for attention under the eyes of the others he continued, “Your love life my nephew!”

Ichigo turned red as the early morning flowers growing in the fields south of the once great battlefields, the scarlet painted his cheeks sharply highlighting the paleness of his skin once more. Shinji couldn’t help but burst out laughing at the helpless expression dancing across Ichigo’s features, soon accompanied by the light laughter of the other occupants of the table. In one moment, the expression was gone and Ichigo’s brow was twitching the youth leaning ever closer to stabbing a still bellowing Isshin.

Jushiro reached over and ruffled Ichigo’s hair disturbing the rather fearsome image he had been projecting and leaving the wild mane of hair to spike all the more so. Ichigo settled back in his seat with a pout doing a fine impression of Kisuke earlier in the evening, all the while maintaining a fierce glower directed towards Isshin.

Rose slid a sake cup over to Ichigo with a melodious hum and a mellow smile. Ichigo considered the glass, eyes flickering between it and the blond before he nodded the angry persona disappearing in a flash as Ichigo tipped the drink back smiling through the dull burn of sake afterwards letting the faint play of anger fade away.
The light atmosphere resumed once more and this time Love and Rose’s combined efforts dragged the kid into the fray. Rose’s silvery voice lifted above the swaying white noise as if carried towards heaven’s limbs as he regaled the table with his adventure in the human world, where he had met a most remarkable woman.

“You see, at first I thought her for a man but it was not so she was a lady. One who had led the troops through the higher peaked columns of our neighbours’ frontier”

Rose lilted pleasantly, beside the curly blond Love chuckled flicking his fingers at Rose’s temple before he added, “Then the idiot decided it would be a good idea to fall firmly on his face in the snow.”

Rose pouted indulgently as laughter rippled along the table, even pulling that light airy fae laughter from Ichigo. The darkness that had swollen like the early tides had receded but the tiredness of hearth glowing amber still remained.

Shunsui jumped into the opening in the conversation attempting to begin a tale of his daring bravado while facing a wicked feminine serpent, before he was promptly quieted by Jushiro as he lightly hit his partner on the head. Shunsui began whining pawing at Jushiro’s arm and Shinji joined the others in their mirth at their now familiar actions. A flash of movement out of the corner of his peripheral vision caught Shinji’s attention.

Isshin was standing up contemplating the table as if decided whether he would blow off into night’s firefly light embrace. Feeling Shinji’s attention, the head of the Shiba clan lifted a hand with a wide grin shaking his *kizeru catching the light of the oil lamps with the gold embellishing detailing the sides in swirled patterns of noble design. The man made an acute gesture with his unoccupied hand gesturing for Shinji to come along.

The short-haired blond swept his eyes around the table for a moment, deciding whether he would venture out with the enigmatic captain. Another bottle of sake was resting innocently on the table likely already near empty, looking at his fellow captains for some he could already see the rosy pink of inebriation. Turning to Ichigo he saw the kid watching with a minute amused smirk that held a slice of mischief.

Knowing the kid could handle himself (and would likely have blackmail for years to come) Shinji heaved himself from his seat, taking a moment after being disoriented having remained seated for so long. Ichigo turned concerned viper fast to gaze at Shinji questions bubbling up like a curious child. Shinji flashed the kid a reassuring smirk before he turned and trailed after Isshin the broader man having already cleared a path through the restaurant.

The air outside was crisp and clear with the onset of night, tangy with the fragrant blossoms littering eaves above, and the mellow sting of sake. Isshin leaned against the wall of the Split Eel the kizeru perched against his lips, wispy strands of silver glowing like mystical moon light drifting into the open air. Isshin quirked an eyebrow gesturing lightly with the kizeru Shiba blazing brown eyes glowing in the eve of the restaurant light.

Shinji shrugged taking the proffered pipe and inhaling the heavy taste of tobacco feeling the way the smoke listed through his lungs before he released the pipe and blew out, the smoke curling against the roof of his mouth. Passing the pipe to Isshin, Shinji let his gaze focus on the crescent moon hanging in the sky clustered about by tiny pinpricks of light. Kisuke always lectured Shinji on how they were so very far away no matter how close they appeared and that they were beyond even the Earth.

“I’m worried about him.”
Isshin confessed taking a deep drag from the kizeru, his own gaze a touch melancholic staring at the same sky as Shinji. The blond captain considered the man’s statement heavily before he replied, “Everyone is. It’s clear he ain’t sleepin’ well and he damn well won’t see Unohana on his own.”

Isshin sighed and nodded at Shinji’s low drawl, the blond captain knew his words held truth it was clear in the restaurant. The assessing gazes the captains had periodically cast towards Ichigo, accompanied by worry and concern with what they saw. He also knew that one of them would have to corner Ichigo into seeing Unohana before it got any worse, because Shinji had no doubt that the situation could get worse.

“Yeah it’s strange… He was fine the first day and then he just deteriorated ya know? I think he tries to get to sleep but Kaien’s told me he keeps seeing Ichi on the roof in the early hours of the morning. I want to talk to him but I’ve never been good at connecting with Ichi, hell few people can actually get past those walls of his.”

Isshin spoke tiredly as if carrying the weight of his nephew’s burden had weighed his own shoulders. The new information didn’t shock Shinji, somehow it seemed obvious that Ichigo was someone to sit on roof tops in the hours when the sun hadn’t woken, but it left a deep-seated heaviness in his gut that had Sakande rolling along with him.

“Guess Kaien’s our best option then?”

Shinji questioned, the image of the seastone-strong lieutenant coming to mind. The man normally possessed a calm temperament when it came to his duties as a Shinigami though he was occasionally bubbly like a puppy with a sword. Then you invoked Ichigo and he flipped between over excited puppy, and mother bird of doom, it was both humorous and always left Shinji worrying for his health.

Kaien and Ichigo were close, brothers in a bond that required more than just blood, they had shared sake and stories countless times. He was one of the few people who could really touch Ichigo’s soul and convince the kid of their point; Kaien connected with Ichigo in things they couldn’t hope to understand.

Isshin nodded stroking his chin and resting the pipe between his lips, his eyes were distant and soft in the way they always went when he thought of his family. With a breath of smoke like the coiling warning of a dragon he replied, “Yeah, he is I’ll talk to him see if he can knock some sense into Ichi.”

Shinji laughed softly at the joking tones, the tense and somber atmosphere abetted slightly by the jovialness that laughter always enconced. From behind them the sounds of mirthful hysterics rose, like a group of caterwauling cats.

The two shared a look one of knowing amusement before Isshin tucked the pipe into one of his sleeves and slid open the thin shoji doors with a grandiose flourish. A gust of warmth wrapped their forms from within tugging insistently on the clothe of their shihaksho and enticing away the cool chill of the night.

Shinji slid into the seat beside Ichigo with a huff the heady taste of tobacco still heavy on his tongue and dancing with his senses. A whisper of a flush painted Ichigo’s cheeks accompanied by that wide grin that he flashed when he was unusually joyful.

“Back so soon?”

Ichigo questioned easily crooking one brow and letting youthful amber slit mischievously, Shinji
chuckled and ruffled the brats tangled mane of orange, ignoring the low swipes at his hand. Stealing Ichigo’s sake cup Shinji downed the burning liquid before he replied with a cheshire grin, “Just checking that our retreat strategy is still in place. Looks like we won’t be here too much longer, a drunk Kensei is to say the least an interesting night.”

Ichigo smiled a bit brighter, like any anti-social person his ‘socializing bar’ as Kaien had dutifully dubbed it with a flourish was likely full. Under Shinji’s nose Ichigo retrieved (stole damn sneaky kid, spending too much time near Yoruichi) the sake cup and poured himself another glass of the warm liquid.

They sat together in the cheery warmth of the restaurant listening to the other captains prevail with interesting stories, some gripped Shinji’s attention like a vice and he felt like he couldn’t turn away, others had him straining to cage a yawn. Looking to his left he could see Ichigo’s eyelids drooping and his head was resting in his palm, the kid looked moments away from crashing.

“How bout Ichi share something and then we send the kiddie off to bed?”

Shinji asked as he poked the kid, Ichigo sighed a long-suffering sigh before he raised his head from his hand catching the amused looks of the members of the table. Ichigo thought for a few moments brows furrowing and orange shading pensive amber before the kid visibly perked with a story to share.

“My friend once was kidnapped,” He received rather confused and horrified looks at the blunt statement before he continued, “and she was taken by her brother who ran a gang. So, my friends and I, a rowdy group of adolescents, decided to rescue her...”

Ichigo continued to talk of the incident with nostalgic smile, eliciting laughter from the group as he told of a man who couldn’t stop dancing, and another dressed like a peacock. How sand appeared from nowhere, and how a certain red head was trying way too damn much.

“To save her, well I had to throw her...” Ichigo began hesitantly reaching the conclusion of his story, from what the kid had been saying they had been on top of a building at the time. Everyone was shooting slightly dumbstruck or awe shaken looks at Ichigo, who rubbed the back of his neck in a vaguely embarrassed manner.

“Let me get this straight Ichigo, you tossed your friend from the top of a building?”

Kisuke questioned slightly disbelieving, Ichigo nodded with a smile that lightly ventured into the realms of sadistic before he continued, “Yep she went sailing into the arms of the red head... Then they both yelled at me as if I had sent her to her doom?”

Ichigo ended on a slightly questioning note blasé confusion soft underneath the nostalgia. Laughter trickled along the table and Shinji could hear murmurs of ‘only you Ichigo’ and ‘of course the kid did something like that’.

Ichigo rubbed at his eyes as if trying to brush away the sleep like an infant and Shinji knew it was time to send the kid off to Morpheus’ realm. Grasping Ichigo’s forearm he heaved the kid to his feet and pulled the young Shinigami out of the clustered mess of chairs and chair legs.

“I’ll see Ichigo off fellas’.”

There was some pouting that Ichigo was leavening but it was disenchanted by the small wave Ichigo gave them all and his goodnight said in that deep caring voice accompanied by a shallow bow, “Thank you all for allowing me to dine with you tonight. May your night be restful.”
Amusement broke out among the table at Ichigo’s formal goodbye, along with a chorus of farewells in return as Shinji steered Ichigo towards the exit. Pushing aside the thin doors Ichigo shot a final wave over his shoulder before he stepped outside into the cool night Shinji following close behind him.

“Do you want me to walk ya home?”

Shinji questioned honestly with good intent, Ichigo frowned before he paused and considered the offer. In the end, he shook his head in the negative with a light smile on his lips, Shinji stepped forward drawing the kid into a tight hug he let his reatsu wrap around the soul in his arms.

“You take care of ya self Ichi. Get some sleep or by the seventh layer of heaven I will drag you to Unohana.”

Shinji whispered ending on a light joking note, Ichigo laughed muffled against Shinji’s shoulder before he pulled back so that Shinji could see radiant amber orbs. Ruffling the kid’s locks in farewell Shinji disengaged from Ichigo watching amused as the kid patted his hair down and straightened his clothing.

“Night Shinji, I will don’t worry about me I’ll be fine.”

Ichigo assured with a faint curve of his lips, Shinji nodded reluctantly watching as the thin figure turned with a final wave and became a faint shadow retreating into the mists of night’s embrace. Somehow Shinji doubted Ichigo’s words, he only hoped his instincts were wrong, Sakande purred her agreement in the recesses of his mind. Turning once more to face the restaurant Shinji shrugged aside the worry of the night and prepared to return to their little haven of mirth.

X

Chapter End Notes

* A Kizeru is a Japanese pipe that was used for smoking tobacco within the feudal era.

Thank you all for reading, I hope you all didn’t mind the interlude before the plot thickens. Did you enjoy the interactions between the captains (both with each other) and Ichigo? Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Flag!!
Toska

Chapter Summary

There is a lot of sadness, and insomnia, plus hallucinations.

Chapter Notes

Toska

(n.) A dull ache of the soul, a sick pining, a spiritual anguish.

Hello everyone, we’re finally back. I apologize for the delay in posting there were some communication issues with my editor, but we’re here now. I will be posting 2 chapters this week, chapter 28 will go up tomorrow so keep an eye open for that. Now actually focusing on the chapter, I apologize in advance for any feels, or other such emotions. I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

“Go to sleep.”

“No.”

“Go to sleep.”

“I told you no.”

“… Go to sleep.”

“Fine I’m trying.”

“Are you asleep?”

“No.”

“Go to sleep.”

“I can’t when you keep yelling at me to.”
“It worked last time.”

“Last time your definition of sleep was slamming my head into a building till I passed out.” Ichigo grumbled at Shiro, the spirit’s dual tone voice echoed throughout his mindscape; their bond thrummed with the pale spirit’s ambient reaitsu. It curled around Ichigo like a cat, low vibrations resembling a purr thrummed along Ichigo’s veins in a lulling trance that drew Ichigo away from reality and into the soft crescents of reaitsu fluttering along his soul.

Shiro muttered something indecipherable in the back of Ichigo’s mind, the spirit’s concern radiating from the core of their inner world, Zangetsu-Ossan’s presence also fluttered with concern and worry for their wielder in that well-deepening way. Ichigo pushed aside the faint voices of his subconscious as he willed his eyes open from their heavy slumber, feeling like he was fighting a great battle that was already quite lost, he was seated in the office of the Eighth division still though it felt like he had left before. It was like waking to a strange dream a keen sense of déjà vu lingering about his senses just as much as the cloudy drowsiness.

It was like that when only Zangetsu-Ossan’s deep baritone and Shiro’s reaitsu were able to cajole him out of bed, the heaviness that pressed him into the mattress disturbed only by his sense of duty and his two soul kin. Ichigo needed to just waste the days away where he didn’t have to feel the dead, and he could be left to the thoughts of his mind however much they tortured him. But that could cause problems if he wasn’t seen for weeks and if Ichigo had an abundance of any substance it was problems.

The quiet hum of paperwork being filled out lilted about the office, accompanied by the minute shuffle of papers and the rustle of fabric. Blinking away the disorientation and groginess, Ichigo yawned and reached up to shield his eyes from the lights dancing like a kaleidoscope in front of him, a whirlwind of circles and bright flashing motions that floated across his sight.

Adjusting to the light slowly Ichigo considered the office, faint sunlight cast grasping shadows upon the furniture and illuminated the curved wooden spirals. Ichigo looked around himself taking in the desk where he was seated, and Shunsui’s form hunched over the other desk dutifully filling out paperwork for a change.

Ichigo stared his mind feeling like it was coated in a thick amber, and that everything was moving at a speed beyond slow, there was a quiet contemplation weighing Ichigo’s brow. The world around him suddenly seemed sharp in some features and blurry in others, as if his mind couldn’t be decided what it wanted to see. Ichigo’s hazed caramel orbs focused on Shunsui seeking gravity in the comforting presence of his captain. Taking in the curve of his jaw, tracing wispy threads of stubble, before his gaze came to rest on the flowery kimono draping the man’s shoulders, Ichigo felt unaccountably tired like he had tread the earth’s surface for countless years.

The young Shinigami stared mind unseeingly blank, like a cavernous tomb had opened itself there and proceeded to lock away rationality. Distantly on some parallel plane Ichigo knew he needed to sleep, and sleep properly. He barely grasped an hour’s sleep in the past few days; it was evident in the specter listlessly drifting by the window staring at the world with a soft smile on her face, the whimsical one she got when she talked of her dreams or killer robots.

Of course, Ichigo on some deeper level knew that Orihime wasn’t really there, no that’s what the blood and lifeless corpses laid out at his feet were there to remind him of. But it was nice to see that smile again even if it was only his imagination, a warning or trick of his sleep depraved mind.

Ichigo couldn’t sleep. There was an ache inside his soul and he knew not the cause. He wondered briefly if it was like those times when he would sink beneath a blanket of despair unmoveable from such a prison for weeks, but this was deeper scarring and so incredibly heavy. It was pulling at him
only in the insistent moments that he closed his eyes or when too fresh presences entered the room. Then the wearing tear of his past would claw itself to the fore front of his mind and viciously curse his thoughts with images of the wars he had lived. His own voice longed to reach out and confide the darkness of his night, scream it to the world so that he could be released of the burden he was shouldering unendingly.

Ichigo knew he had people to talk to… but he wasn’t willing to burden them with his own horrors, taint their time with wasted breaths. He also knew his family was there for him, it pulsed in his chest like a sapling planted with care and bursting forth to wrap tendrils of warmth around his core. They drove back the mind-numbing drowning sensations that were slowly choking the breath from his soul.

It was irrational but he felt like it should be kept a secret, maybe it was how he had been moulded into the man he was. Always taught to hide his weaknesses never submit to them, power through the pain and heartache. Ichigo knew there was no hesitance in his soul, but this was something else, like chains wrapped around his ankles, cold and stealing, draining pulling him beneath the waters of his inner world, the waters that were cool and nourishing in some fountain like way. The chains wrapped around him in some dark place, the craws of carrion folk crying out accompanied always by the wailing of the widows.

Orihime drifted closer, a slightly pained expression on her innocently-cast features; he knew she wouldn’t have wanted him to suffer like this. None of them would have, because they cared and loved him even though he had failed them. And didn’t it caress his insides, make him want to burst with relief and gratitude that he was loved, after everything they still loved him now in this timeline as in the past. Maybe he was punishing himself, for failing, for living, maybe he just wished it could all be over so he could see them again.

In the end, he knew he wasn’t in the right state of mind, his thoughts tipping between a clarity he knew well and these hazy inseam thoughts that chased his will and soul. Why now? He wondered why it was that he had taken this metaphorical dive into uncharted waters, fallen off into the deep lurking abyss. The one that held pray to all manner of strangeness and everything lurked with some hidden purpose.

He supposed maybe it was an accumulation, a build up of the stress he had undergone in teaching the Vizard and being surrounded by his family night and day. A family that had become part of his everything and who he had held the broken bodies of. It could have been the return to Soul Society itself, the sudden shock of once again being surrounded by presences of those who had entered death’s realm (it had been like that the first few months, but back then he had been overwhelmed by the situation and burning alive with the will to change it).

Now he wondered if he left, would they be fine? Sosuke wasn’t hellbent on destroying Soul Society and becoming a deity among men, and the Soutaicho knew the future, knew about the Quincy and how to save Soul Society. He couldn’t leave though, not in the span of time limited as danger to his family; it was like he was trapped in a moulded cage where to take a single step out of line could harm those who cast Hollow masks over their features. It made the desire for an end all the starker because he couldn’t stand being trapped, not when his whole life had been moulded with polished strings.

But he wasn’t going to end it all, because he had reasons to live. Sometimes they were the small ones, like the tea served in that small corner of the 45th sector of Rungokai, or sometimes it was the knowledge that his sisters would still be born, that Rukia would be alive. He had to see them, see their smiles once more and know that they would be able to live.
It could have been the month, June was always a hard month, it was when the world had shattered for him that first time. It was when he had lost his mother the sun to his world, to his family’s as well. Ichigo had buried that guilt long ago but even now it gnawed at his heart. Still Ichigo had picked himself up, rose from the embankment of water tearing at his limbs with greedy hands, just as he rose every other time.

“Itchigo you should speak with someone.”

Zangetsu-Ossan suggested softly, the reverberating baritone of his voice settling the anxiety and endless churning in his core and mind. Ichigo slumped and opened his eyes; it was funny how he didn’t even remember closing them, though the humour was short lived.

Orihime was gone the faint scent of orange blossoms careening away in the fields of his memories, instead in front of his eyes stood Chad. The gentle giant was hunched over knowing eyes revealed. Something tugged fiercely at Ichigo’s heart it was the sorrow of a bond where one lived while the other was gone. Kami he missed Chad, a man who he could tell anything to and trust his life with, his brother in all but blood. They had relied on each other countless times and their bond had deepened like a well reaching to the core of the Earth’s center. Now he was gone, his presence not even existing yet, just like so many of the others.

The ghostly impression of warmth drifted across Ichigo’s cheek and he blinked away the blurriness, and focused on the large hand holding his cheek, the faint impression of a thumb caressing under his eye sending shivers cascading down his spine.

Zangetsu’s recommendation to speak to someone was sounding more enticing by the minute, if only to release the pressure building behind his eyes and begging him to release the cries of his soul. He had to be careful though, the world couldn’t bare witness to his endless secrets, he couldn’t fall apart where greedy gazes could run home with the news of falling sanity. Ichigo took in a few deep breaths trying to clear his mind, it hadn’t worked before and it didn’t work now, instead he was given the tight yet loose sensation of his lungs expanding and holding the air within them.

Playful and dark with aged fondness, reaitsu sneaked out and curled against Ichigo’s legs tenderly questioning him and radiating warmth. Ichigo looked up catching Shunsui’s eyes from under the brim of his old straw hat; there was a fire in cocoa eyes that temporarily released the icy melancholia tying his soul to the earth’s glacial peaks. Ichigo attempted a smile for his captain. It was soft and sincere full of a quiet gratitude that Ichigo sometimes dwelled on for hours.

He just thought about how wonderful it was to have people who cared, and loved him (though there always lingered that doubt, that fear of betrayal threaded into his being). When Ichigo lost all of that suddenly there was distance a barrier the idea that now this wonderful life inspiring thing was gone, and that he was never going to get it back. Zangetsu’s reaitsu hummed assuring him that they would never lose their wielder again, they may have left (and never of their own violation like others) but they always came back.

A warm hand dropped onto his shoulder and Ichigo cocked his head haphazardly staring at Chad, the Mexican man was glancing down at Ichigo in the soft rough kind of way, the one that somehow reflected the golden light in Chad’s soul, those eyes conveying to Ichigo everything he needed to know.

Shunsui sighed pushing a hand over his face while the other gripped one of Katekyōkotsu’s pommels, Ichigo watched with no amount of surprise as Shunsui pulled out a bottle of sake, he considered the clear liquid in the fading sunlight; the first prick of evening’s sails were chasing the sun. The man tipped the bottle towards Ichigo. The orange haired Shinigami shook his head in the negative, ignoring the sigh and flash of disappointment flowing in wine deep eyes, accompanied by
The ever-present concern Shunsui showed for his lieutenant.

The drink had been an offer Ichigo wasn’t yet ready to take; he wasn’t ready to let the pain of his soul be bared to a man who had once stood like a father to him. And he had seen what turning to the bottle did to a man without hope, he would suffer any day than fall into the deepening void that scowled back hungrily; he had dealt more than enough times with Isshin’s alcohol induced anger and words. Their eyes locked across the table as Shunsui poured himself a glass of sake, ambient reaitsu tangled and caressed against each other stoking warmth to flood Ichigo’s systems once more.

“Go get some sleep Ichi.”

Shunsui announced quietly, a faint pleading in his voice; Ichigo studied his captain once more in the silence basking in the presence of Katen Kyōkotsu and Shunsui’s own reaitsu. The youth considered spilling everything then and there, telling the man who had become like an uncle or father to him in the time they spent training in the same barracks, now just younger.

Ichigo knew it wasn’t the time, not yet. It would come and then he would tell them both, Jushiro ever understanding and Shunsui filled with deep empathy; he would see the acceptance on their features but not now. Not when the shadows of Ichigo’s mind played fruitfully with their images twisting words spoken carelessly and pulling at Ichigo’s will, he couldn’t confide when their death was bitter on his tongue. Ichigo nodded shuffling out from the desk and the youth placated the paperwork for a few moments, thoughts still drifting on lazy currents.

Shunsui’s presence drew close and Ichigo looked up curious only to receive a hug. It was oddly comforting in that Ichigo had never been a fan of contact, especially not after what he’d lived through. Shunsui pulled back slightly gazing into Ichigo’s eyes with a soft compelling warmth that hitched Ichigo’s breath and left him feeling like he was a child vulnerable yet taken care of, his Captain chuckled softly before he leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on Ichigo’s brow.

He settled in Shunsui’s arms the weight and ache of his sleeplessness wanted to drag his body into the ground, and the whirlwind of his emotions, anger, confusion, grief, sorrow, pain, despair, drowning him deeper in the pools of his mind. Instead he let their presences interact while he breathed in the familiar comforting fragrance of sake and ginger. They remained embraced for a timeless few moments as if Shunsui was attempting to shield Ichigo from the demons in his head, the orange-haired Shinigami appreciated the gesture as he slumped further into Shunsui’s arms his attempts working as the pooling cold dispersed if only temporarily.

Crystal like wind chimes echoed in some far-off distance and beckoned Ichigo on, the air was charged tonight and he felt as if it had all finally reached a head. That the great and endless expansion of blue would rain down upon the world to herald a change that was likely nothing more than insignificant to the rest of the world. Yet would thunder into his own life and wreak havoc, tossing him about like a ship on the ocean.

Shunsui ruffled Ichigo’s locks tightening his hold on Ichigo and wrapping him in layers of his reaitsu, before sending the kid to the door with a light push. Ichigo turned to Shunsui with a faint smile and a gentle wave before Ichigo slipped outside of the barracks.

A heavy summer breeze listlessly drifted in the air, as Ichigo stepped outside, playfully ruffling tangerine locks and sending them dancing across his sight. He stared for a moment wondering at his next action, he could return to the Shiba home and try to get some sleep, but he doubted it would be a fruitful endeavour. Not with the way his heart beat restlessly in his chest and kicked up dregs of energy in the souls of his feet.

Rationally he assumed that his mind was once again playing tricks on him leading him to think that
energy was flooding through his veins, but he also acknowledged that at this point he couldn’t muster that same energy to care. Ichigo sighed and pulled his conscience within his frame from where it had drifted, he closed his eyes for a moment and then tipped his head back looking at the softening blue of the sky above. It was a peaceful sight one that ignited war within in his chest as the peace instilled by the skies was balanced precariously against the inner turmoil simmering like the great tunnels of rock within the south.

Tossing decisions and caution to the wind Ichigo let his feet guide him aimlessly along the winding streets of Serieteti. His thoughts tripped and tumbled about his head and the lengthening shadows around him seemed cold and callous, reaching for him with greedy claws to ensnare whatever light pulsed in his chest. Ichigo flinched as his gaze fell to the ground and lifeless blank eyes stared up at him, the corpse was horribly mutilated but Ichigo thought he could still recognize purple strands.

Nausea burned his throat, and he blinked away the hallucination harshly as his heart hammered in his chest accompanied by shifting reaitsu. He needed to talk to someone, whether to assure himself that they were indeed hallucinations and that his family was alive (but they did die, and he had seen it so didn’t that make them real in the end). He couldn’t be seen as weak within the public eye, he had to remain strong and blink away the chasing hallucination if only long enough that the Vizard would not suffer for his actions. Ichigo took a few deep breaths and rested against pale white walls, Zangetsu’s familiar reaitsu coiling around him in comforting waves.

Ichigo knew who to talk to… or at least who he could figuratively talk to, because as much as the Soutaicho knew the truth Ichigo wasn’t spilling his heart to the old man. His thoughts turned to his brother, understanding sea green eyes and those nights over the warmth of sake, someone who had been nothing but words and grief-stricken eyes in Ichigo’s own timeline. But Kaien was still at work, and would be for a while if Ichigo recalled correctly (honestly Ichigo had little clue as to what was real but he was managing) and he wouldn’t separate the Shiba heir from his beloved work under Ju.

That left Byakuya, who while still in the dark would be open to listening to Ichigo. Decision partially made Ichigo straightened and pushed off from the wall blinking disoriented at the wavering shapes in front of him; the sunlight piercing through the thick veil of clouds slowly crowning the sky made the world seem untameable like a dream. Ichigo realised belatedly that his plan had a flaw, to Shiro’s amusement; he had no idea where Byakuya was.

As much as Ginrei could now tolerate Ichigo, the youth was not about to brace the icy noble’s office if he knew for certain Byakuya wasn’t there. Of Soul Society alone there were a thousand other places Ichigo could check, but as he was still slightly sensible he reasoned that he could use his reaitsu to find the ebony haired Shinigami.

Ichigo closed his eyes once more letting his concentration solidify as his mind filled with thoughts of his friend, that small smile he shared with Ichigo when lightly amused, the deep rumble of his laughter like spring breaking forth, the call of his blade as they danced. Ichigo let his senses dart out searching for the presence that always lingered with the feeling of sakura blossoms and a cool ice.

A faint smile danced across Ichigo’s lips when he located the presence of his friend in one of the inner Rungokai districts. Flicking his eyes open Ichigo thought of the distance to the district and with a shrug decided he could walk. That decision was promptly rectified a few minutes later as Ichigo’s patience already weathered was lost and the Shinigami fluttered like a faint wisp of night in wicked fast Flash-Step.

The district was bustling with warm early nightlife, crowds of people flocking the streets and drifting aimlessly to and from the many vendors’ stalls, paper lanterns from the recent festival still littered the streets overhead in bright colours and cast the early evening brightly. The wafting scents of roasting
meats, fresh fruits, and newly birthed blossoms drifted throughout the air in the heady mixture of Rungokai.

It was a homely scent in some minute ways, reminding Ichigo of nights won in cold harsh deserts that prevailed to early morning and simple afternoons wandering what still stood. Even starker in his memories were the early morning markets of Karakura Town, the ones he visited with his mother as they addled from stall to stall, and the ones he later brought his sisters to as they shopped for their household.

The faces in the crowd, the ones that were achingly familiar staring with accusing eyes he ignored, turned a blind eye to the guilt curling inside his gut like a sleeping dragon. He knew his faults they were only now here in front of him because of his own weakness. A false strength that had been strengthened in culture and life, to show weakness was wrong when in the end it was the strongest thing one could do in the presence of family; it showed you trusted them, displayed your strength and their strength that one could be so free.

That weakness was also covered because of circumstance, he couldn’t afford to be seen faltering by the public. So, he walked paved streets with his head held high and the aches and sickness twisting his chest buried underneath layers of control. If his family and close friends were the only ones to notice that was perfectly alright in Ichigo’s books.

Drifting in the sea of bodies for a few lost moments, Ichigo let the empty thoughts of his mind twist around his heart, he was okay or at least he could be if he talked to someone. Zangetsu whispered softly in Ichigo’s ear and Ichigo felt slight guilt that his zanpaktou had to deal with a wielder such as him. He placated their outraged denials with a small self-deprecating smile but forged on through the crowds.

Byakuya’s presence sparked like liquid gold against the edge of Ichigo’s senses, his brow furrowed in concentration as he tried to pinpoint the location of his friend among the thousand other signatures clawing for attention; when he closed his eyes and really opened his senses he could see them all, the bright bursts of colour, the subtle earth tones, the jewel glimmering metals. Ichigo nodded to himself and parted through the crowd till he reached a small tea house carefully tucked away from the rustling crowds and other store fronts.

There was a store beside it that sold a variety of foreign merchandise and Ichigo was tempted to temporarily forgo his quest to see Byakuya and enter the store, because they had some interesting things in the storefront and Ichigo really wasn’t the best at making decisions at the moment. Shiro scoffed before he devolved into giggles, which sounded unusual in Ichigo’s mind; once the hollow spirit had calmed himself down he chided Ichigo and urged him to find Byakuya. Zangetsu-Ossan seconded the idea and Ichigo shook his head in faint fond amusement before he turned his attention to the tea house.

There was a short driveway to the tea house, the building itself was the kind nobles would likely visit, with faint reds imbued in the daub material, large ornate arches fitting of the noble palaces in the mortal realm. Under the eaves of a curved overhanging structure Ichigo spotted Byakuya cloaked in shadows, the glow of the oil lamps catching the metal of his Kenseikan and sending it soaring like stars.

Ichigo moved to step forward before he paused, another figure was with Byakuya. In the half light of the evening imbued by cloudy darkness, Ichigo saw the faint shift of fabric and a smaller diminished form, curious and slightly disappointed Ichigo silenced his reaitsu where it raced antsily against his skin and moved to the side to see clearer.

Ichigo mouth opened in silent shock as for a hurricane moment the lighting convinced Ichigo that he
was staring at Rukia, and that wasn’t possible because while his hallucinations were there (and he had seen her form felt the chill ice of her presence encase his neck like a noose) they did not interact with the ‘technically’ living. Another shift of fabric and Ichigo sighed in half hearted relief as he realised the figure was not Rukia but her older sister Hisana.

Oh, Ichigo realized things in a slow concussive emotion that trembled throughout his frame in a blinding whirlwind that left his hands shaking and the wish to hide. Byakuya was here on a date with Hisana, while the fact in itself wasn’t overly surprising, Ichigo wondered why his chest was hurting so much so suddenly.

It was as if Uryuu for all his false impudent mockery and threats had fired one of his Quincy arrows through Ichigo’s heart. The pain while not excruciating throbbed in a dull sort of unbearable ache and Ichigo had no idea why.

Zangetsu-Ossan’s presence swept over his reaitsu helping to contain the bursts that rose up in heady arcs from his skin. It was as if the world had blacked out, the sun destroyed in that moment as his plan had fallen into a black hole of nothingness gravity. Ichigo on a subconscious level (and Shiro’s chiding) knew he was being a touch over dramatic but that didn’t take away from the panic in his reaitsu and the pain flooding his eyes.

He knew she was Hisana but she looked almost exactly like Rukia, and Kami it hadn’t hit him before but the fact that she was here meant that Rukia was out there alive somewhere. Somehow the pain in his heart was too much to bear at that thought. Words bubbled up in his throat, he wanted to rush forward pull Byakuya aside and tell him everything, take off running and never touch the ground again.

He loved his friend too much to do that, Byakuya deserved happiness, deserved the time with Hisana however short. As much as Ichigo had impacted Byakuya’s life, taught him how to be free as a noble, given him laughter and misadventures. Byakuya had also given extraordinarily to Ichigo, the man had sacrificed time and energy to break down Ichigo’s walls with a gentle hand, he had seen the blinding scathing pain of nightmares and had smiled, had locked Senbonzakura with Zangetsu and instead of hate or malice Ichigo had sensed a plethora of positive emotions that left him breathless in wonder.

It had been so long since he had felt that connection, by the end of the war there had been no one to have a friendly spar with, no one to pit his soul against that wasn’t an enemy. Already by the second half of the war with numbers dwindling there had been no space for it, and when there was it was hollow like their wielders. Ichigo had missed the sensation that undeniable warmth that flooded his system like adrenaline.

Now in this timeline he was helping to shape, he could raise his blade to spar and feel that they were alive and well. They weren’t the same family he had come to known, Shunsui was younger less weathered by loss, Shinji was still a subtle manipulative bastard, but Sakande was happy, a goddess of golden sands reinstated, Kisuke was open in a way that left Benihime crowing for blood. Byakuya still held that ever present grace of sakura, the kind that soothed Ichigo’s senses. The ice was gone, that shell that had taken forever to be cast aside and even then left traces, was wholly unfounded, and Ichigo basked in the warmth of Byakuya’s soul clashing against his through their blades.

It was because of the bond between them that Ichigo stared for a moment longer savouring their presences, watching as Byakuya leaned in and caressed Hisana’s cheek with a tender smile, before he turned away. His feet led him while his mind collapsed upon itself stirring long kept secrets to the surface and a catalyst of reaitsu to surface beneath his skin.

Everything hurt, they were staring at him an endless line of bodies that he killed. Some faint rational
part crowed that he should sleep or return home but the noise only joined the endless torrent of screaming pounding against his heart. He thought he could hear Zangetsu’s cries but they were faint under the overwhelming surges of reaitsu escaping through the seal and tearing at the blurring land around him.

His resolve was crumbling; the endless will to remain strong in front of others was clawing at his chest to escape and with it pulling the ever life-beating organ into the open. His gaze wildly swept around taking in the semi-crowded streets and the nearby presences of Shinigami, he couldn’t afford to fall here. Shinji’s bleeding corpse taunted him with shallow lifeless eyes as it pointed and whispered in his ear of the danger he would bring with his actions, how it would be his fault once more, how they would all fall. History would repeat itself and they would be banished if not executed, except he would be the cause.

He shouldn’t be sick in the first place! If someone found him it could be all over for the Vizard, turbulence would split the ivory city in two. Ichigo’s breathing picked up rattling in his chest as he thought of the pain he could cause, he had to get away so that if anything were to happen, if he were to fall sick he could do so in quiet and return when he was better. To protect the Vizard, his family he would suffer alone, for an eternity if he had to (he would do it for them all no matter how much his zanpaktou insisted they didn’t deserve it).

The sky was darkening as Ichigo’s feet carried him into a mess of forest spent near one of the outer districts; it was utterly silent as if all the earth had succumbed to the waves of despair welling inside him. It hurt to see them and he had no idea why, he could guess some of the causes but it was nowhere near enough to explain the pain splitting his core. It felt as if he had lost again.

He was fine he chanted to himself willing his soul to remain glued together with faded memories and patched sunlight, because he shouldn’t, he couldn’t fall. Ichigo gripped Zangetsu’s pommel lacking the familiar sensations of his spirits he chanted under his breath, Rukia’s petite form curled in the bows of the trees staring at him accusingly challenging him to give up. He searched for Zangetsu’s presence blindly as if swimming through the clouds of ink that floated in the end of borders.

The thought seeded itself in his mind, maybe everything was an hallucination this was just the dying dreams of the only soul left to care for a broken world. Ichigo’s reaitsu snapped from his form restrained from fully escaping only by the weakness of his own body and the seal, the ache and weariness of his soul pulling at a galaxy of reserves.

Ichigo’s presence cut and ripped at the earth sending soil careening into the air flying like a maelstrom, trees were torn from the earth’s unwilling grasp, leaves fluttering to the ground blanketing it. At once the presence died away as Ichigo slumped to the earth leaning against a great rowan tree still standing in the onslaught of his presence. Dry empty trembling shook Ichigo’s form as he curled into himself pulling at his shihaksho in distress, orange shading hazy amber orbs from the world Ichigo wished he could hide from.

The youth was infinitely lost, Ichigo felt as if he was drifting endlessly pulled between a reality where he had lost everything and all that happened was merely the last attempts of a desperate mind, and a hope that it was real, because how could it be real? He had travelled to the past for a reason he couldn’t yet discern, he had convinced Aizen to abandon the path of a deity and saved the Vizard from a fate of banishment.

It was his fault. Was this some punishment a hope only to be teared away in the end? Ichigo knew it was his fault, as much as he lied to himself and told himself he didn’t believe that it was his fault all those deaths and destruction. The reason in this semblance of a life he struggled to even raise his soul from the bed was the deep weight of guilt, and sorrow, and grief pulling at him endlessly.
He had held their dying bodies! Every single one of them multiple times over, cherished their last words, saw the light flee their eyes, flee him as he let another soul die under his watch. Kami he was so useless! He might have well killed them for all he could do!

Yuzu and Karin were there now those soft and naïve smiles that only children could possess, and the adoration they felt for their big brothers illuminating glassy corpse eyes. Their words were echoing in his head chasing his thoughts, carved into his skin in permanent ink that he couldn’t scrape away no matter how desperately he clawed at his skin. Yuzu’s comforting words that it wasn’t his fault, Karin’s hopeless accusing eyes because at the end of it all she had lost hope, lost everything when Toshiro took a blow for her.

He would never hold their bodies again, never comb their hair away and kiss their foreheads the way he once had. Ichigo would never rest in Chad’s large protective form after a tiring day where the spectres of Karakura were calling to him. There would never be the dog piles at the end of the days of war, where their limbs would tangle and reaitsu would surge and meld till they were sharing their sorrow and happiness. He would never hold his mother’s hands, taste Orihime cooking, share sake with Isshin and reminisce, would never laugh with Shunsui about the rumours, share medical tips with Jushiro.

Not the way he had, never in the way their bonds had developed, Ichigo wasn’t their older brother, wasn’t some punk kid who had charged his way into their lives and smiled like a madman. A cry surged from his lips, because he would never see their smiles like they had smiled for him. They were gone and he would never touch their souls again.

An ear-splitting roar shook the land as reaitsu swirled once more in mirthless currents that screamed a warning to all living. Ichigo remained immobile the presence dim and tapered to his spluttering soul, the scream only joining the cacophony within his mind.

The ground cracked and thundered like the sky above as rainy sheets began to cascade towards the earth hoping to drown the sorrows of one of its children. A tear ripped itself within the rain slicked sky dark currents of fathomless night racing about and from within a pale disc of white appeared.

Dark crimson reaitsu stained with the malignance of hate, crackled out from the garganta spilling out into the surrounding areas and reaching into far off reaches as the almost Espada level Menos Grande stepped forth into Soul Society.

Ichigo shakily raised his head from its place between his knees where he had been spiraling deeper into the endless void of his mind, only managing to remain still by controlling his breathing. Ichigo stared at the large figure lumbering towards him in that slow drifting movement like the creature was light as air, its pale blood red eyes beamed sharply in the sheets of rain surrounding them.

A cruel grin split the creatures face as it reached Ichigo, staring at the young Shinigami with a hunger in its presence. Ichigo remained limp against the rough bark of the rowan, what did it matter anymore if nothing was real in the end? Dully Ichigo could feel Zangetsu’s reaitsu snapping around him trying to call out to their wielder but Ichigo was deaf to their voices lost in the splintered shards of his mind.

A large pale fist grasped Ichigo’s form the massive hand easily dwarfing Ichigo’s only too small body. The Menos Grande raised Ichigo till he was considering the eyes of the beast. He could almost see the same lifelessness there that reflected in his own eyes.

He wondered if there was any point in struggling, if anything was even real? All he could feel was the cold pulling at his soul wanting to drag him into the encroaching darkness, an endless numbing traveling through his body and settling around his heart the last rave of warmth. The Menos Grande roared grip tightening impossibly hard around Ichigo as it clenched its clawed hand into a fist.
Ichigo gasped as sharp jerk of pain shot through his system clearing his thoughts if only temporarily. He wiggled slightly in the creature’s grasp Zangetsu’s voice gaining volume and rising above the slightly tamed voices screaming at him within his mind. Zangetsu’s familiar weight formed in his hands and with a sharp bite of reaitsu the creature loosened its hold on Ichigo so that the Shinigami could spring free.

Ichigo released himself and faced the Menos Grande, images of his first time facing one flashing relentlessly though his mind. All the anger and emotions swelling inside him fuelled into his blade arcing about Ichigo in heavy hits of black as he raised Zangetsu, the care he once held to remain hidden falling away, as the blade slipped from its sealed state into Zangetsu-Shiro’s blade, the uncontained raw power of Ichigo’s untampered soul and emotions released in a final thrust.

“Getsuga Tensho.”

Ichigo breathed quietly his power racing from the blade to slam into the hollow creature before slicing clean through its form and leaving wisps of inky black to dissipate in the rain. The moment the last drop of Ichigo’s power rent itself from Zangetsu’s blade the voices returned in full force accompanied by the howling voices of the dead.

Ichigo fell to the water-soaked earth slowly, landing softly against the base of the rowan tree boneless and limp. Ichigo felt like a marionette doll, too still and unable to move a muscle to defend himself against the swelling darkness. He felt so tired as if he could close his eyes and it would be over, the ever-present cold was seeping into his bones chasing his veins and encircling his heart like a pack of wolves.

It radiated with the pain and the only tether to a reality he was sure existed if only because he couldn’t imagine the love that had been gifted to him, was his grasp on Zangetsu’s hilt, slow crescents of reaitsu lazily circled the blade and Ichigo’s form in a desperate attempt to reach their master. Looking up Ichigo settled slightly in the inevitability of the moment studying the grey swept sky above clouded in wispy strands of smoke.

Ichigo could almost see it, the infinity of the world stretching around him, his reaitsu the part of him that touched the world revealed itself like a second layer superimposing itself over reality. It still beat inside his breast the need to talk to someone but it was tamed by the thousands of pulsating lights glimmering like stars between his eyes, the caress of a wind unfound tickling orange locks. Ichigo’s shallow breaths rattled in his chest as the rain danced around his form and his thoughts tumbled from breathless lips in a mantra of apologies and names.

X

Chapter End Notes

So… I hope the feels weren’t too bad. I wish I could say the next chapter is going to better, but you’re in for a wild ride (it gets better eventually). Did you feel the insomnia/sadness/general mess of what’s happening was captured well? Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Cherry!!
Kaien was worried. That was an understatement he was damn well panicking, the only thing keeping him still and tethered to the Earth was Nejibana's soothing presence rustling against his skin. Kaien's instincts were screaming at him battering against his senses and sending flares of protectiveness careening through his system. Something was wrong; he trusted his instincts enough to know that when he was this alert, this distraught it could only be the truth.

Kaien flitted along the familiar path to the Shiba home darting under great sentinels, knowing that once he arrived his fears could be put to rest. Those nagging instincts had chased Kaien from Ukitake-taicho's office at the end of the day, and straight towards Kyroraku-taicho's office.

Kaien's heart had stopped in his chest the moment he felt the lack of Ichigo's familiar presence. Shunsui must have seen the blatant concern and fear on Kaien's features as the older captain was quick to calm the lieutenant's racing heart.

Now Kaien swayed between a sick worry and the lingering threads of hope that Ichigo would be safe at home. He had only missed the orange-haired Shinigami by twenty minutes, so Kaien prayed that Ichigo's infallible luck had not landed him in some dubious trouble.
The roll of reaitsu against skin and the ominitity of the cloudscape hovering above, struck softly at Kaien's heart bringing to the fore front of his mind the orange-haired youth. Kaien had noticed Ichigo's falling state with a heavy brow and down turned lips, Ichigo had no visible reason for such a sudden twist but Kaien's mind whispered other ideas; grating thoughts of nightmares, and sleepless nights under the moonlit desert. Of days in the beginning where Ichigo could not move himself from slumber. Isshin-jii had approached Kaien the other night adding to Kaien's plans already set in stone of talking to Ichigo.

Kaien was going to do such tonight come hell or high waters, Nejibana whispered softly in his mind the calm of still lakes submerging the deep-seated panic that left him short of breath. The Shiba heir paused to lean against a lean oak tree for a moment, attempting to work himself out of the deepening worry and fear he had pulled himself into. The kind of state he always worked himself into when it came to Ichigo.

He couldn't help it in the end, not when he thought of their first meeting drenched in rain and touched melancholy, the air itself had burnt with the taste of power and sorrow. The bright spark of orange like a dying ember that had suddenly invaded his life and grown to a fire that filled it with a warmth he wanted. Just thinking of his little brothers' smiles always brought light to his eyes and a mirroring reflection to his own lips.

But when he thought of Ichigo happy without the weight of the world on his shoulders, over those quiet moments of sake and the endless horizon of stars overhead, he felt lighter than the tranquil feathers drifting in graceful motions towards the Earth. When he saw those expressions on Ichigo's features it struck him that he was able to help heal the youth. Maybe he was one of the few who could with the way Ichigo protected himself, but it only made the matter closer to his heart.

Now for an unidentifiable reason (he chalked it up to big brother instincts), he could almost sense that Ichigo was in trouble, was somewhere far away and yet near in that way he often was. Except this time, they could lose him to the wispy stones that disappeared underfoot on the pathways of his mind he often retreated to, his inner sanctuary sometimes more of a cage then a haven.

Ichigo was still like a child in some ways Kaien reflected fondly, as much as Ichigo was strong, older than when they first met, and wise beyond the years he claimed to possess (Kaien knew Ichigo had lied about his age, younger souls after all had a feeling about them, a potential). But he was also naïve in some ways; misunderstanding interpretations, confusion as they talked about one topic or the other. He was lost like a small child that couldn't see the light for the clamouring shadows surrounding him.

That didn't take away from who Ichigo was in the slightest, it was a part of him, an innocence that wasn't really innocence, just a part of Ichigo's personality the endearing mannerisms that fluctuated like the seasons; one moment the soft cool winter calm and collected, the next the burning summer sun scorching all with a fiery temper.

Kaien pushed off from the tree, gaze drawn to the swollen sky above, crescents and curves of grey whipped about and interchanged to form a breathtaking mosaic of warning. Kaien embraced the charged atmosphere echoing rain, a weather pattern he adored. It reminded him of his inner world and the beads of water that clung to Nejibana's kimono or grasped the wavy strands of her hair.

The lieutenant pushed aside tangling ebony locks and focused on the task at hand his heart temporarily settled, yet the grievances his soul uttered heavy in his thoughts. In a sharp efficient manner Kaien resumed flash-step and hastily retreated towards the Shiba mansion.

Kaien had a mini heart-attack upon arriving home, Ichigo's presence was nowhere within Kaien's senses. The home buzzed with the other Shiba members, Kukkaku's fire quenched soul, Ganju's
earthy kindness, but not Ichigo. While this wasn't ultimately a surprising fact considering the numerous times the kid managed to suddenly suppress all of his vast presence, it still cut at Kaien like a knife, as he stormed into the compound following his sister's blazing presence pulsing with worry.

Kaien arrived at the door as it slammed open to reveal his younger sister's distraught features, they lightened upon seeing Kaien the fond traces of love echoing softly between the two before the darkness appeared with heavy peals of thunder and she pulled Kaien inside.

"Have you seen him?"

Kukkaku questioned insistently eyes blazing like dragon fire in the shadowed interior of the entrance, the servants were nimbly moving on soundless feet and lighting the swaying oil lamps. Fear gripped Kaien's senses like the pommel of a sword as he raised drawn sea green eyes and asked in return, "He's not home?"

Kukkaku shook her head, a desperate sort of denial clinging to her features as her hand fisted into Kaien's shihaksho. Kaien froze soft trembling motions shaking his arms as he felt the world around him spin to a stop.

This was bad, levels of bad akin to the Soutaicho deciding to retire. Shunsui had related to Kaien Ichigo's condition and last Kaien had seen Ichigo he had been pale as early frost and twice as lifeless. According to Kyoraku the youth had only tumbled further down the scale of looking like death, even Kaien's penchant for drama could hardly exaggerate Ichigo's state (Nejibana's gentle chiding insisted otherwise).

"Dammit!" Kaien muttered under his breath, he should have taken greater incentive to care for Ichigo, it was his job as an older brother. He should have gotten off work early so they could walk home together, he should have payed closer attention to Ichigo's presence, he should…

Nejibana's reiatsu roared like the towering tsunamis they were capable of in their anger, drowning out the thoughts of guilt and self doubt, even as Kukkaku's slender hand grasped the curves of his cheek and she tilted his head up from where it had fallen to cast desolate eyes toward the ground.

"We're all at fault, but right now we need to focus on Ichi. He was insanely tired and he could be hallucinating, lost, anything, so we need to find him."

Kaien nodded as Nejibana's presence washed over him in waves, pulling back the levels of guilt and the worry, leaving cresting determination in its wake. Distantly a part of him wanted to yell at Ichigo, be furious at the youth for letting it come to this, while another part wanted to wrap the fire-head up in his arms and never let the youth go till Ichigo had devolved all of his secrets, the ones he kept to his breast like a mothering animal protected it's cub.

For now, he settled on finding Ichigo. Resting a hand over Kukkaku's warm one lingering on his cheek, he nodded gratitude in his eyes, and that love he held for his sister shimmering alongside it. She always had a way in directing them where they needed to be and setting them straight, heck she had marched up to Ichigo one day viciously poked him in the chest and demanded he go and talk to Unohana. The audience of the spectacle has tensed wondering what reaction Ichigo would grace them with; he was like a lottery one never knew what they were going to get. To the unanimous surprise (but also not really) he had slumped his shoulders, pouted a bit, but agreed.

Shaking away idle musings Kaien pulled himself together and nodded, promise heavy like the crashing waves within his soul. Heaving a sigh, thoughts darkening seastone eyes, he breathed deeply before saying, "I'll find him… but be prepared for a worst-case scenario."
Kukkaku flinched at the implication but nodded eyes lost and young beneath raven waves, sometimes Kaien forgot that Kukkaku was the younger of the two with the maturity she carried. Leaning down Kaien placed a quick kiss to her brow and wrapped his reaitsu around her humming with reassurance and home, before he turned and strode from the compound into the howling winds that tore at his clothing and hair.

Stretching his senses out Kaien searched for a spark of Ichigo's presence, anything to indicate where the flame-haired Shinigami might be. Kaien's shoulders tilted down in distress when he identified nothing. He cursed whoever had taught Ichigo how to hide his reaitsu so well, because Ichigo could make it seem like he wasn't even there, not even the barest whisper of a presence. Nejibana softly nudged his thoughts along the right path, encouraging him to find a solution to the sudden pitfall in his plans.

Kaien racked his mind for a moment filled only with the baying of the world around him. His senses still stretching out, racing along the planes of Soul Society snagged on a familiar presence one that sung with nobility and hung with the faint hint of sakura blossoms. Ideas springing to life within his mind, Kaien cast one last searching gaze at the Shiba mansion, before he tilted his head towards the overcast sky and prayed to Kami that Ichigo was okay.

Byakuya was thankfully not a master at hiding his reaitsu, Kaien supposed that was one positive in the shit storm of a situation they found themselves in. Kaien hoped beyond all things possible that the Kuchiki heir had seen Ichigo, or at least had an inkling of his presence. If not Kaien would have to resort to scavenging Ichigo's many hiding places scattered throughout Soul Society, which would only waste time, and that was something Kaien couldn't afford to waste.

The two were as closely knit as any bonded by friendship could be, and Kaien hoped that Ichigo had decided to depend on that bond and visit Byakuya, because he could trust Byakuya. Hell, Kaien had listened once as Ichigo on one of their exceptionally fruitful drinking nights had rattled on about Byakuya for a good half hour, just prattling about how Ichigo was grateful, and also how stupid Kenseikan were.

The earth blurred beneath his feat as he launched into a whip-paced shunpo scaling along the paths to Rungokai and its many districts. Nejibana hummed around him as the world around Kaien disappeared into wispy shreds and haunting imagery.

Panting slightly in faint exertion as he arrived Kaien's sea eyes cast around like a hawk, picking out the figures in a rapidly dwindling crowd, the cast of people milling about were steadily dispersing at the nasty weather looming overhead, and cracking like the chariots of war.

It had been a nice day too, Kaien remarked as he cut through the droves of people, one with soft blue quilting the sky and a peaceful summer breeze. He had ventured to the markets with Lisa and Rangiku on his lunch break, the two still working lieutenants helping to walk Lisa to her home before strolling to the bar for a drink and a bite of food. The cheery atmosphere of the festival had been contagious but slightly undermined by the rattling feelings chasing him.

Kaien's eyes landed on his destination, noting the curved arches and elegant framework nestled in between two other buildings that he spared only a flash of his sight. He vaguely remembered visiting the place a few times with his father or Isshin-jii for official Shiba clan business. It had always been incredibly boring and no matter the effort Kaien strived to listen his attention always drifted. He wondered why the young Kuchiki was here when for all he knew Kuchiki-taicho was still slaving away over paperwork.

Kaien cussed lightly as the sky opened up in a slow manner, large fat drops colliding with the earth before they increased in intensity and number till the world itself was drenched in sheets of water.
Hurrying under the curved arches Kaien almost laughed at the feeling of running through the rain, he missed the days when as children they had eagerly burst outside to clamber through the mud and puddles.

Sliding the light door of the restaurant open, Kaien stepped inside and sighed softly at the gust of warmth drifting on the air currents accompanied by the rich scents of veritably preferred meals of high elegance. Kaien's eyes swept around the room sharp as a jack knife, muscles coiled tensely before his eyes landed on a head of raven. Spiking his presence sharply so as to draw Byakuya's attention, Kaien waited in the eaves of the doorway, eyes observing the various occupants of the room.

The normal plethora of nobles were gathered within the room, accompanied by random couples dining under candlelight. The glamorous robes adorning the nobles shimmered in the oil lamp light, accompanied by the women of the room's dainty hair perched upon their head like a crown with different hair pieces of valuable metals sparkling. In the tables clustered in the back Kaien could spot tables crowded with wizened old men and heavy smoke, the dull air of senility hanging there like a cloak over air.

Sharp seastone eyes landed on the figure sitting beside Byakuya as the youth's head whipped around before his eyes widened, and possessing the ever present Kuchiki grace he rose to his feet and hurried over (though he appeared to glide rather than hurry). The women who had been eating with Byakuya possessed a petite frame with a delicate or fragile air about her, glowing indigo orbs shone in a gentle manner from underneath a crown of raven hair.

Kaien wondered who the women could be, having never seen her at the numerous Noble gala's cursedly occurring throughout the years. Kaien tucked away the questions and his inquisitive nature as Byakuya approached him a pensive look cast about his features as he bit his lip pensively.

"Kaien, what is it?"

Byakuya began speaking informally as he closed the greater distance between them so that they were shadowed under the eave of the entrance and away from prying eyes and ears. Kaien frowned, glowing sea orbs hard before they softened slightly, the worry and concern that was bubbling beneath his skin escaping to the surface for a brief moment before he asked, "Have you seen Ichigo?"

Byakuya frowned, a whirlwind of emotions passing over his features ranging from confusion, to worry. The young Shinigami straightened his spine slightly in the presence of a warrior preparing for battle, eyes distant in thought before he slowly shook his head. A moment later his head whipped up eyes scrutinizing before he replied, "I haven't seen him, but… earlier this evening I swore I felt his presence. What's wrong? Where's Ichigo?"

Byakuya helpfully supplied, before a faint panic overtook his features breaking the Kuchiki mask as he frantically spat out the questions. Kaien held a hand up letting it rest on the other's shoulder in a comforting motion he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with his other hand before tiredly running it through a messy mane of raven. He felt as if the world had sunk it's weigh into his spine. He had no idea how to find Ichigo now and could only hope for a sign as he stretched his senses out as far they reached in the hopes of catching a whisper of Ichigo's presence. Turning his focus once more to Byakuya, Kaien shook his head and answered, "Ichigo's missing, he left work early today but never made it home. Don't worry, I'll find him you get back to your date… Just do you have any idea where he might be?"

Kaien intoned faintly emotions guiding his words and bringing to light the situation. Byakuya drew
in a sharp inhale, eyes wide before his reaitsu danced restlessly around them slipping beneath Byakuya's skin beneath one moment and the next.

"I should come with you!" Kaien sharply shook his head and Byakuya slumped before continuing, "I-I he might be in one of the outer dist- "

Lightning flashed sharply accompanied by the crackle of thunder as the loud noise sent vibrations reaching through Kaien's soul. At that moment Ichigo's presence flared as another more malevolent presence speared sharply into existence.

Cursing sharply Kaien gently pushed the other in the direction of the tables where the lady was waiting and hissed out, "Go, don't worry I'll find him."

Kaien spared no thought for Byakuya after that, thoughts solely focused on Ichigo he darted out of the restaurant, uncaring of the pouring rain as it drenched him and plastered his hair to his forehead.

Reaitsu stretching out wildly Kaien locked onto Ichigo's presence hidden in a way that didn't seem possible and thrumming with untempered emotions. Kaien choked at the overwhelming grief and sorrow surging there, the sense of loss ripping at his soul.

Grasping Nejibana's pommel Kaien breathed in drawing on the boundless calm of the oceans, the still waters providing peace flowing through his veins and sharpening his senses. The rain around him ceased its endless noise and distraction falling apart under Kaien's will. The lieutenant surged forward whipping through mud and earth on his path towards Ichigo a frantic prayer mumbled under his breath.

X

Kaien stumbled upon Ichigo resting against a great rowan tree, in a land pockmarked by reaitsu and some great force, fire-bright hair beaded with sweat, eyes glassy with pain. In that moment Kaien wanted to sweep his little brother into a hug and never let go, stifle his soul in Kaien's own so that Ichigo would never have to experience the pain he was drowning in. Kaien stopped himself quelling rising paranoia by drawing on Nejibana's calm presence, her own reaitsu lingering with the mirroring emotions they felt for Ichigo.

Kaien strode into the clearing in a slow purposeful manner careful to draw out every movement and let his reaitsu dance across his skin, even as his heart stuttered a dangerous staccato. Ichigo's head snapped up amber eyes sharp and almost feral yet somehow conveying an emptiness that pulled like the void, before he recognized Kaien and the fight drained from his body, he slumped lifelessly against the tree behind him like a marionette without string and broken joints.

Kaien's heart wept inside his chest at the pitiful and painful sight of his proud, strong, younger brother cast so helplessly, because Ichigo wasn't weak. Even allowing Kaien to see him like this tugged softly at the warmth of Kaien's heart before it was submerged by the endless rain drumming around them and sweeping the land from beneath their feet in muddy streams.

Kaien swept forward in the shadow cast clearing with urgency plaguing his steps, and crouching in front of his brother the Shiba heir lifted the crown of orange bowed with the weight of far too many secrets, and the encroaching darkness. Ichigo's eyes were half-lidded as they gazed at Kaien in a hazy whirl of amber like cloudy glass, unbearably weak and tired, the light however tamed always presented a faint spark suddenly so dim it seemed tempted to flicker out at any second.

"Kaien?"
His voice was rough and low as if he'd screamed and yelled at the gods above a thousand times over shouting his pain for the world to hear in a place forgiven to nature. Kaien choose not to reply, letting his presence answer the younger's questions, he leant forward slightly and rested his forehead against Ichigo's the weight and presence of his reaitsu light but reassuring. Duly in the back of his mind he recalled Kukkaku's words speaking of the hallucinations Ichigo had been caught seeing, he wondered if that was why the teen looked at him in soft disbelief, he wondered what chased his sight that Kaien could not see.

"Ichigo dear one, when did you last sleep?"

Kaien questioned honestly, he too had seen the way Ichigo flinched at nothing, shadows embarking to terrorize him in daylight and in the night his bed was empty. He sat above them all staring at the moon eyes empty in a way so distantly longing and forlorn, as if he was almost seeing the loved ones he sometimes spoke of to Kaien in early morning under sake sweet night's fading shadows. Ichigo cracked a faint smile so broken and weak that Kaien felt like crying at the bitterness encased in that one gesture, felt the water of his soul rise up to pain his eyes and threaten to course down his cheeks like a waterfall.

"Actually sleep? I've slept some here in there but it's only an hour, more if I'm lucky. How can I sleep? How when their cold corpse eyes are taunting me, the Shinigami I doomed, lifeless icy hands tearing at the sanctuary of my mind and sleep to pull me deeper or free me into heaved waking? Even then in daylight the ghosts are following me drifting through my thoughts and provoking hell fire to spike and ravage till I am drifting lost in wispy shrouds.

Kaien was slightly confused by the tangle of words, things he had never heard Ichigo speak of, and the drifting manner of his speech. But Kaien pushed the lingering emotions away daring to focus on Ichigo, he swept a hand up and in a soft familial motion brushed tangled orange locks out of Ichigo's eyes. The air was damp like his own eyes and Kaien cursed circumstance, that such heavy rains that chill the earth and sink everything down with water, would choose this day to fall upon them.

Ichigo's lips were near blue; he looked like a being forged of ice the shivers of his arms and trembling of his hands not mere memories, this time displaying the fragility of his soul. Kaien wanted to curse the stupid fool for disappearing on him leaving him and the others so damned worried. But he remained there for a quiet moment like amber preserving something in time, knowing that it wasn't the time to chide the youth, Nejibana's roll of reaitsu fluttering playfully with raven strands assured him of the thought and tamed brewing emotions. Staring into wide amber orbs Kaien smiled endearingly while softly stroking Ichigo's cool skin he stated in a pleading tone, "Ichigo you need to sleep."

Ichigo blinked a few times, as if trying to process the words like they were received but distorted through vast quantities of water, though the rain around them was uproarious and sound-deafening there seemed a space between them where words were unobstructed. Ichigo cocked his head as if questioning the words running them over in his mind before he began furiously shaking his head.

When he opened his eyelids, the orbs beneath them were wild and manic with a deep hysteria spiking suddenly. Ichigo choked on his breath for a moment hands fistng the clothe of Kaien's shihaksho before he stuttered out in a collapsed whisper, "No I can't they haunt me. K-Kaien… I want it to be over. Why won't it end? Why must I suffer like this, years upon years of a life that should have ended long ago faced constantly with the visage of the dead? It pulls and drags at my soul in a way that is so achingly tiring and I just want it to stop. The days where the world is wrong and I can't muster the energy to move, the days where its one flashback after another leaving me shaking and weak. I want to be healed or have this form fall to ruin so that my soul might find peace."
Kaien's eyes stung at Ichigo's voice so broken and dejected, as the youth abruptly sunk further into the rough bark of the tree all energy and movement cut away in the last threads of desperation. Kaien grasped Ichigo's shaking hands where they clenched at his shihaksho shakily, imbuing his hands with the inner warmth of soul and the churning reaitsu of the sea, he let that warmth travel from his hands into Ichigo's trying to impart a shred of heat to the cooled skin. Avoiding the numerous questions swirling like the desert storms within his mind Kaien focused on one question at a time trying to get his little brother to open up he asked, "Ichigo why do they haunt you?"

The fractured soul looked up from where his head had come to tilt towards the ground, he stared for an infinite moment their souls connecting in jagged strands that stole Kaien's breath. A fire was brewing in Ichigo's eyes, it was the same Greek fire that could burn upon the waves in the south it was explosive and temperamental boding dangerously in Kaien's mind.

Ichigo surged to his feet suddenly leaving Kaien to scramble for purchase as his support was now striding forward to gaze at the sky above where the rain was picking up, thrust upon them like the tears of a vengeful god cascading down Ichigo's cheeks in a false imitation of the tears Ichigo refused to shed.

"I hate the rain… It's always there heading the end," Ichigo began softly voice echoing in the clearing rising above the rain he continued, "They haunt because I let them! I can't let go, my past is what makes this future, how can I move forward without resolve? It's a broken logic surely but one that has worked in a world torn about by fire… but this world isn't broken rubble and endless emptiness, is it?"

Ichigo's babbling heart poured from his lips, eyes bright in the sudden crack of lightning splitting the sky in chaotic streaks and illuminating his stark visage, he was like a natural disaster personified, hair and eyes wild, skin pale as death, and the myriad of colours weaving around him.

"Ichigo you need to let it go your past is behind you, don't you see the future is ahead we can be your resolve you don't need to hold onto the will of the dead. You don't need to let it weigh you down you can move forward without the sorrow of your memories."

Kaien interjected softly attracting Ichigo's attention as the youth whipped around reaitsu piping along his skin and trailing along the ground in seams of crimson. Kaien didn't flinch as the reaitsu brushed against his own coiling around it in a tender caress. Ichigo's hair flicked around his head, shihaksho rustling as desperate and desolate eyes clashed against Kaien's heart.

"You don't get it… so few do and even then, they don't understand! Your future is my past! I see the dead every day I knew them loved them and they walk by me and don't know my soul, and even then, I am taunted by the dead not yet born as waking specters. We shared long nights, cups of sake, and years captured within months, and the blood of their bodies rests on my hands, coats my soul because I carry their wills, their dreams within me. The dreams and wills of people who may never be born because I interfered! Or who will never dream of such because they live in a world without broken creatures tearing concrete to dust. I hold onto them because I was too weak to save them, I carry the fault of their deaths. I failed. I'm worthless, my name means nothing if I cannot protect. My own sisters were torn from me in front of my eyes, souls ripped of all they were and the innocent life draining from their eyes and I couldn't save them! Even you are just a ghost in the future haunting Rukia and tearing apart my being! You were dead before I was born!"

Kaien was stunned speechless by the catastrophe of words spilling from Ichigo's lips, the figure alone and still where usually he would pace or run his hands through his hair. Instead he swayed lifelessly on his feet his voice loud and thundering still escaping through the forest and ringing in Kaien's ears. The water was drowning Kaien's thoughts and it seemed to fill his head as the words slowly
connected with Nejibana's quiet intervention.

Ichigo was from the future. He didn't doubt his brother's words, Ichigo however delusional couldn't make something this tremulous up. It solved so many of the mysteries that had collapsed around the youth as they lived together. Even that first night drowned in rain (Ichigo was right it was always the rain) when Ichigo had appeared out of charged air with a well of power that brought Soul Society to its knees. It explained so much, the endless mysteries of his past, people who they had never heard of, wars that had been fought that they had never seen, the wisdom and trepidation when he met certain characters.

But Kaien wondered how it was even possible, and what had been so deeply horrifying to force Ichigo to live each day with the presences of the dead claying and clamouring around him. If Kaien considered Ichigo's character he could see the reason, Ichigo was a protector one who would sacrifice everything for family, and to have the world sacrifice itself for him would surely crush his soul (but Ichigo had spoken of betrayal and how could that be with who he was).

Eyes drifting to Ichigo, the pale form standing desolate head cast towards the ground, Kaien pushed aside desperate musings and gathering silence for another time and raced forward so that he was holding Ichigo in a half hug leaving distance so that Kaien could glimpse Ichigo's soul killing eyes. It welled up inside him a desperate need to convince his brother of how wrong he was, the water droplets around them suspended themselves sluggishly drifting around their forms and collecting in rivulets by Kaien's feet.

"So, what I died!? They died over and over again but you chose to come back. You have lived with it for so long seen their faces every day, Ichigo you've strived for so much and I know nothing but already you've accomplished more than any could be said. They wouldn't want you to suffer, just as your zanpaktou, a part of your soul speaks they too would want you to move on without hesitation. Never forget them as they forged who you are but accept that they are gone and it wasn't your fault! Sometimes life doesn't allow us to be what we think we need to be; sometimes she's a cruel bitch. But Ichigo you lived because of them, it's up to you whether you want to throw it away. The future is likely safe now, I know you've had a hand in the Vizard incident look what you accomplished if it wasn't for you they would have been banished or if Central 46 had their way executed. You saved them already you are changing a future that was yours. This world will be different no matter what! Let go of this pain inside your heart."

Ichigo looked up eyes starting to flicker in an unchained hope even as they rumbled with emptiness in the dawning quiet he responded, "I want to damn it! Kaien I want it to be over. I'm so damn tired of it all. This planning, this pain, my soul erupts and spews torment and tempestuous storms upon me over and over. And if it being over means healing I want that! I've saved so much even turned the madman away from hellbent destruction.

"But there's so much more in front of me, a seemingly endless road. Goddamn I'm so sick and tired of hiding behind facades endless questions, and I don't know what to do. I want to talk to someone tell them everything about Orihime's smile, Rukia's drawings, Chad's coin so that they live on beyond me. I want to share their last moments and feel that soul crushing pain settle if only slightly. Wounds that have only scabbed to become scars a reminder but not a gaping part of me. There was another man who travelled through time. But I'm alone. I arrived in a crash of light, a stranger in the world I knew that didn't know me. And I'm so fucking afraid it will happen again. That I will cradle your broken corpses knowing I was useless to stop it. So damn scared that you'll all turn to find me useless lock me in Mugen again; charge me with betrayal and hate me. My secrets they're too much! Swallowing me whole, I've shared with Yam-jii, talked to the old man told him the truth but he can't aid me. It's not enough! They're like piercing knives an endless tattoo never stopping always there and I'm so lost."
"Kaien… Thank you so much for trying, you all helped but there's too much and it's rushing, overpowering so much so that my own soul cannot defend me from this darkness. I want to heal, and see their smiles once again, watch you grow old and take an apprentice, I want to see a future, I want to live."

Ichigo's words were rushed from his mouth fast and heartbreaking so full of despair and sorrow equated by hope and light in an uneven and dizzying mixture that left Kaien feeling tears streaming down his cheeks and Nejibana echoed his grief her piercing wails for their kin echoing in his inner world. There was also light a hope welling in his chest and sliding along his reaitsu because dammit Ichigo wanted to live and that was all Kaien needed. Before he could contemplate his actions, he pulled Ichigo into a tight hug surrounding him with his form and warmth, reaitsu a powerful force coiling around Ichigo embracing and swelling the forlorn child in his arms.

"Ichigo you are not alone, we are with you. You don't have to bear this burden alone we will take it with you, all of us. We love you and won't ever turn our back on you. The past, yours and mine has been, what matters is our future. We will stop whatever destruction and horrors from happening. You won't have to hold our broken bodies we are there for you."

Kaien's words were slow and moving caressing and soft over the endless pour of rain. Thunder rumbled and crackled sharp with the flash of light illuminating the land and Ichigo looked up from where his head had been resting in the crook of Kaien's neck. Those orange locks were plastered to his face eyes a dizzying tilt of emotions so prevalent and a miasma that had Kaien choking.

"I was never alone just too strong to bear it. But I'll live because the loneliness is not quite so wide."

That lone sentence a complex simplicity of overwhelming meaning swirled like a prophecy in the air, words of a man living for the future. Before Kaien could respond Ichigo looked into his eyes and whispered, "Please Kaien end it I want the suffering to be over help me heal in the light of day. Don't let me fall into darkness."

Then Ichigo tipped forward boneless eyes fluttering cold. Kaien caught his body hands reaching up to trace the pulse of his neck, he was horrified to feel it fluttery and faint the beating of his heart echoing the ending of a clock. He slung Ichigo in his arms the rain impairing his vision for a moment before it parted like a sea swept storm under the force of their reaitsu as he charged forward trusting the guiding flow of Nejibana towards the Fourth division.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed, or at least felt something. My friend tells me I'm too cruel to Ichigo and I have to agree, but we will be seeing some healing so once more apologies and promises that it will get better. Thank you all for reading, comments/reviews are always appreciated. Till next time!

Tower!
Amaranthine

Chapter Summary

Ichigo awakens... sort of, healing commences

Chapter Notes

Amaranthine
(adj.) Undying, immortal, eternally beautiful

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 29. This chapter is the beginning of some healing and is very much lighter than the previous chapter. I also started to experiment a slight bit with romance so we shall see how that turns out. I hope you enjoy, and read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo
X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Everything was a soft white, it surrounded him like a familiar blanket cradling him in faint sensations of warmth and peace. Ichigo wanted to bask in the feelings, the peace that had abandoned his life and appeared in flashes ever since the war, now swathed him like a mother’s embrace warm with every sense of home. Thoughts of the chaos and war filtered through his head slowly before simmering to nothingness as if the terror of his own thoughts couldn’t reach him in this surreal plane of white.

Ichigo opened his eyes, or at least that was the feeling he associated it with as his sight gazed at the world of ivory. It was like a winter swept land after the storm settled leaving everything soft and pure looking, covering his view spanning endlessly beyond sight. The place and all it’s emptiness, while slightly unsettling was overwhelmed by the blank quiet and peace that Ichigo struggled to find even in his inner word. When the inevitability of his memories and soul would rise up with levelling waters; murky currents that caressed his form in malignance and sorrow like a lost lover.

Thinking of his inner world weighted Ichigo’s mind with thoughts of his zanpaktou, where were they? That one question brought forth a flood of questions surging through his mind and brimming on his lips begging to be asked.

It came back in pieces like dust on the wind gathered up from the four corners of the earth, and in no
chronological order. There was a clarity in his mind that had been lost since he had returned to Soul Society after the Vizard training, perhaps longer than that. It was as if cloudy glass panes, weathered from years under Mother Nature’s whims had finally been swept clear. Ichigo’s emotions felt raw and stark but they weren’t like the flood waters rising in the monsoon season, they were just there, a part of him that he could better accept.

That grief still swirled, endlessly lapping at the edges of his senses as it always had, always would. But it was lighter? As if he pictured sorrow and mourning as the night darker than the latest hour yet it had lightened to a grey. That’s where it would stay, because he could heal, and was healing, yet it always left a mark, left traces.

Turning his mind to the broken assembly of thoughts and memories, he could see now how foolish he had been in refusing to confide in one of his friends sooner (at least he had a whisper of sense to try and speak but by then it was too late for much of anything). Ichigo had torn himself from his spirits blocked their words from his mind, he had hurt them so bad with that gesture and he knew it; It pounded in time with the fluttery beat of his heart, and dragged awfully at his insides. Ichigo had broken their promise, locked them away, closed his senses to their voices, was blind to their reaitsu, when he swore he would never do such again.

The thought pounded in his head accompanied by his heart, and the breath in his lungs was choked out for a long while, before he focused his thoughts, the deep-seated pain in his heart telling him this would haunt Ichigo for a long while.

Ichigo’s bond with Zangetsu was essential to their soul. Without them Ichigo would have broken down multiple times over, would have lost what shreds of sanity remained and left the world caked in some wicked chaos. They were his anchor, his support, the world to him when all else had fallen, the two spirits understood him better than even Ichigo understood himself and yet they still cared for their brash, sometimes idiotic wielder.

They had saved him when it all became too much when he was standing on the edge of a dangerous precipice, when he couldn’t muster the will or strength to raise his blade they pulled him together till he was standing upright. When his powers had been taken after Aizen and the Winter War, Ichigo had spiralled far, drifting away from friends and family as if his voice couldn’t reach them through the waves he sunk beneath their own imposing walls. Some whisper of Zangetsu in the lingering traces of his badge, and even more so in his own hands and eyes had held him together long enough for their reunion.

Ichigo smiled softly at the thought of that reunion, the bliss of his powers surging through his body alighting every nerve and playing wickedly with his inner world. They all had basked in the sensations of togetherness (and even then, in a time where he hadn’t known the truth Ichigo had easily pulled Shiro to his side, the hole in his soul not only fitting Zangetsu-Ossan) before the righteous fury came.

They had cursed the names of his friends and family for leaving Ichigo in such a state (Ichigo at the time hadn’t known what the spirits meant, he thought he could understand better now), reaitsu raving around like a wild dog. But then they had seen Ichigo’s acceptance, the will of his soul unchanging in the face of such trials, and they had been proud, Zangetsu-Ossan had smiled that deep grin the one that chased away the night, and Shiro well he had well and truly cackled.

Thinking of his spirits carved softly into his heart and rustled along the sensations of reaitsu in this surreal plane. He tilted his head in confusion considering his reaitsu and the keen difference he could lightly identify, for a split second it reminded him of the rain. Then his mind drifted to that night and the grand spectre that had appeared like some ominous reaper.
The realization that he had released such a plethora of power to take down the Menos Grande (Really, tired-Ichigo? A fully charged in seal-mode Getsuga Tensho was overkill), and consequently likely revealing how much he had been hiding his powers shocked him and had him clenching his hands (or what served as his form on this plane) into a fist. He had been so damn careless, he could have screwed everything up for everyone, could had alerted Bach to his presence early, and that could have proven to be catastrophic.

Kaien flashed in his mind’s eyes, determined with tears steaming down his cheeks as he countered Ichigo’s despair with the bright pulsing light of his soul. He had told Kaien the truth…. The thought caught his breath, he wondered if his brother even believed Ichigo, or if he thought Ichigo had finally fallen over the edge; because as much as Kaien trusted Ichigo, anyone would think him crazy for shouting to the world that he had seen that same world fall to dust.

Kaien had looked him in the eyes, fought every breath of Ichigo’s will with his own, and his soul had believed Ichigo’s desperate words. Kami that had been stunning, because it was easy to tell an old man who was wise and could easily garner the meaning of Ichigo’s words, or coyly tease certain scientist into believing that he was toying a balance. But when it was a babble of words pouring from his heart straight to his mouth, and family, the fear of betrayal, abandonment, the end of something was so heavy and weightless at the same time.

It swallowed a person whole if they dwelled only on the fear and dark alternatives, but Ichigo was already half submerged. Kaien’s honest reaitsu, accompanied by Nejibana’s presence imbued in the very rain around them surging through the water, convinced Ichigo otherwise if only temporarily. Convinced the youth that the water wasn’t going to choke life from the creatures in it’s grasp, not when Kaien was there and Nejibana’s swaying lily presence flourished in such an element.

Then he had begged Kaien to save him, from himself, from the rain, from it all, before the encroaching darkness and cold had finally swallowed him. He had fought it for so long but in Kaien’s arms, with those seastone eyes staring into his own with love, Ichigo knew he was safe and had finally succumbed to the pounding in his chest and the heavy weight of his weariness.

Then there was nothing but white.

While Seireitei was a city forged of white stone, this was not Soul Society or any form of the Fourth with the soft hum of healing reaitsu, and Unohana’s striking presence that was like chai or cinnamon, sweet but with a bite. No this was endless white blanketing him in feelings of warmth and home, soothing all his worries and fears till he felt he could just stay and rest for an eternity of time, only the curiosity and faint impressions of some outside force shimmering the time-still sense of the place.

Wisps of ebony swirled in the distance like sand flicking up in spirals that danced with grace, like the flight of the Jigokuchō. It coalesced pulling together into a small form that was achingly familiar and so inherently painful that Ichigo’s breath caught in his throat, and he felt his heart had stopped.

Her form seemed to glide towards him light as air and with all the ghostly presence of the living, there was a flush on her cheeks, light in her eyes, and the blood that had stained the world like a canvas of crimson was no where to be found. That petite smile was on her lips the once that was fond and true, the one that sometimes lingered when she stared at her brother, or after Ichigo did something particularly endearing (stupid).

Ichigo’s hand reached out, of its own accord drawn towards the figure who was an arm’s reach away, his eyes hungrily drunk in her visage. This was different then the pale spectres that had haunted his nights and days in the week leading up to his collapse.

It had stuck his heart like a gong to see their figures, stone cold and pale as morning lilies, sometimes
immortalized as they had been in death crimson painting everything in sickly shades of night, other times they were hollow a product of the endless despair that had carved them out as family and friends fell around them.

She looked like the day he had first met her, when she had floated through his window on winds of fate and manipulation. When they had spat and she taught him, then the fight with the hollow where she sacrificed herself so that Ichigo could save his family. The crown of her hair glimmered like raven feathers, and fathomless indigo eyes stared into Ichigo’s own amber orbs drenched in a spiral of emotions.

“Rukia?”

Ichigo questioned voice seeming loud and quiet all at once in this empty space of nothingness white. She tilted her had then, as if adjusting to his voice her eyes sweeping over Ichigo in that fond adoration before she nodded.

The moment held like time suspended by the maw of a celestial being, tenderly Ichigo’s hand reached up and rested on her cheek taking in her young vibrant eyes, the form of her spirit, and the warmth of her skin with a soft longing and pained smile. Rukia’s hand stretched out to rest on Ichigo’s own cheek before it reached up pushing aside long bangs, running through hair tickling the bridge of his neck, tracing his defined jaw; he had changed since they all had last seen him. More so since this version of Rukia had seen him, this new lieutenant of Soul Society who had only recently passed the grief of the loss of her mentor, and had found happiness again even in the soft in-between spaces of war.

Ichigo had grown form that unruly teenager, who rushed head first, blade swinging, reaitsu surging wild and unkept, into a man during the course of the war. A child grown too fast settling into his skin with a fervent speed and need. He had never truly felt comfortable with what he was, not with the sudden revelations thrown at him every which way and the lengths he strived and forced himself to become stronger, but it had been pushed aside as he never settled always moving on to the next battle.

Now he was a little bit older, still a fair bit twisted, a little bit wiser, and mostly settled into who he was. As if sensing his thoughts and their drowning complexity, Rukia’s demeanour tensed and changed so that she was staring at Ichigo with that sharp disappointment and scolding that she always adapted when she decided it was time to scold some sense into the orange-haired Shinigami.

“Ichigo… How could you be such an idiot?! Baka!”

Rukia started softly, before she stepped back fist raised and the image of an angered sprite enlivened. There it was Ichigo acknowledged with fond smile, the inevitable snap, Ichigo could only tense in preparation for the words that would be so sharp, and truthful, and stinging but right.

“How could you let yourself fall to such a state! Orihime always tried to feed you for a reason, do you think Ukitake-taicho forced you to go out with him just for tea! Kami I swear they need to instate the ‘Look After Ichigo’ club two-point O with how well you can take care of yourself! And honestly? What were you thinking when you decided not to talk to anyone, I get you’re reclusive as all fuck, but you have people to talk to, just because Nii-sama’s busy doesn’t mean he wouldn’t take the time to talk even if he was with Hisana, or Kaien-san for Kami’s sake! You know he cares about family more than enough to drop work on a breath’s insistence.”

Rukia raved, small form enshrouded in reaitsu as she bashed Ichigo over the head a few times to get her point across. Ichigo nodded sagely, already well-aware of her points and his own stupidity, Rukia stared for a minute before a sardonic laugh slipped out and in a less accusing tone she said,
“You’re such a baka Ichigo. You’re still wondering how you travelled through time?”

Rukia questioned easily and Ichigo looked up confused before he nodded slowly and slightly hesitantly, Rukia shook her head and continued, “Still can’t see what’s in front of you, yet able to plan for an alternative no one could or would think plausible. You did it, it was you who traveled through time. It wasn’t the Hogyoku or some will of the Soul King, it was your own power and will. Kami I know you can be an idiot sometimes Ichi, but you need to open you eyes and stop trying to be humble or stop with the denial. I swear how did you even survive so long? You are more powerful than the Soul King of our time, you sealed away your powers because they were crazy expansive but you couldn’t even get a read on how vast they are. Baka you should take the time to know your powers!”

Ichigo stared wide-eyed, mind uncomprehending as he tried to process Rukia’s words. They made sense on a distant level as if the truth had always been on the tip of his tongue but he had never bothered to swallow it and that was just crazy. Sometimes he felt it, when he really opened his eyes, the ones of his inner soul and glimpsed the souls of others, touched the void of space, felt the might of the world wrapped into the threads of life.

Rukia laughed and knocked Ichigo upside the head once more in her typical violent manner, eyes radiant she smiled and waited for Ichigo to respond. The young Shinigami’s gaze drifted around the endless white emblazoned around him as he slowly nestled the idea within his soul accepting it for what it was, it was just another part of him like everything else. Like the Quincy heritage, like the blood of the Shinigami’s history, like his own faults; If he could accept those, then it wasn’t too far of a stretch to accept that he had… trans-dimensional powers? Sixth dimension level powers? He had never bothered to keep track of the deity stuff Aizen had been sprouting in many of his monologues.

In that moment, his soul finally settled that fraction more, there was always room to grow but he felt he finally understood his own soul a bit more. And Kami wasn’t he an idiot if he hadn’t seen this staring him in the face the whole time. Of course, as always Rukia was right, speaking of the ebony crowned little devil Ichigo turned his gaze and curiosity to her.

“Where am I midget?”

Ichigo asked with a smirk easily slipping back into their old roles, the bickering like an old-married couple, the teasing and fun like they were siblings. At one-point Ichigo had hooked up with Rukia (Renji had sulked for days on end) it had been good, had worked so well, but then it didn’t. They preferred to be friends, that’s how it was, she was like a sister to him, granted a little sister who was not exactly younger.

She scowled turning sharp eyes on Ichigo, eager to jump in the fray and teasing under the pseudo animosity. Like a feral animal she smiled and responded, “Don’t know Strawberry just what you whipped up, some other plane, maybe a dream.”

Ichigo scowled at the old moniker even as a fondness bubbled up in his chest like a spring of warmth. Rukia shrugged at her own noncommittal answer. Leaving Ichigo truly wondering where they were, there was none of the blurriness and distortion he associated with a dream, yet the plane had no sense. He pushed his curiosity aside happy to enjoy the moment with his friend, Rukia grinned faintly before a familiar scowl settled on her lips.

“Don’t think I’m finished chewing you out yet Ichigo.”

She warned with a shake of her finger, righteous fury flooding crystal irises, Ichigo nodded basking in her presence once more. Damn he missed them all and even her nagging and yelling was welcome in the face of his loss.
“There you go again, always dwelling on our deaths Ichigo. Come on baka we’re free now, you’ve already saved us. I mean seriously only an idiot like you could think of even trying to convince Aizen that he shouldn’t destroy the world! And don’t get me started on the pining! Kami it’s almost ridiculous watching you fumble and ignore your feelings. I mean seriously Ichigo, you hooked up with him in the last life…. Granted that did take drastic measures, and it was more of a fling because in war you try not to get that connected. But that’s beside the point! I swear blatantly ignoring your feelings, do I have to smack sense into you again strawberry-head?”

Ichigo processed Rukia’s gaggle of words in a rather slow manner, the comforting and blank aura of the place seemed to drain any need for haste. So Ichigo took his time eyeing the midget and slipping over the words in his mind. Rukia’s nagging made sense as usual, at least for the first bit which is what he would try to focus/analyse because he really didn’t want to deal with the headache of emotions romance brought forth.

Rukia in her nagging was correct as always, and really Ichigo accepted that he was an idiot. Maybe it was who he was brash and reckless, or some remnants of his teenage years but Ichigo was definitely too far gone to care that he had tried (and succeeded) to save Aizen-Sosuke.

Ichigo guessed if he thought about it he had saved them? No not really, he acknowledged within his mind, that was far too optimistic for any crazy person to consider, Ichigo remarked to himself with a slight curve to his lips of amusement. Still he knew that when they had passed in his timeline, they had been freed from the torment and constant torture of a world burning up in war. Granted some souls had been lost forever under the weight of a Quincy attack, others had entered the cycle of rebirth only to succumb to a crumbling world. Those thoughts were mean, true enough to hurt but also a gentle reminder that they hadn’t seen the end, or lived through a sick twist.

Rukia’s gaze sharpened and like she always somehow knew, like any who had always known him were always able to tell when he was avoiding a subject. Her eyes alone conveyed her demand for Ichigo to stop procrastinating and focus on the topics he was avoiding.

Running her words once more, he paused flying over one phrase on repeat, brow furrowed in thought and eyes bright. Ichigo pursed his lips for a moment before looking up catching the raven locks of Rukia’s hair framing her petite features and shading sharp crystalline orbs from sight.

“You said you all were watching over me? I-Is that true?”

Ichigo questioned softly, thoughts and warmth bubbling throughout him. Rukia’s demeanour softened as well, eyes sincere and gentle she smiled and nodded before answering, “Of course we’re watching over you baka, couldn’t leave an idiotic strawberry on his own. Don’t try to deny it, your own collapse is proof enough.”

Ichigo scowled at her teasing and reprimanding but the familiar expression he usually adopted slid away to be replaced with one of those faint smiles full of good humour and warmth. That expression was held for all of a minute, or what felt like such a time in a room with nothing indicating anything, before his brow once more furrowed in thought, and curiosity lightened his yes.

“How are you watching over me?”

Rukia shook her head regarding Ichigo cynically. For a second Ichigo worried that Rukia would pull out her sketchbook and illustrate the answer, which would become less of an answer and more a piece of modern work. Rukia’s eyes narrowed as if sensing Ichigo’s thoughts (which was completely likely with how perceptive the midget could be, and how long they had known each other) before she tilted her head as if thinking and responded, “Hmm it’s difficult to explain, I think Kisuke would be one of the few people to understand it decently enough to explain all the science portions of the
equations. But I think it simmers down to, you build a bond with people, share love, reaitsu, touch souls and that lingers on. So, while our timeline is gone and our souls aren’t really a thing in the whole spacetime continuum matter, our energy, the thoughts and love we shared for and with you is still there and so we’re watching over you even if we’re mostly powerless, we’re here for you.”

Ichigo sat down at her answer because he hadn’t necessarily been expecting that (the truth that they had been watching over him was shocking enough). The idea that their bond was the reason for their presence warmed his chest and left that smile, the ones of his childhood, open and free littering his lips and stretching the muscles of his face. They were watching over him; somehow the confirmation was powerful, endearing, and comforting.

Ichigo basked in the cozy sensations for a little while, just simmering with it all, digesting what this experience had brought him. Rukia let him, plopping down beside him with her usual grace and airs. Her cool presence and the sensation of reaitsu wrapped around him; it carried with it the gentle scent of jasmine and freshly fallen snow that he had deeply come to associate with Rukia.

She turned then as if sensing Ichigo’s straying thoughts and pinned him into place with sharp ice cut eyes, Ichigo knew he couldn’t run from it not when faced with a diviner of truth such as Rukia. The orange-haired time traveller sighed running a hand through his hair in a familiar tick, sight straying to gaze at the vast plains of endless expanding white before he sighed a small sigh again and said, “It’s not the same. This isn’t a war, and he already has someone, she’ll make him happy. Me, I can barely handle my relationships right now, and what if he wants someone who isn’t ace, someone who wants deeper intimacy?”

Rukia turned understanding eyes his way, her soul brought forth a minuscule smile upon Ichigo’s lips even as dark thoughts laced his brow and brewed in his chest like an oncoming storm. He couldn’t deal with sexual contact, didn’t want it or like it, not anymore. Ichigo was fine with that, he had accepted who he was long before the revelation of his new-found sexuality.

But Byakuya, he deserved someone; the relationship he had with Hisana, he deserved the intimacy that Ichigo would never be able to provide. Byakuya needed a partner not someone who’s weekly schedule involved a mental breakdown, or nights swallowed in haunting dreams.

Oh, Ichigo was going to start trying to heal, once he woke up he wouldn’t push it away anymore. Kaien had finally helped Ichigo to accept that he needed to try, that he couldn’t hold onto their memories in such a painful way, the breakdown has just been another factor in a long simmering solution.

Ichigo wouldn’t push whatever feelings he was developing onto the Kuchiki heir, because Ichigo probably wasn’t ready (and he doubted the both of them had really come to term with their feelings, if Byakuya even had any), and he wasn’t going to ruin Byakuya’s life with his own selfish whims.

Rukia scowled before hitting him upside the head, hoping to knock some sense into Ichigo likely. The only result of her action was the hissing and clutching of his skull, followed by a faintly vicious glare in Rukia’s direction. The ebony haired midget laughed swatting away Ichigo’s light fist on a path of revenge before she really stared at Ichigo.

“I swear Ichigo, you’re hopeless when it comes to romance. I mean you have learned a little but you still have a long way to go. Just because Byakuya loves Hisana doesn’t mean he can’t love you too, and besides I think you know the cause of her illness…” Rukia paused eyes sad and dark in that awful way Ichigo hated to see in any of his friends. As if sensing Rukia’s distress or Ichigo’s own frothing emotions, another presence appeared behind Ichigo, stalked against his back was a broad and familiar form. One that smelt of hot cocoa and the heavy tang of metal, Ichigo would recognize Chad’s presence anywhere lest the feel of his reaitsu which was like liquid gold and crimson.
Rukia blinked slightly eyes darting from Chad to Ichigo for a moment before she shook her head in amusement watching as Ichigo tilted his head back to look up into Chad’s one revealed eye. The orange-head could see that familiar promise in those eyes, years of silent communication passing between their eyes in an instant, one that spoke of reassurance and comfort. A wide smile curled Ichigo’s lips and he settled back against the familiar presence breathing in the feeling of his friends.

A beaming smile slipped onto Rukia’s lips, followed by an easy smile on Chad’s own face. Rukia quirked her eyebrows before she continued, “You know the cause of her illness, and that there’s not viable cure. But Ichigo you’ve already changed the timeline, I know you’re worried about what will happen to Byakuya when... she passes but you’ll be there for him. It doesn’t have to be like it was in the war, he isn’t the Byakuya you know, and you’re a different Ichigo in the end. And because you’re Ichigo and whatever you do in life is usually five galaxies from normal, your relationship doesn’t have to fit normal standards.”

Chad assented to Rukia’s wisdom with a small grunt, and the flowing brush of reaitsu like the hot southern winds sweeping across desert lands, brushed across his skin. Ichigo thought over her words, really he was almost lost without his zanpaktou spirits’ wisdom and guidance, but Ichigo was sort of functioning as he considered Rukia’s words. She was right and he mostly knew it (she was almost always right- maybe it was a women thing?) but it was still a hard thing to grasp.

Relationships during a war didn’t really… work. That hadn’t stopped Ichigo from falling in love with everyone a few times over, but Ichigo had learned his lesson, it was hard to lose a friend, but devastating to lose a love. So, he stuck to one-night stands, and poured the love he felt for them into his battles, into his will to survive and protect.

He wasn’t in a war anymore. That didn’t mean he was ready for serious relationships, it was near impossible to think of when you know a person so well you can breathe all their deepest secrets in one breath. Byakuya however, was different in a slight way, maybe it was because of Ichigo but he was open, the same Byakuya Ichigo knew and yet completely different.

Chad nudged Ichigo’s shoulder with one of those smiles on his face, and Ichigo nodded getting the message. As long as he acknowledged it and considered the possibility, and stopped trying to run away from his feelings they could leave the topic alone. Rukia huffed sending Ichigo a bemused look as if chiding him she said, “I swear you would be lost without us.”

“Mmhm proofs already there.” Ichigo replied with a light tone and a wink, Rukia scowled and Chad frowned slightly at their friend’s easy acceptance but Ichigo shrugged, it was what it was. Two new presences flickered on the edges of Ichigo’s senses and he tilted his head up only to hear a familiar call, “Oi Ichigo! You Idiot!”

Uryuu appeared behind Orihime, where the brunette was dragging the gangly Quincy behind her with a determined aura and the soft willed look only she could muster. Uryu was as per usual scowling, the light bouncing off the lenses of his glasses and catching on the Quincy embodiments emblazoned on his outfit, Orihime was dressed in a comfy outfit that suited her ditzy personality a beaming smile stretched across her face and her eyes were bright as supernovas.

Uryuu was tossed to the ground in what should have been a gentle move from Orihime, but well Tatsuki’s training had adverse effects that no one had realised till it was too late, and Orihime was accidently body-flipping people left and right. Thinking of Tatsuki, brought to mind the others Keigo, and Asano even, Chizuru; he missed them.

When the Winter War began they had done everything in their power to keep their other friends out of the battle (those who had invaded Soul Society were already far too immersed). They had become a safe haven of sorts, having enough power to temporarily defend themselves, Ichigo and the others
could meet them for coffee just talk normally. They had continued to support them as life went on and the tides of war became darker and their friends more haggard and despairing.

Thinking of them and their cruel endings twisted Ichigo’s gut and darkened his eyes. A large warm hand jolted Ichigo from his thoughts as it settled on his shoulder, and Ichigo looked up to see Chad’s knowing gaze. A flutter of reaitsu whisper-soft danced across his skin and Ichigo nodded a reassuring light in his eyes as Orihime dropped to the ground beside Uryu.

Uryu and Orihime in an awkward shuffle that involved the whole group, eventually settled so that Orihime was squished beside Ichigo, and Uryu was wedged into the small space between Chad and Orihime. It was messy but it worked, and reminded Ichigo of days where at the dawn of morning after nights of battle they would collapse in the barracks in a dog pile of limbs and reaitsu. Sew their souls together till they couldn’t tell one’s thoughts from another’s feelings.

Ichigo basked in their presences, absorbed the feeling of togetherness that had been gone for so long, a feeling he doubted he would ever find again. Orihime giggled beside Ichigo and he turned considering the young women she had become.

Over the war they had all changed, grown up from adolescents rushing in headfirst, to powerful adults. Orihime had driven her powers to new lengths to stand on the battlefield, mastered ways to rip a person inside out by rejecting a certain vein or organ, could just as easily reject healing as to apply it. She had kept up her bubbly persona, but it had become tame and mature still ever whimsical, but when she snapped she was as terrifying as Unohana and could be far deadlier.

Uryu was still scowling sizing Ichigo up under the mask of his spectres eyes fond and irritated in a mix only Uryu had mastered. Ichigo felt the familiar pull to argue with his cousin, about whatever inane topic rise in his chest just for old times sake.

Their bond by blood was one of cousins, but Ichigo considered them brothers any day. Even when Uryu had falsified a betrayal Ichigo had already known it was fake, because Uryu was a good actor but when you’ve spent years upon desert sand sharing a small tent you know everything.

“You are such and idiot Kurosaki, or should I say Shiba now?”

Uryuu began with a slight bite and Ichigo laughed eyes bright as he began to rise to the challenge. Orihime’s tinkling laughter trickled between them, even as Rukia sighed and in a resigned tone said, “I already nagged him for everything.”

Uryuu huffed and looked Ichigo in the eyes and said, “I doubt the idiot listened to any of it though.”

Ichigo scowled and responded, “And how would you know with your pride clogging your senses.”

They stared down each other for a tense moment, Ichigo daring Uryu to leap forward so they could tumble across the stretches of endless white. Finally, Uryu broke and looked away with a small laugh eyes brightening and losing the serious tint as he turned to face Ichigo once more and said, “You never change.”

Ichigo wanted to deny Uryu’s fond words, but he knew it was still mostly true so he let it slide. If Ichigo had any semblance of a plan in responding it was interrupted as his cheek was pinched between two stern fingers. Ichigo turned his head a slight bit to see a pout firmly entrenched on Orihime’s features, the time traveller grimaced he did not like seeing that expression on her features, least what it boded for him.

“Dummy! How come you’re not eating enough? Was my food so bad that you can’t stomach real
world food?"

Orihime scolded softly eyes sharp as needles, as she interrogated the poor Shinigami castrated against Chad in the face of her wrath. At the end, her lips twitched slightly indicating that she was mostly joking about the last remark.

It was a bit of an inside joke between their group, no one had expected anything edible of the food combinations she whipped up, and no one had been brave enough to try them. But then there was a mission and while Ichigo could cook fine, and Chad could manage they had all been dead tired. So, when Orihime came out of the makeshift kitchen carrying something light purple and smoking there had been a few uneasy glances and bets who would see the morning.

It had been good in a weird sort of way, like a comfort food or a family tradition that was a part of some special event. Oh, the texture had been weird but the flavours had blended well enough. Orihime had practically lit up the endless night with her enthusiasm when she found they liked her food (though they were still slightly opposed to eating it again, and wondering over the health benefits or lack there of).

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Jeez how many times does a guy have to apologize for starving himself? Nah Hime your food was just so good that everything tastes bland in comparison.”

Ichigo half-whined, half apologised sincerely joking in an attempt to lighten the mood, and draw away indubitably from more pestering from his friends on his eating habits. Orihime laughed, different from the fake giggles she enticed the rest of the world with, her laughter was deep and whole.

What Ichigo said was partially true, he really did miss Orihime’s stunning food combinations, they were like a taste of home. Kaien had been super freaked out the one time he caught Ichigo enjoying rice with jam in a strike of homesickness, the elder Shiba had been stunned speechless, pointing between the food and Ichigo half attempting to speak, as his mind computed another boggling Ichigo thing. Or at least that was what Ichigo supposed Kaien was doing whenever he was silenced by one mood or the other of Ichigo’s.

Rukia chuckled softly at Ichigo’s answer, while Uryu huffed a faint smile belaying his actions, Chad trapped one of Ichigo’s moving hands beneath his own much larger palm. Ichigo looked up and caught the intent of Chad’s eyes the gentle smile playing on the giant’s lips and Ichigo nodded answering the unspoken question. He would be fine in the end, even though he had lost everything of his old world expect for his soul kin, he had made new family and friends in familiar strangers.

There was warmth pulsing in is chest when he thought of Kaien and the Shiba clan, their endless concern for him and the boundless love they shared. Byakuya who had embraced everything Ichigo had thrown at them with a beckoning smile. The Vizard who had become a family again under Ichigo and Sosuke’s power, one with a stronger bond and the will to push towards the future. His captain and Jushiro, the Soutaicho, Unohana, the list went on as he considered them all.

Ichigo settled into the balance he had carved out for himself, he would worry about the future, and the no doubt angered presences of his friends when he woke up. For now, he settled into the closely-knit group breathing in the familiar scents of home, the gentle lilt of reaitsu like a lullaby, and the comfort of it all.

“Remember that time Uryu and Orihime raided the Espada camp?”

Rukia questioned softly lightly striking conversation, she received a multitude of nods and laughter as they thought of the story. Orihime brightened while Uryu groaned dragging a palm across his
features as if he could rid himself of the memories.

“Oh yeah and Chad and Ichi came busting in to save us because they thought we had been kidnapped, when in reality we were drinking tea!”

Orihime chirped excitedly clapping her hands together, Ichigo laughed under his breath, eyes fond as he recalled that scene to mind, it certainly had been one of the stranger moments in the war, but also completely unsurprising in the way that their lives often were. Uryu groaned then and continued where Orihime had left off, “Yes while Orihime wanted to drink tea with them I had been dragged into the whole matter. Not to mention their guard kept eyeing me up as if I was a piece of meat!”

Rukia placatingly patted Uryu on the head with a sardonic smile that belayed her true intentions. Uryu only sighed and swatted at her hand casting a glare in Ichigo’s direction partially because he could, and likely because he was Uryu and always willing to antagonize.

“And then I arrive only to find you all dressed up as if you were in some desert oasis in the human world!”

Rukia replied with a laugh bringing a small smile out onto Ichigo’s lips, looking up he could see a small smile on Chad’s lips as well the amusement in his eyes radiating like the sun. Ichigo did remember that, the outfits and the whole scenario had seemed like some weird dream.

Ichigo rested amongst his friends, the people he called family, soaking in their presence and basking in the nostalgia and warmth. They continued to reminisce in airy voices that rushed over Ichigo and lightened his own spirit, drawing away some of the weight he could hardly feel in this limitless plane but knew none the less was there.

He savoured the time, knowing when he woke that it would all be gone. Ichigo had come to a few realisations while submerged in this depthless plane, but that didn’t diminish the truth any less, and the truth was that he wouldn’t be able to speak with his friends like this in the waking world ever again. Not these friends who had shared the stories with him, gotten tied up in all manner of situations.

And that was okay, because just the same he had newer memories, ones created with those of this timeline, experiences and his own fair share of troubles. One day like he had promised Rukia, and so many others he would speak of them plainly, tell of story after story till his throat ran dry and his eyes were like pools of limitless water. Ichigo would make sure the memory of their sacrifices and the lives they had lived would thrive on not only in him but within his friends.

“Remember when Ikkaku recruited half of Soul Society into doing his ‘lucky’ dance?”

Laughter rippled among the group at Uryu’s tone, Ichigo joined in lungs light in his chest and eyes bright as a hearth. This was home and it would always be so, time couldn’t take that away. Rukia continued the story detailing the disastrous events that followed the incident, Ichigo sighed contently and closed his eyes happy and free.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! I hope you enjoyed the lighter chapter, and the promise of
some healing for Ichigo, I also hope the romance wasn’t too overplayed? Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Tassel!!
Chapter Summary

Unohana thinks of her recent patient, there are some visits, and Kaien sees Ichigo.

Chapter Notes

Sough
(v.) to moan, to rustle, to sigh;
(n.) the gentle, soothing murmur of wind or water

Hello everyone! We are here with chapter 30 (Yay!). I was a bit surprised by the responses I received for the latest chapter, as a few were negative, however they were outshined by the positive reviews/comments so thank you to everyone for your support. Romance will still be a part of this story (I was feeling vindictive this chapter) though in a subtler flavour.
Thank you all for reading this fic as it’s developed and changed, your support has been amazing!
*I have Tumblr for my art/writing, so feel free to send any asks/questions Tumblr is: Arowen12Freelancer

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The Fourth was a mess, or at least part of it was; one room sectioned in the back far away from the rest of the division. Unohana stared in equal parts despair and annoyance at the boarded off room where one of her patient lay; reaitsu surged around the room in a whirling vortex that snapped and ripped, at any who dared to come close in a heavy defensive manner. Unohana had been able to breach the area only a sparse few times, and when she did it felt as if one was wading through thick syrup and that the air was as thin as the peak of a mountain.

Turning her gaze around her eyes searched for the one other member of the Fourth who had surprisingly been able to enter the room without concern. Hanatarō wasn’t the best Shinigami by any means, he wasn’t overly powerful, or intelligent, but Unohana respected his determination and spirit. Not to mention his own zanpaktou was one suited to the art of healing. It had been a strange change of events that when the young Shinigami was sent to check on the patient (as best as one could from behind a doorway) after drawing lots, Ichigo’s reaitsu had calmed like still waters allowing Hanatarō
Hanatarō had veritably freaked out, but had entered the room anyway heedless of his own trepidation and checked on the patient before reporting to Retsu. She had rushed to the scene eager to re-assess on the patient. While Hanatarō had deserted the patient to report the news, Ichigo’s reaitsu had picked up once more in that frightening lash of power that tore the surrounding area to shreds; but was kept temporarily at bay only by powerful kido Hachi and Tessai had created. The same power that had rippled out over Soul Society and had stolen the breath of most Shinigami brining them to their knees, before dying to nothing. Over an hour later Kaien had appeared with the reason held tightly in his arms, a hypothermic orange-head.

As soon as Hanatarō reappeared the rampant reaitsu settled, it paused as it sensed Unohana but unlike before it seemed to almost shrug and let her pass. It had been a relief to check up on her patient once again after that first night.

Kaien had appeared like a herald of the storm, drenched head to toe yet looking perfectly comfortable in such a state. If Unohana discounted the blatant worry and fear that had been prevalent on his features not to mention the wide-eyed disbelief and sorrow.

Ichigo had been in his arms, pale as death, and cold as one who possessed such an incurable illness. For a mild second Retsu’s heart had stopped in her chest at the still orange-haired Shinigami before her searching fingers had caught a pulse. Unohana had no time to ask questions or reassure Kaien she only directed one of her subordinates to contact the Shiba family, before Ichigo had been carted off into one of the vacant medical rooms leaving a floundering Shiba and a pressure that hung around the Fourth like a cloak.

It had been a mad rush to figure out what plagued the kid, as Unohana remained calm her trusted lieutenant at her side she had scanned the youth. His reaitsu had been near non-existent at the time clinging close to him like a shell as if trying to protect him. Ichigo’s skin had been cold and clammy, and she had been shocked to find his respiratory system beginning to fail that accompanied by the worrying signs of hypothermia which led to a long night.

In the end, his heart had stopped over three times throughout the night, and at one point the chance of survival depended entirely on Ichigo’s own will to survive. She had jumpstarted the healing process within his body in the early morning, all the while maintaining a stable condition, because if he had fallen ay further she doubted the rates of his survival would have been high even with sheer will power.

Sighing and sweeping her long hair neatly over her shoulders Unohana took a breath and composed her thoughts, pushing aside the weariness that weighted her soul with the pressure of caring for such a troublesome patient. Sharp eyes followed the presences of her subordinates as they bustled about the Fourth in an idle manner, till she landed on the mop of black hair she was looking for.

Hanatarō was perceptive and it showed, as the gentile Shinigami looked up catching Unohana’s presence and attention, he hurried over traversing the long corridor with a nervous expression plastering his features as was normal. The seated Shinigami bowed slightly before his eyes took in the closed door with a hardness and determination Hanatarō only mustered when it came to patients. The Fourth while generally comprised of weaker Shinigami strength wise, always had those with wills of fire it was how the profession seemed to work.

With Hanatarō’s presence the lashing whips of reaitsu settled enough, that Unohana pulling her reaitsu around her form could enter the room. Her observant gaze took stock of the equipment lining the walls, and the general state of the room before landing on her patient. Additionally, she noted the sharp fading presence of Ichigo’s zanpaktou spirits; she had caught one of them (and she knew there
was two) starring at Ichigo mournfully softly brushing orange strands before ha had faded away in
the early morning sunlight.

Hanatarō scurried forward in a quick manner performing a first assessment while Unohana hung
back to allow the young man to work. The seated Shinigami began by checking obvious signs and
areas such as pulse, breathing, reflexes, as well as the equipment so that Retsu could assess the
patient in a quick and efficient manner. He flashed her a hopeful smile and Retsu let a small
reassuring and faintly proud curve of her lips show before she padded over to Ichigo’s bed.

He looked peaceful and so very young on the cot, the sheets drawn up to his chin as if just resting,
but he also appeared stark against the overwhelming white of the Fourth. It was a draining colour
one that she had voted against when they designed the building but this was Soul Society and when
did they ever listen to sound advice. The colour of his hair only added to the drastic contrast of light
and dark, bringing out the paleness of his own skin, and reflecting the faint purple under his eyes that
was steadily disappearing each day he spent in the healing coma allowing his body to rest.

Hanatarō’s reaitsu peaked questioningly, and Unohana glanced over to see the young man standing
beside one of the small circular windows (they had learnt from Ichigo’s last stay that wide windows
would only encourage escape). She considered it for a moment, knowing that it was likely if they
opened the windows there was a chance of disturbance or the interference of Ichigo’s reaitsu
preventing them from reaching the window once more. On the other hand, the room needed the fresh
air as did the patient, and she knew Ichigo was a fan of nature.

He had spoken of the gardens he had visited, trees that towered over everything and were so wide
and thick one could fit many people inside it’s trunk. He talked of meadows and flowers with a light
airy voice that echoed someone he once knew.

Nodding softly Hanatarō smiled in return and hefted the windows open, letting a pleasant breeze
curtail through the room and gently rustle their hair and clothing; It brought with it the mild smell of
rain echoing the continuous rainfall of the past few days.

Letting her hands hover over Ichigo’s chest, she let the guiding hum of healing kido flow about her
as she assessed the patient, checking his vitals, circling the systems of his body, assessing the activity
of his soul the best she could. He seemed to be almost completely recovered, nothing a few days in
bed rest wouldn’t cure, though Kami knew getting Ichigo to stay in bed was a nigh impossible task.
Though she doubted Ichigo would wake up any time soon if his previous state was any indication.

The Captain of the Fourth, to make sure her patient received the exact care he needed had done a full
report, both on the incident and events that had led to the collapse. She had spoken to his friends and
family in an attempt to nail down what had caused the drastic dip in health in the youth. What she
heard didn’t bode well, it stirred the old warrior insider her, and rustled softly with her spirit.

Ichigo had only very recently started to confide in Unohana, as such they had only met up a few
times, often Ichigo sought her when he felt the need to chat. They would sit over tea and speak
sometimes of nothing, the latest piece the lieutenant had found within in the archives, new
discoveries in the field of medicine due to collaboration of the Fourth and Twelfth divisions. Other
times they would sit in silence and Ichigo would look as if he wanted to speak, but would hold his
tongue eyes promising.

But then the incident with the Vizard happened and she had hardly seen him, both during their
training and in the following few weeks afterwards. She had understood the young man was busy,
and that the training of a group of powerful Shinigami that had been hollowfied was likely no small
matter (and she was still waiting for Kisuke to pass the scientific notes correlating to health so she
could treat them correctly if needed) but she had had no idea of what it truly was like.
Unohana had always suspected that Ichigo suffered deeply from his time in the wars he had spoken of, she likened it to a condition of the mind or soul that affected him because of such traumatic events. She had seen it’s likeness many times over within her barracks, the many patients she treated who had suffered in some scaring way displaying similar mannerisms.

While it varied for everyone she recognized the flashbacks, the nightmares and insomnia, the constant state of alert he maintained, along with his general reluctance to talk about such events, and the self-loathing he rarely displayed. It didn’t help that it was likely he also suffered from Melancholia* according to what Kaien had suggested, a condition that was near unexplainable but affected many of the souls she had met nonetheless. It was a weight on the soul, something that pulled one down sometimes and almost stole the will to live.

Recently though it seemed his symptoms had reached a new height, and he had finally crashed. Kaien likened it to a break down, stating that Ichigo had been spouting nonsense by the end, speaking of impossible things. They had all accounted the many nights they had seen one of the youngest Shibas upon the roof or wandering the garden, accounting for an increase in sleeplessness.

Shinji had frowned when questioned before suggesting that the training, and transitions between Soul Society and their base, had likely stressed out the young man. The enigmatic blond had also suggested the worry Ichigo had sustained both in maintaining the safety of the Vizard, and dealing with their return.

Shunsui had spoken of the absent-mindedness Ichigo had displayed while at work, sometimes drifting to sleep at his desk only to jerk awake a few moments later. There had also been accounts of Ichigo flinching at nothing, which led Retsu to suspect he had been hallucinating.

What his family had told her made the female captain want to slice both Ichigo and everyone else up, or at least intimidate them to the seventh layer of hell. For all honesty, she could give Ichigo a bit of slack, he obviously hadn’t been in the right frame of mind, but that was still no excuse. His family should have aided him sooner once it was obvious his health was deteriorating.

It didn’t matter now, what happened was what happened now they needed to focus on Ichigo and healing. She suspected the coma was likely a form of healing his body and mind had submerged in, as once his reaitsu had settled she could sense underneath the outlying hostility, warmth and comfort.

Satisfied with the scan and it’s results Unohana stepped back leaving room for Hanatarō to complete the small matters that he was easily suited to and he had confided that he preferred doing; Hanatarō said he found it relaxing and meditative and Unohana faintly agreed. Her subordinate bustled around the room clearing out broken furniture, fixing the blankets, and when he was firmly settled within his rhythm he began speaking to Ichigo, or perhaps to himself.

“It’s strange, because of what happened a captain’s meeting was called and everyone was freaking out. But in the end, it’s kind of secret that you’re here Shiba-san after all the public is far too proficient at spreading rumours. Well in the end I think it will be fine, Hirako-Taicho supposedly handled the situation, and was super creepy!”

Unohana muffled a small smile against the palm of her hand, as Hanatarō continued to talk just speaking in an comfortable manner that set one’s nerves at ease. It was a peaceful thing to see, and she wondered if the medical theories Kisuke-san supplied were at all correct. The man suggested that speaking to coma patients was actually beneficial, the wry captain hadn’t exactly pinned down how but he had suggested it was plausible so she remained in the corner content to watch Hanatarō putter about.

Ichigo’s reaitsu had settled as time passed, drifting around the room lightly warm like a hearth. She
studied the youth stretched on the mat once more, wondering what secrets Ichigo held so closely to his breast that they weighed him down so much that he suffered in such a way.

Ichigo was a bright young man, already he had greatly changed Soul Society and the rather ancient (though nothing compared to the Soutaicho who seemed as if he had been here since creation) Captain could attest to that. Already change was seen within the hierarchy of Rungokai and the power the Central 46 had was once more diminished to a respectable level. That wasn’t to lose sight of the Vizard, a case that could have gone so horribly wrong (she knew the government she served) but in the end, had lead to the strengthening of Soul Society as a whole.

Retsu straightened fractionally as two familiar presences brushed across her senses, a faint smile curled on her lips as she swept from the room Hanatarō oblivious to her movements as he continued to ramble. The gentle curve of her lips and her soft countenance, twisted away as the imposing persona of the Fourth captain reinstated itself as she swept through the sterile barracks, her own thoughts saddened knowing that the two man she respected would likely be disappointed by her news.

Ukitake looked well though a bit pale, was her first assessment as she swept into the entry hall to the barracks, as always, her mind was focused on the rather sickly man. Dragging her eyes over to Kyroraku she noted the slight haggard and wild cast to his features, having his lieutenant fall ill so disastrously after they had recently reunited must have been a hard blow for the normally easy-going man to take.

The two were chatting under their breath, hands held between them tightly clasped, as if for support. Unohana paused in the doorway waiting for the two men to compose themselves to face whatever news they sought.

Jushiro coughed after a quiet moment disrupted only by their whispers gathering Retsu’s attention and she once more turned to face the two. Shunsui’s eyes were set far off above her shoulder as if retreating from some great battle he was unwilling to face.

“How’s Ichigo?”

Ukitake questioned softly, that fatherly concern he showed for any of his subordinates appearing in the tone of his voice, and the light of his eyes; Shunsui’s eyes darted over lightning fast before he looked away again as if both desperate and unwilling to hear the news. Unohana let out a soft sigh thinking of the young man, before she let a small reassuring smile curve her lips and she replied, “He’s doing better, his condition is stable but I don’t expect him to wake up for at least a few more days.”

Jushiro nodded eyes a touch brighter to hear that the youth was relatively alright. Shunsui deflated slightly all the tension bunched in his shoulders leaving him with a small breath of relief. Staring at the two for a moment, brow furrowed in thought Unohana recalled that Kaien hadn’t appeared since he had brought Ichigo in a fortnight ago, question on her lips she returned her attention to the two men and asked, “How is Kaien? I haven’t seen him here since that night I would expect him to be waiting beside Ichigo’s bedside regardless of my opinion.”

Jushiro frowned slightly at Unohana’s question, the corners of his lips tilting downwards, the white-haired man sighed and looked to his partner. Shunsui flashed Jushiro one of his lopsided grins, the playful smile he always had for his partner. Amusement brightened Jushiro’s features and the darkness dissipated as the sickly captain faintly smiled and replied, “I’m not surprised, Kukkaku’s been keeping him cooped up at the Shiba family home. The word is she’s either too paranoid to let him go thinking he will likely hurt himself, or some manner of danger will befall him; with the Shiba luck it’s an inevitable thing. Or that he likely had a small cold from being out in the rain all night.”
Ganju dropped by and assured me though, that Kaien will be free of his jail cell tomorrow. It must be hard on Kukkaku, being the mature one of the three, Kaien can be plenty serious when the situation calls for it, but Kukkaku keeps her head on her shoulders.”

Retsu processed the information with a slight smile, happy that Kaien was being take care of at home where he was surrounded by family. On the other hand, she hoped the brat hadn’t caught a cold from being in the rain, it would be rather silly considering his water-type zanpaktou. She made a mental note to prepare the Fourth for Kaien’s visit tomorrow she had no clue what it would bring, as the Shiba family were as a rule unpredictable. But she had no doubt of the man’s energetic manner, and slightly overbearing personality when worried (some claimed he was more of a motherhen then Unohana, to which Ichigo had sagely agreed in her confidence).

“Can we see him?”

Shunsui asked softly a touch desperately, pulling the captain of the Fourth from her musings.

Unohana studied the man closely understanding his concern and the guilt weighing his brow. Retsu pursed her lips for a moment in thought before she nodded and said, “I’m sorry I’m not allowing visitors at the moment. his reaitsu has been particularly volatile within the presence of most people in the division, and even when no one’s around. I’m afraid an unknown or new presence could trigger it to regress into an even further aggressive state, I’ve already denied Hirako-san, and Urahara-san from visiting him today.” She paused and considered the two for a moment reflecting on their bond with Ichigo before she continued, “However if you’re willing you can try.”

Jushiro frowned slightly at the information eyes dark in that protective way that she sometimes recognized in her own eyes when it came to her subordinates. Shunsui held a downcast expression one that was grim but also a touch amused, as if knowing his lieutenant, he would expect nothing less. The two shared a glance, turning inwards to face each other, so that they could speak in hushed murmurs under their breath.

Unohana let them, letting her attention drift to the rest of the division keen eyes searching out any visible problems and idly assessing the patients laid out along the rows of cots. She frowned slightly as she noticed some trouble in the sector that the Eleventh division had practically claimed as their own, and shook her head noting it before moving on.

Allowing her gaze to draw towards the two captains once more, she saw they had finished their discussion and seemed a great deal surer than they were when they first entered the Fourth. Some of the life had returned to Jushiro and Shunsui looked less like a tired old man and more of the usual flirtatious drunk.

They were sharing a soft adoring smile with each other and Unohana shook her head in amusement. The pair had been near inseparable since their first year in the academy, and while the many stints they had pulled were admirable to say the least (Yammamoto preferred to curse the brats), their bond these days was deep as a well and one to be admired for all it had withstood.

“It’s fine thank you for allowing us the chance to visit Ichigo Retsu. But we’ll wait till Kaien has seen Ichigo, he should see his brother first and then we can affirm our own paranoia. Besides our lunch break is almost over.”

Jushiro spoke with a gentle smile, eyes light and warm in that way he so often convicted. Shunsui turned with a half-cocked eyebrow before he interjected with his usual mirth, “What lunch break? I’m just dodging a paranoid and somewhat frantic Lisa!”

Jushiro chuckled quietly, well use to Shunsui’s antics, and Retsu joined them under her breath muffling the sound with a dainty palm. It reminded her of when they had been fresh out of the
academy the two following Yammamoto around like lost ducklings all the while Shunsui cracking jokes, while Jushiro muffled his laughter under the disapproving glare of their mentor. Unohana nodded a gracious smile on her face hiding some of the amusement that still shone in her eyes, she replied, “I’ll alert you if anything changes.”

The two nodded and bowed before strolling out of the Fourth a light air about them as they chattered amicably. Retsu was glad to be able to settle their anxiety and fear, Kami knew that there would be many more concerned Shinigami in the next week, because Ichigo was magnetic like that. Maybe it was the charisma, the blunt honesty that was often shrouded by mysteries, and a good portion of it in her opinion was the naïvete and overwhelming pain that convinced near everyone that the youth needed to be protected.

Sighing once more Unohana turned her gaze to the Fourth, to the position she now managed, where once all that had mattered was the thrill of battle. Idly she reminded herself to pass Ichigo’s room as she made her rounds checking up on the many Eleventh division members, and the Shinigami from the recent mission.

X

Kaien paced because he was totally, definitely not worried or anything of the sort. Nope not at all. He could almost sense the amusement of the Fourth division members and others Shinigami waiting in the entrance hall. He couldn’t really help it, even Nejibana’s normally relaxing reaitsu had no affect only soothing his nerves slightly enough that he wouldn’t flip out and decided to destroy the damned Fourth.

It wouldn’t be such a problem if he hadn’t been trapped within his own home for the past few days, only the bare minimum of news to confirm that Ichigo was alive and okay. Not to forget that his main source of entertainment had been paperwork, as Kukkaku had been stern on what activities he could attempt to complete.

But Kukkaku had stated/enforced that he stay at home, as in her eyes he would only be in the way at the Fourth. Psshh he was not like a dog when it came to an injured Ichigo, he wasn’t! Nejibana’s dismissive scoff trickled along their bond. And he was totally not sick! So what he had sneezed a few times, and maybe his head was pounding, and he felt like he could sleep for five years? That was just the stress and worry!

Nejibana’s trickling laughter echoed throughout his mindscape and Kaien deflated acknowledging he was a little bit sick. But that was no excuse, he had wanted to be at Ichigo’s bedside the first night when Unohana-taicho had carted him off reaitsu reassuring but the situation bleak. It was his duty as an older brother to stand guard at Ichigo’s bedside should he wake, and if he had to wait he would comfort the torn soul with his presence and the lull of his reaitsu.

Kukkaku had appeared in a storm of worry and motherly concern wrapping Kaien up in blankets that had appeared as if magically. He was still trying to process everything that had happened that night, and he had been in a state of shock the cold seeping to his bones and flooding his mind, along with the bone-chilling imagery and haunting words.

So, he had been dragged home where a worried Ganju had served piping hot tea, and a soup that was hearty and filled his chest with warmth, even as he sat there stock still uncomprehending. He had moved like machine according to Kukkaku, and he couldn’t much dispute that as the whole night after the incident seemed like a blur, a haze of ‘oh my god, oh my god Ichigo’s from the future oh my god’.

He had spent the next two days trying to console his siblings, assure them that Ichigo would be
fine… eventually, because Kaien was a big brother first and foremost and their health would
overcome his sanity any day. Kaien would make sure that Ichigo would be alright in the end,
because there was no way he was letting his little brother suffer alone anymore.

A lot of the time he had sat out in the gardens under the light rain that soothed every frayed nerve
and helped him to process the monumental news that had been dumped on him like the weight of the
world. He meditated out there, uncaring of Kukkaku’s chiding and nagging about sitting out in the
damp air, clothes soaking wet, and perched on the same water infused wood.

He had run his younger brother’s words through his mind, over and over again trying to accept a fact
that seemed so monumentally impossible. Yet even as he had reasoned that night, it made sense in a
twisted kind of way. It left him with a multitude of haunting questions, because according to Ichigo
Kaien was dead in the future the youth came from, and that was slightly (very) disconcerting.

Not to forget the wars Ichigo had spoken of even before he had revealed his time traveler nature.
Kaien wondered what enemies could appear that could challenge Soul Society so greatly. He knew
of the Quincy but they had been dormant for many years, and surely the Shinigami hadn’t gotten so
weak to be so easily defeated? Ichigo had also mentioned another time traveler, and that left Kaien
additionally wondering about the worn journal Ichigo sometimes carried around, the nights the
orange-haired Shinigami spent running over calculations, or sneaking into the archives (it was funny
how Ichigo thought Kaien didn’t know about that). Was it all to figure out how he had crossed time
and space? Or was it to identify the mysterious time traveller?

It was all quite frankly a mess and Kaien had only finished basically sorting it. But he understood
enough to know that Ichigo had travelled through time and was now here, that he had changed the
timelines already. He had saved the Vizard (and wasn’t it a frightening thought to consider what
would have happened if Ichigo hadn’t been here, to consider how everything could be so very
different), and as the time traveller of he hour had stated convinced a certain megalomaniac away
from attempted godhood.

Kaien also had sworn both to himself and Nejibana that he would aid Ichigo in healing, support the
youth in any way he needed (well okay, except for homicide… depending on the person). He was
going to help Ichigo, save him, whether that be from himself or the enemies of the future that Ichigo
couldn’t defend against. If Ichigo needed a shoulder to talk to then so Kami help him that’s what
Kaien would be, if the kid needed a hug then that was what Kaien would provide. Because dammit
he didn’t want to see his baby brother like that ever again, so broken and hopeless. Ichigo deserved,
nEEDED to have that light in his eyes.

Pulling himself together Kaien plopped onto one of the low cushions neatly ordered around the
entrance to the medical sector of the Fourth. He sank into the chair like one would in water, and
Kaien couldn’t muster the energy to struggle his way out of the black hole like cushion, as he waited
for Unohana-taicho. He had caught Ukitake-taicho and Kyroraku-Taicho early on in the day when
they had reported into work, they had delivered the message over tea that Ichigo was recovering.
The news had taken some of the weight off of Kaien’s shoulders, and it had been a relief to see his
captain again. Even if it was only a few days he always held a slight worry for the often-sickly man.
It had lightened his heart to see that the two were both fine, chatting amicably in their usual manner,
because Kaien knew that the incident had to have hit Kyroraku-taicho hard. And whenever
Kyroraku-taicho suffered Ukitake-taicho was right here beside him, so it was vise versa; they were
partners, souls bonded for life.

Sighing Kaien let Nejibana’s calming presence wash over him, rippling over the creaks and divets in
his soul with a gentle touch assuring him that everything would be fine. With a clack, the doors to the
medical bay slid open with force, quiet and yet seemingly loud in the hospitalized atmosphere of strict silence. Craning his head to the side Kaien spotted a crown of inky black hair and the gleam of Kenseikan.

Byakuya Kuchiki paused have finished with his rather dramatic entrance and Kaien fixated his gaze on the Kuchiki heir. He wondered why the youth was visiting now when he had the chance while Kaien was locked up at home. Byakuya turned assessing eyes around the room, scanning over the hospital beds and other waiting Shinigami, before they landed on Kaien and deep ebony orbs lit up as the young lieutenant floated over (damn Kuchiki and their infinite grace). Kaien resisted the urge to scowl, as while he respected Byakuya as Ichigo’s friend and all the young noble had done for his brother, he would rather visit said brother alone, not to mention he was still sort of playing the blame game.

Oh, Kaien had decided to take most of the fall, as the egocentric bastard he was. There were moments where it would rush over him, how useless and incompetent he had been in the situation. How that ignorance had led to his little brother lying in hospital bed stuck in a coma and so very deeply grieving for a lost world. But he also acknowledged with a slight bitterness that if Byakuya hadn’t been busy eating dinner and on a date, or doing who knows what else he may have been able to aid Ichigo before he completely snapped.

But that was in the past, they all shouldered the blame (and he had no doubt Unohana would be reiterating that fact) so he smiled and welcomed the youth over with a gentle hand motion. Byakuya nodded relief dispersing the tense weight that clung to his shoulders and frame upon closer inspection, and slipped over before lowering himself with the utmost grace into one of the cushions. Where he promptly sank like a floundering fish. Kaien muffled laughter behind his palm as a humorous smile danced across Byakuya’s lips.

“So, Kuchiki-brat have you visited Ichigo yet?”

Kaien questioned teasingly with a light mirth his soul only faintly echoed, Byakuya turned eyes widening fractionally in surprise before he composed himself and replied, “No my grandfather was… displeased with my actions so I was unable to leave the compound except for work; he doesn’t know I’m here.”

Byakuya’s eyes were mischievous as he relayed the reason he was unable to visit sooner, and his own disobedience of his grandfather’s orders. Kaien had to hand it to Ichigo he sure knew how to corrupt someone, in the good way. If Byakuya had never met Ichigo, Kaien wondered what the youth would have been like, probably the perfect example of a noble stick up their asses and all. Though the Shiba heir suspected that even underneath a noble façade, Byakuya would have retained his sense of humour. It was a sad thought and Kaien was glad Ichigo was able to free Byakuya the early restraints of nobility, and even to loosen him from such a strain as an adult even slightly.

“Ah good old grandpa.”

Kaien responded with a nod and a wry grin, Byakuya’s eyes radiated amusement even underneath the diamond hard masks of nobility. Kaien could understand well the youth’s disposition regarding his grandfather, the elder was on one hand exactly that a senior who was a bit stuck in the times, but he was the man who had also raised Byakuya after his father had passed. The youth furrowed his brow in thought before asking, “What about you Kaien-san?”

Kaien smirked softly mind skipping away from thoughts of grey-haired old men, and winked before he replied, “The wicked princess of the Shiba household got her claws on me, and I was unable to escape until today. She claimed that I was sick, which I vehemently deny!”
Byakuya cackled under his breath, sharing an empathetic gaze with Kaien before he composed himself once more. At that moment Kaien sneezed (rather quietly mind you) and received a rather pointed stare from Byakuya. Kaien shook his head in denial, eyes easily conveying a look of innocence and false disbelief to the amused noble.

Byakuya nodded his head in complacent acceptance, while his features conveyed his sardonic refusal with an arched eyebrow and laughing eyes. Shaking his head balefully Kaien listened to the quiet hum of Nejibana as a gentle silence fell between the two and they waited for Unohana to return.

It was a little while later (waiting rooms, and damn long waiting time) before the imposing female Captain swept through the doorway, long ebony locks fanning out behind her like a curtain. Her predator eyes scanned the room before landing on the two Shinigami sunk within the cushions and unable to escape what was sure to eventually be a death blow.

A smile slipped onto Unohana’s lips though it was nothing like the sadistically sweet one that promised only pain; it dissuaded Kaien’s previous thoughts of pain only temporarily. This one was soft and gentle in the way Kaien thought only Unohana-taicho’s hands could be. The woman wasn’t one to entreat a patient to stay in bed with kind words and bribery, she used her force of will and the demonic aura that followed her around echoing the unseen part of the female captain, the hidden warrior.

Her hands however when dealing with a patient, were always gentle like a mother’s touch. She was comforting them in a way she never normally was and it was both strange and yet assuaging. Healing was a strange field, the people who devoted their lives to it were usually a brand of strange all their own, but they possessed a will power that could rival a deity when it came to their patients.

“You’re both here to see Ichigo I presume?”

Unohana questioned, though in the end it was more of a statement if the raised brow and fae glittering eyes were any indication. Kaien nodded sharply, as beside him Byakuya stiffened his own cranium mimicking a nod like a statue. If that was what Kaien had been like he could understand Kukkaku’s concern over his wellbeing.

The poised women’s other brow arched asking if they were coming, and Kaien held back a sigh as he considered the deep plum chair that was currently entreatng him to a rousing argument about why he should never ever get up again. Byakuya bounced out of the seat, limber as a new sapling and with all the energy Kaien felt he could muster once had had sipped the god’s nectar, otherwise known as caffeine in any form.

A hand waved in front of his eyes pulling him from muddling thoughts, sitting down had not been a good idea for his mental state. Reflexively he swatted at the hand, but when it persistently remained an offering to aid, Kaien did sigh out loud and grasp Byakuya’s outstretched hand. With a sharp tug Kaien was lifted to his feet and free of the dreadful (welcoming) temptation of sleep.

Unohana was looking at the two of them in thinly veiled amusement, lips curved up in that saccharine way that was neither malignant but definitely not boding positively for the entreating party. With a sharp jaunt of thorny spring reitsu the imposing captain swept into the medical bay.

Sharing resolute looks of assurance, the two Shinigami slowly followed behind Unohana-taicho as she cut through the rather chaotic mass of people rushing to and fro, like one cut through butter, as they tended to the victims of the recent Eleventh division duel. Kaien narrowly ducked and twisted around the scurrying bodies that passed heedless of anything else, playfulness sparking in his soul as it reminded him of busy nights in the Shiba home when they had been young. The nobles had milled about as Kukkaku, and Kaien scurried about under the coat tails of kimonos gleeful laughing.
Byakuya cast Kainer an amused look from the corner of his eyes, while in front of them Unohana shook his head presumably in amusement as he muttered something about Shiba antics. Kainer only smirked happy to provoke positive reactions from any one in any situation but most assuredly in situations where their souls needed a bit more light.

As they drew closer to the secluded rear of the Fourth where the individual rooms were kept, the air pressure became increasingly heavy. Kainer struggled for a moment, surprise striking and stealing any chance at defense before he composed himself and wrapped his reaiitsu around himself like a blanket. Byakuya’s breath hitched and when Kainer looked over he could see a touch of nostalgia and familiarity on those carved features. If that hadn’t answered the questions floating in Kainer’s head, then the sharp burst of static reaiitsu that could only ever belong to a certain orange-head did.

Unohana paused then turning piercing eyes their way, she seemed to weigh her words for a moment, brow furrowed in thought before she cautioned, “It only gets worse as we venture closer, Ichigo’s reaiitsu had been very volatile since he was brought in. It has only settled for one of my subordinates, who as far as I know has had little to no interaction with Ichigo. The only reason I am allowing you two to visit, is because I know how close you two are with Ichigo.”

Kainer frowned, and angling his body so he cold better glimpse his partner in crime he saw a mirroring expression on Byakuya’s own features. It struck at the chords of hurt that still wound his soul, to hear that Ichigo’s reaiitsu was so defensively lashing out. He worried what was chasing the youth now, that even in rest he was troubled. Or perhaps it was simply a protection his own body employed after far too many experiences (and wasn’t there always far too many scars over Ichigo’s body as it was, to suspect that some were not of battle cause).

Unohana’s countenance seemed to darken as she stared at the grim determination on their features under-shadowed by the love they both felt for Ichigo however different it was. Her mouth thinned and the corner of her lips turned down while she crossed her arms with a jolt. Kainer had been expecting a talking to, so he only braced himself for the inevitable, the tearing open of a festering wound that was nowhere near healing, not till Ichigo had opened his eyes.

Byakuya beside him jumped like a frightened hare, and Kainer’s eyes softened as he turned to face Byakuya. As much as Ichigo was mature (far too mature for his age, possessing the eyes of an immortal who had lived for centuries), Byakuya was very much still young and untested by the world. The guilt Kainer felt roiling in his gut must have been like a sword to the chest for the Kuchiki.

Unohana’s eyes softened imperceptibly as she considered the ebony haired heir, before it disappeared and she reaffirmed her stance. Her voice was deceptively quiet when she spoke again, “I acknowledge that you both already know what you have done wrong, and the guilt you feel is punishment enough. Even so I need you to be informed of Ichigo’s situation. As I have been told by you and others close to Ichigo, he suffers frequently from long-term flashbacks, and insomnia, and recently he started experiencing hallucinations along with severe insomnia.

You both need to realize that his state is very serious and I think Ichigo suffers from one of the post-war conditions. He is a veteran of a war we haven’t seen, and because of that we do not have the exact knowledge we need to aid him. Additionally, when correlating this with other symptoms and actions he has displayed I believe he suffers from Melancholia.”

She paused to let the words, like a hot iron through skin, sink in. Kainer had always remotely acknowledged that his brother had problems, even before he found out about the insomnia, there were times when Ichigo would space off and a broken so very desolate expression would slip onto his features. But to think he suffered like that, while not totally unexpected the conformation still hurt.
There was accusation in her voice and it cut like a knife, because he should have realised sooner, should have done something to help with those conditions, they all should have. Why had they been so blind to one of their own’s pain? Nejibana soothed him a deep-running sorrow thrumming their bond, even as determination pounded like a tsunami at his core.

Byakuya choked on his breath softly, reaitsu circling around him nastily. Shaking his head in concern Kaien rested a reassuring palm on the youth’s shoulder letting his own calming reaitsu cloak the Shinigami’s and echo peace like gurgling brooks.

“I am currently planning on ways to assist Ichigo, and you both need to realize how essential you are to his health. Ichigo is a man who thrives on family and the bonds he forms with them, you’re the ones who are going to help him heal more so than I ever can.”

Unohana stated conviction in her voice, her words stirred his soul clearing the heavy air of grief and guilt allowing him to focus. Byakuya took a deep breath, shoulders straightening and ebony eyes sharpened like obsidian under the crown of his hair. Unohana nodded to herself and led them further along the hallway.

The air became increasingly heavy like wild winds, it ripped at their clothing scratched at the walls, and tangled with their reaitsu. Unohana foraged onwards seemingly unaffected even as the force of her reaitsu picked up till it pulsed around her skin in a soft blue hum. Casting a concerned glance at the youngest, and consequentially most inexperienced of the trio Kaien saw the youth was relatively alright; His eyes were glowing with suppressed reaitsu, and the faint scent of cherry blossoms lingered in the air but he continued to push forward as if he was walking over air.

After a tense few minutes they reached the end of the hallway and consequently broached Ichigo’s room. The rice paper frame shuddered and whipped about in a manner that was somewhat contained, but as they drew closer became frantic as if sensing danger.

Unohana cast warning eyes behind her, cautioning them to wait as she hesitantly approached the doorway. The reaitsu that had been previously frantic but was not exuding a malignant or dangerous feel, suddenly flipped menacing and dark. Kaien only ever saw it with such qualities with Ichigo in the early morning mumbling under his breath, or early dawn after just waking from a dream that was far from pleasant.

She sighed cloaking her reaitsu around herself so that she seemed almost to glimmer like a beacon, before beckoning them forwards. Hesitantly Kaien took a step forward allowing the tidal wave of Nejibana’s power to wrap around him and submerge the over bearing reaitsu of his brother that reached out to entangle him. Byakuya frowned eyes closing in concentration before the heavy scent of sakura floated along the hallway and the youth stepped forward.

It was as if they were preparing to enter a battlefield rather then entering the room of a patient. Unohana hesitantly rested her hand on the doorway, as the pressure increased and viciously the reaitsu tore at them, as if trying to chase them away yet never injuring them only whispering of danger. With a breath of courage, the female captain slid the door open.

Immediately Ichigo’s presence rushed at them as if freed from a great cage, it slammed into them pushing their bodies against the wall and noiseless screaming seemed to rush past their senses. Kaien frowned breath leaving his lungs in heavy pants as his eyes strained to see the spot of orange against the stark bedding of the Fourth. Unohana remained upright through sheer force of will, and likely experience with the powerful force before them.

Turning worried eyes to the youth, Kaien frowned as he caught the sweat beading Byakuya’s brow and the tight grasp he held on his zanpaktou’s hilt seeking to draw strength from it’s material form.
Extending his reaitsu in front of the youth in a half shield Kaien smiled softly as the young man straightened fractionally, sending a grateful smile towards Kaien. A small frown replaced the smile and Byakuya paused for a moment before a touch sorrowful and guilty he turned his eyes to Unohana and said, “I would like to try and stay to watch over Ichigo even if that means standing out here for hours. But my grandfather is expecting me home soon, and I thought I would be able to visit quickly, but well Ichigo is always damn stubborn. Just seeing him is a relief. I’ll be back tomorrow though, that is if I can sneak away.”

Kaien nodded in understanding, while he wanted to tell the youth to fuck noble responsibilities, he also knew what it was like to feel the pressure from one’s elders. And to feel disappointment when one was unable to succeed, especially from one’s own grandfather. It also didn’t help that he was being selfish and wanted Ichigo to himself.

Unohana’s lips curved up encouragingly, instead of disparagingly which Kaien was eternally thankful for. The kid could feel guilty all he wanted about not being there for Ichigo, but it wasn’t his damn fault that he was tied up with noble duties.

“I can lead you to the exit, Kami knows it’s usually a madhouse that few can navigate. Are you accompanying us Shiba-san? I doubt you will see much more of your brother with the way his reaitsu is reacting.”

Unohana asked turning piercing eyes towards Kaien after speaking her piece to Byakuya. Kaien considered the keen women before him cynically before he saw the honesty of her question. She wasn’t doubting his devotion to his brother, just honestly concerned about his ability to escape the Fourth, in a positive way for once. Deflating slightly Kaien turned a vacant gaze towards the room before replying, “I'll wait, I have the time. Even if I have to sit out in the hallway I'll be here for my brother.”

Approval shone in Unohana-taicho’s eyes as she nodded a faint curve of her lips the only give away. Byakuya stared at Kaien a touch of wonder and respect in that gaze before he bowed his head and said, “Please keep careful watch of Ichigo, Kaien-san.”

Why the brat! Kaien could see amusement and mischief radiating from the soul in front of him, honestly sometimes he did regret letting Ichigo ever get two feet near the Kuchiki heir (though he suspected Ginrei-san regretted it most if not all of the time) because those two together always ended up in trouble. Okay well most of the time, often times they were content to sip tea and chat about the latest gossip.

Unohana nodded once to him respect in her eyes before she was fleeing down the long infinitely stretching hallways that all medical practices seemed to hold. Byakuya gave a small wave a prayer in his eyes, and Kaien hoped the kid would be okay before the youth was gliding after Unohana.

Alone for once with Ichigo since the mess had started Kaien turned his eyes towards the still open door and the patient inside, his own eyes were deep with a faint longing and the sorrow and empathy he emulated for his brother.

As the two finally disappeared from sight Ichigo’s reaitsu hovered around him, before it suddenly surged forward sweeping around his form curiously as if asking who was in front of the room instead of defending. Kaien let his soul rise forth to meet the reaitsu the gentle calm waves, the crashing storms, the will to protect his family.

The reaitsu still ever forceful settled around him with a huff as if deciding that either he wasn’t worth defending against, or he wasn’t a threat (or maybe it recognized him?). Kaien wasn’t sure what to expect but he knew when not to look a gift horse in the mouth.
Letting Nejibana’s soothing calm wash over him like a balm Kaien let go of the tension, the guilt, and everything negative pulling him down till it was just the warmth he held for life and all of it’s properties. His family, the ramen shop in the Thirteenth sector of Rungokai, that one rug at the Shiba mansion that was always incredibly soft.

Entering the room Kaien’s gaze zeroed on Ichigo taking him in like a man in the desert would take to water. His steps were slow and measured in a strict sign of control, as he moved closer reatsu poking at Ichigo’s own, picking up on the faint undertones of warmth and comfort that hid under the blank unassuming wall of protection and emptiness.

When he was beside the bed Kaien truly let his eyes observe, tracing the thinness of Ichigo’s features (he had always been so thin, and his unwillingness to eat had never helped), the light dusting of purple under his eyes a stark contrast to the abysses that had seemed to yawn beneath his eyes before that night.

He looked peaceful as if wherever his mind wandered it was a good place and the thought contented Kaien softly; Peaceful and young, that was how Ichigo always looked in sleep unless stolen away by terror inducing nightmares.

Raising a hand Kaien hesitantly reached out and clasped Ichigo’s own hand where it rested limply on top of the sheets. It was still cold as if he couldn’t shake the chill of that rainy night, but there was a trace of warmth, a pulse fluttering beneath searching fingers, and that was all Kaien needed. An assurance that he hadn’t lost his brother because of his own ignorance, that the world hadn’t lost such a bright soul of its own making.

Without his consent tears escaped his eyes and trailed down his cheeks in a dizzying reflection of his miasma of emotions. Maybe it was the relief he was alive, the pain of it all and the horror of what Ichigo had faced, it could have been his own guilt catching up to him, or perhaps the mind-numbing hope that he would help Ichigo heal.

Kaien stood there basking in Ichigo’s presence with a soft smile for Kami knew how long. He could almost sense the physical manifestation of Ichigo’s zanpaktou, his blade kin but it was faint and dim, still a reassurance that Ichigo wasn’t alone. Nejibana crooned soft whispers in his ears lulling him into a gentle state of rest and contentment where his thoughts idly drifted and all there was, was a peaceful sort of nothingness.

The hand he grasped tightly within his own twitched and Kaien sharply glanced down surprise lining his brow, into bleary amber orbs swathed in confusion and a strange mix of contentment, warmth, and nostalgia. Kaien internally freaked the flip out, because his brother was awake, and dammit he had worried that his damn stupid younger brother would never wake up. The tears that had dried on his cheeks picked up once more and Ichigo cracked a tired smile before in a rough voice he spoke.

“Hey Kaien.”

X

Chapter End Notes

*Melancholia was the name for Depression in the 18-19th Century, before that there was still a concept of depression. As the timeline is only near the end of the World Wars, and the Shinigami are not yet technologically aware/advanced I choose to use this
name as I would think they would use such a name. Additionally, I confirmed that Ichigo has PTSD but I used a different name/was very vague, as I didn’t think Unohana would have a scientific term for it yet.

Well I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. We are finally moving onto the healing process so that will be exciting. Thank you all for reading reviews/comments are always appreciated!

Peridot!!
Caim

Chapter Summary

Ichigo speaks with his spirits, and gets a few visitors.

Chapter Notes

Caim

(n.) lit. “Sanctuary”; and invisible circle of protection, drawn around the body with the hand, that reminds that you are safe and loved, even in the darkest of times.

Hello everyone, here is chapter 31! I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo sat on the edge of the skyscraper peering at misty depths below enshrouded in ever rising flood waters, that swayed and tossed fervently depending on his emotional state. There were harsh gales billowing throughout his inner world, buffeting the sides of the towering buildings and sending emerald leaves scattering about the air in a way that reminded Ichigo of a certain Disney movie Yuzu loved. The orange-haired Shinigami basked in the sensations, the feeling of the wind ripping through strands of sharp orange, cutting into the flowing Shinigami robes and desperately enticing him with thoughts of falling, the vindictive sensation of it all.

Letting his arms hang stretched out comfortably beside him, Ichigo closed his eyes and tipped his head back, he felt almost invincible in the face of the wind, it was an empowering sensation. Freedom was heady, and maybe sometimes the wind whispered it so lustfully in his ear, that he was tempted to fall away.

Gingerly rising to unsteady feet Ichigo swayed a bit, easily flowing with the motions before he considered the murky depths below. With a slight exhale, that was more nerves and bravery than anything else he stepped off the ledge and fell. The air soared and raged around his form, pulling the material parts of him, all the heaviness of his emotions and the weight of his thoughts up, as gravity dragged his soul below.

He crashed into the waves, like one saunters into water; gently with hardly a ripple of motion, sinking deep beneath the waves, embraced as if by large avian wings. Distractedly he watched bubbles float up to the surface, where the bases of the skyscrapers encased sunlight into beaming rays like that of a heavenly being, to shine upon his features.

Ichigo could feel them in his inner world, hiding from him, just as he was hiding from them. Avoiding the inevitable confrontation that chased at his heart with fear, and bit at his nerves. The
knowledge was sharp like a lance, and seemed to pull the water around him in vicious ways, like coiling hands of deep-sea creatures. Ichigo’s left hand curled into a fist even as the other helplessly reached towards the growing distance between the surface and his sinking form.

He wanted to move forward from all the pain, and he was near ready. But he couldn’t, not till he had reconciled with his zanpaktou, because they were everything when there was nothing left; and veritably far wiser than him, they were often the ones to finesse his half-baked battle plans. Ichigo didn’t want to face the confrontation, the accumulation of the guilt and sorrow, dreading what it might bring.

Their despair and pain lingering between and within the three was his own, he was the source tenfold. His body trembled lightly with repressed emotions and the feelings coursing inside him, theirs, his, an endless cycle. Just as seamlessly as they often blended together thoughts merging till they were one being once more, the soul made whole.

Ichigo’s thoughts drifted to a halt as his back impacted against a rough surface, that dug into his spine yet soothed his racing pulse. Curious Ichigo turned his head slowly in an exhausted motion to look at what he had fallen onto. The bark of a tree visited his sight, the wide trunk stretching a ways below to join with the blocky base of a skyscraper, where Ichigo could barely make out the curving wreath of roots floating and peeking out from the building, that mimicked a nest of snakes.

The tree was warm beneath his back, pulsing with life like a beating heart. He was nestled in the curve of the tree where branches reached out curling upwards towards the light. Ichigo had long ago forsaken trying to understand his inner world, so meticulously plants surviving under water bargained little surprise. Studying the tree, he thought he could see words encrypted in the bark, they ran and chased the broad branches he was ensconced between, whispering of lost and hidden things.

Ichigo tilted his head back looking at the crown of leaves above him, a myriad of greens and golds that swayed and bobbed in the half-lights reaching the depths of the watery world he had submerged himself in. He had made a promise to his zanpaktou and he had broken it, they deserved a better wielder than Ichigo.

Someone who wasn’t burdened and held-down by all the pain and suffering that he had pulled them through, a wielder who could release their zanpaktou in their full state in battle, instead of their meager half-form. Ichigo circled the thoughts in his head, memories of the war faint and tangling like vine, heard but weakly so as if in a dream.

The overbearing warmth that filled him after the surreal trip to the other plane (as he had taken to calling it) still filled him. It was like nature, in the first breaths of spring was sauntering through his lungs, plowing through his veins leaving blossoming seeds, crowning his head in floral night. It didn’t tame the swelling vortex of emotions, nor did it simply hide them in locked chains of ice.

It accepted these feelings; helped him to acknowledge that the feelings would always be there, the guilt, the hurt, the sorrow, and sometimes the anger faded. But that was okay because they weren’t the pivotal movement of his whole life, the driving force between every interaction, Ichigo still used those emotions to push forward, but he didn’t drown in the thick sheets of ice they imposed over his sight and lungs.

He had been mistaken in thinking such, if only partially. He had held onto the emotions with an iron grip refusing to let go or even acknowledging their presence, believing that was the key facing the future.

No Rukia and by default her zanpaktou though beings of snow and ice knew how to heal with their element. The soft touch of snow upon one’s cheek like a frost maiden’s kiss to chase it all away,
blanketing white to bury the hurt and pain. Ichigo had relied enough on those methods of coping, and while they worked inevitably he had to face the truth, the pain, the hurt, and it came crashing down like the thunderous avalanches of fate.

So Ichigo was walking through spring trying to learn to live again, to listen to life and her message, feel it in his chest, see it in their eyes. He wouldn’t give up, wouldn’t let hope slip away he was here now to stay… but not without his zanpaktou, his soul kin. The two spirits who had supported Ichigo when he needed it the most, and when no one was around or able to; they were essential to his very being.

When there were bodies lying in the Fourth stone cold on the gurneys, unmoving. He had kept a silent vigil throughout the night, always whenever another one fell. Each time his soul kin had been there, standing silent and solemn in the background, or cradling his shaking form wiping the tears away tenderly like a loving mother, with all of the grace and ease Ichigo had long forgotten in her absence.

They were here with him now, even if there felt a cavernous distance of hurt between them, the fact that they were still with him assured him greatly and soothed the mounting worry that had built when he had returned to his inner world. Because there was no one else who had survived, he was the one who carried their memories, and fallen dreams, and his zanpaktou supported that weight with him. They had lost as well, felt the pain of Ichigo’s soul keenly, saw blade spirits they knew fall to nothing as the wielder succumbed to death’s bittersweet grasp.

They were alive, and for that Ichigo was so thankful. He felt it now like a gnawing hunger pushing him forward, it had been absent so long, the only thing pushing him forwards was the need to save the future, see all those lost beneath the sands of time alive once more, breath in their lungs. His own happiness, thoughts, ending didn’t matter if he could save everyone else. Now he wanted so desperately to live. That night in the rain built upon hysteria and the ravings of his unstable mind, had helped him to realise that he wanted to see Yuzu’s smile, watch Orihime flutter about, listen to Chad’s deep rumbling baritone.

He wanted to watch Kaien and Miyako be happy together with that loving warmth in their gazes, training and mentoring Rukia the brat she was. He wanted Byakuya to find the world in Hisana even if it hurt a bit. Ichigo felt happy when his family was happy, it had always been their own happiness over his own, their safety over his life, ever since the day upon the riverbanks where he had sworn to protect his family.

But Ichigo for once wanted to do more than just live for the people who made up the bonds of his soul, he wanted to live for himself, and that included his spirits. He wanted to study the books in the archives, discover new techniques, or improvements on old ones. He wanted to joke and laugh with Kisuke and the others, be mysterious and coquettish with his words as much as someone who was not the best at lying could be. Drink sake under the moonlight with Isshin or Kaien talk about the inane things like the soft thoughts of beyond the grave. Savour the taste of Kukkaku’s tea, watch Ganju laugh and ride the wild boars, walk Rungokai’s bustling streets and enter random stores for the fun of it. Wanted to show the world Zangetsu’s form, and the bond that had been praised for it’s depth and strength. Reveal the power that he had always wielded gifted to him by birth, and the circumstances of life.

But first an apology and a good portion of grovelling would be in order.

“Ichigo.”

The orange-haired Shinigami opened his eyes from where he had curled up into a neat little ball, tilting his head back slightly so he could look up at the world, and away from the voice. That deep
rumbling voice calm as the still watery blues, but lurking with wisdom and a thousand other hints that led to wild chases and thought-provoking minutes. He could sense them stark as daylight. Shiro perched in one of the uppermost branches like a cat starring down at them with wide unblinking eyes, Zangetsu-Ossan sitting cross-legged maintaining perfect balance on the branch a bottle of sake perched somewhere nearby.

Then Ichigo opened his eyes and drew in a sharp breath of water (and wasn’t that always a faintly weird sensation), because he had missed his zanpaktou spirits even though the period they had been apart had been short compared to the near year of anguish they had spent separated. There was warmth on Zangetsu-Ossan’s lips but his eyes waged war between the protective fondness he always wielded, or a deep hurt that was a crippling sight to the orange-head to see on his spirit.

Shiro from up in the high branches of the tree was snarling, the look wild and striking on bleached features, Ichigo knew on a baser level that Shiro was snarling at him for two entirely different reasons, but both correlated to Ichigo so that spirit had wrapped it up in one terrifying scowl. Ichigo sighed softly eyes tilting downwards unable to meet the eyes of those he had so terribly wronged.

Shiro’s reaitsu sparked and the lithe spirit scampered down the tree branches like a squirrel or perhaps like a crab scuttled, Ichigo had long ago acknowledged and accepted the peculiarities of his spirits, till he was in front of Ichigo ebony wide blade dangling along the column of a pale throat. Ichigo didn’t move merely looked up into heated ebony sclera, and burning gold pupils.

“Listen King! Ya damn fool, ya left us, abandoned us, didn’t listen to us, shut us ta fuck out. Ya. Broke. Your. Promise. But ya also weren’t in ta right frame a mind, ya were hallucinatin, mind finally flipped so far off ta deep end that ya were drownin’. And we couldn’t reach ya. I am ta darkest parts of ya! Do ya fuck’ng understand what that means I feel it all, understand the pain better than every single other fuckin’ person, everything ya never acknowledged I hold it because that’s where it wants to hide, but I’m still standing here. We’re fuckin’ hurt King, by your ignoring us, but also because we couldn’t fuckin’ help ya! We shoulda been able ta reach ya, and screw some damn sense into your useless skull, but we failed and ya fell.”

Ichigo looked up with wide eyes, heart hammering like a jack saw was digging around his rib cage, the accusations felt just as painful. Shiro stilled at Ichigo’s lost expression, words and thoughts bumbling about the orange-haired Shinigami’s brain in an amalgamation of thoughts and sorrow. Shiro was always essentially right, even if the message was delivered harsh and blunt, like tearing the bindings off of a wound, quick and painful as hell but faded soon enough. Ichigo had already accepted that he had broken his promise, but to hear the words he already knew by heart spat out like hellfire, Ichigo struggled to draw breath. And the guilt in Shiro’s voice? Ichigo should never have to hear that, not after the first time, when Ichigo had run himself ragged, and before he could save someone his own weakened body had shut down.

The two had blamed themselves for not forcing Ichigo to rest while the war raged on (he couldn’t afford to, people were dying every day), just as the guilt he felt had built and built, but it had never been turned his zanpaktou’s way. Instead he had forgiven them wholeheartedly, because it wasn’t their fault in the end. They were a team, a unit, a trio and they needed to work together, know each other’s limits, how to aid, what to say, if they wanted to cohabitate and save the world.

Ichigo frowned eyes warm as the fluttering nature of his soul, and leaned forward to gently rest a hand against Shiro’s cool cheek, the hollow-like spirit leaned into Ichigo’s touch craving the warmth and acting for all his nature like a cat. Ichigo tilted the hollow-spirit’s head up so that he could look into inhumane eyes, see their bond like living threads stretched between them.

“It’s not your fault, I was careless… I didn’t care what would happen, to me, to the plan, by the end I
was welcoming it. I was the one who shut you two out, when I should have listened, because I had finally given it up, I’d hesitated. My body doesn’t excuse my actions, ever.”

Shiro frowned twisting out of Ichigo’s light grasp sending a hapless stare over his shoulder before he turned to face Ichigo once more. Stroking a hand through long orange locks and letting reaitsu playfully dance between their forms Shiro paused and took a breath before assessing his words before he spoke.

“Ichi ya can’t blame yaself fa what happen’d in the end we were all careless, and we all made mistakes. But don’t ya Ever think that we wouldn’t want ya as our wielder. We don’t care that we can’t be in our released form, ya take the time to give that to us. And we don’t fuckin’ care what ya say we, went through this shit together, we want to be with you.”

Ichigo stared, because while he had always known this (they had reminded him several times, and Ichigo had taken it to heart, he just faltered too easily sometimes. It was what happened when you lost all trust in family and friends for however brief a time). Shiro’s words had been enforced with a powerful surge of reaitsu that wrapped around him and heightened the living warmth inside his chest till he felt as if the swirling emotions inside his chest was tempest waters on high.

Shiro giggled breezily eyes glowing with mirth, pulling Ichigo from his musing circling thoughts, and denial mixed with hope thought. Ichigo looked up into Shiro’s eyes, the spirit staring at him like a puppy waiting for an answer. Ichigo shuddered the spirits words echoing in his mind and filling him with happiness, their conformations always seemed to do such. Ichigo shrugged his shoulders and looked into those eyes conveying his desperation to never lose the two, in addition to the deep sorrow and remorse he genuinely felt.

Before Ichigo could move out of the way of the suddenly joyful (hollows were a bit bi-polar in general) spirit’s way he was glopped in a mass of white lined with black giggles still echoing faintly.

“Damn King I missed seein’ ya dumbstruck face.”

Ichigo scowled for a moment at the spirit’s teasing, before a reluctant and half-amused grin curled his lips. Shiro reached up somehow disentangling an arm from where it had been trying to crush Ichigo’s rib cage, to ruffle wild orange locks before the spirit disentangled itself and darted up into the trees, though far closer than he had been previously. If Ichigo focused he could still spot the glowing orbs shining like illuminating candle light.

With a soft incessant tug at his soul, Ichigo turned his attention to the elder zanpaktou spirit who was still serenely sitting composed and watching (Ichigo sometimes missed the days where Ossan would stand on his pole, he did it less so now). Though Ichigo knew his spirit, and could see beneath the façade and masks there was amusement in his eyes at the younger spirit’s actions, and fondness and adoration along with the fierce protectiveness Zangetsu-Ossan showed directed his way.

Let it never be said that a wielder is unlike it’s spirits. They were all stubborn beyond reason, though Ossan knew better when to succeed, and Shiro was one hell of an adversary when it came to the end of a battle, if only because of his damn stubborn refusal to submit. They were all protective, extremely so and especially of each other. Which was a rather complicated balance that had taken them many years to find, because while they all wanted to keep the other safe (though perhaps less so for Shiro and Ossan) they had to acknowledge that safe wasn’t something they regularly could achieve, not with the way fate had toyed with their lives.

There were other similarities, after all they were the same soul, like Zangetsu-Ossan’s tea and sake preferences, Zangetsu-Shiro’s more impulsive behavior or love of battle that Ichigo felt whenever he truly unsheathed his blade and let it run wild. The small minute things, and the core of their being.
They were all part of the same soul, and Ichigo wouldn’t have had it any other way. There were no
two other beings in the expanse of the universe that Ichigo would rather have as his zanpaktou, to
share in his soul and time of living.

A cough pulled Ichigo from his musing (procrastinating) thoughts and he glanced up to catch the
deep cocoa of Ossan’s eyes beneath the tinted yellow visors, an abashed smile slightly lopsided
settled on his lip in return. Soft chuckling followed the gesture, as Zangetsu-Ossan opened the bottle
of sake with the finesse all of his moves possessed, and poured the clear liquid into three sake cups,
or at least he attempted to with a soft frown.

The liquid merely escaped the bottle to flow about their heads in a translucent glimmering state
different from the water, Ichigo laughed softly at the faintly helpless look on Ossan’s face (Shiro had
complained for years about the first time his world had been filled with water when it had happened).
A moment later the elder spirit concentrated his reaitsu and the liquid refrained from floating about
them like liquid mercury shining and glimmering diamonds of light, and settled into three small
crimson cups.

Ichigo took the proffered cup, savouring the taste, the burn as he swallowed, and the heat that
traveled through his system afterwards. It was a brew wholly of his inner world, and was a satisfying
drink no matter the time, it filled Ichigo with warmth and echoed comfort, or calmed raging nerves.
Ossan chuckled softly once more, the deep throaty sound tenuring pleasantly along the waves, as
curly strands of hair billowed about the older spirit, Ichigo airily smiled eyes bright as his gaze briefly
flickered upwards to vermillion camouflage.

There was quiet for a spare moment full of space, and deep contemplative silence that drifted
Ichigo’s nerves away from grasping tendrils and let him feel the presence of his soul-kin. Zangetsu-
Ossan seemed to consider his words, brow furrowed, and eyes studying the clear liquid, as he paused
before saying, “Ichigo I do not need to tell you anything or berate you for the grievances that have
occurred, as Shiro has… adequately laid it out. But I also want to reiterate, I would never choose
another wielder over you, you are kind to those who need it, always willing to be empathetic and
understand the cause and motive behind any villain. You have suffered so much pain and yet you
have become such a wonderful young man, a true testament to your character. You have travelled
and done amazing tasks that many others would balk at the mere thought of, and gone even further
than that.

We have travelled together for a long time Ichigo, though it may be extensively short in the eyes of
the Shinigami, and the way of the world. But together we have persevered, your will undiminishing,
until… and it is okay that happened. You’ve been so strong for so long, breaking shade only under
cover of secrecy and even then, rarely. But you survived, pushed through when you could have
ended it, and that’s what matters. You’re alive.”

Ichigo was shutter still, rarely hearing the elder spirit speak so much in one breath, much less in a
month. He was a spirit of few words, one who preferred actions and intent-lined reaitsu, so when he
did speak Ichigo took them to heart, even the puzzling riddles, and vague answers that left him
frustrated for days.

The spirit had done what he had initially stated, echoing Shiro’s words, with the elegant twist the
older spirit always had. But to hear it again from Zangetsu-Ossan was reassuring, striking home and
driving the final nail on the coffin of the whole affair. Ichigo just wanted to move forward, with the
healing process, let it all go. He was so mind-numbingly tired of the plaguing weight of all his
emotions, and the weariness that had seemed bone deep for ages.

Ichigo sipped at the sake once more considering his spirit who was staring at Ichigo, light pride in his
chiseled features, at Ichigo’s weary nod of acceptance, eyes portraying what words could not. The warm expression on Zangetsu-Ossan’s features, caused mirth and light to bubble up within Ichigo’s chest so that an echoing smile lifted his own lips. Shiro slipped form his perch a slight way up, silent except for the rather obvious clatter and rustle of leaves, till he was behind Ichigo arms slinging around his neck. Ichigo shifted slightly at the sudden weight but otherwise didn’t move, content to let the sometimes-clingy spirit do as he wished, the hollow conveyed some meaning over his head to Ossan before speaking.

“Come on old man, can’t leave Kingy here having any more doubts that were ever gonna leave him. Cause we’re not.”

Zangetsu conceded with a tilt of his head shifting so that he was closer to Ichigo, the orange-haired Shinigami felt himself drawn back into Shiro’s cool chest as the pale spirit settled against the tree, air bubbles lazily gliding around their forms. Zangetsu-Ossan settled a breath away from Ichigo, before he plucked the yellow visor’s off his face with a teasing smirk and set them on the bridge of Ichigo’s nose, hiding his befuddled and partially knowing eyes.

“Say it Ichigo.”

Zangetsu-Ossan commanded softly, Shiro was staring intently at Ichigo in addition to Ossan’s already intense eyes, and the youth sighed with a soft fond smile shaking his head sending water rippling about before softly he replied, “I want to live.”

“There that wasn’t so hard eh King? Ya can think it, we can know it, but ya need to say it every once an a while.”

Shiro interjected breath ghosting across the back of Ichigo’s neck and sending chills chasing his spinal column. Ichigo arched a brow in amusement but otherwise said nothing leaning back against the mirroring torso behind him.

“Ichigo you have never faced this alone, and we are still here. Will always be beside you in facing the circumstances we have wrought. We will aid you in healing, with all our strength, all our will, the power of your soul, only because of your will to move forward.”

Zangetsu added letting his hand reach out to connect with one of Ichigo’s own, warm currents of reaiitsu surging along his skin heightening the sense of their bond. Ichigo cocked a smile with a tinge of mischief and bit back, “My lack of hesitance.”

Shiro coughed out a laugh, gold glimmering and radiating casting the water like fae spirits. Zangetsu arched a brow, deep seated laughter ringing throughout his reaiitsu and peaking beneath the crown of swirly brown locks.

“That too Kingy, don’t forget you kept ta both of us by ya side. Ya stuck with us, just as we are with you. And we wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Shiro rasped out happily in response, breath ghosting his ear with the dual tone of his spirit’s voice. Ichigo shook his head, as much as he was able, and reached up to lightly flick the white being on the side of his head in their gesture of fondness.

Ossan smiled and the two spirits’ reaiitsu surged whirling around him and disturbing the lazy drifting of the water currents. There were a thousand promises there, and Ichigo let his own reaiitsu rise in conformation as tired eyes drifted close, home in the safety of his soul.

X
“Ya shoulda seen their faces Ichi! It was hilarious, everyone was trying to understand what had happened and the rooms were in complete chaos. Not to mention the past week! There’s practically been line ups out ta door ta see ya, cause Unohana’s been pretty strict on visitors. Damn kid ya sure have attracted quite the following.”

Shinji chortled perched at the end of Ichigo’s bed, in the Fourth. Ichigo smiled eyes bright and mirthful beneath a soft wave of tiredness, as he listened to the blond Captain recount the events of the days following his collapse, and subsequently the captain’s meeting that had convened the late morning after. The meeting had occurred both to discuss Ichigo’s state, and whether it could reach the public (the public was unable to formerly acknowledge it, but rumours flew with the ease of the wind), and discussing how a Menos Grande had been able to enter Soul Society.

“I don’t even know how it happened! It’s not like I go to the academy and lecture the students on how amazing I am. Though in hindsight Rangiku has likely had a hand in it, along with Yoruichi. Have you seen the articles the Shinigami Women’s Association publishes?”

Ichigo surged forth with an answer to the surprising end of Shinji’s flabbergasting tale, he hadn’t expected to gain a following of any sort in Soul Society. He was just a lieutenant of the Shiba clan, and while that had always warranted attention from potential suitors of neighbouring clans it was nothing like the smirking blond was suggesting.

Ichigo had dealt with his fair share of admirers and fans (though more so in the first war, which had been bloody light compared to the following war), but it had always been a distant thing. The adults of Soul Society (as well as his father once he actually got involved) had served as a buffer at the time, until he was accustomed to it. Then he had been forced to learn how to deal with it on his own.

“Hmm Shiba-kun, getting quite the popularity eh?

Kisuke interjected from where he was seated behind Shinji staring intently at the sheets of paperwork before him, striped bucket hat shading misty eyes from sight (every time Ichigo saw it a sense of rightness replaced the nagging feeling of wrong that often assaulted him). Shinji huffed, a sardonic look directed towards Kisuke, though the man took no note of it eyes glued to the stacks of paper. Shinji’s hazel eyes flashed to Ichigo assessing the youth, before the blond smiled wicked sharp rebutting and answering Kisuke’s light tease with sharp wit.

“Well some of it is probably that fanbase of yas Ichi, but most of it’s people ya touched. The fans are ta type who read ta magazine and think ‘Well look at that slab o meat’ and batter their eyelashes at every well toned piece of meat on the street, even the stuff at ta stalls. Ta others are those ya worked with at the academy, or helped with on a mission; I reckon ya apprentice, the red head, was by earlier.”

Ichigo laughed quietly, still feeling the dead weight of his body, the heavy rise of his chest. Shinji’s eyes flashed razor sharp with concern and a cocktail of other emotions but Ichigo was a little too out of it to try and dissect the patchwork and maze that Shinji often presented, so he dismissed it. And rather flashed a reassuring smile at the blond.

The other blond in the room scowled, though amusement played in from beneath the cowled brim of Kisuke’s hat. The scientist had been jovial and conniving enough for the beginning of the visit, but had quickly settled in the corner and pulled out a stack of paperwork kept on his personal. Ichigo had long stopped questioning his habits (he had once pulled a full-blown hand saw out of his sleeve). The man was a scientist and an introvert at that, so his subsequent shut down from the rest of the world after being well and truly sociable, was to be expected, and the few scathing or teasing remarks were enough for Ichigo.
“You should have seen Shinji, Ichigo. He was pacing like a frantic father for three nights straight, mumbling under his breath about how he was going to kill someone- which is relatively normal these days now that I think about it.”

Shinji glowered at Kisuke as Ichigo laughed once more in a constrained manner, appreciating the dynamic and humour between the two, in addition to the information of how Shinji had humorously spent the past few days. The two had been acquainted well enough before the incident (though Ichigo knew that only through the gossip, and their own tales they had imparted in the future). But the hollowfication had brought them all together, showed leadership and charisma, helped the two bond over how best to deal with their ‘little hollow problem’ as well as the topic of Aizen.

Kisuke ignored the sour expression, immediately followed by a more childish one Shinji flung at the man before turning to face Ichigo with an eye-roll. The orange-haired Shinigami only laughed and shook his head helplessly.

“So, what are ya plannin’ ta do whence ya escape?”

Shinji asked, trying to draw the subject away from the laughing matter, such as himself, and his worrying. Ichigo’s gaze swerved to stare out the window, as if seriously considering bolting through the small porthole. All though it seemed Unohana had learned her lesson from the multiple previous times Ichigo had been able to escape through a window and stay out till dark, and had given him a room with an incredibly meager sized window. That however hadn’t stopped Ichigo before.

In his defence, he had never returned injured from one of his little escapades, tired yes, injured no. The Fourth made him feel claustrophobic after too long, cramped in the small rooms, with endlessly white sterile walls. When he ‘escaped’ he really just walked around Soul Society, more so in the outer districts where the forests were thick and he could think undisturbed. His body however on this occasion was still too beat, from the rather sleepless week before so he was halted from such activities for the time.

Ichigo considered Shinji’s question. What did he want to do once free? He had a list of people he needed to apologize/console either for worrying them half to death, not confiding in them, or speaking to them.

In Kaien’s case, his brother deserved heartfelt thanks, and all the adoration Ichigo realistically could heap on the man, because he could have given up (Though Ichigo knew that wasn’t in his character in the slightest). Instead he had saved Ichigo, had taken the information he was from the future rather well (they had only spoken for a short while when Ichigo first woke, and Kaien had been man handled away to complete work since, but he didn’t doubt they would be having a talk). He knew his brother was much the same as Ichigo, and would have done it no matter what because they were family, but that wasn’t going to stop Ichigo from hugging the man fiercely when he was able (doctors had said hugging was a good thing if Ichigo recalled correctly).

He would have to speak to Byakuya as well. The thought was one that sent his nerves racing, but he calmed them with a soft breath, Chad’s assurances beating at his pulse. He didn’t have to bring up any feelings, they could remain friends as Ichigo wished. No what also concerned him, was the likely annoyance that Byakuya felt, in that Ichigo should have pulled the noble heir away from his dinner so Ichigo could talk to him.

In any case they would likely iron everything out over tea, where they could catch up as they hadn’t been able to in a while (first the Vizard training, and then the rush of settling into work once more). He was happy at the thought of sharing tea with Byakuya again, and just speaking of simple things, or talking about thought provoking subjects, such as the new militia instated in Rungokai.
In the end, he knew he wanted to heal, take some time for himself, walk around Rungokai, pause and reconsider the journal, speak with Sosuke about the future a small bit. But also talk to someone (likely Unohana), like the therapy he never took in the mortal world (Ryūken had advised it for all the teens who been in the war, Ichigo believed he had managed well-enough on his own, and no one cared to push it).

“Talk to Kukkaku, try to console her for my grave misdeed… and avoid her wrath. Eat Ganju’s cooking, Kami knows that it’s better than hospital food. Hug Kaien when I see him, then likely get slapped by him. Heal.”

Ichigo responded with, deciding not to share the rather collective miasma of things he wanted to do in his free time. Shinji smiled encouragingly and nodded, a touch of sympathy on his features at the thought of Kukkaku’s wrath. While the man himself had never truly faced it, he had likely heard more than enough horrifying tales. Kisuke looked up briefly and there was an aghast expression painting his features, before it devolved into his coy smirk and in that sly innocent tone he said, “I’ll pray for you.”

The bastard had dealt with Kukkaku’s rage before (how could he not when he was friends with Yoruichi. There had been a few incidents from what the Shihōin princess had shared with one of those teasingly amused hellcat grins), and was only far too happy he wasn’t on the receiving end. Ichigo shot a scowl towards the Captain of the Twelfth who brushed it off with a merry tip of his hat.

Quiet settled for a few as Ichigo turned to stare at the window with a touch of longing in his eyes. Shinji shifted into another abstract position within the visitor’s chair, leg raised haphazardly in the air, while another hand came to cushion his head. Kisuke had shifted his eyes to the paperwork once more humming softly under his breath, with a tune that ticked like clockwork and felt like mechanics.

“Ichi…”

Shinji spoke softly and Ichigo glanced over to see the blond staring at Kisuke, eyes locked in wordless communication before they turned back to the orange-haired Shinigami sequestered in the medical bed.

“We’re sorry, we shoulda have done something more when we noticed your… ah difficulties with sleepin’. And we should have checked up on ya once we returned. We saw ya at dinner, and even though we noted your… deteriorating state we didn’t do anything. We’re both deeply sorry for that.”

Ichigo opened his mouth a few times, trying to put too many thoughts into words before closing it. He stared at Shinji and Kisuke, noting the deep sorrow and apologetic swell in their souls, reaching out through their eyes. Ichigo was slightly stunned to have received such an apology, as he hadn’t cast the blame on anyone but himself.

“They have well meaning intentions Ichigo, they are guilty that you are in the Fourth due to their own ignorance (and the ignorance of Soul Society as a whole) and so wish to apologize.”

Zangetsu’s timber floated along the channels of his mind, and while Ichigo did not need the explanation, he welcomed it all the same. It cleared his thoughts into an orderly path that he could follow. Tilting his chin upwards so he could look the two Captains, who he held immense respect for, in the eyes Ichigo responded, “You don’t need to apologize, it was my own fault. I should have paid attention to my body, or talked to someone sooner. Nevertheless, thank you both for the apology, but do not blame yourselves. I don’t want a hoard of people ‘protectively’ stalking me because of one incident.”

Shinji and Kisuke looked up sharply at his words, bodies tense, eyes grim. They looked like they
wanted to protest Ichigo’s denial of their grievances, but Ichigo continued to speak over them until the message reached home. He ended on a light note, tweaking smiles from their lips, and brightening the dreary take the atmosphere had adapted at Shinji’s solemn confession.

Kisuke chuckled under his breath, and Shinji smirked, likely imagining the horrifying situation Ichigo had laid out. He didn’t doubt already that Kaien was debating posting a guard on him at all times, if not to have someone monitor him rather than protect him, then to soothe Kaien’s own paranoia.

Silence descended once again, comfortable and light. Ichigo felt as if an imaginary weight had been lifted from his chest, one that had aided in the heavy feeling submerging his lungs as he drew faint breaths. Their visit had been welcomed, in the deafening silence of the Fourth broken only by the outside bustle, and Hanatarō’s intermediary visits (and Ichigo had been dead shocked to see Hanatarō of all people, though word had reached his ear that he had been one of the few people to soothe his reaitsu. Which had been both ironic and endearing).

He had only woken the morning of the day before, under the pulling sensation of Kaien’s tidal reaitsu rushing around and eagerly tangling with his own presence. Unohana had been a blessing in keeping the guest to a minimal, but it seemed luckily the news of his awakening hadn’t spread, and he had only seen his Taicho and Lisa the night before.

Still Kisuke and Shinji’s visit was welcome. They were a sense of home, after the month training with the Vizard, and Shinji’s own wild reaitsu calling of dusty cities, and endless suns had tamed mild hysteria and worry with the familiar press of instinct. Soul Society was still home and would always be so, all of it’s inhabitants included (even the particular ones he didn’t like) but it was distant still at the time he had fallen, where as the Vizard were still fresh.

A knock on the door disturbed Ichigo of his musings, and he glanced up to where the shoji door slid open to reveal Unohana’s pleasant countenance. Her trained gaze surveyed the room, taking note of the guests with a passing fancy before landing on Ichigo. Her gaze pinned him down, and he let himself submit beneath her will, too tired to fight with ragging fire eyes as he usually did.

The Captain of the Fourth directed her gaze to the visitors once more and pursued her lips, a faint apology in her eyes before she asked, “I’m going to have to ask you two to leave now. I need to speak with Ichigo, now that he is fairly coherent.”

Shinji flashed Ichigo an apologetic wide grin untangling himself, before he sauntered out of his chair throwing a cocky glance back at Unohana. The female captain only shook her head at the other’s actions before directing her gaze to Kisuke. The scientist looked up from where he was gathering the paperwork into his sleeves with a sigh and sly wink in Ichigo’s direction.

“We’ll see ya soon Ichi. Best of luck dealing with ya family.”

Shinji carolled to Ichigo’s small wave, before he stalked out the door whistling a cheery tune under his breath. Kisuke rolled his eyes before drawing his sight to Ichigo he said, “I hope you feel better Ichigo.”

With the brief parting, the enigmatic man followed in Shinji’s footsteps at an ambling pace throwing a small wave over his shoulder. Ichigo let a faint smile eschew his lips before he turned his attention to Unohana, who held a vaguely amused expression, one eyebrow arched with humour.

The peaceful expression slipped from her features as she glided over to one of the chairs, and settled herself there. Ichigo grimaced heart heavy in his chest, he had been dreading this encounter, all the while wishing to be done with it. The female captain flashed him a reassuring and gentle smile, steeping her fingers across her thighs so she could consider Ichigo with a critical eye.
“Let’s talk Shiba-san.”

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, next we will be continuing with their little chat (sorry for the minor cliff hanger). It will definitely be an interesting session. Shiro has such a potty mouth. Thank you all for reading, reviews/comments are always appreciated!!

Bowl!!
Acatalepsy

Chapter Summary

Ichigo and Unohana have a chat.

Chapter Notes

Acatalepsy

(n.) The impossibility of comprehending the universe; the belief that human knowledge can never have true certainty.

Hello everyone, we are her with chapter 32. Finally, the talk with Unohana that everyone was excited about, I had a bit of trouble with this chapter, and writing in general this week but I think it turned out well. I hope you enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo blanched, and closed his eyes to take a reassuring breath at the striking words that sent panic fluttering about. Opening his eyes, he studied Unohana, who remained patiently seated in the likely uncomfortable visitor’s chair. There was a peaceful, welcoming expression on her features, but otherwise they were impassive. If Ichigo studied her eyes he thought he could see a glimmer of curiosity and concern but it was hard to tell with the imposing women, and the mask of impassiveness she usually possessed.

Ichigo let his breath leave him in a diminished manner, feeling his lungs deflate as the air passed his lips, as he considered her request (which was really more of a demand, however sure Ichigo was that she wouldn’t push him, if he wasn’t ready). He knew he needed to speak to someone, he had confided as much with his zanpaktou and to himself. And while he had inevitably in a rather disastrous attempt shared it with Kaien, Ichigo knew he needed to share it with someone else, more particularly a healer.

Kaien was a great older brother (a role in Ichigo’s life that had never been filled before), understanding, caring, if a bit over protective. Ichigo knew he could go to Kaien for anything, they had become close over the long years they had known each other; nights spent over glasses of sake, sharing ambiguous stories, or contemplating society for all it’s flaws, or life in all it’s wonders. But as
much as Kaien would endeavour to aid Ichigo in healing from the scars of his past, in the end the lieutenant of the Thirteenth was not a healer.

He had confided in others, the Soutaicho who had taken it unflinchingly (and thereafter seemed to consider Ichigo his protégé, or nephew), and he had alluded to the truth with the two scientists thrice over (he was pretty sure they had caught on, but they hadn’t confronted him yet which Ichigo was thankful for). But it did not deter the simplicity of the matter, Unohana was a healer, she was also a veteran, had seen a war and all it’s trials, someone who was experienced and not close within his heart (he suspected that was a temporary matter).

He had never been particularly close to the women in his own timeline, though he had had his fair share of encounters within the Fourth division. Whether cause of his own injury or others was a variant at the time, though more often then not it was Ichigo who was injured. He had mourned her passing, felt it keenly as any other member of the Gotei 13 he had known. But it wasn’t like in this timeline, they had already met a few times, Ichigo had never been prompted to speak of his experiences, after that first declaration before he had confronted Yam-jii.

Instead she had served tea, chatted about recent inquires into the field of medicine, Ichigo had shared what knowledge and interests in the field he retained from the days where his dad worked in the clinic. It had been a break from Soul Society as whole, a chance to distance himself from the time travel aspects of his life, in addition to his friends.

If asked Ichigo would say he trusted her, she reminded him of a motherly figure, or that of an aunt with the way she acted around Ichigo. There was care and compassion in her eyes, instead of the cold clinical detachedness he was familiar with. Maybe the women saw the scarred soul he was beneath the layer of strength, or maybe she recognized a veteran like herself but far too young. In the end Ichigo believed he could trust her with his secret, the only thing stopping him was his own fear and hesitance.

“Ichigo hesitation is not who you are, you know you can trust her then do so. She will be able to aide you in healing.”

Zangetsu-Ossan advised, the deep baritone thrumming the channels of his mind, soothing his nerves and helping Ichigo to push forward. Unohana was not necessarily a therapist, but Ichigo didn’t doubt her ability to help him, she was a healer first and foremost, one who would find a way if necessary. She had come prepared to accept whatever words and truths Ichigo threw at her.

Considering the woman once more, he caught the corner of her eyes where they lingered on the window taking in the pleasant nature scene, drawing her attention. Unohana glanced up, eyes steely and strong she studied Ichigo’s own determination, in return of his challenging eyes.

“You won’t be able to speak of anything we talk about, right? At least not without permission.”

Ichigo asked patiently and a touch unsure, worrying the corner of his lip in thought, he knew practically all medical procedures like the back of his hand, but that didn’t stop the small sliver of doubt. Unohana nodded a vaguely amused smile painting her lips she replied, “Patient confidentiality Ichigo-san.”

Ichigo nodded, expecting the answer he turned his gaze to the window to collect his thoughts. Wondering how to approach the situation and spell it out for her, there was a vast worth of memories and experiences that he could talk about with her. Ichigo assumed though that he would likely have to attend a few (read many) sessions with the strict captain (which he wasn’t wholly opposed too) before they would even begin to scratch the surface of the deep tomb of issues Ichigo had.
Decision mostly made, and lacking any hesitance or further energy to muster such, Ichigo began, “The first time I met you was when I woke up in the Fourth after Aizen had revealed himself as the grandmaster mind behind Rukia Kuchiki’s execution. I as any teenager, possessing the conceived notion of immortality and recklessness in the face of death, had invaded Soul Society with a small group of close knit friends to rescue the young Kuchiki. After a stay in the mortal realm, where she loaned me her powers to save my family.”

Unohana looked up sharply at his words, eyes surprised and studying Ichigo and his demur speech, as if trying to complete a puzzle without all the pieces and a whole ton of confetti involved for fun. Ichigo ran a hand through his hair and continued, “I-I come from a future, one in which Aizen-Sosuke betrayed Soul Society and created a legion of Hollows equal in power to those in commandment of the Gotei 13, a world in which the Vizard were banished to the mortal world. In which a war occurred, lasting three long years, at which in the finale of it all, I gave up my powers, my soul kin, to defeat the megalomaniac. For a year I was without my powers, till they were returned to me. Soon after we were thrown into another war, one against a race long thought to be exterminated by the command of the Central 46 and the Gotei 13. The war was long, somewhere around twenty years, I can’t recall. In the end, I was one of the only survivors in a world that was perishing, all balance destroyed, so I… I ripped apart time and space to redo it all, to save the future and everyone else.”

Silence abounded throughout the room along with a thin curtain of reaitsu, heavy and oppressive, after Ichigo’s rather stunning confession. Briefly Ichigo glanced at Unohana, seeing the masked shock and horror that played upon her features, before he tipped his head up to look at the bland ceiling above. He could feel his chest tighten, his throat was dry, though that could have been from all the talking, a sickly feeling bubbling up in his gut, the world seemed to close in around him. Ichigo gripped the sheets in a death hold, focusing on deep breaths and Zangetsu’s calming presence. Speaking of it in such blunt terms was difficult, knowing every word was being assessed, picked apart, seeing at all briefly in his mind’s eyes. He chased away reoccurring thoughts, and focused on light breathing before he turned his head to regard Unohana once more.

A considering light was in her eyes, it played with a magnitude of other emotions that Ichigo couldn’t decipher, but could partially detect in the down turned corners of her lips, and furrowed brow. She seemed at a loss of how to respond, and Ichigo couldn’t blame her, lost himself on how to proceed, what next to say. They remained in silence for a few more minutes studying each other, and thinking over Ichigo’s words.

“I guess I can say I was not expecting such a conformation. However, Ichigo I accept you, and the truth in your words.”

Unohana spoke softly, a touch hesitant though Ichigo barely picked up on it. Her words brought a smile to his lips, and had warmth surging through his chest deflating the tension throbbing in his body. As much as experience had proven otherwise, Ichigo still always held that tiny sliver of doubt that one day someone would refuse to believe his words, or would laugh at his pain. So, the conformation, no matter how many times received was always supportive, and welcomed.

Ichigo looked up from where his gaze had drifted to the sheets, obviously searching for the meaning of life in them, as was a common occurrence. He flashed Unohana a grateful smile, eyes as bright as he could muster with the exhaustion still hanging onto his system like lead. The female captain’s countenance brightened slightly at the positive response from Ichigo and the corners of her lips tilted upwards faintly.

Her hands shifted in their placement upon her lap, and she considered her words for a few moments.
Ichigo content to let her, preferring to endure the silence (talking took too much energy in any case it seemed) and let Unohana lead the conversation.

“Ichigo in the end your healing depends on you. You choose what we can or can’t talk about, and how I can help you. If you merely wish to use me as your sounding board and relay all your memories of the wars then we can do so. However, if you wish my aid in healing then we can work together on comprehensive strategies moving towards a healthier you. The decision is ultimately yours.

Ichigo blinked and slowly comprehended Unohana’s words, in the end he had never really considered how he could heal with Unohana. Talking it out had always been one of the leading ideas, but as was normal he hadn’t formed a plan to follow through with.

In the end, she was correct it was his decision. His choice whether he actually wanted to heal, or merely talk (which would still help him heal, but in a far less comprehensive way). Turning his attention to his zanpaktou Ichigo asked their opinions, hoping they could aid him as they always had in making a rational decision (Kami knows rational was never normally part of any planning).

“Go for old psychopath’s method, she knows what she’s doin’ and ya need to stop moping and get ya arse in gear.”

Shiro called out before Ossan could speak (he could sense the older spirits’ irritation at the gesture, though there was also familiar amusement). He shook his head in humoured amusement at Shiro’s blithe and blunt tactic, though he couldn’t deny that such a tactic often worked, and while he was sadistic in his delivery at times he was always truthful. Ichigo sent the mental equivalent of a thumbs up to Shiro, before he turned his attention to Zangetsu-Ossan.

“I think for treatment we need to cover all aspects of your life, from before the war, to the space in between. As while you likely have trauma from the war, we need to assess how your life before and in between affected performance on and off the battlefield. What I need to figure out in depth is your...
character, are you empathetic? Humorous? Kind? Merciless? Once I know you and how you deal
with situations it will hopefully be easier to develop a strategy. We can start by talking about
whatever you see fit, analyze it and then discuss solutions to problems you are currently facing, and
how they may relate to your past experiences.”

Unohana suggested as their treatment plan, with a sharp nod and a patience in her form that
suggested she could wait for Ichigo to digest the multiple servings of semi-complicated. Ichigo
considered the plan, it was broad and open with room for shifting and growing, and of course it
wasn’t set in stone. He would be able to choose what they talked about, how they analyzed and what
he could do to help himself heal. It made sure both he and Unohana were shouldering the
responsibility, and monumental task of trying to help him recover. It helped to ease some of Ichigo’s
tension, they could adjust to fit their needs, and the treatment he needed. A half-smile tilted Ichigo’s
lips and he said, “That sounds like a good plan.”

His voice drifted out a lot hoarser then he was expecting, Unohana faintly winced before passing a
glass of water to Ichigo. He drank the soothing liquid slowly (knowing better from far too many
experiences in the past-future), and wished there was some tea (and a general lack of hospital food)
before setting the glass down.

Unohana had a concerned smile painting her features asking if he required any assistance, Ichigo
responded with a faint shrug and attempted to pass the meager message that he would be okay
eventually (or at least that was the belief he firmly held onto- though time healing all wounds was a
rhetoric in his case). Unohana considered Ichigo once more in the silence before she asked, “Would
you be okay with starting today? We don’t have to get into anything too heavy, we can just begin,
lay some foundation.”

Ichigo frowned considering her question, and wanting to delay the inevitable. But it was just that
inevitable, and since the female captain was already firmly ensconced in one of the visitor chairs,
Ichigo knew he had little justification to say otherwise.

However, Unohana was right, this was his decision he couldn’t base it on whether or not she was
necessarily easily available and standing in front of him. It was his choice he had to be ready for it.
Ichigo knew he was tired of the weight of the future, and all the emotions he carried on his shoulders,
he also knew that he was ready to start seeking help. It all boiled down to if he was ready to step
forward and take it.

It was always easy to think and plan, but to do it was another thing entirely Ichigo thought with a
sigh. Zangetsu-Ossan’s presence rippled across Ichigo’s senses approving of the time he had taken to
think things over (if he wasn’t ready, not truly then the healing would be pointless), but also
encouraging him to move forward.

“We can begin today.”

Ichigo sounded with a barely there smile, Unohana nodded and pursed her lips for a moment before
a open an encouraging smile settled on her features. She briefly flared her reaitsu with a wink before
she asked, “How about we start with identifying some of the problems you’re facing first.”

Ichigo nodded and sighed running a hand, though his tangled hair as he thought of the multitude of
problems he faced near constantly. It was a long and extensive list stretching far beyond physical
ailments, and a complexity of psychological knots that would send any other sane person running.
But Unohana was not any other person, nor was she particularly sane.

“I-I always feel tired, like even when I get a good rest (which is rare), and it’s not like my body is
tired… but my soul? And I know I have chronic insomnia, sleep doesn’t come easy to me if at all
some nights. When it does I suffer from extensive nightmares, that are more memories then nightmares sometimes. I know I’m underweight, and that is likely due to my reduced appetite… I can barely stomach large meals, and sometimes can’t even manage food.

I’m often depressed, finding a lack of will to get out of bed, much less continue living. I suffer from flashbacks, and can be triggered by certain events, places, or even people. Sometimes I am also reduced to panic attacks, though they are short-lived thanks to the aid of my zanpaktou. I have problems with my emotions, preferring apathy with most people, so it hurts less, and I often wish to avoid relationships altogether. In addition to also having mood swings, I can go from happy and at peace, to grim and sorrowful within the space of a minute. I have major trust issues, and slight separation anxiety.

I-I guess I should reveal my bloodline to you, might help in the future. My mother was a Quincy, though she was a half-blood, her reaitsu was incredibly pure. My father was a Shinigami, a Captain who dissented to marry my mother. In the event of their meeting, a hollow attacked my mother, the only way to save her was to lock the hollow from within her soul, as I understand it at least. As her first born, the hollow in my mother’s soul was transferred to me.

It- I was getting better, before the incident happened that is. I was finally getting into the habit of eating more, and I was getting better sleep then I had in years. The nightmares, flashback, depression, all of it was still there. But it wasn’t harsh and they occurred in less frequently. But with my re-introduction to the Vizard, the stress of training them, and living with people who were like family. I relapsed… badly… and I didn’t seek help when I needed to.”

There was utter silence in the small private room in the Fourth as Ichigo finished speaking in a mostly detached sort of way, akin to how he would deliver a report within only the slight give away in his voice. He felt raw and open, slightly dejected in admitting how his recovery had been progressing towards something, and how it had all come crashing down because of his refusal to seek help. A feeling of chiding, or Shiro’s glare simmered from their bond, and Ichigo shook his head with apologetic smile, remembering and understanding well their discussions about placing blame.

Unohana was stone still in her seat, face blank, but her eyes were two raging storms, crashing with such fervor that Ichigo didn’t dare to look any longer lest he never escape such a storm.

The tense atmosphere that was held like a breath, was broken as a timid knock sounded on the shoji door. Their sudden (though likely unexpected visitor) waited a moment before sliding the door open, they stepped inside with a tray of tea and matching mugs balanced on their arm. As if sensing the frigid aura of the room, the division member rushed over quiet as a mouse and set the tea ware onto a side table. With a respectful nod to a still frozen Unohana the subordinate scurried from the room.

A fond amused smile twisted his lips, even as his gut curled with unease at having blatantly revealed near everything about himself (it’s not like he wouldn’t in time anyway). It was unnerving after keeping secrets for so long, and especially when it wasn’t a burst of emotions in the form of words, or taking the space of a breath. It was detached, analyzed and thoughtful retelling, or sharing. He turned and cradled the Cornish blue tea pot, before pouring the steaming liquid into the two matching mugs.

Unohana was still ridged in her chair, likely processing the crazy information Ichigo had dropped on the women like an atomic device, with all of the devastating effects. He felt a touch of guilt at provoking such a reaction, but knew that if any one could handle it Unohana would be able to. Spooning a bit of sugar into Unohana’s tea (as he knew the woman liked from past experience), Ichigo took his own black and lifted the mug to his lips. It was a deep heady brew that sent heat
pooling in his chest and soothed the ache of his throat.

For a tiny moment Ichigo could pretend he wasn’t in the Fourth disclosing his life story, and seeking medical aid. For a moment, he could almost sense the Shiba mansion, Kaien beside him as they watched the early sun grace the land. He blinked and the sensation was gone, he smiled sadly at the odd pang in his heart. It had been quite a while since he had had a home to miss. It was a funny irony to be homesick for a place, instead of a person or a place that didn’t exist for a change.

Beside the bed, Unohana shifted the shuffle of her shihaksho alerting Ichigo to her return to the realm of the aware. Refocusing on the Captain, he watched as she absentely picked up the tea cup, and stirred before sipping the burning liquid. There was silence as the two sipped their tea for a quiet moment, before Unohana steeled liquid and said, “I wasn’t expecting…that. Excuse my momentary lack of functioning within the outside world. I was speaking to my zanpaktou as well as considering the information you had shared.”

Unohana pursed her lips, and her eyes twinkled with allusions to the easy weave of her words. Ichigo flashed a faintly apologetic smile in her direction but the women waved it away with a flippant wave.

“After discussion with my zanpaktou, I think I’ve thought of a few solutions, as well as responses to certain issues you addressed. I think though that it would be wise and beneficial to have cohesion between the Twelfth and Fourth division, so that our efforts within the field of medicine, and in correlation to you can be as successful as possible.”

Ichigo perked up at Unohana’s mention of solutions, happy that the women had been able to think of something. Surprise coloured his features faintly at her suggestion of working with the Twelfth division. While it had occurred to him before (and the two divisions had worked together in the past as far as Ichigo remembered) he hadn’t necessarily considered implementing it in his own case. Though he knew as soon as it was suggested to Kisuke it would be accepted, the man underneath his contrived mask of faint worry was likely flailing about in guilt, and at the same time trying to solve how he could help Ichigo.

Unohana looked pleased at Ichigo’s positive reaction and with a nod she continued after restlessly twisting her fingers, “For sleep there’s only so much I can do, though I will enquire to Kisuke about working on an herbal based sleep solution, one that would provide dreamless sleep would probably be preferable no? For your appetite, I would consider a dietary plan,” Ichigo scoffed, and she raised an eyebrow, he hastily defended himself by saying, “It’s just never worked before, like writing in a diary, I just can’t focus on it, or I am a touch too rebellious to follow them.”

Unohana frowned disapprovingly for his interruption but there was a knowing pleasure in her eyes as she continued, “Your dietary plan, would consist of foods recommended for portion size, as well as nutrition. Additionally, I would think it would be beneficial to have you eating with other people, which can be arranged between the Shibas’ and your Captain.”

The smile that settled on her lips, was familiar in it’s hidden menace, and Ichigo repressed the urge to sigh and drag his hand through his unruly hair; That look sealed one’s doom and more particularly Ichigo’s. It wasn’t that Ichigo didn’t like eating (he still missed Orihime and Yuzu’s cooking all the time), but the plan, involving both people and portion sizing was constricting. Shiro was cackling within the background of his mind, the distortion of his voice echoing like a trench.

“She’s got ya hook line an sinker!”

Shiro called out gleefully, and Ichigo had to agree with the spirit. That was how they had managed to stuff any food into him during the last war, not the portion sizing, but forcing him to eat with other
people. And if it was with the Shibas’ Ichigo knew he would never escape a meal (and he wouldn’t if it was Ganju cooking), and if his Captain was roped into the whole idea he would be mother henned to the seventh layer of hell if he delayed lunch by one minute (it was still surprising how protective Jushiro, and Shunsui were in this timeline).

Still it was a good plan, and obviously despite claiming ignorance Unohana knew him a bit better then she let on. With a reluctant sigh Ichigo nodded his agreement to the plan, a pleased expression formed on Unohana’s shapely features.

“We can’t do too much about flash backs or triggers unfortunately. We can hope that with time the flashbacks will decrease in numeracy as you were saying was beginning to occur, and we can eliminate potential triggers if they are known. Our sessions will help work out your mental state, and hopeful some other issues will be resolved from there.” She paused and considered Ichigo keenly for a moment, eyes warm and open before she continued in a much softer tone, “If you ever feel the need to talk, or are having an attack of some kind. Don’t be afraid to contact me, even if it’s in the middle of the night. There are always people who want to help you Ichigo, you just need to seek them out.”

Unohana frowned softly while she spoke, her meaning conveyed through the sincerity in her eyes and her words, illustrating the best solution she was able to find, especially for a rather difficult patient, as well as offering support. Ichigo smiled and nodded his thanks her words igniting inside his chest, casually he sipped the still scorching tea, as he waited for Unohana to ask the question furrowing her brow.

“Ichigo… is your power above that of the Soutaicho’s?”

The female Captain asked hesitantly, gaze affixed to Ichigo’s features, locked onto his eyes, as if compelling him to answer her. Ichigo sighed (he was doing a lot of sighing) and ran a hand through his hair, letting his other hand drift to grasp Zangetsu’s hilt before he replied, “Yes my power level is above that of the Soutaicho… it’s even above that of the Soul King. I-I always had abnormally high reaiatsu for a human, then again, I wasn’t truly human,”

Unohana glared faintly, rejecting his words and making Ichigo pause in his explanation, he flashed his arms up in a sign of defense and apology before he continued, “My life in retrospective seems a constant series of battles, with small pockets of peace in between. When my mother was alive it was the bullies at school, after her death, it was a fight to find the will to live, and to care for my sisters. I would often fight in the streets to defend myself, and my best friend. Meeting Rukia, we fought together, once she was taken I fought to save her. Challenging the Espada (the hollows equal to the power level of the Gotei 13 Captains) on their home turf, over and over into a bloody war. Then false peace, no more big battles, blood and endless sand. But crushing loneliness, a grey and empty life. And to receive my powers once more only to be launched back into battle against new enemies.

And in the end it is a fight against time, and events that should never have been, a fight to keep moving, keep surviving. In the end, I suppose that’s life, fighting constantly to survive in big and small ways.”

Ichigo finished slightly out of breath, and took a spare few moments to regain his breath, and sip the still warm tea. Unohana, sat ramrod straight once more, eyes narrowed and there was a certain kind of cold fury there, that while not directed at Ichigo still sent shivers down his spine.

“Ichigo, you’re telling me that in a war that was of our own making and matter, you fought for us? In both wars? And we let you? Take no offense but you were a child… how could we?”
Unohana asked deadly soft, her tone sharp as razor wires, though Ichigo knew they weren’t directed his way. When she put it that way it sounded bad, and the truth of the matter was it had been bad. He had been young, a teenager and his whole life had been stolen away from him in the two wars that had spanned what could have been his life. He had been suspended from strings for so much of his life, taut and snapped with the whim of whatever manipulator saw fit to think themselves a master of life. He had gained in the war, but he had also lost immensely. 

But Ichigo knew if the circumstances were the same, he still would have fought with them (with not for, or as their unjustly messiah), because they were his friends, and if they had fallen who would have protected the world? His sisters?

Shinji had always been a cynic, and had spat the matter out with blatant disgust and heavy remorse in one of his rants, when it was just the two of them, speaking, talking, reminiscing. Ichigo had been more then stunned the first time it had all been laid bare. Another manipulation in the ever growing, ever crossing webs of manipulations that had seemed to constrict his very breathing. In the end Ichigo still fought for Soul Society even knowing what they had done.

“They supposedly needed my power… in the end I was okay with it, because if Soul Society had fallen, the Quincy or Aizen would have gone after the mortal realm eventually. Still times were rough, and poor decisions were made…”

Ichigo defended in a tired voice, there was strength and conviction behind his words, but it was held down by the weight of the truth, he had been fifteen when he first entered the war. Unohana studied Ichigo, sizing him up, as if asking herself what made Ichigo tick, why he would fight for an obviously corrupt society. Whatever she found seemed positive as she lightly shook her head, a glimmer of bemusement under the crown of her hair.

“Only you Ichigo, I can believe only you would be capable of all you’ve done. Your will to push forward, forgive the machinations of others, seek allies in enemies as you have done with Aizen. It could be fate or destiny if you choose to believe, but as you stated it was your own will to rewrite your ending that sent you through time.”

Unohana summarized his whole character in a few lines, Ichigo felt a smile unbidden slip onto his lips at her words. They were endearing, and supportive of what Ichigo had done and who he was. Zangetsu’s pleased hum thrummed along their bond illuminating to Ichigo what his spirits thought of the Captain of the Fourth’s words.

“Thank you, Unohana-san.”

Ichigo replied with a wink and a hint of mischief colouring his voice, she quirked an eyebrow but said nothing else, her reaitsu betraying the content and amusement she was feeling. Silence settled over the room once more, only the soft rush of the outside world disturbing the calm, a contrast to the earlier tension that had settled like a heavy fog.

He was tired, in a way that suggested emotional exhaustion (though physically his body was still beat). It was a better emotional exhaustion then the kind he was used to, this was like the exhaustion after a particularly good workout; warm and still thrumming with energy even as it settled into sleepiness. Ichigo blinked a few times, content to stay awake for a while longer.

Unohana looked up from where her gaze had drifted to her hands, there was a question on her lips, but hesitance furrowing her brow. Ichigo tilted his head curiously, open to whatever question she would throw his way.

“Is there anything else you would like to talk about today Ichigo? We can talk about an event, or
even a person. And Ichigo, you don’t have to use anyone’s names if you don’t want to.”

Unohana asked benignly and without force, undemanding of Ichigo’s continued therapy but open to continuing. Ichigo considered the question, did he feel like talking? He was emotionally tired already, but he felt as if he could continue talking. It was like a flow of water, once released, not easily stopped. He wanted to talk about his family, indulge in the small musings when he thought of them in the twilight, fond and heartbreaking.

He nodded and a wicked light flashed in his eyes, though it was undermined by a faint pleading and gentleness, as he said, “I’ll talk, but I want to hear about you too. It’s only fair.”

Unohana chuckled lowly under her breath, her aura of doom was back but Ichigo could inordinately sense her lack of killing intent. He had asked, because Ichigo genuinely wanted to know about the female captain. She had always been a mystery even in his own timeline, but she was kind and genuine (even with all the sociopathic tendencies). If Ichigo was going to have to talk to her often, he wanted to know her. When Unohana finally stilled in her mirth she lifted her head up and accommodated his request with a nod.

A wide bright smile flitted across Ichigo’s lips as he leaned his head back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling and gathering his thoughts. Who did he want to talk about? He could talk about any one in the whole of Soul Society, but it would probably be wiser for the time being to stay away from members of Soul Society. His friends and family had been those closest to his heart, and the ones who he likely held some of the deepest pain for.

If he was going to attempt to talk, he might as well go all out. Ichigo decided with a frown, images of their smiles drifting to the forefront of his mind. Zangetsu’s reassuring reaitsu washed over him, supporting Ichigo and giving him the courage and strength to speak.

“… I had two younger sisters, they were twins and were four years younger. Their names were Yuzu and Karin. Yuzu had blond hair, and she smiled like our mother. Radiant. It was a smile that could brighten anyone’s day, warm and so full of love. She was always a gentle soul, happy cooking and caring for the family after Kaa-san passed. But she had a spine of steel underneath the passive exterior. There was a time where I hadn’t returned for a week, and… well she was the one to slap some sense into everyone.

As she grew older, she grew into a woman, and men would always ask to date her… she always cared so much for our family, I protected her always and in return she was always there for me, always providing a comforting shoulder. She was the one I relied the most on when I lost my powers, at least within the family. She had little spirit power, but in the end, she was completely amazing.

Karin had dark hair, they were like light and day in all respects. She was brash and stubborn, a lot like me actually, probably because she looked up to me. She had a good amount of reaitsu, it increased as she grew, and during the second war, she didn’t partake in battle but she helped to maintain defensive positions (Yuzu helped with healing when she could). Karin was always into sports, and I always tried to be there to support her games, I think I only missed a few, and each was Soul Society related. But she was excellent at them, probably could have been a professional. She actually dated a Shinigami, though their story is amusing.

I have so many fond memories of them, their smiles, their laughter, the women they matured into. Yuzu would always nag me to get more sleep, or eat more. She was always worrying after everyone. Karin cared in that gruff kind of way, but underneath she was very much like Yuzu. We used to on the anniversary of out mother’s death have a picnic at the cemetery. We would talk to her, tell her about our year, and just be together as a family.
I used to walk them home from school when they were younger, ask them about their days, assist them if they needed help with homework. After Kaa-san died, one of my driving wills in life was protecting them.

There were the nights before it all started, goat-face would come barrelling in from the clinic, attempt to tackle me, where I would consequently… subdue him, before sobbing at the large poster of Kaa-san. Yuzu would berate us both before ushering us to the dinner table with her mighty wooden spoon. Sometimes Karin would cheer, often times she preferred to complain.

And there was the good mixed in with the bad of the war. When Karin unlocked her Shinigami potential, I was the one to train her, teach her to manifest her zanpaktou, help her to achieve Shikai. She was one of my fist students in that respect, and it was stunning to see the determination kindled on her features as she worked to deepen her powers.

Yuzu had a bad breakup, and instead of going to her twin, or goat-face, she came to me. We devoured a tub of ice cream, and watched a couple comedies, we just shared in our laughter and the love we held for each other. We joked and laughed, gossiped about whatever curled up on the couch at home.

The three of us would sometimes trip into the kitchen (though more commonly it was just Yuzu and I), pull out one of Kaa-san’s old recipe books and just make it, fitting together seamlessly.”

Ichigo’s eyes were suspiciously wet when he finished, though no tears fell. His throat was dry after having spoken for so long, and his emotions and insides felt as if they had been dumped into a tsunami of a storm with an umbrella and then dragged through a volcano. Talking about them hurt. Struck deep at his core, and brought forth a cascade of memories both painful and endearing.

It was funny how easy it was to push it all aside for a time; the sadness and homesickness. But it was also infinitely more rewarding to think of them, remember their smiles the colour of their eyes. Which ice cream flavour was their favourite. It brought warmth and colour into the everyday monochrome, soft pastels speaking of events pass, and rich earthy colours harbouring secrets and emotions, nurturing them.

A mug of tea was passed to Ichigo, steam rising up in incandescent swirls, Ichigo nodded his head in thanks and took a slight sip. His breath was still ragged in his lungs, berating with the weight of his own memories.

A warm hand settled on Ichigo’s’ left shoulder and he looked up to catch Unohana’s coal dark fathomless eyes. Her reaitsu swirled around him comforting and open in a sincerely sincere way. She stared at him before a smile settled on her lips, and in a soft wistful way she said, “Your sisters sound like wonderful women Ichigo, I would be happy if I ever the have the chance to meet them.”

Ichigo nodded his agreement a faded smile of pride and love lingering on his lips before he cast his gaze towards the tea below, and took another sip. Silence hovered for a moment, the two content to wait as Ichigo attempted to recuperate from the rush of emotions, and batter away the exhaustion that bordered his unconscious.

Unohana was silent with contemplation, she frowned into her tea cup before she asked, “Ichigo do you want to talk about their passing, we don’t have to if you’re not ready.”

Ichig looked up startled at the rather unexpected question, there was no judgement on Unohana’s features only everlasting patience. He thought about her question, he didn’t think he would ever fully be ready to talk about their deaths, much less anyone else. But did he want to? They had been a focal point of Ichigo’s life for nearly all of it, however tragically short. That didn’t deter the point that their
deaths had damn well murdered Ichigo.

But he had promised that he would remember them, and talk about Yuzu’s cooking and Karin’s sports. It was all well and good but Ichigo knew the supposed bad had to be remembered always. For the sun could not be so radiant without the night. Talking about them would hurt, initially and probably for a while afterwards but it would give him the chance to try and let it go or at least condition himself to be able to speak about them without breaking down (however unlikely such a plan seemed).

“They survived the first war, but they didn’t make it through the second, like everyone else. We set up a barrier between the human and Shinigami world, so that the Quincy kind couldn’t invade and disrupt the human world. But Bach found a way to slip through, and he found my sisters, of all things. In a small show of mercy, he didn’t torture them, didn’t draw out their deaths. He had targeted my family because he knew it would affect me, but at that point in the war he had still cared for life. I-I found them…”

Ichigo’s voice was a restless whisper, that drew to a simmering silence. His hands were clenched into the sheets, and his breath was ragged, escaping his lungs in harsh pants. He could feel his world closing in around him as the relentless sight of their corpses passed on the floor arms entangled together, chased him, pulling at the healing threads of sanity of his mind. Seared into the back of his eyelids and confusing all his senses.

Ichigo shuddered hands twitching, and before it could develop any worse, before he could fall into unconsciousness, he felt Zangetsu’s reaitsu surge over him, helping to drive away the lingering dread that pooled in his gut. The maelstrom of emotions that the mere thought of that event had wrought. Zangetsu’s reaitsu wrapped up Ichigo in layers of bubble wrap and warmth, while Shiro plainly sealed the memories up into the back of his mind.

Unohana’s reaitsu peaked, heavy and dark. Nothing of the cyanide lighting she usually carried, this was heady like the earth, or the air after rainfall as it wrapped around Ichigo soothing his senses. The imposing woman swept forward, hesitating beside Ichigo she sought his eyes. Gaining his sight, she slowly bent over till she was a breath away, then she in the ever same excruciatingly slow manner wrapped her arms around Ichigo.

He flinched slightly as he was drawn into her chest, the contact sparking all kinds of warning bells, before they dispersed to nothing. Ichigo felt his erratic breathing start to fade as she continued to hug him, her presence and Zangetsu’s wrapped around Ichigo like a blanket.

“Ichigo remember, you have already changed the time lines, you’re not going to lose anyone else.”

Unohana consoled in a whisper, before she slowly drew away. She paused holding his shoulders at arm’s length, her eyes bore into Ichigo as if scraping away at the surface to reveal the core of his being. Ichigo couldn’t muster the energy to care, and instead yawned, blinking away the tired tilt to his eyes.

“I’ll let you get some rest Ichigo, don’t hesitate to call if you need anything. And I promise, next time it will be my turn to share a story.”

Unohana counselled with a faint smile, her eyes were troubled and thoughtful but Ichigo could see there was new found awareness and contemplation thrown into the mix for fun. Nodding Ichigo watched as the female Captain swept from the room in a leisurely walk.

Ichigo turned to consider the window once more, debating the merits of attempting to escape through the small frame again. Another yawn ragged his mouth as Ichigo slumped against the bed, everything
feeling heavy in his tired state. Zangetsu’s presence rolled over Ichigo assuring him, and gently lulling him to sleep. His last thoughts were of Yuzu and Karin’s brilliant smiles.

X

Thank you

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! I hope the talk with Unohana lived up to expectations, as I had a bit of writer’s block this week. Reviews/Comments are always appreciated!!

Canvas!!
**Kintsukuroi**

Chapter Summary

Ichigo talks with Byakuya, and Kaien (not simultaneously).

Chapter Notes

**Kintsukuroi**

(n.) (v. phr.) “to repair with gold”; the art of repairing pottery with gold or silver lacquer and understanding that the piece is more beautiful for having been broken.

Hello everyone, we are here for chapter 33! I hope you all enjoy this chapter and the ensuing bonding sessions. Read on!
Also best of luck to everyone going back to school!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo basked in the sunlight from where he was settled on a long stone bench entrenched in the gardens of the fourth. There was a pleasant breeze drifting through the air and the weather was pleasant. From underneath the hanging tendrils of a weeping willow, Ichigo peaked out at the rest of the garden, intimate with it’s design through his many escapes, but less so in the daylight.

The young Shinigami was ecstatic to finally be released from his somewhat confining room in the Fourth (he wasn’t claustrophobic by any means, but anyone could go crazy after spending more than a few days conscious in there). Unohana had quite firmly glared at him with all the presence of the terrifying women she was, as she had conceded in allowing Ichigo outside, of course on some conditions.

Ichigo didn’t mind the Shinigami settled a good distance away knee-deep in a flower bed. The women had already been tending the garden, and had saved Ichigo the hassle of attempting to escape the severed gaze of a healer solely focused on their patient, which in that case would be Ichigo.

Zangetsu settled across Ichigo’s lap hummed with energy reflecting their wielders content, Ichigo huffed a faint breathless laugh and shifted to run his hand over the blade. Speaking to Unohana the day before left Ichigo feeling tender and open, longing for solitude and time to collect his thoughts. He needed the time to think, to recover from speaking about everything, to just settle once more.
But the inevitable crushing loneliness of the Fourth had returned even with Hanatarō’s brief intermissions, so Ichigo had been pleasantly surprised to hear he would be receiving a visitor (and thankfully not some fan of the Shinigami Women Association’s magazines).

The excitement of having another visitor had quickly turned to equal parts hesitance when Unohana had revealed it was Byakuya who was finally coming to visit (apparently the Kuchiki heir had tried to visit before but apparently Ichigo had been very much out of commission, and unaccepting of visitors in his unconscious state). His thoughts on Byakuya were a confusing mess of strings that he was still trying to untangle, Byakuya had and would always first and foremost be Ichigo’s best friend.

He treasured that relationship and didn’t want to lose it, he didn’t need romance in his life, not at least with the state he was in. So he would wait, he wouldn’t mention it, they could just act as they normally were. Or at least Ichigo hoped it could be so, though he acknowledged the latest ‘incident’ might have unforeseen consequences with a furrowed brow.

Ichigo also considered the other tremulous knots tangled up in his mind, there was the matter of the night Ichigo had succumbed to his exhaustion. Ichigo knew he was in for a verbal lashing, or something of the sort depending on the Kuchiki’s’ mood, in the near future for not trusting his friend, or confiding in him sooner.

In Ichigo’s defense, he still believed he had done the right thing in not disturbing Byakuya. As much as the Shinigami was likely guilting himself over the matter, he couldn’t control Ichigo’s actions, much less a delirious Ichigo. It was his choice to not disturb Byakuya while on his date and he would stick by that when they finally confronted it.

There was also the matter of Hisana, her illness, and Rukia which Ichigo was trying to sort through. He had a few ideas of what could be killing Hisana, but without testing he couldn’t be sure (though Kisuke was a former spy, perhaps he would be able to aid Ichigo in his conquest). He wanted to try and save the kind woman if he could, the light in the Byakuya’s eyes of his timeline when he spoke of her still lingered with Ichigo in a soft warmth spreading through his chest. Ichigo wanted Byakuya to have that happiness, and a relationship that would support him and help him grow.

There was also Rukia. Ichigo knew that he was going to need a lot of preparation and probably a few more therapy sessions with Unohana before he would be able to face the midget. He was mostly certain that Rukia already existed within the timeline due to Hisana’s appearance, but he reminded himself to check. He had no idea how his time travel would affect future events, the so-called butterfly effect.

In any case Ichigo knew what district the small future Shinigami had grown up in, she had relayed her history a few times to Ichigo. Ichigo paused and cocked his head for a moment, a faint whisper of an idea settling into the creases of his mind. Even if he couldn’t save Hisana (and he would damn well try), he could still make sure she reunited with Rukia. After all, Ichigo knew where Hisana’s sister was, and it would be a way to thank both Rukia and Hisana, while allowing them both the closure they needed.

Just thinking of Rukia brought a soft and sad smile to Ichigo’s lips, images of the fiery midget passing through his mind’s eye. Seeing her, and the others in whatever plane he had transcended, had been hard enough on his emotional stability as it was. But Rukia was a blatant sign that the future, was drawing closer in multiple ways. Ichigo had always had a few half-baked notions about how he would deal with certain incidents, or characters, but it wouldn’t be such a simple thing to deal with. He would have to work around certain incidents make sure others occurred. Like Isshin meeting Masaki, though it wasn’t necessary he would like the two to meet each other in the future.
Ichigo always remembered his parents romance with a fond smile and a whistle of nostalgia, they had been utterly beautiful in their love; a balanced relationship, where neither had held more power, they had loved each other with all their hearts, and then their children as well. And Ichigo thought the two deserved that (if also so that Uryu’s father could make his own choice as well). He had thought over it a bit, when he considered how messing with Aizen would affect the timeline. His conclusions had left a small frown on his lips, because if Aizen wasn’t there to incur the power of the Espada and challenge Soul Society, they would lack the training and power needed to prepare for the Quincy that the Winter War had provided. Otherwise they would likely be obliterated even with extra training.

He had been dwelling on the matter, trying to find a solution, a way to up the training of the whole Gotei 13 but it was no small feat. In the end, he had dejectedly decided on consulting and confiding in Kisuke and Sosuke. The two masterminds would likely be able to help Ichigo come to a solution that had been staring him in the face the whole time (though he wasn’t letting them plot out the whole future, as they inevitably would, given free range).

Thinking of the future helped to draw Ichigo’s mind back to the topic at hand, that being Byakuya and his fully warranted concerns (Shiro saying otherwise didn’t count). Ichigo had told Kaïen, he had told the Soutaicho, he had hinted well enough to the science nut jobs, and he had finally talked to Unohana, but he hadn’t disclosed his rather impressive time travelling abilities to the Kuchiki heir.

Ichigo felt a touch of guilt at the matter, he had shared the rather life changing information with near everyone but his best friend. Which was basically a breach of the friendship code (but Ichigo was willing to temporarily overlook that set of codes considering his less than stellar record), he was supposed to be able to trust Byakuya with anything. And he did! But Ichigo supposed he wasn’t yet ready to share his complete life story with the man.

Though Ichigo knew for certain that the truth would come to a head eventually. Things like time travel didn’t stay secret forever no matter how much Ichigo could try. If he hadn’t told the two science freaks they would have figured it out within a few months anyways. Telling them just gave him a portion of control over what they knew, in addition to a strict no experimenting rule.

It still weighed on his heart that he should come clean to Byakuya, his friend deserved it for all he stuck by Ichigo for. The blade in his hands hummed and Ossan’s old voice drew along the channels of Ichigo’s mind, “All with time Ichigo, the universe constructs opportunities when they are needed. You’re not ready to face this truth in detailing it to Byakuya, so wait. At the very least till you are healed, and clear minded.”

When Zangetsu said it, it sounded a thousand times easier Ichigo thought with a huff and a fond smile. He could understand patience and practice it well enough Ichigo supposed, having spent years dealing with his father after all (Yuzu had to have had the patience of a goddess with what she put up with).

With a sigh, he ran a hand through his hair and Ichigo decided to put the matter to rest, choosing to dwell on it another day, among the hundreds of other threads, odds and ends, that formed his thoughts.

The devil of his thoughts appeared with a shimmer of reaitsu brushing against Ichigo’s senses jerking him from his quiet contemplation. Looking up semi-sharply Ichigo caught the gleam of light off of Byakuya’s Kenseikan as the man hovered by the doorway to the gardens. Upon noticing Ichigo’s gaze pinned to his form for a few minutes, hungrily drinking in the sight of his friend, Byakuya looked up.

The Kuchiki stepped out of the shade of the doorway and into the cool gardens, gliding across the
soft emerald grass towards Ichigo. He looked the same as the last time Ichigo had seen him, all pressed elegance that was ice sharp, but a slight bit ruffled. His hair was mussed, his hand clenched around the hilt of his zanpaktou, and his eyes were a wicked storm beneath the crown of his hair.

Byakuya paused before Ichigo, letting his deep silver eyes slide to lock onto Ichigo’s amber orbs. They stayed there in the silence of the garden, broken only by the shuffle of the plant life and other living things, staring into each other’s eyes assessing, questioning, apologizing.

Finally, with a battered sigh Ichigo cracked a welcoming smile and gestured to the side where the rest of the bench stretched out. Some of the tension bundling in Byakuya’s shoulders dissipated at the gesture and the lieutenant of the Sixth shook his head with exasperation before plopping down, lacking the agile finite grace of his station.

“It’s good to see you awake Ichigo, and not through the trembling doorway of a private room.”

Byakuya commented lightly, as if talking about the weather, except for the small inflictions in his words, his voice a completely normal mix of exasperated and fondness that only came from dealing with Ichigo’s antics and ticks for too long. Ichigo shrugged faintly before turning his attention to Byakuya, he nodded and replied, “I missed you too. And it’s nice to finally get some fresh air.”

“Looking to escape again are we?”

Byakuya questioned with a feral grin that was all teeth, Ichigo smirked in response settling into the familiar rhythm between the two. Knowing that eventually it would have to be broken for more pressing matters. Ichigo winked and shot back, “You wish.”

Byakuya laughed silently under his breath, still the picture of perfect dignitary for all others to see. Gazing superstitiously around as if to spot eavesdroppers, Byakuya leaned in close as if to speak a secret before he said, “I’ll help as long as we’re not stuck in the woods for two days… again”

Ichigo spluttered at the reminder of that particular event, a light embarrassed blush stained his cheeks as he craned his head back. Byakuya laughed outright at Ichigo’s stunned expression even as Ichigo hastily whispered, “We agreed we wouldn’t speak of that, besides you were the one who agreed to come.”

Byakuya stilled in his laughter, and considered Ichigo and his words with a raised brow. Shaking his head Ichigo slapped Byakuya lightly on the arm, receiving a barely there reprimanding glare in return for the action. The Kuchiki-heir huffed at Ichigo’s nonchalant response pretending to turn away and give him the cold shoulder. The action lasted for all of a few seconds before Byakuya turned around eyes open and dark.

Before Ichigo was aware he was doing it, he clasped his hand lightly over Byakuya’s arm giving it a light squeeze and a sign of reassurance. Byakuya let out a heavy breath of air and considered Ichigo for a few moments before saying with in a soft and breathy voice, with some hidden urgency, “Kami, Ichigo I was so worried, I didn’t know what was happening, suddenly you were in the Fourth and nobody could see you. I was so scared I was going to lose my best friend.”

Even as Byakuya’s facial features remained relatively impassive with his words, his voice shook and trembled with tender emotions and his eyes were a sandstorm that swept Ichigo off his feet and stole his breath. He knew his injury (read carelessness) had hurt the people around him, but he hadn’t realized it had struck Byakuya so deeply, nor had he yet experienced its devastation first hand.

Furrowing his brow Ichigo considered Byakuya, noting the downturned eyes and closed body language. Zangetsu hummed where he set it gently beside him on the bench as he reached over to
grasp Byakuya’s hands. The familiar callouses of sword play sounding across his hands, and long spindly fingers.

“I’m sorry Bya. It’s okay I’m here, and I’m not going to be leaving anytime soon, not if Unohana has anything to say about it,” Ichigo said voice soft and meaningful, before picking up with a happy and playful grin at the end.

Byakuya laughed looking up from where his gaze had been drawn to their hands, the sorrow that had hovered like a cloud disappearing into a more somber and contemplative air. His eyes were bright once more and he stared at Ichigo, till the orange-haired Shinigami felt a touch uncomfortable under the force of his gaze. Then a wicked twist took Byakuya’s face, and Ichigo could only gulp in preparation for well-deserved repatriation.

“Ichigo Shiba, you are a foolish man you know that?” Ichigo nodded in a complacent manner, at the sharp sarcastic tones and Byakuya continued with a faint growl, “I mean are you kidding me? You don’t sleep well for who knows how many days, and then you decide it’s a good idea to go on a walk without telling anyone, and get yourself blown to the seventh layer of sleep.”

Byakuya beneath the calm and polite exterior had words of venom that splattered against his soul, and made Ichigo hiss at the harsh truth his friend was spouting. As if sensing Ichigo’s dejectedness Byakuya’s eyes simmered from their molten silver and in a softer voice he continued, “Ichigo, I know you’re not always use to depending on people. But even if I’m busy, you can always call on me, I’ll drop everything to help you. Just as I know you’ll do the same.”

Ichigo dropped his own gaze, hands tightly clenched together as Byakuya’s words rebounded throughout his skull. Ichigo sighed softly turning his gaze away from his friend to study the sprawling vista of greenery.

“Byakuya I-I… I made a mistake, I stopped caring about what would happen to my body. But I don’t regret not coming to you that night,” Ichigo turned to pin Byakuya with a glare when the lieutenant made to protest, “I know you will drop anything for me, and I would do the same for you, but that doesn’t make it your fault. Because I was the one who choose to move on, it was my choice, you couldn’t have stopped it if you tried.

I know I screwed up Byakuya, but I’m going to try and start healing… Unohana’s been helping me a bit. I want to get better… and I know that you’ll be there to support me.”

Ichigo’s thought process was a jumbled mess, and what he was trying to say came out disjointed and slow, some of the meaning behind his words shining through regardless. Byakuya turned to consider Ichigo, a frown marring his brow as he pieced together the orange-haired Shinigami’s words.

Before Ichigo could shift out of the way, he was drawn into a sudden side hug, pressed up against Byakuya. Fond eyes were centered on Ichigo and he shifted till he felt comfortable before flashing the heir a mirroring expression.

“We’re a right mess, aren’t we?”

Ichigo suggested with a huff followed by a weak laugh, Byakuya laughed alongside Ichigo for a minute considering his friend before replying, “Most certainly, but any other way and we wouldn’t be half as amazing as we are now.”

Laughter rippled out into the open, at Byakuya’s nonchalant phrasing as the two giggled, as if the funniest joke in the world had been shared between the two. Eventually regaining himself, Ichigo panted giggles still slipping past his lips, his eyes found Byakuya’s and before they could help it they
were laughing once more, doubled over the bench with his stomach aching.

“So, I saw you were with a girl that night?”

Ichigo ventured with a sly wink once they had settled themselves once more, Byakuya flinched sending a sharp suspicious glare at Ichigo from beneath the shadows of the foliage. The Kuchiki sighed tapping his fingers against his thigh as if contemplating answering Ichigo, before he looked at the orange-haired nuisance and with an amused shake said, “Yes I was with a girl, her name is Hisana. I think you might remember meeting her in the marketplace that one time?”

“Ah yes the fate driven collision, you were instantly pinning, and I assured you that life would bring you two together.”

Ichigo already well knowing the answer responded sardonically with a wiggle of his eyebrows and a suggestive wink. Byakuya blushed faintly, eyes hard as diamonds as he stared at the orange-haired Shinigami, before with a dramatic sigh the man responded indignantly, “I was not pining.”

Ichigo made a vague sound of obvious sarcasm and said, “Of course not,” before he seceded and slumped against the bench. Perking up slightly at a sudden thought, Ichigo flashed a wicked grin and asked, “So a second date?”

Byakuya glared and huffed a bit, like a horse biting at the champ, before he rolled his eyes with thinly veiled amusement and annoyance only a best friend could muster before he replied a touch reluctantly, “Yes there’s a second date.”

“Look at Byakuya all grown up.”

Ichigo declared with false exuberance, pretending to wipe away fake tears (and Kami he was starting to sound like his father). Byakuya rolled his eyes once more, reaching up to flick Ichigo on the shoulder before he settled down once more.

Ichigo batted at the hand, till he was left in peace where he promptly slouched once more. He still felt worn (and would likely feel like that for some time to come according to Unohana) and while the fresh air was nice Ichigo already felt a touch tired. Still he could go on for quite a while, if it was Byakuya he was there to keep him awake.

“So, what’s the recovery plan?”

Byakuya asked pleasantly, curiosity lining his brow. Ichigo shrugged vaguely a touch of discomfort splashing his features before he replied, “Unohana wants me to start on sleep aid pills, and then work on better eating habits, plus some therapy.”

Byakuya turned concerned eyes Ichigo’s way, studying the orange-haired Shinigami as if asking himself a question regarding Ichigo’s listed health recovery. As the remaining silence took hold Ichigo ran a hand through his hair, and with all the petulance he could manage continued, “And she’s planning on making me eat with either the clan, or Taicho.”

Byakuya’s gaze was heavily amused as it swerved and landed on Ichigo, wry chuckles escaping his lips he responded, “Ah yes the horror of having to eat with people. It must have been a pain eating lunch with me every day at the academy.”

Ichigo spluttered at Byakuya’s sharp retort, a frown crossing his features Ichigo huffed and shot back, “That was different, there was no one else around. Plus, you can actually hold a decent conversation. Unlike Taicho most of the time, sometimes he has nothing to talk about but how Jushiros should totally assist him with his next prank, or he’s mooning about the man.”
Byakuya laughed heartily at Ichigo’s whining tones, a disbelieving stare levelled at him from under Byakuya’s brows. Ichigo pouted but dropped the act with heavy sigh, letting his body slump to rest against Byakuya, he’d been feeling clingy since he had woken up. As if the deep-rooted fear of losing everyone having been brought to the surface of his psyche had encouraged such a reaction.

“It sounds like you’re in good hand with Unohana’s plan.”

Byakuya suggested calmly, a sly grace of his lips giving away the game. Ichigo choose not to rise to the bait and nodded fingering Zangetsu’s hilt as his eyes swept over the garden once more, noting the locations of the other Shinigami present.

“Hey Bya?”

Ichigo questioned faintly in the open air, eyes soft and nostalgic as he soaked in the atmosphere and his friend’s presence, Byakuya cocked his head, ebony tresses swaying with the motion he gestured for Ichigo to continue.

“Remember that time we got lost in the woods?”

Ichigo relayed with a bemused smile, Byakuya frowned for a minute before his eyes widened, he groaned and responded, “As I seem to recall it was you who got us lost in the first place.”

Ichigo plastered on an innocent expression, hands splayed against his chest in pseudo horror at such an accusation. Byakuya stared unamused for a moment before shaking head at Ichigo’s familiar actions

“It was not my fault, I was just temporarily directionally challenged. In any case remember how it rained like the gods themselves were angry?”

Ichigo parroted with an east gait, Byakuya’s gaze settled on Ichigo and contained a bare shred of amusement laying under the bare disbelief at Ichigo’s defence. Ichigo chuckled quietly at the expression, it was always fun to rile up the other lieutenant and see how long he could hold his mask. There was always the additional bonus of when Byakuya said his name with a long-suffering sigh, that spelled all the woe in the world in a single word.

“I remember, we were there for three days right, and every day it rained without fail.”

Byakuya retorted with a heavy staleness and dry amusement thinking of their circumstances. Ichigo shrugged his shoulders, the vague chill of wet heavy cloth washing over him before disappearing in the mid-afternoon sunlight. Those days had been long and relatively miserable, but the situation had been lightened by Byakuya’s companionship, and the fire they had eventually lit even with the rain.

“And then we stumble onto a village, soaked to the bone.”

Ichigo said with a half-smile, Byakuya turned and pinned Ichigo with his heavy led eyes and continued the story, “And then Ginrei appeared, and was… well angry is one way to put it.”

“Oh yeah he chewed us out halfway to hell. But it was worth it in the end.”

Ichigo added, fondly recalling the series of events with a smile. The wind rustled past the two, cajoling hair into a reckless dance, Ichigo shared a faint smile with Byakuya before his gaze distantly landed on the garden.

“Once you are free of Unohana’s torturous clutch we should go out for tea, catch up. You can tell me how the training went.”
Byakuya’s tenor drifted between the two, and Ichigo looked up at the words spoken tenderly with spitfire snark and suggestion. Ichigo nodded flashing a bare wink in Byakuya’s direction before he replied, “Indeed, wouldn’t want to miss out on our annual tea sessions. And you can tell me all the latest juicy gossip.”

Byakuya let out a deep laugh, the sound vibrating throughout the small area, he turned amused eyes in Ichigo’s direction and combated with, “I thought gossip was Kaien’s duty.”

Ichigo frowned before nodding sagely, conceding Byakuya’s point with slip of a grin. A tender silence stretched between the two, and Ichigo was content to bask in it, worrying his lip as he thought over rampant suggestions and ideas, pushing back faint nostalgia and lingering emotions.

“Missed you.” Ichigo said soft as the breeze in the small garden. Byakuya turned to consider Ichigo, eyes warm as a hearth he replied, “Missed you too.”

Ichigo leant into Byakuya’s side, fingerling the hilt of his zanpaktou as he dwelled faintly on those words, like the choir of church bells inside his head. The faint nostalgia sticking the back of his throat as silence continued to reign undisturbed.

X

Kaien slouched in the chair brushing a hand through his hair, as he sipped from a mug firmly clenched in his other hand. Ichigo thought his brother looked tired and worn still, but he wasn’t as bad as that first night. When Ichigo had finally awoken it had been to the visibly haggard appearance of the Shiba heir, Kaien had proceeded to talk, cry, and yell at Ichigo for the next five minutes before he had realised Ichigo was far too out of it to understand a word he had sprouted.

In the end, they had settled in the silence, Kaien speaking in soft gentle tones of little everyday things, like the one shoji door that always squeaked, or Ganju’s latest escapades within Rungokai. He had spoken soft and snuck glances at Ichigo at every possible interval, as if afraid that if he didn’t Ichigo would slip away. It had settled Ichigo, and before he had realised it he had drifted to sleep once more in his brother’s presence.

Now Kaien was here again in the late evening, after finally escaping work (at least that was the tale Kaien spun, in all reality Ukitake likely let him go early). The Shiba heir looked up suddenly, as if feeling Ichigo’s studying gaze and flashed his younger brother a reassuring smile and said, “Don’t worry about me Ichi, I’m getting sleep now that I know you’ll be okay.”

There was the confirmation to Ichigo’s suspicions that the worried older brother hadn’t slept. What else could Ichigo expect of Kaien, other than to comfort his younger brother, when it was obvious the older had something weighing on his chest. Ichigo nodded and flashed a wicked smile and snapped back, “Course I worry about you Kaien, especially after that one time with the apples…”

Ichigo let his sentence die off at Kaien’s sudden glare peaking out from beneath the crown of his bangs. The glare disappeared quickly enough with a shake of Kaien’s head and a small puff of laughter the man settled once more into the seat.

“How are you feeling Ichigo?”

Kaien questioned concern lining his voice, and furrowing his brow. Ichigo shrugged a touch, thinking over the question; he was tired that much was clear at least with the drowsiness that clung to his movement, and the cobwebs lining his head. But he didn’t feel particularly overwhelmed by any certain emotion, he felt lighter after having chatted with Byakuya (in addition to Unohana, so as a whole, he felt lighter), the tensions and worry over the situation that had arisen gone in the face of
Ichigo answered with a wry smile that belayed some of the emotions coalescing in amber orbs. Kaien frowned a touch, lips curving down slightly, but otherwise said nothing nodded with a sad sort of twist.

Ichigo wondered how his brother was handling everything. Kaien had been the one to which Ichigo had revealed everything albeit in a disjointed and pull apart way, he had been the one to see Ichigo struck up by madness and totally lost depthless and drowning.

He wondered if the older brother was okay, they had hardly had the chance to see each other since Ichigo had woken up a few days before. He had dumped a heap of information on Kaien, mentioned his death and how fucked up the future was; a future that was Ichigo’s life. So Ichigo fully expected a likely confrontation of his declaration of time travel among other things.

Kaien shifted drawing Ichigo’s attention, as the lieutenant shuffled through a stack of papers precariously balanced on his lap, as he rubbed at his forehead. Sometimes it was easy for Ichigo to forget how much work his brother did, the man was not only the heir of the Shiba clan, but also a lieutenant for the Gotei 13. And yet he managed to present all the energy and mannerisms of a child, albeit in a tamer way than Isshin.

Ichigo doubted anyone could muster the sheer enthusiasm for life Isshin held. Which reminded Ichigo that Isshin would likely be visiting soon, as the clan head it was his duty to check on an injured clan member. Though Ichigo didn’t doubt he would do it in any case, as that was the kind of man Isshin was, even for all his dramatics the values he held for family were high (though perhaps not solid, more of a linear value).

He vaguely wondered with a touch of amusement and humour, if Unohana would recognize the man as his future father. Well Ichigo had never confirmed to the women that his father was a Captain, Ichigo didn’t doubt her intelligence and her ability to piece the clues together. After all, Ichigo was obviously of Shiba lineage, his face mirroring Kaien’s couldn’t be chalked up to coincidence. And with the power level he had revealed he possessed, well it would be obvious he wasn’t the son of some background Shinigami.

Ichigo was already quite certain that the Soutaicho knew which one of the Captains would become the deserter, but the old man likely didn’t care, or just wanted to see the drama unfold. In any case, Ichigo would still have to face the energetic man soon enough, and that was as always a mixed cocktail of emotions.

“Ichi?”

Kaien’s even timber pierced the silence along with the shuffle of paper. Ichigo looked up at the fond nickname, Kaien often rolled out (along with a few other variations that often included the use of strawberry). Ichigo responded to the silent inquisition demurely with a faint, “Hmm?”

Kaien twitched a bit, hands twisting together, before the man looked up powerful silver eyes studying Ichigo. Having found his resolution Kaien sighed and hesitantly questioned, “Ichigo is it okay to ask you about… that night… and what you revealed?”

And there was what Ichigo had been bracing himself for the moment Kaien sauntered through the door with pep and a shallow smirk. A warmth settled in Ichigo’s chest that Kaien had thought to ask Ichigo if it was okay, instead of firing away.
Ichigo had never really understood or appreciated having an older sibling till Kaien had squashed his way into every inch of Ichigo’s life. In his original timeline, the other Shinigami had certainly cared for Ichigo like a younger sibling (if only because he was most certainly one by a hundred years), but they had been friends or mentors first and foremost.

It had been a strange experience adapting to the concern for his health and safety that Kaien mustered at every opportunity. The respect of his boundaries, and sometimes just knowing what exactly Ichigo needed to hear or talk about. It was overwhelming and endearing in a way only the Shiba clan could muster, their welcoming attitudes had pulled him into their folds, no matter how reluctantly he had resisted.

Their chats over sake, had been bonding time exclusively for the two of them. A chance to get to know each other, and for Ichigo it really was like meeting a stranger. He had heard stories of course, both from Ukitake and Rukia, but meeting Kaien in real life had been a different experience. He had learned that the man preferred sake from a small store sequestered in Rungokai, that he originally hadn’t known what he wanted to do with his life, until he met Ukitake, that the water had always soothed him and he had always connected with it.

The love that Kaien simply radiated for his family, couldn’t be related in words. Ichigo was glad Kaien had convinced him to accept the adoption into the Shiba clan, he didn’t know how he would have survived without his older brother’s constant support. Without the support of the clan, they along with Byakuya had pulled him out of his shell, and helped him focus on the present and actually living.

Ichigo considered the question Kaien had posed. While that night was still tender in his mind, it wasn’t an open wound. He had accepted it for what it was, shouldering the grief and guilt it had unleashed, but with the barest whisperings as if grains of sand piled upon his shoulders.

In any case Kaien deserved the truth, and the answers to the multitude of questions Ichigo had no doubt left the Shiba heir with. Zangetsu hummed reassurance along their bond, their presence sharper in his mind than it had been for a while, without him realizing it. They had admitted the faults on either side, and realised pent up words and emotions had been clogging their bond for a while, slowly building up to a heaving mess, like Ichigo’s breakdown.

“Yeah... you can ask Kaien. You deserve the truth.”

Ichigo replied lifting Kaien’s attention from where it had idly plummeted towards the paperwork once more. The older brother’s silver eyes positively glowed at Ichigo’s answer and he felt a mirroring smile settle on his own lips.

Then Kaien paused, eyes scrutinizing Ichigo’s features he deflated slightly and said, “Don’t do it because you think I deserve the truth. As much as my curiosity is nipping at my bones. Are you okay to talk about it?”

Ichigo smiled softly and nodded in acknowledgement warmth flooding his chest at Kaien’s concern. The man smiled then, shoulders relieved from their tense slump he took a breath eyes staring out into the silence before he continued in an awkward hesitant tone, “So the future?”

Ichigo nodded with a huff of laughter, and ran a hand through his hair turning his gaze to the sheets he nodded and replied, “Yeah the future.”

“How far into the future?”

Kaien asked after a few minutes of silence, after the confirmation had set in. Ichigo considered the
question, pursing his lips and furrowing his brow in thought, Zangetsu helpfully (not so much in Shiro’s case) attempted to aid Ichigo, helping him line out the timeline and what had occurred, and what was yet to occur.

“I would say about sixty to seventy years time in the mortal realm, but it’s hard to put an exact number.”

Kaien flinched at the answer, eyes wide as saucers, he mumbled out, “That close?”

Ichigo nodded bangs flopping forward to shade his eyes as he grasped the pommel of his zanpaktou. Kaien bit his lip from the corner of Ichigo’s peripheral view, the lieutenant’s own hand resting on Nejibana’s sea wrapped hilt.

“And you’ve here been since that night… what over a hundred years ago? Planning, trying to save the future?”

Ichigo nodded, not exactly sure of the date he had arrived (time always seemed to blow by before he had realised it), but the time frame sounded correct. Time in Soul Society was a misogynous concept, hard to navigate or circumvent. Time in the human world didn’t always correspond exactly as it was supposed to either, usually it was the fault of the Dangai Precipice, but Ichigo was pretty sure his little escapade in ripping apart time and space had messed with the space time continuum in small unforeseen ways.

Kaien thought on Ichigo’s answer in the quiet that had descended between the two, Ichigo reached over and snatched one of the mugs of tea set out. The night had begun to chill with early dustings of the next season, and the stone bench was perhaps not the most comfortable perch to spend three hours on. It was a warm chai, spicy and sending heat corralling through his system. He drank the liquid slowly content to savour the moment, and waste all the time Kaien needed to process the rather astatine information.

“And I- I died?”

Kaien questioned like the strike of a gong, Ichigo hesitantly nodded a sharp and stiff moment. He thumbed the mug in his hand darting a glance at Kaien, catching a snapshot of the emotions sprawling across his features; sadness, contemplative thoughtfulness, curiosity, hesitance. Ichigo frowned emotion caught in the threads of his reaitsu, as he sounded out, “It was close to when the whole thing began, a Shinigami you were quite close to was sent to the mortal world after the incident.”

“Was Miyako okay? And the clan?”

Kaien asked a touch frantic brow furrowing with worry and concern. Ichigo knew the women was his wife in the future, but as far as Ichigo was concerned (and knew) they had met in the Thirteenth division (as well as one of the recent festivals) and had only begun dating. Perhaps it was deeper than Ichigo thought? It was also completely expected of Kaien to ask after the clan, and the truth of the matter curled Ichigo’s insides.

Ichigo bit his lip at the answer knowing it would hurt Kaien, just as likely as everything else Ichigo would relay to the Shiba heir. His voice was solemn as he uttered his next few words, “She died before you, killed by the same monster a hollow of… a certain megalomaniac’s creation. Her death caused you to be careless and…”

Ichigo trailed off breath catching his lungs and forbidding him to speak of the incident any further. The Kaien of his timeline, had always been a distant concept, someone Ichigo wished he could have
known, but he had accepted he would be unable to. This Kaien was real and in front of him, a living breathing person he knew as well as his features in the mirror.

“And the clan?”

Kaien asked voice thick with sorrow and grief, his expression hidden under a perpetual cover of shade. Ichigo’s head sunk towards the ground and he frowned before continuing, “They were dishonoured, struck from the rank of nobility upon false accusations. They were hunted down, and spread far and wide. In my timeline, I only met Kukkaku and Ganju.”

The thought now of the clan, his clan terminated in such a way bit at his nerves, and had him grasping Zangetsu’s blade. In his own timeline, he had never known them, they were a family he had never gotten to meet. And when Kukkaku spoke of them it was short with pain, and never close to the real things. The immense family the Shiba clan possessed had stunned and overwhelmed Ichigo at first, but he had gotten used to the prevailing warmth eventually.

To relate it all to his living and breathing brother was a touch difficult. Kaien breathed in sharply, eyes wide as the moon his reaitsu was shaky around him, and Ichigo wished he could pull the lieutenant into a hug. But he didn’t, knowing for once Kaien needed the space, needed to come to terms and grieve for a future he would never know. If Ichigo held even a fraction of his powers it would be a future that would never come to pass.

“So, I had an apprentice?”

Kaien asked softly after the long period of silence had settled over them like a blanket, a little smothering but mostly just there. Ichigo nodded a wistful smile lighting his lips as he thought of the tiny midget and replied, “Yeah, she was the one to begin the first stepping stone to the whole catastrophe that was my life.”

Kaien flinched at the dry amused tone competing with the faint snatches of blatant weary of the situation, in the one simple sentence. Kaien glanced up quickly shifting his hands over and over again before he shook his head as if dismissing an idea.

Finally, after a minute, Kaien cracked a half smile studying Ichigo he commented, “You’ve told me a bit about your family, a-are you actually related to the Shiba clan?”

Ichigo pursed his lips at the question and crinkled his eyes at the light suggesting tones underneath Kaien’s simple question (he had talked about the girls and his parents briefly, some things more than others).

“My father was of the Shiba clan, he deserted on a mission where he met my mother. My sisters and I were raised within the human realm, and knew nothing of our heritage.”

Kaien let a pleased smirk slip onto his lips at the confirmation and silently exclaimed, “I knew it, told Kukkaku you had to be a Shiba with your facial features.”

The smile diminished somewhat as he acknowledged the next part of Ichigo’s sentence and what it signified. Ichigo could almost see the man trying to piece the few pieces of the puzzle together a thoughtful frown playing across his lips.

Ichigo decided to aid his brother and with a run through his hair bright hair, and a tick of Zangetsu’s presence Ichigo continued, “I was dragged into the world of the Shinigami when I was fifteen. A Shinigami lent me her powers so I could save my family.

She was taken back to Soul Society for breaking a law, though she was sentenced to execution,
instead of the usual penalty. A few friends and I broke into Soul Society to rescue her, we succeeded but in the end the true mastermind of the whole plan was revealed. A Captain who was promoted to such a placement after the drastic drop in captains regarding the hollowfication incident within my timeline.

He fled to Hueco Mundo, where he raised an army of hollows equivalent in power to the Shinigami Captains. The war lasted three years and was coined the Winter War, though no one can really say why, considering it wasn’t even winter most of the time. there were battles and deaths, but most of Soul Society survived.

Then came the resurgence of the Thousand Year Blood War. The long-fabled war between the Quincy and the Shinigami to seek balance. That war decimated both sides utterly, till I was the only one left standing.

I-I couldn’t let the future be what it had become so I ripped apart time and space to travel back in time.”

Ichigo acknowledged that he was getting better at summarising his life story, as he sipped at the soothing tea. He had given Kaien the bare bones, as he knew in the future he would be able to share information and stories freely (and it would likely be asked of him). For now, he could wait, until he had the energy and time (as well as the stability to speak of such things).

“You went into a war when you were fifteen? And fought in two wars?”

Kaien asked voice shaky as his visage, his skin was pale, eyes wide, and the grip on his zanpaktou was so tight the fingers around the metal were white. Ichigo breathed deeply and nodded, the semi-devastating fact had been brought up a few times (and more recently in the past few days). Ichigo ran a hand through his hair, and replied with the same answer he had given Unohana.

“If I hadn’t fought, we would have likely lost. And in the end if I hadn’t fought the human world would have eventually come under attack in any case.”

Kaien blanched, eyes hard and face grim at Ichigo’s words he softly growled out, “And the Soutaicho or the senior Captains couldn’t deal with the issue? Instead they forced a fifteen-year-old to fight their battles?”

Ichigo flinched again, heart hammering in his chest like a drum, his grip on Zangetsu was iron tight. Kaien’s expression abruptly cleared at the tense figure Ichigo cast, brotherly worry taking over the malice that had quickly castrated his features.

“Every order has its faults.”

Was the only justification Ichigo mustered, he had known, realized fairly early in the war, that Soul Society wasn’t as clean as the ivory exterior liked to present; the history with the first Substitute Shinigami, the Mod Souls. Soul Society had its own fair share of violence and dark history, it was in their very beginnings. But Ichigo had accepted it for what it was, in the end when you’re in a war fighting to save everything, those things matter less and you only focus on surviving and winning.

Ichigo had been bitter about it a few times; stewed in anger and silence. The worst had been the period without his powers, left alone with only his thoughts, able to analyze the situation for what it had been. At the end of the war he couldn’t muster the care or grudges, not for long dead souls. It was just the same in the new timeline, they were still mostly innocent of the future deeds. When he felt that anger he stowed himself away, whipped out Zangetsu and let the injustices of the world rip from his blade.
Ichigo yawned the gesture ripping itself from his mouth, Kaien looked up at the movement eyes warm and clashing with tepid ice. The older brother studied Ichigo for a moment, eyes sharp as daggers he asked, “W-was there any happiness in the wars?”

Ichigo considered the question, gentle nostalgia prodding his mind, he reached up and rubbed his arms, gaze drifting to the window. There had been good, the bad had been overwhelming, but there had been some sparks of good.

Nights at the local bars, tipping back sake and swapping stories, tea under the beguiling sun, training feeling the lust for battle in a friendly environment. The endless nights camped on Hueco Mundo’s sands with Orihime’s strange cocktail of food like substances. The Vizard moving as one cohesive unit, fighting together in a way that just couldn’t be replicated.

“There was happiness, friends, family, and fond memories.”

The corner’s of Kaien’s lips twitched up at the small confirmation, as if he couldn’t bear the thought of Ichigo living such a life of darkness (he remembered when he had truly been a radiant soul, even underneath the layers of a tough exterior). A yawn slit Kaien’s own features, and he sent a lukewarm glare in Ichigo’s direction, the orange haired Shinigami only grinned and waved with a humorous aura.

Ichigo distractedly rubbed at his eyes, they were feeling heavy with the calling weight of sleep. He felt worn out from the day’s events, and was already ready for sleep. Kaien lurched to his feet after carefully setting the paperwork down he staggered over. In a soft airy voice Kaien consoled, “We can talk more later, for now don’t you get some sleep Ichi-berry. Ganju wants to cook a full-blown meal when we get home, and Kukkaku wants to show off her new fireworks.”

Ichigo nodded catching Kaien’s outstretched hand and giving it a small squeeze of reassurance. Kaien laughed lightly and hopped over to plant a gentle kiss on Ichigo’s forehead with a whispered, “Night.”

“Night Kay.”

Ichigo responded sleepily settling into the pillows, as the true weight of his tiredness made itself apparent. Kaien’s lips curved into a gentle wistful smile, and he ruffled Ichigo’s bright tangerine strands before pivoting and striding towards the door.

A warmth settled in Ichigo’s chest as he replayed the elder Shiba’s words repeatedly within his mind. Zangetsu hummed along his thoughts and throughout his chest, and with a few deep breaths Ichigo let the sleep clawing at his mind overtake him.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you all enjoyed the recent chapter. Reviews/comments are always appreciated!

Hula!!
Redamancy

Chapter Summary

Ichigo has a visit from a certain pair of captains. And returns home.

Chapter Notes

Redamancy

(n.) The act of loving in return.

Hello everyone, I am back. I’m sorry for the long hiatus (and the lack of forewarning), but I just needed to take a step back from the story with the start of school. But don’t worry we are back on track with regular updates. Thank you everyone for your constant support!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Jushiro shifted in the rather uncomfortable visitor chairs of the Fourth that Retsu had never bothered to replace; even with all of Shunsui’s complaining and whining (which Jushiro bore the brunt of more often than not). The Fourth was quiet in the early morning, rebounded with a silence that just felt peaceful, but whispered otherwise of its patients. As was most of Soul Society, but then that was why they had chosen to visit at such a time.

Without thinking of the action, Jushiro’s gaze drifted over to his partner slouched in the seat, in an angle that suggested sleep, but was more of Shunsui’s contemplative position. Or at least it could be, Ju acknowledged with a contrite smile. His curly hair was bunched along his shoulders in a messy tail, and his well-loved straw hat was eschewed upon his head, the cute sight brought a smile to the white-haired Captain’s features.

Fabric shuffled softly in the background, and Jushiro’s gaze was drawn to the resting orange haired Shinigami they had come to visit. Ichigo was crashed in the medical gurney, sleep casting a relatively peaceful expression upon his young features, though it was broken every so often by a grimace and trace of pain.

Jushiro wished he could aid the youth in some way, stop whatever nightmares that plagued him. It was those that had caused the stay in the Fourth in the first place, and seeing the pain on a Shinigami
he had come to consider a friend (if not something closer to family) cast bitterly inside himself, knowing he was powerless in most senses to aid Ichigo. The youth was still pale, but the dark purple that had rimmed his eyes like crescents was gone, and his presence was brighter, warmer in an indomitable sense and that comforted Jushiro somewhat.

The Shiba lieutenant of the Eighth would probably be ecstatic to hear that today would be his last day in the Fourth. He could finally go home, and as Jushiro suspected escape from the cramped building (though it was plausible Ichigo had already escaped, as had been the case before). They had stopped in for tea with Retsu before entering the room of one of her more vexing patients, and received the positive news cozied up in her office on the chairs embowed low to the ground, and with the consistency of quick sand. She had related the basics (patient confidentiality and all that), and it had been positive which had brightened Ukitake's considerably normal morning.

It was always a pleasure to talk to Retsu, she was one of the few Shinigami actually older than them (which was sometimes a daunting thought, if a twist nostalgic). She was an intelligent woman, with a talent in healing that was unrivalled. Kind where it counted, displaying it to those who needed, all the while remaining firm. The mothering tendency she always held for her patients had become pronounced over the years, especially in cases with a long-term patient.

With Jushiro’s many visits to the Fourth they had become well acquainted with the strict female Captain. Even if Shunsui often balked at the thought of visiting the Fourth (though it was always less so when it came to visiting someone important), they both knew they had a sort of home with the women. She always welcomed them with that small keen smile, offered tea, and was always there to talk (Shu sometimes referred to her as an estranged aunt with good intentions).

A calloused and large hand grasped his own where it was settled on the chair, and Jushiro glanced over to look at his partner. Shunsui had been struck hard by Ichigo’s collapse, and the awful surge of reaitsu that had erupted that night, had coiled his instincts in warning, and echoing dredges of pain and fear, overshadowed by paternal worry. It wasn’t easy, not when the threat of losing both of one’s lieutenants even if the prospect was quickly rectified, and then having it happen again so soon. Shunsui had spent more than a few days curled up in the Thirteenth, hiding from the world, and the reality of the situations, for a slight change. Usually it was Jushiro seeking comfort from the curly haired captain after an attack, or whatever other matter stirred him.

Shunsui did seek comfort from Jushiro, though it was usually in a far different manner. Kyroraku had a habit of internalizing whatever was troubling him; he would often bluster into the office after one of his attacks, and hide the distress beneath the cocky teasing and a bottle of sake. To see Shunsui shaking slightly, that distant gaze in his eyes that hadn’t appeared since those first missions where reality had struck like a fist to the gut, worried Ju.

But Jushiro had known Shunsui for many years, sometimes seemingly too many to count, and had easily calmed the Captain of the Eighth with soothing words, a calming tea, and the simple chatter about whatever Shunsui wanted. His partner had eventually pulled himself out of whatever slump he had drowned himself in and they had talked Shunsui brandishing his sake cup with an easy smile.

Sōgyo no Kotowari giggled in his mind at the memories of a few of those events, the twin spirits always amused by whatever Jushiro’s partner did, and a humorous smile settled on the white-haired Captain’s lips. What he wouldn’t give to slip back into their days of the academy if only for a short while, escape their current reality and all its grievances, the weight of their age. Time seemed simpler then, less troubled youth, and whispers of war in the air. It had been the academy, running around and trying to survive the workload, dealing with Shunsui’s pranks, the Soutaicho gruffly teaching them and taking them under his wing.
“Ju you’re doing it again.”

Shunsui’s deep rumbling timber (one that Ju felt he could listen to forever), scolded in a faint whisper, eyes straying to the still slumbering youth. Jushiro flashed an apologetic smile at Shunsui vaguely shrugging his shoulders. The weight of the future had been heavy in his thoughts recently, and well dwelling and pondering was something Shu and himself had adopted in abundance (Yam-Jii said it came with the age which was not reassuring in the slightest) they both had agreed they would try not to dwell on the future. But well the past was always open for nostalgia.

Shunsui shook his head with a small half laugh, curls of chocolate brown hair trailing out from under his hat to collect around his features. Those entrancing brown eyes locked onto Jushiro’s own blue, the bond they shared that thrummed invisibly seemed to glow with happiness if just a touch briefly.

A soft gurgle of noise drew them away from the staring that could go on for hours, content to just glimpse the universe in each other’s eyes. Ichigo was stretching slightly in the bed, blinking blearily at the world, and rubbing at his eyes like a young child might. Jushiro thought the action was adorable, but wisely refrained from commenting on such (at least when the youth was waking up, Ichigo was not normally a morning person), though he did share a look with his partner and a raised brow.

Shunsui only nodded his agreement with a smile covered behind his hand and bright fond warmth saturating his eyes. Ichigo’s reiatsu uncoiled from his form sentient like, snaking across the room, till it landed on them. It paused, almost in confusion then reached out to interact with their own presences more thoroughly. The orange-haired Shinigami’s reiatsu was raging fire in the form of determination, soft currents of tempered wisdom and grief, protective darkness like rich soils, to Jushiro’s playful and hydraulic natured reiatsu.

Ichigo’s eyes fluttered open, revealing deep amber orbs, that swept around the room lazily tracing over their forms. The lieutenant’s brow furrowed as his gaze landed on the two Captains settled in the chairs once more, and a look of slight warmth with a touch of puzzlement spread over his gaze. He had the look of a man who desperately needed caffeine, and knowing Ichigo most assuredly in the form of tea.

“Good morning Ichigo.”

Shunsui spoke slowly and soothingly, the dazed just waking up expression still firmly entrenched on Ichigo’s features, he blinked a few more times and then hesitantly raised his hand in a mute wave. After a quiet moment Ichigo made a soft sound and ran a hand though shocking orange hair, and in a voice slightly rough with disuse and the early hour responded, “Morning?”

Ukitake chuckled faintly under his breath at the finitely concerned and lost answer; he made a mental note that if there ever was time to question Ichigo it would likely be in the morning. He hadn’t yet started the engines in his mind, the ones that told him what not to reveal to anyone, or rather how to function considering the still blank gaze he was throwing their way.

“Not happy to see us Ichi?”

Shunsui asked with a predatory grin eyes sharp as knives, voice light and teasing. Ichigo shook his head up, then to the side, as if he couldn’t decide the correct answer to such a question. Almost unnoticed his hand sneaked out from its place at his side and he grasped the hilt of Zangetsu drawing the blade and its presence closer to Ichigo.

“Always happy to see you Captain.”
Ichigo choked out with a rough dry kind of humoured tone. Shunsui raised a hand against his chest in pseudo hurt, casting affronted looks between Ichigo and Jushiro as if asking his partner if he could believe the snark and sarcasm Ichigo fitted into six words. Ukitake only inclined his head to indicate to his partner that he would not aid him in this endeavour; Ichigo sometimes seemed a sprite of snark and sarcasm, and one that would best Jushiro any day in that area.

“How do you feel Ichigo?”

Jushiro asked with a light gentle smile, the question in his eyes deep as a whirl pool. Ichigo pursed his lips, and furrowed his brow once more as if trying to piece together an intricate puzzle, and Jushiro reminded himself to never attempt to wake Ichigo up in the morning. He had no idea how Kaien had continued to do so (he had heard horror stories of flailing limbs and nonsense rambling) and survived it. Not when a sleepy Ichigo was apparently an unlocked box of sarcasm and confusion.

“I-I’m uhmm still a bit tired, but I feel way better than I have in a while… is – is there any caffeine, tea?”

Ukitake smiled when Ichigo responded with the mostly positive answer, and the predictable seeking of caffeine. Any Shinigami who was employed in a position requiring paperwork, knew the merits and lifesaving benefits of the substance whether in coffee or tea. Turning his head Jushiro traded a minute happy smile with Shunsui. Returning his gaze to Ichigo he nodded regarding the orange-haired Shinigami’s question about caffeine. It had been asked in such a hopeful voice, eyes bright as the moon, and with Jushiro’s confirmation a half-smile settled on Ichigo’s lips.

Before Jushiro could even heave himself out of the rock like formation of a chair, Shunsui had pushed him gently back into the seat (wouldn’t want him hurting himself on a chair, that was a viable concern with the seats they were seated in) and padded over to a small table resting against a wall.

Unohana was a wise and wonderful woman, which Jushiro had seen proven countless times. This was just another case, she had directed them to the room Ichigo was resting; accompanied by a short Shinigami who radiated nerves but had steel in his eyes while was carrying a teapot.

Shunsui gracefully poured the liquid into a cup all the bearing of nobility in their childhood showing through, the long stream of amber surreal in the early morning light. With a tip of his hat and a jovial smirk, he padded over and passed the ceramic mug over to Ichigo. The youth held the cup to his chest for a moment savouring the warmth, before he took a deep breath of the heady aroma and sipped at the near scorching liquid.

Shunsui settled back into his seat with a huff after placing the tea pot back on the side table with a slight clink that was loud as thunder in the silence that lingered about the room and the Fourth. A familiar large hand sought his own out, holding Jushiro’s smaller hand in his own warmer palm as they sat there in the silence content to let Ichigo wake up a bit (it was funny how easy doing nothing got as they grew older).

Every once in a while, Shunsui would look over; catch Jushiro staring in a mindless absent sort of consideration, and smile like the day light had appeared. It brought a mirroring expression to his own lips as seeing Shunsui’s smiles always did.

Jushiro briefly looked up at Ichigo after a few minutes of comfortable rest, wondering how the youth was faring having received the promised caffeine, and was surprised by what he found there. Ichigo was holding the ceramic mug, eyes shuttered close, a serene basking expression closing his features. What surprised Jushiro was the light threads of peace that seemed to coalesce around Ichigo.
Even from the first day Jushiro had met Ichigo, he had been able to tell within the first few minutes that Ichigo was not all that he appeared or claimed to be. It had been apparent in every motion to their experienced eyes. That in addition to the fact that whatever had happened to Ichigo before he had been inducted by the Shiba clan had been horrible, a war that tells playing in the air around him, and in his gaze.

He had carried himself like a warrior, always alert, always tense. And Jushiro knew how that felt from experience, the stress and drain it put on one’s self. Then there had been the eyes, they were old incredibly so for the young soul they hosted. Full of so many emotions always that Jushiro had always struggled to identify what Ichigo was in fact feeling, sorrow and grief had shown out starkly though.

It had been apparent to both Jushiro and Shunsui upon their first meeting that Ichigo was someone to watch out for. Either for the danger he could one-day present (the power that hummed in every fiber of his soul), or for the sheer concern that had swelled inside the both of them at the youth’s state.

It was foreseeable now which choice Ichigo was within their ranks. Oh, he was a man to be feared, Jushiro would never forget the way his blade danced and ripped some strange instinctive style, or the madness in his eyes that sometimes flashed like lightning.

But they had also seen a man who sometimes appeared far too innocent for the weight he was carrying, one swamped by a veritable cesspool of emotions and thoughts. There had been pain in every gaze, hurt in every corner of his lips, washed wary only briefly by Kaien’s smile or some small quirk; and really it had been the little things in life that made the youth smile, they had noticed. The sun rises, herbal teas, Jushiro and Shunsui smiling at each other like old lovebirds.

So, they had without even speaking (which was really not significant considering how often they conveyed words with nothing more than a gesture) agreed to take the youth under the wing. They had realized quite easily and within in a brief time that no Ichigo did not need training, he was highly proficient enough as it was. But they had offered a shoulder to lean on, a cup of tea when the young Shinigami felt he needed it.

Ichigo had just clicked with the two of them, in a way that sometimes made Ukitake wonder about the hidden truths in clipped sentences and gestures. Speaking with the two elder Captains for hours, about morality, the responsibilities of a governing body in relation to its citizens, the young man could hold a conversation as well as any ancient Shinigami, with intelligent and thought-provoking ideas behind each sentence. Nevertheless, they had slowly chipped away at the diamond like shell Ichigo surrounded himself with and found the man underneath.

Ichigo had been far more then he presented on first glance underneath the shell. Kind, thoughtful, caring, knowledgeable beyond reason sometimes. He was as complex as the rest of them even if it was sheltered and buried underneath the front he presented to the rest of the world to protect himself.

It was strange observing Ichigo now; there was something different about him that Jushiro couldn’t quite place. It was a good something he could tell that with ease, but whatever it was he had no clue. Only that the weathered shroud of a veteran he had carried around like a cloak wasn’t all there and in its place was Ichigo maybe not all whole but a different Ichigo nonetheless.

As if sensing the rather calculating stare from Ukitake, the youth looked up and caught Jushiro’s eyes gently lifting his arm with a happy little wave and gesturing the same with the mug. Jushiro copied the movement in a slightly less enthusiastic manner. Shunsui sighed beside Jushiro, it was a fond sound one that Jushiro liked hearing as the Captain of the Eighth caught their little rendezvous with a blatantly fake put-upon frown.
Again, Shunsui attempted to strike a dramatic and offended position, tilting wildly in his chair but somehow maintaining balance, and whispered something about his partner and his lieutenant betraying him behind his back. Jushiro set a comforting hand on Shunsui’s arm with a knowing and teasing smile, and lightly patted it in what was a sort of sarcastic comforting motion.

Low airy laughter drifted from the bed in the center of the room, and the two Captains turned their head to find Ichigo sprawled back on the bed, mug carefully placed on a side table, eyes glancing towards the ceiling with a wide-open grin on his lips. He just radiated happiness in a wild uncaged sort of way that made Jushiro want to hear that laughter many times over.

Shunsui’s gaze case back and forth between the bed and his partner, a low pout filling his lips, and he began murmuring about his prized lieutenant and partner once more though his eyes were flickering lights of amusement. Jushiro let a smile grace his lips, one of the soft real ones and let it show with a nod towards Ichigo, the youth beamed a bit brighter at the gesture if possible, before he slumped back into the medical gunnery with a soft kind of happy sigh.

Ichigo took a steady slow sip from the mug he had retrieved once more, eyes peering at the two Captains from over the rim in a slightly humorous manner reminiscent of an owl or a child. Shunsui settled down from his dramatic fit with a curl of his hand running through his locks, sharing a cursory glance towards Jushiro, all the questions and concern in the world there for his partner to see.

The white-haired captain nodded minutely, confirming that he was fine and that he thought Ichigo was likely now coherent enough to speak to the two of them (and that perhaps Ichigo was a bit better than even they had been expecting, even with Retsu’s warning). If anything was to truly wake up a soul it would be laughter, that and caffeine Jushiro amended gazing at the mug in Ichigo’s hands.

“So Ichigo…”

Shunsui started before abruptly trailing off as if he was unsure how to continue with his sentence, which was a likely thing. Shunsui liked to present the image that he had everything planned, and knew how to proceed. But Jushiro knew more often than not that was not the case in the slightest.

Ichigo cocked his head eyes a touch wider over the lip of the cup. Shunsui ran a hand through his curly locks again smoothing them back under the brim of his hat, in a rather difficult motion, before he nodded more to himself and continued, “So you are feeling better?”

The reiterated question surprised Ukitake slightly, having expected a multitude of other questions Shunsui could have thrown to start the conversation instead, ones that reflected more so the worries plaguing the Captain of the Eight’s heart,

Ichigo rubbed a hand over his arms again in a tired motion, considering the two elder Shinigami before he replied, “Better’s a strange concept when you’ve been living the same way for a long time. Still I do feel that way in most senses. I haven’t felt this rested in a long time.”

The orange-haired Shinigami’s answer was as upsetting as it usually was, in a way that Ichigo likely didn’t even realize. Someone had managed to train the kid to speak partial truths and deflect it with fact, but even then Ichigo wasn’t a liar and preferred honesty over it. Ichigo would have made for a scary adversary even without the vast wealth of his powers.

“That’s good I’m glad… Lisa’s been worried sick.”

Shunsui echoed in a quiet kind of confirmation that had Ichigo’s attention more than the broad heroics. A grimace painted the lieutenant’s expression as Shunsui mentioned Lisa. From what Jushiro had observed the two lieutenants had grown closer over the years working together and even
more so after their extended ‘training’ period.

Shunsui had likened it to the bond siblings often shared, through Jushiro really had no base for it but he assumed it was a good comparison. They often talked and chatted amicably whenever they worked together (which was often considering their positions), and Shunsui told him they often took lunch together, and as time had passed they had, he supposed become proficient in working together because of that friendship.

Ichigo’s head tilted towards the bed sheets in a universal sign of sorrow and apology, hand unconsciously seeking out the hilt of his zanpaktou and wrapping his fingers around the blade. With a soft frown, he looked up and with his heart behind his words said, “I’m sorry Taicho I let everyone in the division down, as well as hurt Lisa and you.”

Shunsui frowned at the response titling his head forward to shade his eyes and the emotions within them beneath the cowl of his hat. There was silence hovering, the confession lying heavily between the three as Shunsui thought over his answer.

Jushiro was a touch surprised that Ichigo had made the first move; he thought it incredibly brave of Ichigo to take the first step forward and responsibility in making an apology. Then again, he had learned long ago that expecting or trying to predict Ichigo was an impossible thing damned to be stopped and refuted at every turn.

Jushiro reached out and settled a comforting hand on Shunsui’s bicep warm reaisu pulsing between the two in a familiar nature. In between one breath and the next Shunsui looked up staring solely into Ichigo’s eyes for a long drawn out moment before he responded.

“Thank you for the apology Ichigo… I’m glad you understand the necessity of it. It means a lot to me that you took the consideration to apologize…” Shunsui struggled with the next part of whatever he wanted to say fingers idly tracing the floral patterned haori settled over his shoulders. Jushiro rested a comforting hand over his much larger one, understanding his hesitance. He didn’t want to hurt Ichigo, but he couldn’t leave his emotions the way they were.

“…I just… Ichigo I was so worried about you and after what happened…” Shunsui finished dragging his hand over face even as his sentence trailed off, eyes deep with emotions trying to convey his message. Ichigo frowned softly; his eyes were like gates swung open, emotions blown wide in amber pools in a way that Jushiro had never really seen with the orange-haired Shinigami.

“I-I’m sorry Shunsui.”

Ichigo apologized again voice low as embers, Shunsui’s head snapped up in a rough aborted motion, and likely before Shunsui could even comprehend what he was doing he was out of the chair and shuffling towards Ichigo. The youth shifted in the bed eyes wide as Shunsui hovered over him for a few moments staring at Ichigo as if he would disappear before he leaned forward in a carefully pronounced movement and wrapped his arms around Ichigo.

The youth stiffened at the contact as he seemingly always did, eyes wide as saucers at the gesture and looking a touch misty. Jushiro thought he could catch another mumbled apology under Ichigo’s breath as his partner tensed slightly. Shunsui’s voice was just loud enough for Jushiro to hear in the emptiness of the room as he spoke to Ichigo.

“Enough apologizing love, all that matters now is that you’re safe and home.”

Ichigo startled slightly at the words, before his hands hesitantly grasping Shunsui’s haori tightened to hold the heavy fabric in a white knuckled grip. Emotions were passing through his eyes like wind;
whirling and twisting back and forth in such a cacophony that Jushiro choose to look away from soul catching amber eyes. Ichigo’s mouth hesitantly mumbled over the last word Shunsui had spoken, as if Shunsui had uttered something utterly incredibly to the orange-haired youth. Maybe Shunsui had.

It was hard to tell with Ichigo, some things resonated; the simplest things left him gaping eyes brimming with emotions, while other words meant nothing even with the philosophy behind them. Ichigo rested his head in the crook of Shunsui’s shoulder for a moment holding on as if letting go he would fall away. Jushiro looked away giving the two a moment of privacy; he studied the hilt of his zanpaktou lovingly running his fingers over the weathered material.

After a moment Shunsui pulled back from the embrace, drawing Jushiro’s attention he leaned forward and with all the tenderness of a parent he placed a faint kiss on Ichigo’s brow, before he treaded back to settle beside Jushiro. Knowing his partner would need it Jushiro reached out and grasped Shunsui’s hand, reassuring warm and assuring between them.

Ichigo took a few breaths regaining his composure and from the peripheral of his view the white haired-Captain could see Ichigo reaching for his blade once more, dependant on his zanpaktou spirit in a way most Shinigami did. Then again, most Shinigami didn’t possess the bond Ichigo did with his spirit.

“So, any news from the outside world?”

Ichigo asked with a hesitant smile bringing the room forth from the somber aura it had settled on with the more serious matter of the conversation. Shunsui cocked his head and stroked his goatee eyes light and mirthful, lips grinning.

“Well we spoke to Unohana…”

Shunsui teased leaving the sentence hanging, Ichigo pouted at the blatant teasing crossing his arms in front of his chest and appearing for the world to see like a child. Shunsui laughed deep and throaty, kindling a light laughter from Jushiro’s own lungs at the humorous expression.

An unamused expression slipped onto Ichigo’s features as he waited for the answer with a huff. Finally, Shunsui relented recovering his breath he tipped his hat as if telling a secret and finished, “She said you’re free to go home today.”

A wide grin settled on Ichigo’s lips at the news bright as the sun in the room of the Fourth. Jushiro couldn’t help the curve of his lips at the contagious expression sharing a knowing glance with Shunsui even as he settled into the chair with a happy sound.

“So, have you been surviving without me Taicho?”

Ichigo asked after a moment, the picture of innocence even if mischief hid under the faux smile. Shunsui huffed and made a few noises of disagreement eyes darting towards the door as if contemplating escape before he straightened his posture and straight forwardly replied, “Of course, the office was quieter without your presence.”

Ichigo lasted all of a minute before he was cackling and mumbling about all that Lisa had to endure on her own. Shunsui maintained an affronted look shortly, before his own lips curved into a wide grin and he was joining in on the laughter. Jushiro shook his head in amusement settling back into the rock like chair, content to let the two catch up once more.

X

Their home was warm as Ichigo settled in the entryway leaning against a well-placed wall, Kaien
sliding the shoji door shut behind him with a click. He could almost feel the older brother’s concern, alert for the moment Ichigo so much as swayed unsteadily on his feet. And while he liked the warmth welling in his chest at the gesture, there was also a touch of familiar annoyance at the older brother’s over protective nature.

Kaien popped up beside Ichigo toeing off his shoes with a light sort of whistle under his breath, he was beyond happy to finally be bringing Ichigo home and he couldn’t blame the clan heir. Still Ichigo tried to relax the tense cast to his shoulders and focusing on his breathing, he was still far too out of place with his emotions. This was his home, and however much Kukkaku would likely act on her new vendetta (mainly Ichigo’s carelessness), it was a place where he was safe.

He succeeded somewhat in dispersing the tension rolling his shoulders; he didn’t understand why it was so hard for him to settle. Perhaps it was anxiety about being home again, and their reactions. Or maybe it was the lingering sense of familiarity that the whole structure carried that was leaving Ichigo out of place. In any case he acknowledged with a rough kind of sigh, that his emotional stability was close to nothing, and he was veritably floating in a sea of emotions.

A warm hand settled on his shoulder jolting him out of drifting thoughts, accompanied by a concerned prod of reaitsu. With a curve of his spine he glanced over into Kaien’s eyes, which were somewhat reassuring almost stating that the Shiba heir would be behind Ichigo the whole way. It settled Ichigo slightly, just as Zangetsu’s presence swept over him brushing aside conflicting feelings for a time so he could enjoy being home with his family.

Before he could thank Kaien for the gesture (and really his brother was being way too caring lately, though Ichigo didn’t entirely mind) a blur appeared in the corner of his vision before darting forward and across the entryway. When the blur finally stopped in it’s abrupt movements, Ichigo identified the new figure as Ganju, standing a few feet away, arms crossed with a pout adorning his features.

Ichigo studied his little brother in silence waiting for the youngest to make the first move, as he had an idea of the reaction he would be presented with (Shiba’s were as a general rule unpredictable). Ganju appeared much the same as ever, still dressed in variants of earthy green, and the typical Shiba accoutrement of too many bandages. But the kid had sprouted since Ichigo had last seen him (and that was a strangely familiar concept for Ichigo to comprehend, siblings growing up, and watching them do so), reaching near his chest, maybe his shoulders if Ichigo guessed correctly.

There was a kind of pride in the thought that his little brother was growing up, accompanied by a distinct horror and déjà vu that twisted his insides into knots. Zangetsu carefully picked said knots apart assuring him in breathy nonsense words that settled the disquiet within his soul. He had become numb to the family dynamic he was a part of, (if that was at all possible with the Shiba family) and the ones he had already experienced and maybe his sudden tip off the deep end with all it’s negative repercussions had some benefits.

Everything suddenly seemed different since he had woken up; maybe it was brighter in some ways, or maybe he had opened his eyes to whatever he was blind to. But the crux of the matter was, he was seeing his life, the one around him a touch differently. His family, the relationships he held, his own plans.

Ichigo’s little brother huffed appearing moments away from a full-blown tantrum by the somewhat adorable expression on his features, though Ichigo was certain the youth was past that stage. One could never tell with Ganju though, he could be childish one moment, and the next posses maturity and wisdom like that of Ukitake at other times. That was often how it was in Soul Society, time was a weird concept, and Ichigo was well experienced with that concept or as much as any one person could be.
Ganju stared at Ichigo, Ichigo stared at Ganju for a quiet few moments blatant with tension and other less noticeable things, more as they seemed to assess each other. Or rather Ganju was tracing Ichigo’s form as if he could find the cause of Ichigo’s illness, or pain, and that sent a bolt of guilt through Ichigo’s chest. Because really, he had thought he was done with worrying younger siblings over his well being, but here he was again he thought with a slightly aggrieved smile.

Ganju’s eyes narrowed and his hands settled on his hips, before with the mustering of courage on Ganju’s front the youth called out in a tone full of accusation he said, “Ichigo you pig.”

Ichigo blinked a bit in surprise at the words Ganju had spat out with all the petulance and thinly veiled emotions of a young child. Really Ichigo couldn’t expect anything less but it was still amusing, as was the word choice for such an insult. Smirking, though he let some apology reflect in his eyes Ichigo retorted sharply, “Is that an insult or a compliment? Considering your love of boars Ganju.”

Ganju pouted a look of consternation donning his features before his arms were crossed in front of his chest and he said, “That’s not fair Ichi-nii.”

Ichigo decided to agree with the sentiment with an appeasing nod. Ganju studied him sceptically for a few minutes eyeing Ichigo up and weighing his words before he rushed forward and jumped at Ichigo. Said orange-haired Shinigami scrambled to catch the veritable comet hurling towards him, catching Ganju in open arms and swinging him around a bit (with a considerable amount of effort compared to when Ganju was younger and smaller).

The youngest Shiba’s arms tightened around his chest like a choke hold squeezing the breath from his lungs, even as the gesture sent warmth hurling through his systems and split his lips with a smile. Ganju laughed as Ichigo swung him around a bit bright and airy, before Ichigo set his brother gently down on the ground with a laugh of his own.

Ichigo looked up from where Ganju had returned to studying Ichigo seriously, though there was a brightness to his expression again, one that Ichigo liked to see. Kaien was leaning against one of the far walls, a satisfied and smug smirk on his features, it was soft in all the right ways, and his eyes were like a hearth as Ichigo connected with them.

As if hearing the noise and commotion Ganju’s hug had caused, Kukkaku appeared in the entryway arms crossed expression something fierce (and Ichigo and the other males in the room, would deny that they had felt fear at such an expression). She came to a standstill in the entryway eyes wide as saucers as her gaze landed on Ichigo (had Kaien not told them he was coming home today the wicked man. Though perhaps he had informed Ganju?).

Her eyes traced over him almost near frantically, and the expectant and surprised silence from before was back. Ganju quietly and smartly shifted out of the way, and that was all that Kukkaku needed to fling herself at Ichigo and wrap her arm around his chest in a suddenly familiar death grip.

Ichigo tenderly wrapped his arms around Kukkaku breath leaving his lungs in an awkward gust of air at the force the one arm held. Really it was just one arm, and it held more of a punch than Ganju’s flying tackle. Kukkaku pulled back after a moment where Ichigo basked in the comfort radiating throughout his soul, those pleasant emotions and feelings shrivelled up and died at the icy glare that was directed his way.

It was as if the vessels in his body had frozen at the look on Kukkaku’s features, this was why he feared incurring her wrath. And why he knew better than to do actions that would incure it, or at least he thought he knew better. She weekly punched him in the chest with a fond shake of her head and a soft laugh the glare disappearing as she spoke, “Ichigo Shiba never do that again,” The glare returned
in full force and the temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees and she continued, “Because if you do it will not be pretty, got it?”

She ended with a vicious smile that would put even Kenpachi to shame. Ichigo hastily nodded and the room temperature returned to normal and everyone else in the room let out a quiet sound of relief. A small smile settled on Kukkaku’s features, there was concern there but also relief as she reached up to gently caress Ichigo’s cheek with sharp eyes.

Kaien shifted a touch too audibly in the entryway and she rounded on the clan heir with a fierce frown as Kaien reared back in fright. Ganju sidled over to Ichigo with a laugh eager to watch a somewhat familiar scene play out (it was almost always Kaien and Ichigo that got chewed out by Kukkaku, though when she decided to turn that bite on the elders that was a sight to see).

The Shiba princess didn’t even have to say anything before Kaien was apologizing in a hasty mumble the picture of humility. Kukkaku nodded satisfied and stepped back a pace from the rather intimidating pose she had struck the moment she had entered the foyer.

As if noticing the sudden and rather large conglomeration of people within the entryway, Kukkaku sighed and running a hand through long raven locks turned to Ganju and said, “I now see why you insisted on cooking tonight. Go on get back to the kitchen you can glue yourself to Ichi-nii at dinner.”

Ganju grinned abashedly at her words and the dry tone in Kukkaku’s voice, before his gaze darted between Ichigo and Kukkaku as if he couldn’t decide whether he would listen to her words, or whether he wanted to stay with Ichigo more. Giving the youth a gentle shove on the back Ichigo nodded with a reassuring smile and said, “Go on, I’ve missed your cooking, and can’t wait to taste what you’ve cooked. We can catch up later.”

Ganju pouted but nodded and scampered off in the direction of the kitchen with a parting wave and the tread of feet in the distance. As soon as Ganju was out of sight Kukkaku turned her gaze on Ichigo once more though it started sharp as iron it softened and she pulled Ichigo into a gentle hug this time.

“Don’t you ever dare worry us like that again Ichigo you hear? You need to take better care of yourself. Just remember we’re always here, we’re your family as much as you might wish otherwise we’ll always be here for you.”

Kukkaku admonished slightly face pressed into the clean and comfortable robes Ichigo was fitted in (Unohana had insisted he could wait to don the familiar and comfortable Shinigami shihaksho). Her voice was deep with emotions and Ichigo instinctively tightened his arms around her trying to assure his older sister that he wouldn’t be so careless.

The moment was abruptly broken as Ichigo’s back was seized by tough arms, pulling Kukkaku and Ichigo into a tight hug as Kaien cheerfully called out, “group hug!”

Ichigo choked on his breath in the middle of the sudden sandwich he was squished into, Kukkaku crushed against his chest, (or maybe it was more of him being crushed against her) growled out Kaien’s name with utter loathing and resignation. The older brother laughed unrepentantly, only squishing his younger siblings tighter against his chest in response.

Ichigo reminded himself that leaving Kaien alone, and not giving him attention was never a good thing. He was like a puppy in that respect, if he didn’t receive attention he would act, and usually not in the best interests of the people around him.
Ichigo squirmed weakly against the iron bear hug he was entrapped in, and mumbled under his breath about dragging Kaien somewhere and seeing how he liked feeling Zangetsu’s blade. The older brother just continued to laugh loud and obnoxiously. It brought a tiny and reluctant smile to Ichigo’s own lips, he had missed interacting with his siblings, even Kaien and his over exuberance was refreshing compared to the Fourth.

Kukkaku grumbled under her breath before she shifted around and released her one good arm (considering the other was more of a stump than an arm) and proceeded to wrack Kaien’s arm with her hand. Ichigo could almost feel Kaien pout as he made small hurt noises but refused to let go. Ichigo felt warm squished in between the two older siblings and without thinking much about it slumped in the arms holding him up, and rested his head against Kukkaku’s shoulder.

Instantly the arguing pair were on high alert concern tangibly rippling through the air, as they quieted gazes darting to their younger brother. Kaien stiffened before he relaxed and Ichigo mimicked the motions before settling once more, hesitantly Kaien asked, “Ichigo?”

The orange-haired Shinigami made a vague noise of agreement, followed by another noise of reassurance. Though Ichigo didn’t actually bother to lift his head from it’s resting place on Kukkaku’s somewhat comfortable shoulder.

He could almost feel the older souls trading glances over his head, but really Ichigo was too comfortable to care at the moment. Eventually the two settled and the three siblings just remained locked in a tight embrace for a silent few moments.

Kukkaku was the first to pull apart from their small huddle as Ganju’s voice echoed throughout the Shiba mansion calling on the older sister. Ichigo reluctantly let her go straightening up in Kaien’s arms even as the older brother pulled him tight against Kaien’s chest and held him for a few more minutes.

Then Kukkaku was calling them and Kaien let out a soft kind of sigh and was leading Ichigo further into the warm home (and really it was almost like the Shiba clan radiated warmth, in every breath, gesture, movement).

Eventually Kaien pulled Ichigo into the informal dinning room, which was a relative mix of comfy seating and a somewhat put together dining table. The room held a sort of mixed up feel to it, but in a good way with the wide variety of designs and patterns. The door connecting to the kitchen (at least it did after another door and a hallway) slid open to reveal Kukkaku, messy bun and all. She strode in and before Ichigo could decide on a seat of his own Kukkaku was pushing him into a green monstrosity.

He sunk into the seat with a bit of surprise and floundering before he finally found himself comfortable. Kaien was watching the scene with clear amusement form where he had settled in an armchair directly to Ichigo’s left (and for a second Ichigo wanted to do a double take, because he could really see it. See how the man had become the clan head), all poised looking for all of a minute.

Kukkaku satisfied with Ichigo’s seating arrangement settled into the seat on Ichigo’s other side with a satisfied grin. Ichigo just sighed in fond amusement at his siblings’ antics and shook his head settling into the seat, a moment later the shoji door slid open and Ganju entered bouncing with energy.

Grey eyes landing on the only orange-haired adult in the room, Ganju popped over to the three of them and settled beside Ichigo on the practically massive couch curling up against his sides. Kaien cooed at the sight, even as Kukkaku reached over Ichigo and swatted the eldest Shiba in the room.
Kaien frowned, bottom lip trembling before he turned to Ichigo and Ganju and whined about unfair treatment, and cruel younger siblings. Ichigo only laughed in response, far too used to Kaien’s antics and the echoing familiarity of antics from his own timeline.

Their eldest brother turned desperate eyes towards Ganju, hands spread out before him, and asked out loud, “Will anyone defend my honour? Trampled upon as it is.”

Kukkaku shook her head, and mumbled about older brother’s taking care of themselves, which earned a particularly sad puppy look from Kaien. Ichigo just laughed at the question, not acquiescing Kaien with a response.

Ganju looked between the three of them before he stood up on the couch and settled his hands on his hips before declaring, “I will defend your honour brother!”

With that he proceeded to fall back to the couch Ichigo was ensconced in and before he could move to stop Ganju, lightning fast hands were roaming over his sides. Ichigo covered his mouth to try and contain the laughter that was bubbling forth without success.

Before he could throw Ganju off Kaien joined in, and Ichigo’s clear laughter filled the room as they mercilessly continued to tickle him. Attempting to launch a counter strike Ichigo’s arms reached out and found Ganju’s unprotected sides and began to tickle them.

Ganju fell back from Ichigo to escape the torture bright bubbly laughter drifting from the youth’s lips. Kaien grinned still hovering over Ichigo as he continued to pull laughter from his lips. Fed up with the attack, Ichigo flipped them over with a great deal of effort on the lumpy couch and proceeded to tickle Kaien in revenge.

Soon Kaien’s own laughter was drifting through the room, it sent happiness thrumming through Ichigo’s veins. And really being with his family was the easiest way to find happiness Ichigo thought with a grin. Ganju laughed quietly staring for a few minutes, before he called out something about food and was disappearing with the click of a shoji door.

Kaien and Ichigo continued to toss and tumble on the couch trying to tickle each other to death with wide bright grins. Panting underneath Kaien, Ichigo looked up eyes bright as stars with the joy that just seemed to stretch inside him, a mirroring expression was on Kaien’s own features, and Ichigo thought if he could see his family smile like that every day then everything would turn out okay.

The Shiba princess let out a squawk of surprise, and maybe irritation at the sudden appearance of the puppy in her lap. Levelling Ichigo with a fierce glare even as he settled once more into the large cushion free of the oppressive weight.

Happy to oblige the request (at least it was one in Ichigo’s eyes or maybe a dare). The orange-haired Shinigami bucked his hips and when Kaien was unsteady shoved his older brother over the arm of the couch and into Kukkaku’s chair.

Kukkaku coughed loudly in the sudden quiet of the dining room, broken only by their harsh pants and the last traces of laughter. Kaien settled back on Ichigo’s thighs with challenge in his eyes, as if daring Ichigo to move him from his perch.

A knock sounded lightly on the shoji doors, and Kukkaku swept over to open the doors with an
expectant and happy smile. It opened to reveal Ganju, arms loaded with trays of food, still piping hot as the steam drifted in the air above them could attest to. Kukkaku carefully lightened his load and took some trays onto her own arms before ferrying them over to the dining table.

Kaien bounced up from where he had been sprawled in the seat he had stolen from Kukkaku, and paced over to Ichigo offering him a hand. Grasping it Ichigo was pulled out of the sinking chair to stand on his feet once more where Kaien guided Ichigo to a place set beside Ganju.

Kukkaku and Kaien were seated on the other side of the table, which was the seating arrangement they preferred. At least compared to the other one where Kaien sat at the head of the table, as the clan heir was wont to do according to procedure and tradition (though they really only saved that for formal dining).

Ganju darted back into the kitchen with a wink, and returned a moment later with even more trays as he settled them on the table a feast spread out before them. They thanked Ganju for the meal as everyone settled into their seats and the dishes were passed around and plates were filled.

Ichigo’s mouth watered at the rich aroma of food that inspired the air and drifted from the food laid out before them. Ganju had really gone all out, again and really Ichigo needed to praise the kid’s culinary skills more, because he was certainly nothing short of amazing.

They began to eat, a comfortable and amiable silence between the four diners, even as compliments were delivered to the chef continuously (a blush was already staining Ganju from the tips of his ears to his cheeks). Light chatter started up, Kukkaku curious about the latest news in Soul Society spoke to Kaien, even as Ganju turned and began to ramble to Ichigo about what he had done since last the orange-haired Shinigami had seen his younger brother.

It must have been a talent of younger siblings to speak for long periods of time without taking a breath, as Ganju continued to talk occasionally pausing to sample some of his own food, before he delved into a story about the new boar they had found in the outskirts of the Seventeenth district.

The meal continued pleasantly warm and homey, in a way that Ichigo missed and loved deeply. It reminded him of the nights in Karakura, Isshin boastful and boisterous as always, Yuzu’s delicious cooking (another younger sibling coincidence), Karin talking about her day.

It was strange and nostalgic how this life paralleled his old life in so many ways, the people and relationships he held (though he couldn’t blame certain people for being exactly how they were in the future), the dynamics he shared and his place within Soul Society.

And some things were so different. Because he had been in a war for most of his life once he entered the world of the dead, and that meant that there had never really been this peace and daily monotony as Ichigo had grown up. There had been concern for his well being, but never in such multitude, and they had never had time to really deal with it and treat it, not when there was another battle taking place.

Maybe he missed the relationships he had forged (who was he kidding he missed Kami damned everything with all his soul), how easy it was to fall in together and click with everyone in the war. The friends he had grown with, and lived with. The respect he had earned with his prowess upon the field, the characters that were forged in different situations.

But he was here now and that meant many things, but Ichigo knew at least a little that he wouldn’t trade it if offered, because saving them and their features outweighed his own want of the past. Unohana had said it was okay to want for the past. Had encouraged him to reflect on the happier memories he held of those times, of how his life was now.
Perhaps though he shouldn’t be doing it at the dining table, as the finger poking his side pointed out. Glancing down at Ganju who looked a touch put-out Ichigo smiled apologetically and said, “Sorry Ganju, my mind’s been a bit spacey lately.”

Ganju studied Ichigo in that way again, as if he could detect Ichigo’s injury through bare sight alone, before he asked, “But you’re okay now? You don’t have to stay in the Fourth anymore?”

Ichigo’s heart stuttered in his chest at the concern in Ganju’s voice and really Ichigo needed to stop worrying his younger siblings (and really siblings in general). He shook his head and with a reassuring smile replied, “I’m okay now Ganju, I just made some foolish mistakes. I’m home to stay though.”

Ganju nodded a smile slowly overtaking his lips once more as he turned and shovelled some food into his mouth with a nod. Ichigo grinned and resisted the urge to reach out and ruffle the mop of unruly hair settled on Ganju’s head.

“How are you feeling Ichigo?” Kukkaku asked voice piercing the lulling cacophony of noise that had settled over the dining table. Turning in his seat to look at his older sister (and Kaien who was eating as if it was the sole thing in the world occupying his attention), Ichigo considered the question, one that had made an appearance earlier in the day.

Nodding more to himself Ichigo replied, “I feel a lot better, and I think I’ll continue to get better.” Satisfied with the answer Kukkaku nodded and smiled eyes honest, before she turned to lecture Kaien on his eating habits, which could at times be atrocious (it was a wonder how he managed in formal settings). Ganju turned to Ichigo eyes bright and expectant, as if ready to account another story or some epic tale, when a loud knock pierces the vale of noise settled over the table.

Ichigo cocked an eyebrow wondering if they were expecting visitors, but as his gaze traveled to Kaien, he could see mirroring confusion on the lieutenant’s features, and concluded that this was an unexpected guest. They all sat there for a moment still as stone, almost as if debating answering the door (and Ichigo briefly wondered about the servants, before recalling that Kaien had mentioned giving them the night off).

Finally, Ganju jumped to his feet, pushing his chair in and sending a questioning look towards Kukkaku, who nodded curiosity also shining on her features. Ganju beamed and headed towards the door disappearing from sight as another round of knocks echoed throughout the home.

Ichigo wondered who could be visiting them at such an awkward time, it seemed none of the others had any clue as to who their sudden guest could be. The question was soon answered as a familiar loud voice echoed throughout the Shiba household, and the three adults let out simultaneous groans of resignation.

While they all loved the clan head (and it was still a strange concept that Isshin was the clan head and managed business, and was serious. At least compared to the father he knew), his presence was overbearing or exuberant on a good day. Still Ichigo knew they were all secretly a little happy that Isshin was here.

The man carried with him a bright sense of life, as if it clung to him. Ichigo also thought his positive attitude was one that was contagious and being in Isshin’s presence while nostalgic and slightly hurting always left Ichigo feeling a touch brighter.
Ganju entered the dining room with a skip in his step and a happy grin on his features, following close behind was Isshin. His heart still jumped every time he saw the man, and Ichigo doubted it would ever stop. But the mind-numbing pain he had first felt upon meeting the man again, had diminished and was more of an occasional dull ache in his soul.

Isshin swept into the room, all vibrant dramatic movements, he pulled up a chair to the dining table even as Ganju fetched another plate. Ichigo supposed it was never too late for him to join them for dinner.

Isshin froze in his exaggerated movements, as his gaze landed on Ichigo from where he was about to sit down, a relieved look crossed his features, and the thought behind it set Ichigo’s chest on fire. Then before he could even think to move out of the way, he was being swept up into another fierce bear hug by the clan head (and really the Shiba clan were tactile people).

Ichigo deflated in the tight grasp, tenderly wrapping his arms around the older man and ignoring the familiar smells of his childhood, and the safety of Isshin’s arms that just seemed to flow through Ichigo. Instead he attempted to focus on Ganju who was watching the scene with clear amusement and bright eyes, happy to see Ichigo molested…. Or rather receive all the positive attention.

Eventually Isshin set Ichigo down, the orange-haired Shinigami landing with a huff as he gingerly clambered into his chair once more. Kaien laughed at Ichigo’s motions, even as Kukkaku flashed a trace of sympathy his way.

Isshin stared at the elder Shiba siblings as if contemplating vaulting over the table to give them both hugs (he had already likely given Ganju a hug in the entryway, and Ichigo had no doubt that if he really wanted he would vault the table). Instead the man smiled and settled at the chair placed at the head of the table loading it with a sample of every dish.

Ganju beamed at the action, and Isshin laughed, the atmosphere of the room picking up like sudden spring as Isshin asked Kaien a question. Light chatter sprung up, Isshin guiding the conversation asking about everyone’s day, how their hobbies were progressing.

Ichigo was content to sit back and listen to the conversation occasionally answering whatever question was thrown his way with a soft smile. Just being there at the table with his family, was enough to keep a perpetual smile on Ichigo’s lips, his chest feeling lighter than it had in a long while. Even with his recent healing there was really nothing that beat a home cooked meal, and the company of family.

Isshin reached over and ruffled Ichigo’s hair a question in his eyes and the curve of his lips, concern there promising a later conversation (and Ichigo couldn’t wait for the point where everyone would stop lecturing him on taking care of himself). Ichigo smiled in returned a gentle reassuring curve of his lips as he turned and nodded briefly to Ganju’s ramblings. Looking back, he caught a fond satisfied smile on Isshin’s features and it made Ichigo’s heart ache but in a good way.

Turning his attention back to Ganju, Ichigo listened with a light smile as Ganju described a rather strange patch of moss, happy to let his little brother ramble. He settled into his seat once more breathing in and out into the moment, he was home, and the future was ahead, but for now there was just his family.

X

Chapter End Notes
Thank you all for reading I hope you enjoyed the chapter, and the honestly really fluffy last scene. Comments/reviews are always appreciated till next time!

Peace!!
Uitwaaien

Chapter Summary

Ichigo takes a trip to the archives, Ichigo is pestered by a certain cat, and has to suffer through socializing.

Chapter Notes

Uitwaaien

(v.) To take a break to clear one’s head; lit. “To walk in the wind”

Hello everyone, here is chapter 35! Thank you all so much for the awesome support you guys have been showing, it’s readers like you guys who encourage us to write. I hope you enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The archives were as dusty as they always seemed to be; years of the stuff piling up like sand on every surface. As Ichigo walked down a clustered isle that loomed on all sides, filled with parchment and spindly bound books, the oil lamp in his hands swung precariously as he lifted it up to glance at a section trying to find a text correlating to a certain time period. It cast swaying shadows over the walls in an eerie manner as Ichigo tamped down on the urge to glance around nervously as if the sudden guest in a horror film.

His decision to break into the archives in the rather early morning had been a spur of the moment decision. He had been laying in bed, waiting for sleep to come. It hadn’t, as much as he knew he needed to sleep, and wanted to, it just eluded his grasp.

It would be a few more days before Unohana had the sleeping pills she promised ready, though Ichigo was still sceptical on the concept of the pills actually working. He had tried them once in the middle of the war, a few times in between, when they couldn’t afford soldiers who were too sleep deprived to react. That could cost lives on the battle field. Instead of the pills allowing him to get a restful sleep, he had been trapped in his nightmares, almost a form of sleep-paralysis. Kisuke had been the one to design them, and if that meant anything, it helped to convince Ichigo that the pills
wouldn’t work.

But he would try them because he wanted to get better, and the concept of a good’s night rest was still a mostly foreign concept (sleeping in a coma for five days did not count). Almost like a dream in a strange sense of irony. Thinking of Unohana reminded Ichigo that he had an appointment with her in the next week (really it was Ossan reminding Ichigo), he was slightly trepidatious about their therapy sessions. But Ichigo knew if he could trust anyone to provide proper counselling within Soul Society it would be the Captain of the Fourth.

With a sigh Ichigo resumed his earlier train of thought. Sleep hadn’t come, he had stared at the ceiling just breathing, listening to Zangetsu, letting thoughts run in ever similar circles. Between one moment and the next he had needed an escape, chest tight, soles of his feet itching. An escape from the emptiness of the Shiba home that lingered when everyone else had fallen asleep. So, he had slipped away, after making sure Kaien was asleep (he had had a few incidents where he had been caught in late night wanderings by the older brother).

Ichigo hadn’t known his destination at first, just knew that movement, following his feet would help. So, he had walked, travelled along Rungokai’s empty streets in the newly chill night air, and just thought. Sometimes it was the easiest thing to do (other times it was near damming), just let idle thoughts drift, contemplate his return to the barracks and Lisa’s reaction, what tea house Byakuya and Ichigo should visit.

Eventually he had looked up from his musings, at the whisper of Shiro’s interest, to see he had stopped in front of a familiar old antics shop. It was as decrypted as the last time Ichigo had glimpsed it, with its tinted windows and collection of knick knacks clogging the murky glass panes.

There was an aura about the place that just warded off strangers, spoke of time and space, the dust of the world. It was an out of place shop. Ichigo had stared long and hard at the shop door, rotting wood mottled with green, and his thoughts unconsciously swerved to the tattered old journal tucked away in his room under a floorboard.

The book and its contents were still a mystery, one that Ichigo had been attempting to unravel since he had picked the book up again in this timeline. It detailed experiments and events, things that had happened hundreds of years in the past, and things that had only recently come to pass (like an entry about a set of labs being burned down), the dates spread before and after Ichigo had arrived in this timeline.

He was near certain that the author was also a time traveler, though there was the possibility of it being someone of an extreme age like the Soutaicho. But that wouldn’t explain the omniscience in the old and brittle pages.

Curiosity peaked and feeling a refreshed sense of energy to seek the answers Ichigo had turned towards the archives. The first date written within the text of the bound book; dated well over five-hundred years before Ichigo had crashed into the current timeline, slipping to the forefront of his mind.

If he could find archives or reports from that time, Ichigo considered that he might be able to find a reference of the mysterious time traveler. And that had led him to where he was now crouched in the archives, running his fingers through a stack of aged papers at three in the morning.

Ichigo had honestly done stranger things before, he thought with an easy humorous kind of smile. Shiro’s rough chuckles echoed the sentiment as Ichigo paused and pulled out a thin stack with fading ink, hefting the oil lamp Ichigo shined it over the parchment squinting at the tiny font of dancing characters. It was at times like these that he wished he still had his glasses (if only because it was
dark and the font was near impossible to read) he supposed if he visited the world with a Gigai he could get a new prescription. But that would involve visiting the mortal realm, which he wasn’t quite certain he was ready for.

That was beside the point he conceded with a nod, as Ichigo settled onto the floor, reliving the strain on his legs that had begun to burn. Maybe he needed to invest in some stretching with his daily exercising. Yuzu had always said yoga was good for healing, right? Zangetsu’s amusement at the sentiment flowed warmly through Ichigo’s chest as he placed the oil lamp carefully on the ground, where it would provide a good radius of light.

Lifting the paper close to his eyes Ichigo settled into reading the sprawling text with a purse of his lips and an arched brow. It seemed the author of the stack of paper was a Shinigami from the Tenth division at the same time period of the beginning of the old book, it was a report on a few hollow attacks within the inner districts.

It was the typical report format, bland detailing of the hollows encountered, standard injuries, and any casualties. There were some interesting side notes in the margin of the text, mentioning how one of the Shinigami in the squad had disobeyed the Captain’s orders and gone tromping off in the opposite direction at the sight of the hollow. The Shinigami who had wondered off was listed later in the main report as missing in action.

Overall the report had little information of use to Ichigo, and with a tired sigh he turned and placed it back in the filling system. He resigned himself to a long night of sifting through reports and other documents from the timeframe.

He was mostly okay with that, or at least he would be if he had any clue of what he was looking for. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Except the needle looked exactly like hay, because as Ichigo could attest to, time travelers didn’t really stand out (well okay he did, but that was because of his hair… and his power, so maybe he was a bad example). The most he could hope to find was a mention of a power surge alike to the one Soul Society had experienced when Ichigo had first arrived.

Kaien had told him about that night, how the sky had been painted white, the wind had howled and bayed ripping branches from trees. The very air had hummed with power; oppressive, Kaien had described it as eyes shadowed like the depths of the ocean.

Otherwise he had no idea what he was looking for. Perhaps a miracle man (or woman really), someone who displayed talents to the masses, that would appear like magic to the general populace or even to the Shinigami. Pausing in his train of thought Ichigo’s brows furrowed as he considered an idea.

If the time traveller was from the future and they were a Shinigami, or someone knowing of the Shinigami arts, then figuratively they could have come back and invented them in the first place. His brain was hurting trying to wrap it around the concept, but regardless he pulled out a small notebook he kept in an inner pocket (he had Kukkaku sew them on, after one too many complaints about not enough pockets).

He quickly jotted down the idea, and a point to research founders of the Shinigami arts, additionally he added other things he was looking for in his research. Nodding more to himself Ichigo could feel Ossan’s approval at the gesture (having so many memories got confusing at times, and ideas strayed) and Ichigo thinking quite literally outside of the box (because really anything relating to time travel was outside of the box).

Turning around to peruse the stack of sheets once more, Ichigo hummed a song from his teenage
years (something punk, with tons of drums) under his breath, as he flicked through a stack, eyes tracing key words and dates. He would have to come back in daylight and speak to the archivist about the origin of the different Shinigami arts. As he would likely have difficult finding the different sources in the large building, the old man however seemed to know every document within the building.

Finding another promising text Ichigo settled down and cracked open the book (and yay an actually bound text, though it was quite literally falling apart in his hands) and zoned in on the text. He frowned at some of the words and stuck his tongue out, that was one thing about research into the past. The language was different, words that were used commonly in everyday speech never existed or had completely different meanings in the past.

For a large portion of his earlier research Ichigo had carried around thick volumes of text on language alone. There had also been a few texts on the time period and the culture. It was funny considering Soul Society’s rather stagnant state, but a few things had changed. Shaking his head of distracting thoughts Ichigo refocused on the script wondering over the pronunciation of a particularly long syllable word.

It was a few minutes later that his senses picked up on a new reaitsu. Ichigo cocked his head assessing the reaitsu, ripples of space, the feel of mint and mornings. With a shrug he returned his attention to the text, he recognized the familiar mirage-like presence, so there was no cause for concern.

Ichigo wasn’t the only soul who liked to break into the archives after hours. Flipping a page Ichigo analyzed the text and jotted down page numbers, as well as little facts into the small notebook (and it was a real juggle that task in between balancing paper, and his notes). Ichigo sort of wished he had listened to Kisuke’s ramblings about mysteries and deductions, as he sighed and ran a hand through his hair before refocusing on the wavering text. If his escapade served nothing but succeeding in making him fall asleep he would call the mission a partial success.

His thoughts were a soft murmur like music as Ichigo continued to read settling and shifting against the book case every so often to achieve a more comfortable position. Occasionally he would hear the distant whish of fabric, or slide of books but otherwise the archives echoed with quiet. It was peaceful like the streets of Rungokai, but different, rich with the age and histories of the realm of the dead.

“Ichigo.”

The orange haired Shinigami briefly looked up at the whisper of his name, before he returned his gaze to the text tracing over a word with a frown, sounding it out, and referring to a collection of translation notes at the back of his notebook. Shiro’s amusement rang like a gong in Ichigo’s mind, and idly he wondered what the hollow spirit found so amusing, even as he studied the few guidelines, scratched in his own messy handwriting.

“Ichigo.”

This time Ichigo ignored the whisper, sure it was just his imagination and maybe his sleep-deprived mind playing tricks on him. Again. it wouldn’t surprise him if it was, considering the recent bought of hallucinations he had suffered because of his insomniac tendencies. Ossan whispered something about irony and avoiding the subject, but Ichigo only shook his head and turned his attention to a sheet of paper that was far too flimsy.

“Ichigo.”
This time the name was said with force and a tug on a strand of Ichigo’s hair. Startling slightly, Ichigo blinked owlishly pulling himself from the pages to look up into Sosuke’s deep wine orbs. The man had an exasperated expression placating his features, and in the dim glow of the oil lamp he looked a touch ethereal.

The orange haired Shinigami brightened, Aizen could have chosen to avoid Ichigo but he had come to visit, or say hi, or chat, whatever the man would prefer to call it. Sosuke would phrase it differently to save his presumed pride (and man did the scientist Ichigo know have tons of pride).

The happiness at the thought was accompanied by the familiar and warning knowledge that of course, Sosuke was not a sociable person. And while he may have sought Ichigo out to discuss whatever findings of his, it was far more likely that the scientist who had refrained from visiting Ichigo in the Fourth (it wasn’t really his style Ichigo felt), had finally decided to confront Ichigo.

Said Shinigami had all but confirmed for the two scientist that yes, he was from the future. But he had refrained from elaborating more than that (beyond a few brief pointed glares, to illustrate some rules). He was damn near certain that the enigmatic man wanted to grill Ichigo on the future, but perhaps he would wait?

“Ichigo.”

His name was followed by another, harsher, tug on his hair. Ichigo smiled apologetically and glanced up once more into Aizen’s eyes, filled with a touch of fondness accompanied by sharp annoyance. The older man sighed, one of resignation and long suffering as he dragged a hand over his face.

“So, what are you doing here Sosuke?”

Ichigo asked with a bit of forced cheer in his voice, in between the void of tired and energetic, but barely there enough to muster energy to actually be enthusiastic. The question was also phrased in that inquisitive way, that Ichigo knew would bite at Sosuke’s nerves. The scientist in question grimaced at the question, eyes darting to the veritable stack of books collected under his arms.

Oh, so he had been here for research materials, and wasn’t stalking Ichigo, again. That had been a fun few weeks, where Aizen had been hellbent on the belief that if he followed Ichigo around he would reveal all of his secrets. Needless to say, Sosuke had received near zero information from his observation, and one ticked orange-haired Shinigami.

“Researching, what are you doing here Ichigo? Aren’t you still supposed to be in the Fourth?”

Aizen asked with a sharp brow, and a prick of a feral grin. Ichigo blinked a bit in surprise, so Aizen hadn’t known he was free from the Fourth? That was strange, the man was the kind that wanted or needed to know everything. Still Ichigo supposed it was rather new news.

“I broke out of prison, for good this time.”

Ichigo replied with dry humour, too weary to attempt for sarcastic pep. Sosuke studied Ichigo, really studied him. He could feel those intelligent eyes boring into his skull and everywhere else. Ichigo resisted the urge to fidget to Shiro’s amusement, and wondered why everyone was staring him down as if they had x ray vision. Yes, he had been injured, but Unohana wouldn’t have released him if she didn’t think he was damn near one hundred percent.

“Are you sure? I don’t think Unohana would want you out here at… three in the morning?”

Aizen finally asked after a quiet few moments, where Ichigo was tempted to ignore the scientist and pull out his research again. Though it was a valid question. Ichigo wanted to groan at the question all
the same. Unohana had given him the vote of confidence, he was well enough, and in a stable enough sort of mind to be walking around. Just because he wasn’t sleeping (much) didn’t mean there was reason for concern.

Ichigo took a deep breath and pushed aside building irritation. They were all just concerned. That had been his mantra through his stay in the Fourth, question after question about how he was feeling driving him over the edge. He repeated the same mantra under his breath once more, it had only been one night and already everyone was hovering over his shoulder.

Ichigo could readily admit now, that yes, he was fractured, and yes, he had some mental health issues he needed to work through. But that however did not mean he needed a bodyguard for his own safety twenty-four seven.

Zangetsu-Ossan’s presence washed over Ichigo, soothing the irritation with soft whispers, and the lulling feeling of his inner world. Before prodding him to answer Aizen who was staring at Ichigo with growing concern. Right not the best plan to complain about being fine and then zone out in the middle of a conversation.

“I’m fine, her only advice was to avoid a lack of sleeping for a continuous streak. I’ll sleep tomorrow.”

Ichigo answered in a breathy voice, and leaned back against the book case, refusing to think about the familiar answer to the question that had hovered on the tip of his tongue. Though Ichigo doubted replying about sleeping when he was dead would not have earned brownie points with Aizen.

“You never answered my question about what you’re doing here Ichigo.”

Sosuke finally prodded, there was concern and maybe disappointment on his features but it was swept away by faint curiosity. Ichigo looked around arms stretching out as if to indicate the research and ever-growing piles of paper around him before he looked up and responded with an empty, earnest smile, “Research.”

For that answer he received a glare, that pulled soft laughter from Ichigo’s lungs and he relented after regaining his breath and honestly answered, “I couldn’t sleep so I decided to do some research, I’m looking for dates correlating to a certain text I’ve found.”

Sosuke frowned at the mention of Ichigo’s frequent insomnia, before his eyes were lighting up with curiosity, and Ichigo realised he really shouldn’t have mentioned the mysterious text, or maybe he should have stopped talking altogether. Because Sosuke’s interest was now piqued and that meant he would not likely be leaving for a while.

As if to acquiesce Ichigo’s thoughts the older man settled onto the floor of the archives with a brush of his shihaksho and a huff of breath. Ichigo stared balefully at Sosuke for a few moments, before with a sigh he handed over one of the sheets letting the lieutenant scan the brittle paper in silence.

After a few minutes Aizen looked up, brow furrowed, Ichigo wondered what he was confused about. The report of mysterious sightings around the beginning of the Gotei 13, or the language and the use of a verb that currently meant to eat used in a rather dynamic way.

“I suppose your research has something to do with your…. Time travel?”

Sosuke fished awkwardly eyes glancing from the paper to Ichigo. Under the scrutinized gaze Ichigo shrugged his shoulders and flashed the man a wicked grin. An affirmation and a tease, because if Sosuke wanted information he would actually have to ask for it. Ichigo didn’t normally go around
handing out free information, and especially not to a competent scientist like Sosuke (the key word there was normally).

Aizen hummed for a few moments and Ichigo pulled out another stack of paper to study flicking through it and browsing the opening sentences. It was nice just sitting with Sosuke, not attempting to play around the man’s mind games, or refrain from blurt out certain tender information (like the fact that he was you know a mastermind in a war, or that Ichigo was kind of over powered).

Sosuke coughed after a few minutes, and Ichigo looked up mostly ready for whatever the man was going to throw his way. Sosuke sized Ichigo up once more (and he was sort of getting tired of that, or maybe he was just cranky) and said, “Alright I’m going to guess a few things.”

Ichigo nodded and flashed a quick thumbs up, Sosuke nodded his own lips curving up into a gentle smile that took away the sharpness and revealed the gentle soul underneath. The lieutenant collected his thoughts for a moment more before he continued, “You think there’s another time traveller. You have some clue or whatever that indicates this and are searching for proof,” Ichigo nodded and Sosuke continued, “and then there is the fact that you are actually from the future.”

Ichigo nodded again with a wince at the thought of the future, he was trying to avoid thinking too deeply about the particular subject. At least for a short time, he just wanted to recuperate and recover a bit before he plunged headfirst into time and space. Running a hand through his hair Ichigo sighed and replied, “A future, the one I came from can no longer possibly exist in any form.”

“Oh, and why is that?”

Aizen fired back as soon as Ichigo had finished with his confession. The orange-haired Shinigami shifted uncomfortably at the question, pressing back against the shelves behind him that wobbled a bit at the force. Ichigo looked up briefly, before he looked down again, Sosuke could think about it for a few minutes before Ichigo would grace him with an answer.

“In your future… I know there was a war, that much is clear. You must have done something to change the course of the future, either through the elimination of an enemy or…”

Sosuke spoke under his breath, audible enough for Ichigo to hear his mumblings, as the lieutenant trailed off eyes going wide with realization. Ichigo flinched sharply worry beginning to gnaw at his insides. What if Aizen decided that he suddenly did want to wreck Soul Society? What if he was hurt by the news of the future and lashed out?

“Shh Ichigo breath, deep breathes it’s okay, you know Sosuke. As much as he is bitter with some of Soul Society, he has seen what the future you have revealed to him holds. He will just need time to comprehend the revelation.”

Zangetsu-Ossan assured Ichigo, deep rumbling voice soothing Ichigo’s nerves and helping Ichigo to calm his breath where it had begun to pick up. Tentatively looking up Ichigo caught Sosuke staring in concern at Ichigo, the look sent warmth and reassurance running through him twice fold. He reassured the scientist with a soft smile, and the man nodded briefly before Sosuke’s gaze drifted past Ichigo’s head to rest on the stacks of paper deep in thought.

Picking up a stack of paper, Ichigo turned his attention to the words, content to give Aizen the time he needed to organize his thoughts and comprehend the new information dumped on him. Idly Ichigo wondered what Kisuke and Aizen had been conspiring about after the reveal of Ichigo’s true nature.

He wondered with a wolfish grin what outlandish theories they had suggested, what they had
debated about (what if one of them thought he was Kaien’s son, that would have been a strange thing indeed). Ichigo also wondered when one of them would step forward and ask how he had travelled through time. They would probably be a touch disappointed by the answer, if only for the lack of science and machinery.

“Ichigo… Ichigo.”

The orange-haired Shinigami looked up at the insistent calling of his name to meet Sosuke’s bemused glance. Underneath the amusement was a rush of emotions, an uncommon sight for Ichigo to see (though less uncommon now then it had ever been in his own timeline). Sosuke was confused, lost, curious, and a few other things that Ichigo couldn’t place, and he felt some guilt for putting his friend in such a place.

Though the guilt he felt wasn’t enough to push him into spilling his secrets to the man. Aizen had already been inside of Ichigo’s head once, and that was more than enough for Ichigo. Sosuke sighed and shook his head before he said, “So in your timeline… I gave up on Soul Society and there was a war. But… I wasn’t the only major player... hmmm you considered me a potential ally in the beginning. Even knowing what I could have become. This suggests that while I was a problem, there was a greater enemy who…”

Sosuke trailed off eyes dark and empathetic in their sockets. Ichigo’s chest was hurting a touch, but Shiro’s presence took away the sting and wrapped him up like a blanket. After a second Ichigo mustered the energy to flash the lost scientist an assuring smile before he continued, “There were two wars. In the second war, you were an ally in the defeat of the enemy.”

Sosuke’s countenance brightened minutely at the information, and confirmation of his theories. The weight that had settled on his shoulders mainly dispersed lightning fast, however seeing some tension remaining Ichigo breathed in and continued, “What happened in the future, and the actions of the you of that timeline have no relation to you. The Sosuke Aizen I know. You’ve already helped me change the future, so don’t worry about it Sosuke.”

Ichigo finished with a bright smile trying to convey his feelings on the matter in the gesture. Sosuke looked conflicted for a moment (was likely attempting to process Ichigo’s words) before he nodded and returned the smile in a less there way, but meaningful all the same.

Unbidden a large yawn overtook Ichigo and he covered his mouth tipping to the side to stretch. When he was finished he looked up and caught Sosuke’s keen gaze, he had all of a minute to regret the action before the older man was advising, “You should probably go home Ichigo and get some rest. You can speak to Kisuke and I later, when you have the actual energy and coherency for it.”

Ichigo swatted lightly at Sosuke’s shoulder at the snark in his words, but nonetheless tucked his notes into his pockets and shuffled the loose paper back into the binders. With another quick yawn Ichigo unsteadily rose to his feet swaying a bit on the way up before regaining his equilibrium.

Sosuke watched the scene with concern mixing with amusement even as he rose to his own feet, gaze darting to one of the few windows in the archive letting faint rays of light peak through like dust. It was probably early morning already, and Kaien would surly yell at Ichigo for his careless interactions. Ichigo couldn’t much find it in himself to care.

They walked to one of the less known entryways together in silence, comfortable and filled with thought. Arriving at the door Ichigo’s arm was caught by Sosuke’s hand as he turned to open the door, looking into the scientist’s arm he could see the unspoken relief that Ichigo was okay, and that he had forgiven him.
“Night, or rather morning Sosuke.”

Ichigo said with an easy smile and a tip of head. Sosuke smiled in return, eyes illuminating at the words before he let go with a nod and Ichigo nodded back once. Before he darted out the door and through Rungokai’s early morning streets; Just beginning to bustle with life.

It had been a good night, lack of sleep ignored. Ichigo felt content with what had occurred, it made his soul feel light. As he travelled home with a faint smile on his lips Ichigo braced himself for Kaien’s diatribe knowing it was fuelled by love. Then he could finally try and get some sleep.

X

It was some time in the late afternoon when a knock rang throughout the house. Ichigo shuffled in bed, blearily opened an eye before he rolled back over, and tucked himself into the covers with a groan. For a moment, there was sweet blissful silence and Ichigo started drifting again, warm soft bed, exhaustion pulling him under.

The knocking resumed with increased noise, and while Ichigo was tempted to pull his pillow over his head instead he sent a half-hearted glare at his bedroom door and prayed that someone would actually answer the damn thing. With that thought Ichigo pulled his blankets over his head and attempted to rejoin Morpheus’ realm.

It lasted for all of a minute before the knocking began again, except this time it went for a minute straight. As Ichigo was trying to comprehend why someone so desperately wanted a member of the Shiba household to answer the door he threw back the blankets and roughly pushed himself up to a seating position. Tired of listening to the knocking and hesitantly deciding to resolve the station himself.

As he was objectively staring at the door to his room like it was a familiar face, he recalled that Kukkaku and Ganju had vacated the house some time ago (and really it was more of a vague recollection of Kukkaku’s voice piercing his sleep followed by the slamming of a door).

With another particularly venomous glare as the knocking resumed, Ichigo settled his feet on the floor, hissed at the cold, and padded towards the door swaying on his feet. He yawned still tired from earlier in the day. It had been his idea to spar with Zangetsu, because while he wasn’t permitted to go back to active duty yet he still needed to keep in shape.

Kaien the ever over-protective older brother had instantly vouched to watch over Ichigo, in case he pushed himself too far (and he had of course admitted to what Ichigo had suspected in the first place. He just wanted to see Ichigo’s true power, and awesome dueling). It had been a gruelling spar, but in the good way, testing the limits of his body in the way only a few people could, pushing him into working up a sweat.

His muscles twanged thinking of the various maneuvers he had pulled off to avoid Zangetsu-Ossan’s fluid strokes, and graceful steps. Not to mention the brute force behind each of Shiro’s strikes, accompanied by wild instinct. He hadn’t realized he was so tired till after the spar, when basic cognitive functions had dimmed to something painfully slow.

Kaien had given Ichigo a particularly unimpressed look, one filled with a mix of fondness and resignation as he ushered Ichigo to his room. He had rolled Ichigo under the covers, whispered something about getting a nap, kissed his brow, and then had disappeared to do whatever official clan business the older brother was wont to do.

Ichigo had drifted off damn near instantly. And maybe it hadn’t just been the training that had him
tired from head to toe, he was getting sleep, but Unohana had just delivered the pills early in the morning (far too early for Ichigo’s liking). Without them he had still been struggling to get a full night’s rest, still he was doing better, it was just going to be a gradual process. He had accepted that after Ossan had drilled it into his head too many times to count.

Looking up from where his feet had unconsciously been guiding him. Ichigo stared in trepidation at the door. Before with a sigh he mustered all the bitterness at being pulled from his bed and opened the door.

He blinked in mute surprise at the familiar purple haired Shinigami on the other side of the door, fist poised for another knock (and had she really been standing here for five minutes waiting for someone). The Shihōin princess blinked for a moment in surprise, staring at Ichigo and obviously noticing his rather ruffled state, before a small smirk tilted her lips and Ichigo resisted the urge to run his hand through his hair.

Instead he sighed and mustered a rough, “What?”

Yoruichi pouted at the (somewhat) rude answer, but Ichigo couldn’t muster the energy to care. He would apologize later, maybe procure some cat nip and set Yoruichi off on her lieutenant, see how Soi-fon liked that.

“Now Ichigo is that any way to greet an old friend?”

Yoruichi asked with a grin, the area near her seeming to brighten infinitesimally at the gesture. Right how could Ichigo have forgotten that Yoruichi was the damn near personification of the sun, wonderful from a distance, something else up close.

Ichigo didn’t resist the urge this time and ran a hand through his hair throwing Yoruichi a dry look in return to the teasing question the Captain had posed, before he looked back briefly at the house. He was going to tell Yoruichi something that would helpfully steer her away so he could get back to sleep. Ichigo twitched slightly as he remembered and turned to face the Shihōin princess before he informed her of the unfortunate news.

“Kukkaku’s not here, her and Ganju went… out.”

Ichigo finished with a shrug, he was mostly certain that they were likely in Rungokai, probably distributing food to the residents of a poorer district. Things had been getting better in Rungokai, the poorer districts seeing some change, especially with the addition of the militia. But the recent surplus of souls, plus the traditionalism of Soul Society meant that there would always be those hungering. Then again Ichigo reflected faintly, that it was the same in any society.

When he looked up again, he expected to see mild disappointment on Yoruichi’s features. Instead a cat like grin painted her features, and she was positively glowing. Ichigo could already tell that it was going to be a long night, whatever she was recruiting him for.

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“Now, now Ichigo can’t I hang out with my favourite orangette?”

Yoruichi said with a pout and then switched to a wink and a grin. Ichigo refused to let his irritation show, instead he took a deep breath and remembered that no, cat did not always taste as good as it was said to, no matter what Shiro insisted. And that additionally Yoruichi wasn’t always this annoying, he was just grumpy because had been woken up, which was veritably her fault.

He wasn’t going to say anything about the nickname relating to his hair either. He had heard them all before by now (though Shinji had managed a new one to surprise Ichigo when they were training,
though it was less of a nickname and more of a curse), and Yoruichi using it meant nothing but a dull amusement to Ichigo. There was bit of fondness associated with the term, if only for the warmth in Yoruichi’s eyes when she looked at him. And that she had avoided using Mashiro’s nickname for Ichigo was another boon.

Rolling his eyes, Ichigo briefly turned his gaze behind him, glancing at the entryway, before asking, “What do you want Yoruichi?”

He managed to say it without sounding like he was choking on leather, which Ichigo counted a success as he decided to lean on the doorway rather than support his own weight. Yoruichi laughed at the question, leaning forward into Ichigo’s personal space to study him like a specimen under the microscope before she pulled back and said in sing song tones, “Well someone is cranky. Did I wake you Ichi~go?”

Ichigo stared for a moment, dubiously, before he nodded a small pout squeezing its way onto his own lips at the prolonged conversation, and evading of the answer Yoruichi was managing. As if taking pity on the tired soul in front of her, Yoruichi twirled her plum hair between her fingers (it was long now, near what she sported in his own timeline) and said, “Well you see… Shinji decided that he wanted to preserve unity between the Vizard, in case anything goes array. You know safety and all that. So, he decided that we should have dinners semi regularly. And well you see, Isshin overheard and declared that we should have lieutenant and Captain dinners and well…”

Yoruichi drifted off with an easy smile all grinning teeth and apology. Ichigo decided to breath through his nose, and search out Zangetsu’s presence as he computed the information. It had probably been Hiyori who had leaked it (no doubt unintentionally), the woman was just too loud, especially when Shinji was added to the equation.

Still Yoruichi was avoiding the point of her visit and with an impatient gesture he made for her to continue, trying to keep his expression open, and away from looking like he was a minute from exploding. Yoruichi considered Ichigo for a moment before she smiled reassuringly and continued, “So we’re having dinner in say half an hour. Sort of short notice and all that. With all of the Captains and lieutenants, and afterwards we (the Vizard) are going to go out for drinks. Hopefully next time everyone won’t insist on barging in.”

Ichigo held tightly onto Zangetsu’s presence, letting the older spirit’s soothing presence wash over him as he comprehended the subtext in the Shihōin princess’ message. What she was telling him was basically the messenger, and that he needed to get ready for dinner with all the big personalities of the Gotei 13. Great.

Really Ichigo did not want to socialize, or attend the dinner. He had originally planned to spend the evening finishing some research (he was almost thinking of getting some string and a board to try and make some connections) and then maybe work on a technique he was adapting. Those plans were firmly trashed now, might as well have fed them to the dangai cleaner.

Shiro cackled in the back of Ichigo’s mind, he had half a mind himself to just shut the door and barricade himself in his room. Or he could let Shiro out to play with the Gotei 13, that was a bad idea though. If Ichigo was anything of his generation it was partially anti-social (okay mostly anti-social) and not a fan of events involving people.

Looking up from where his thoughts had been drifting once more, he caught sight of Yoruichi planted there hands on her hips face jutting inches from Ichigo’s own. He leaned back a bit and with a breath out of disappointment and a drop of his shoulders he replied, “Fine I’ll be there, can I go and be in peace now?”
Yoruichi blinked owlishly at his response, before she laughed a bit, and then that turned into more of a cackle. Dread filled his stomach, and Ichigo could almost imagine ears twitching with mirth atop her head (and really imagining her with cat additions was not a far stretch, considering how everything about her reminded him of cats).

“Sorry Ichi, no can do. Shinji and Kainen assigned me to stick with you till it’s time. They want to make sure you don’t get ‘lost’ on the way, or as Kainen said, ‘So that he doesn’t fall asleep again.’”

Yoruichi said with an honest tilt to her head even underneath the teasing voice. Ichigo groaned and dragged a hand over his face, but stepped back to let the Captain of the Second inside. Of course, his brother would team up with Shinji.

The mere thought sent chills down Ichigo’s spine just thinking of it, because those two, who were overprotective as all hell, put together only spelt disaster for Ichigo. Not to mention future plotting, that Ichigo had no doubt was already being implemented.

Yoruichi glided in as Ichigo slid the door open with a pained smile. He led her to the living room, asked her about a drink (Kukkaku had spent days drilling manners, the proper ones or something, into his head), and then once she was settled pivoted towards the stairs.

Maybe if he was lucky he could sleep till they needed to go, and hope his hair looked presentable. But no Ichigo groaned out loud in annoyance as Yoruichi’s footsteps behind him made themselves known (and he had probably surprised her again).

Knowing there was no way he was going to ditch his trusty tail Ichigo paced to his room, flipped around to see a bemused smirk on Yoruichi’s face and entered his room with a melodramatic groan. Ichigo could already tell this was going to be a long night.

X

The location Shinji had picked for their dinner was phenomenal, or at least it would have been if they weren’t trying to cram twenty-seven people into a restaurant not suited to that size. Still, Ichigo supposed it could have been worse from where Shinji was plastered on his left, and Shunsui on his right.

At least someone had had the bright idea to create a seating plan of some kind, because the current captain of the Eleventh (he had funny facial hair was all that Ichigo remembered of the man), was an explosive man, though he didn’t see him anywhere in the crowds. And well certain personalities did not get together so well.

It helped that he was at least squished between two people he knew very well. He could very well have been placed beside Chōjirō, the Head Captain’s lieutenant. Who Ichigo had spoken to only briefly, and that had been about teas and different blends. Or worse Unohana, who would have likely spent the whole dinner lecturing Ichigo on his health.

Ichigo glanced around the multiple tables pushed together, a sea of mostly familiar faces with a few lost to time or memory. Ichigo had noticed near as soon as entered the room hot as a sauna, that the Soutaicho had somehow escaped on the dinner. Ichigo wished he could have been as lucky to escape the circus of a night; alas he was not an ancient elder who could probably get away with whatever he wanted.

An elbow seated itself in his side, and Ichigo jolted, casting a suspicious gaze at the grinning blond next to him. Shinji had been waiting outside the venue for Ichigo (or at least it seemed that way, perhaps he had been waiting for other guests as well), he had stared at Ichigo for a quiet few
moments as if divining the truth in the light purple under his eyes, and the mess for hair he sprouted.

Then Shinji had shared a grin with Yoruichi, that just screamed about how the two were lovers of cats, and damn near personified the animals. Shinji had wrapped and arm around Ichigo’s shoulders, gentle and light eyes asking if it was okay, and escorted Ichigo inside ignorant to Ichigo’s depressed mumbles. The building did have a nice interior, all polished wood and the scent of tobacco. But the overcrowded atmosphere seemed to exhume every living thread of the rooms.

Shinji winked raising a finger to his lips for the universal gesture of silence before he directed his finger to the next table over, where Isshin was making a scene (as to be expected) and Rangiku was flirting with one of the waiters.

His heart ached a bit at the sight of the young lieutenant. Recalling the wonderful woman, she had grown into, always caring for others, and always one to have fun. Her presence reminded Ichigo of Gin, the young snake, and he made a mental note to ask Sosuke on how the young protégé was, because Ichigo was not going to stop by Shinji’s office (the hellscape it was) long enough to find out.

A few waiters returned juggling glasses in every nook and cranny of their arms, interrupting whatever Shinji was about to say as they whirled around and set the drinks down. Ichigo breathed out a deep sigh at the rich green tea he had selected, the aroma of the blend helping to soothe his nerves. Across the table Rose caught Ichigo’s eye and waved cheerfully. Ichigo mirrored the gesture before returning his gaze to the deep liquid.

“So Ichi, I’ve been hearing you’re the one who put the idea about the mortal realm into Kisuke’s head.”

Shinji drawled eyes mirthful as he turned his head and nodded at something Lisa had shouted from across the table. Ichigo wondered if they served alcohol at the restaurant, in conjunction with that thought, was the image of Soul Society burning down in flames. A collection of drunk powerful people was never a good idea, and Ichigo only prayed everyone was wise enough not to drown themselves in sake.

Turning his attention back to Shinji’s question he nodded with a happy little self-satisfied smile. Kisuke deserved to see the human world and all of it’s inventions, if it helped Soul Society develop and grow that was only a bonus. Shinji nodded and seemed to mull over a question as he sipped at his own drink, which looked to be sake, but could have been tea.

“Ichigo.”

A voice called out, and Ichigo turned his head to identify the speaker, eyes landing on Love suddenly seated beside Rose. He envied the man’s late appearance, the less time he had to spend in the cramped room the better.

Ichigo waved a bit at the duo again, Rose and Love shared a look. The kind that only partners managed to share, where they were speaking without words. Jushiro and Shunsui were masters in that form of communications. Ichigo had once watched a full-blown conversation, communicated only in eye twitches, and the curve of their lips.

“Are you planning to take the open Captain’s position Ichigo? You’d be perfect for the position.”

Love asked deep voice piercing the cacophony of noise. Ichigo stared at the man, brow furrowed in confusion, lips tilted in a half frown he questioned, “The open Captain position?”

Shinji turned in his seat to peer at Ichigo before he asked, “You haven’t heard?”
Ichigo shook his head at the question, and resisted the urge to snap back that Kaien had refused to divulge any gossip during his stay in the Fourth. And that Ichigo was still trying to figure out what had happened since his stay in the blasted division. Still an open position within the ranks of the Gotei 13 was a pretty major thing, and something he would have expected to hear about.

“Hmm well you know how there’s been debates over creating another division because of the awesome powers of the Gotei 13?” Ichigo nodded his head attention focused on the information Shinji was delivering, the blond continued, “Well the idea was scrapped, because why spread our forces when we can consolidate our strength or some shite like that. Well we all were told that about a week ago at a Captain’s meeting, thing is Captain of the Eleventh didn’t show up. We searched for him ya know? Big hustle, surprised you haven’t heard.”

Ichigo frowned at the information, warning bells ringing throughout his mind as he thought of his own timeline, because a Captain doesn’t just go missing and it doesn’t get talked about. Though Ichigo supposed with the Vizard situation in his own time, a missing captain may not have spelled the same surprise it did now.

“I wonder.”

Ichigo growled out, sending a glare at Kaien who was animatedly gesturing to Mashiro, hands weaving some grand story. His older brother froze, shivers tracing his spine, and Ichigo considered his task done before he turned his attention back to Shinji prompting the blond to continue.

It was Rose who continued, “Apparently there was no trace of him anywhere, no note, sign, anything. Some reported him doing a solo recon mission in one of the outer districts but it wasn’t official in the records. Were still searching but Yammamoto is starting to accept referrals, and organize the battle challenges from the Eleventh, if only because there’s nothing to do about it.”

“Wasn’t Ojiro really adept at reaitsu sensing? Maybe he thought he felt something?”

Shunsui butted in from Ichigo’s other side eyes keen with interest. Ichigo felt his head spin a bit, but he took a breath, pushed the tidal wave of emotions down, and let Zangetsu soothe him. it was a bare possibility but Ichigo wondered if the eccentric man had found some trace of the Quincy.

“So, are you going to apply Ichi?”

Shinji asked reiterating the earlier question. Ichigo thought about it for a moment, considered what it would be like to be Captain of a division. He had lead in the war, but that was different from the daily monotony of being a Captain. He just couldn’t see himself doing it, he barely survived the office work of being a lieutenant as it was, only Shunsui managed to save him in that respect.

The notion was quite frankly amusing, he could almost picture the comical image in his mind, and his mirth betrayed him as laughter left his lips. He received a few concerned looks for the gesture, but Ichigo placated them with a smile once he had settled and responded, “No way, I barely survive being a lieutenant as it is. I just can’t see myself as a Captain”

The orange-haired Shinigami received dubious looks for that answer, and Ichigo swore he saw a few conspiring looks thrown across the table, but the matter was dropped. Ichigo settled into the seat as the food was delivered in waves, a general variety of food to feed a crowd, good and heartwarming if the smell was anything to go by.

Light chatter drifted between the occupants of the restaurant, and Ichigo observed it with a warm subtle smile. Byakuya waved at Ichigo from where he was squished beside Ginrei, and Ichigo flashed the man a sympathetic smile before his attention drifted off again. The atmosphere of their
gathering reminded him of the earlier days in the wars, when a battle was celebrated with dinner, the atmosphere was gritty but there had still been light.

He doubted before the war that the top hierarchy of the Gotei 13 had ever assembled in such a manner. Especially not after the dismissal of so many of their powerful members. War was like that, brought people together; sure it was usually in the wrong way, but the bonds of war were stronger then time itself Ichigo reflected with a self-depreciating smile.

A fist lightly tapped against Ichigo’s forehead and he turned his attention to Shinji who was beaming at Ichigo like the sun. In some respects, Ichigo considered Shinji to be like a sibling, a brother even; they had light fights, arguments for fun, they both annoyed the hell out of each other. It was a nice dynamic for Ichigo to have, even if he did sometimes want to bash the blond’s head in sometimes.

“Say Ichi, what was it like well you were having the long nap?”

Shinji asked, drawing the attention of near half the attention of the table, Ichigo flashed the man a glare, for which he only received and unapologetic grin in return. Ichigo ran a hand through his hair and wondered how to formulate a response, he couldn’t really say he had met children of the future who he knew from the past.

“Hmm, it was kind of like floating you know… time wasn’t really a thing, but it was warm in an abstract sense.”

Ichigo answered with a shrug, he could just feel Unohana’s inquisitive stare from across the table, and knew in their therapy session in the next week, she would be grilling him on what he actually saw. The others just grinned, mumbled something about Ichigo getting a lot of sleep, but he ignored it.

The captain of the Fifth was grinning again, and Ichigo knew that never boded well for the party involved. Though it seemed the blond was temporarily done with his interrogation session, though Ichigo didn’t doubt that it would likely resume at the bar.

Before Shinji could continue whatever, he was plotting, Hiyori had yelled something across the table that ignited Shinji’s nerves. In an instant, the two were bickering across the table, trading gruesome faces and insults, regardless of the other patrons in the restaurant.

Ichigo shared a look with Sosuke, who had mustered one of long suffering, and burst into quiet happy laughter, Rose’s musical voice, and Love’s deep baritone joining in. The light atmosphere remained as happy conversation flowed, and good food filled their souls. Ichigo smiled and settled into the warmth of his chest, and the night, he was still tired, but being here was at least somewhat worth it in the end.

X

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter, reviews/comments are always appreciated!

Snail!!
Saudade

Chapter Summary

Conversations, and odd habits.

Chapter Notes

Saudade

(n.) A nostalgic longing to be near again to something or someone that is distant, or that has been loved and then lost; “the love that remains”

Hello everyone, we are back for chapter 36, which is basically an episode of Ichigo sleeping again but it works. Small side note for any future writers out there, I would one-hundred percent recommend Story by Robert Mckee it is, in my friend’s words, essential for writing. Side note finished I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X= Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Shunsui returned from his visit to Jushiro’s office, to the overwhelming sound of silence lingering about the office and in the air; like the quiet after canon fire. The slightly curious (and maybe somewhat worried Captain) glanced around the office as he stepped inside, eyes sweeping over every surface.

Brows furrowing in concern, Shunsui walked over to his desk, peered under the wooden frame (it had happened more times then he would like to admit), and was greeted with nothing but familiar wood paneling. He repeated the action with the other two desks squished in the room trepidatiously, as if expecting his lieutenants to jump out in some attempt at a prank or a surprise. He found nothing.

It occurred to him eventually as he plopped down in his chair with a frown, that Lisa was still out to lunch visiting Nano-chan; she wasn’t supposed to be back for near another hour. So that was the disappearance of one of his lieutenants explained, but not the lack of a certain orange-haired presence.

Really Ichigo had only returned to work a few days ago, and already he had disappeared. Shunsui ran a hand through his curly hair with a sigh, thinking of the youth, it had been quite the sight the other night at the dinner they had all had (which Shunsui personally never wanted to experience
again, if only for the sheer mayhem that the night had produced). Ichigo had seemed vibrant in a way he hadn’t seemed in quite awhile; then again Ichigo was always in flux.

Still it had been nice to be seated by the youth, even if Shunsui could sense Ichigo’s perpetual annoyance the whole night. Shunsui understood the youth’s irritation, Yoruichi had relayed her mission to wake the lieutenant with glee, and Ichigo had glared the whole time. He had eventually, after some simple chatter, even informed Shunsui that he was planning on returning to work a few days earlier than Kåien or Unohana would like at the time.

Shunsui had been veritably concerned at the news for all of a moment, before he recalled that Ichigo was most often, not the person to sit and do nothing all day (which had been evidenced by Kåien’s whining earlier in the week when Shunsui had visited Ju), and with Kåien as an older brother Shunsui doubted Ichigo had been doing much else of anything, at least under Kåien’s watchful eye.

Honestly Shunsui had to respect Kåien for the dedication he held for his family, the bonds of family the whole Shiba clan had. Shunsui knew that if something were to come between the clan and Soul Society, that Kåien would without hesitation choose his family. It showed in the care he put forth into every action for Ichigo, and for his younger siblings. Kyroraku also knew that however much Ichigo pretended to loathe the actions he did appreciate them.

So, the Captain of the Eighth hadn’t raised a fuss when Ichigo had walked into his office three days earlier then planned, eyes bright, vitality in his step. And if Unohana had lectured him on it briefly, it had been worth it to see Ichigo settle into the office with a small fond grin.

It had also been far too amusing to watch Lisa and Ichigo’s reunion. She had stared at him for a minute, hugged him so tightly he looked like he couldn’t breathe, before she stepped back and the yelling had started. Still Shunsui had broken it up after about five minutes of high emotions, and Ichigo apologizing consistently whenever he could get a word in edgewise (which wasn’t often).

Things had simmered down after that, and slowly they had all gotten into the familiar motions of working together again. Talking over paperwork, discussing the state of the division, overseeing training. Lisa and Ichigo had abandoned Shunsui for lunch together after a day, resuming their usual schedule, and leaving their poor Captain all alone (and he wasn’t really hurt, not when he could go and bother Jushiro).

That still left the question of where Ichigo was currently at the moment, Kyroraku absolved with a heavy sigh. Shunsui knew that Ichigo hadn’t accompanied Lisa on her lunch break, preferring to let the female lieutenant have some time of her own with Nano. That and Ichigo seemed particularly reluctant to socialize today, accompanied with a kind of mindless focus on paperwork.

Shunsui didn’t push; he would support Ichigo in whatever he was going through. It was obvious that Ichigo was going through some healing of some kind (he was certain that Retsu was involved), but the injuries that Ichigo carried took time and would likely never fully heal (Shunsui would know).

The Captain of the Eighth had at least hoped that Ichigo would have had the decency to leave a note or a memo if he was going to suddenly trapeze into the outer districts of Rungokai. Which had happened a few times, usually with good reason. Pushing away from his desk Shunsui padded over to the window and gazed outside at the sunny day, crisp clouds, and hues of fall. He stared.

Shock painted his features, followed swiftly by bemusement and a touch of bewilderment. His missing lieutenant was sprawled on one of the neighbouring roofs of the division, warm terra cotta tiling standing out sharply against the ebony of his shihaksho.

It was a strange but peaceful sight, the youth flat on his back, seemingly asleep, silhouetted against
the sky that colour that made Shunsui think of hidden things, and flowers clustered on the shores. Shunsui smiled fondly and just stared for a little while, content to memorize the moment (and he most assuredly was relating the story to Jushiro).

After a few minutes of silence, Shunsui stepped out of the office window (and no he was not clumsy, nor was it his age Katen Kyōkotsu, thank you very much) and flash stepped onto the old building’s roof. He landed a short distance from Ichigo with enough noise to have drawn his attention if he was awake, and probably enough noise to wake Ichigo’s soul regardless.

However, the lieutenant didn’t seem to notice or waken, instead shifting slightly on the warm tiles. And they were warm Shunsui could feel the heat from them drifting through the soles of his feet, and just wavering the air in a blanket of heat.

Shunsui padded closer after shifting to test his weight on the tiles, eyes observing Ichigo and the peaceful expression painting his features. Shunsui almost didn’t want to wake Ichigo, just leave the kid there basking in the sun like a cat (and really Ichigo sometimes did personify a cat himself).

Un fortunately, Shunsui could not leave his lieutenant out to bask in the sun on a roof in the middle of the day in Soul Society. So, he crouched down, rested a palm on Ichigo’s shoulder and gently shook him awake.

“What?”

Ichigo choked out groggily brows furrowed in confusion as he rolled over to face Shunsui. Honestly it was a touch adorable, and he understood how his partner could sometimes find certain things cute. The young lieutenant blinked blearily up at Shunsui, as he pushed himself into a seated position and dragged a hand over his face before running it through his hair.

“Ichigo breaks over.”

Shunsui said softly standing up from the crouch with a few pops of his joints, and the relieved sigh of his muscles. Ichigo continued to stare at Shunsui for a moment, as if he was seeing or hearing something else. Trying to draw Ichigo back to the present, or the waking world, the older Captain extended a palm and helped heave Ichigo to his feet leading the two back to the office.

Ichigo was the first to slip inside padding over towards the coriander couch backed up against a wall with a mound of pillows. The orange-haired Shinigami stood there staring at the couch for a few minutes, before he prowled over to his desk grabbed his paperwork and returned to the couch, plopping down with a heavy sigh.

“Sorry Captain it’s been a few late nights, I’ve been building up my strength again.”

Ichigo explained after a few minutes, likely sensing Shunsui’s curiosity and concern; in the sudden silence Shunsui was tempted to fetch some tea if only to encourage Ichigo to speak. Kyroraku accepted the apology with a fond warm smile and a nod directed towards his lieutenant, silently disagreeing with the youth’s want to build up strength. It wasn’t like Ichigo couldn’t work out if he wanted to, but Ichigo did not need to get any stronger, he was already damn powerful as it was.

Even if Ichigo hid it under an unassuming guise it wasn’t so easy to hide the power in every aspect of Ichigo’s being, to someone as experienced as the old Captain. Shunsui knew it had been Ichigo who had killed the Menos Grande that night he had fainted, because he had been the only one in the area at the time (and wasn’t it scary to imagine that that was when Ichigo had been tired and hallucinating).
Kyroraku could see why Shinji and Rose had been joking about Ichigo taking the open Captain’s position (though honestly Ichigo would not suit the Eleventh as it’s Captain); he was powerful, charismatic, able to sway anyone to his cause, and with strong morals.

Still if Jushiro and Shunsui did retire soon one day, the Captain of the Eighth would easily name Ichigo as his successor. They had all been a touch surprised by Ichigo’s refusal to even think of applying, but Shunsui felt that Ichigo had known it wasn’t the right fit (that and the thought of all the paperwork had probably scared him off).

Turning his attention to Ichigo once more, who was curled in the seat in a semi-awkward position, papers settled in his lap and balanced against a book and asked with a grin, “Do you often sunbathe on roofs, Ichigo?”

The orange-haired Shinigami looked up at the question. Eyes darting to the laugh lines prominent on Shunsui’s features and the jest in his voice, before Ichigo grinned lips curling like a sprite and he answered, “Only when they call to me.”

Shunsui shook his head in mirth, at the nonsense answer flashing Ichigo a small smile, accompanied by a roll of his eyes, before he turned his attention to the paperwork before him. It was the same boring monotonous stuff that they were always delivered, Shunsui knew in all relativity that paperwork allowed the Gotei 13 to function. But that didn’t dissuade his burning hatred of the dull sheets. Even Jushiro, a man who was for all appearances gentle and unassuming, hated the stuff.

They had even planned on a few occasions on how to ditch the paperwork. Shunsui still had the burns on his thigh from their one bad attempt involving a touch too much fire, and maybe not enough control. Katen Kyōkotsu nagged at him along the channels of his mind, her voice bitter with distaste as she told him to stop procrastinating and actually start working. He could hear the fondness underneath the haughty tones just fine, as he set to work briefly skimming a document on transfers to his division.

“Hey Taicho?”

Ichigo’s quiet voice broke the companionable silence that had developed between the two as they continued to work, dutifully filling out paperwork. Shunsui looked up from a particularly bland sheet to glance at his lieutenant, Ichigo was still curled in a position that Shunsui would never find comfortable, but his head was turned towards Kyroraku and there was a sort of seriousness to his features.

“Yes Ichigo?”

Shunsui responded with a raised brow and a sharp hand gesture for the youth to continue. Ichigo pursed his lips and crinkled his brow for a moment before he asked, “What was it like when you revealed your dual blades?”

Huh, Shunsui mused, out of all the things Ichigo could have asked, he hadn’t been expecting a question relating to his zanpaktou and their rather dual nature. The Captain of the Eighth looked at his lieutenant, assessing the reason behind such a question. Ichigo stared back eyes open as a young child’s, and Shunsui could see an honesty behind the question. So, he considered his answer.

It had been strange the first week where Jushiro and Shunsui had found out the nature of their zanpaktou, one full hectic week. Where they were shepherded under the Soutaicho’s care, and rumours travelled faster than the Flash Goddess herself as if carried by light itself.

“It was a strange experience Ichi, some things changed for us in major ways like our schooling. We
received a lot of attention from the nobility, and there was some discord between the regular students and us. But people accepted it as a fact of life within time.”

Shunsui answered with a faded smile, eyes nostalgic as he thought of the past. He looked up and caught a brief smile on Ichigo’s own lips, fleeting and fond, but there nonetheless. Shrugging his shoulders, and rolling them with a crack Shunsui settled back into his chair prepared to continue with the paperwork, eyes carefully tracing his lieutenant.

“What would you say was the hardest thing about learning to fight with a dual bladed zanpaktou?”

Ichigo asked, Shunsui studied his lieutenant again, noting a deep curiosity and pensiveness painting his features. Shunsui wondered what the youth was thinking of, but happy to help him in any case Kyoraku replied, “It’s a great balancing act, and if you’ve noticed Ju and My blades are very different so we had to find our own unique individual fighting styles. We also had to learn to connect with both sides of our bodies and blades.”

The orange-haired Shinigami nodded at the answer, running a hand through his hair, Ichigo paused and settled for a moment. Shunsui assumed the youth was satisfied (at least temporarily) and reclined in his seat, debating the merits of abandoning the office to visit Ju again, rather than sit in the clustered space.

“Hypothetically if one wanted to improve their techniques or whatever with dual blades how would they do so?”

Ichigo asked tentatively, hand reaching up to scratch at the back of his head. Shunsui stared, really stared long and hard, and really wondered. He had always thought of Ichigo’s decision to join his division, why he had finally decided that of all people Shunsui was the right fit.

His division was one without a main speciality, known for being a laxer division, but able to help in unique zanpaktou (as with Jushiro) having experience with one. Still he was sometimes left wondering what would have had happened if the youth had joined Shinji’s division.

He had wondered why out of all the options Ichigo had chosen Shunsui, who well was a totally cool guy (he ignored her snide comment), he did not have the other benefits that some divisions shared at least for Ichigo. He understood Ichigo’s reluctance to join his brother’s division, and on a baser level he kind of understood his refusal of Shinji’s offer. The blond at the time had already been dealing with Gin, a child protégé who seemed to rub everyone the wrong way, and Aizen who just seemed to lurk with something beneath the surface.

But now he wondered if the Shikai Ichigo had paraded around with for years, was his actual Shikai. What reason could the youth have to hide something like that? It was a well-known fact throughout most of Soul Society that Ichigo was powerful (at least to those who knew of him).

Perhaps it was for that reason Ichigo had hidden it? Because if he had revealed a dual blade he would have received even greater attention, and potentially in a war state of mind, it would lose an advantage over one’s enemies.

Still Shunsui wished Ichigo would have told him, but he valued all the same that Ichigo felt like he could trust Shunsui enough to ask questions that were basically a confession. Thinking of questions brought his attention back to Ichigo’s question. How did one improve when it came to using a dual blade? Shunsui furrowed his brow for a few minutes, thinking over his own answer and consulting Katen Kyōkotsu.

Eventually Shunsui turned to his lieutenant considered the honesty in Ichigo’s eyes and replied, “The
best and perhaps most efficient way is to learn from one’s zanpaktou. However, another technique is to study or speak with other dual wielders, see how they handle their blades, and movements.”

Ichigo beamed back at Shunsui for the little smile he had stolen, as Ichigo shifted in his awkward position on the couch. Ichigo laughed softly at some hidden joke scratching at the back of his hair again, his gaze darted towards Shunsui and then away again for a few minutes before he opened his mouth as if prepared to reveal another life changing fact (which was a trend with Ichigo).

Before Ichigo could ask or tell however, the door to his office slid open with all the frigidness he could expect from her. Lisa stalked inside, glared at Shunsui, probably because she felt like it, and settled at her desk. She briefly waved to Ichigo with a small kindred kind of smile before she pulled out a veritable stack of paper and attacked it with her usual fervour.

Shunsui looked at Ichigo concerned about the unasked question but received a reassuring smile in return. There was a braveness, like flint to Ichigo’s eyes, and Shunsui wondered with an amused sigh what act Ichigo would pull out next to surprise the rest of the world.

He looked down at the paperwork and groaned in an entirely different sort of manner wishing he could theorize and fantasize all day. Instead he received a harsh glare from Lisa, and a pitying smile for Ichigo. Really his lieutenants were too good to him, at least when they didn’t disappear for months.

X

Ichigo was sitting on the roof, staring at the moon and the surrounding night. It was a wispy kind of night, with lingering clouds like beads, and a pleasant vitalizing chill. Nonetheless Ichigo was sitting on the roof of the Shiba mansion. He was making a strange habit of the activity.

Kaien observed this from the window of Kukkaku’s room, where he had been speaking with his younger sister about idle things really, catching up and just aimlessly chatting. He had drifted to the window frame after a few minutes, and then he had seen Ichigo.

The lieutenant had been shocked, damn near enough to feel like he was receiving a heart attack at the sight; Ichigo resting on the roof, staring up at the sky, illuminated in it’s light in an ethereal way. Though outwardly he shifted minutely, eyes sharpening beneath furrowed brows.

Kaien sighed, thinking of Shunsui’s words earlier in the week, about catching Ichigo sunbathing on one of the roofs near the Eighth division. Kaien had admittedly found the story endearing and cute but also a touch puzzling.

He turned with a shake of his head, and Kukkaku must have see it on his face because she shook her own head in amusement and made a gentle shooing motion with her hands. Kaien beamed at his sister, his wonderful, beautiful, understanding, sister, placing a chaste kiss of gratitude on her cheek before he whisked out of the room and towards Ichigo’s.

Kaien stood outside the door for a minute, wondered what he was supposed to say to Ichigo out of the blue, or rather darkness. That he should have been sleeping? It was already quite late at night; Kaien had only recently returned from the late shifts he often pulled, Kukkaku had been up on a sudden whim to learn some Rungokai thing (or maybe it was a new recipe for fireworks?). Maybe it was the sleeping pills?

Regardless the sentiment remained that Kaien was going to talk to his younger brother. With a shot of Nejibana’s strength he pushed open the door and glided into the room, pausing at the open window and mess of paper littering the floor of Ichigo’s room. Really when was the youth going to
learn, Kaien thought with an amused sigh. It was often that way with Ichigo, deep and thoughtful about the universe, life, everything above and below. Except for the little things, like closing the window so his floor didn’t become a piece of art, with scrawling scripture.

Shaking aside his thoughts, Kaien carefully paced towards the window, pausing at it’s frame to crane his head out to the side where Ichigo was lounging unawares (or at least appeared to be). For a minute, he minutely wondered how Ichigo kept getting to these locations, as he dubiously looked at the steep incline.

After a minute of consideration, the clan heir climbed out of the window, solidifying the air under his feet with reaitsu he carefully walked till he was hovering just over a portion of the roof that looked like it wouldn’t give way under his weight.

Setting down soundlessly in the echoing night, Kaien carefully and with distinctively more noise made his way to Ichigo, who by was now visibly awake. He was watching Kaien’s descent with an amused smile, features feathered and gentle in the late hours.

“Evening Ichigo.”

Kaien chirped as he plopped down on the roof beside the younger brother, mustering his ever-present cheer and energy to the forefront of his conscious. Ichigo turned to look at Kaien and waved a bit, looking content to remain silent.

Kaien shook his head in amusement and gently elbowed Ichigo, before he leaned back on the palms of his hands. It was a beautiful night worthy of contemplation and thought; all silence like the deep seas, the horizon lingering and shifting like waves of sand. They sat together like that for some time, the world moving breathlessly past Kaien and Ichigo.

Eventually Nejibana reminded Kaien of his purpose in climbing out onto the roof, and he turned his attention to Ichigo once more. He studied the orange-haired Shinigami’s features for another quiet few moments, and attempted to look to the soul beneath the exterior.

“Can’t sleep?”

Kaien asked in concern, gaining Ichigo’s attention as the youth startled slightly. He turned to look at Kaien with a pout, as if daring Kaien to ask another stupid question about Ichigo’s health. Maybe he had walked into that, but couldn’t he be a caring older brother? Nejibana’s rippling laughter bounced throughout his skull and soothed Kaien’s somewhat hurt feelings.

“Mmm something like that.”

Ichigo finally responded after another minute where he had stared at Kaien in a quiet kind of contemplation. Kaien frowned at the answer (though it was more of a pout, if the amusement turning the corners of Ichigo’s lips was any indication), acknowledging it for the vague answer it was.

“Are the pills not working?”

Kaien asked hesitantly, quietly, unwilling to disturb the peace that settled like a cloak over Ichigo tonight. Said youth blinked a bit at the question, a hand coming up to push aside too long bangs (or so Ichigo insisted).

“I think they’re working… need a few more nights with them to be certain, need to talk to Unohana.”

Ichigo finally answered with a shrug, speaking in a slow elonquated manner that caught and held
Kaien’s attention like moth to a flame. He nodded at the answer, happy with the thought of the drugs working. As much as he was somewhat against the idea of using medication, he also knew that Ichigo’s insomnia had become a serious thing, so he had put aside the discomfort. The safety and well being of his family came first, and if that meant pills that worked, then Kaien would accept it.

“So, you just wanted to go roof watching?”

Kaien asked with a grin bright as the light above them, Ichigo turned with a kind of resigned sigh as he rolled his eyes at his older brother. Kaien’s grin only widened at the gesture, finding amusement in annoying his younger brother even only slightly.

“Just a night for thoughts.”

Ichigo responded after he had stared, unamused, at Kaien for a few moments more. Kaien nodded at the answer, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his shihaksho as a cool wind blew about the roof. Ichigo seemed unaffected as he continued to gaze placidly up above.

“My father’s name was Isshin, Shiba.”

Ichigo spoke out into the night, out of nowhere. He seemed surprised at his own words, if his expression was any indication, but there was no lingering distress at the given information. Kaien let out a silent sigh of relief at the information, shoulders slumped and slightly smiling he whispered, “Oh thank Kami.”

Ichigo shot Kaien a confused look at the sentiment he had expressed, the heir blushed a bit before running a hand awkwardly through his hair and shrugging apologetically he said, “I may have wondered… if I was your father. Which was trippy enough of a thought in itself. But then the thought of how I appeared in the human world, who I married… still Isshin-jii eh.”

His younger brother blinked at Kaien’s ramblings, before a wide mischievous grin split Ichigo’s features, and before he could feel a hint of trepidation Ichigo was laughing softly. Hand pressed to his stomach, another muffling the sound of his mirth.

“Hey, it was a valid thought! You look exactly like me, are a Shiba, and… still it was a valid concern.”

Kaien protested as Ichigo’s laughter began to die down. Before the youth could completely calm down he was laughing again, fluttering noises and his chest heaving. It had been a valid concern of Kaien’s because really there had been nothing to indicate anyone else as Ichigo’s father within the timeline. Even believing it was Isshin was a bit of a stretch, considering the clan head’s lecherous and bouncy nature.

Ichigo turned his head to look at Kaien studying the faint indignation but also amusement on the older brother’s face before he rolled onto his back with a happy puff of air. There was silence again for a few minutes and Kaien could almost sense Ichigo gathering his thoughts, gaze heavy and like that of a man who had walked the earth for centuries where it peered up at the stars.

“My father was an energetic goof, but he cared for his family. Loved the two girls with all his heart, doted on them in an almost ungodly manner. Man, he was just strong, in a way that showed through when it mattered most. He used to, when we went to visit Kaa-chan at the cemetery, pull out a cigarette and smoke it, because she said it was cool. Isshin loved her so much, more then his heart could hold, so it overflowed into he rest of the world. He used to run to this giant poster of her and sob at it when we did something mean.
He ran a clinic, a small little place off the beaten path, kind of. We worked there, all four of us, the girls helping with everything in between. Sometimes he taught us there, broken bones and how to reset them, what went where. It was why first aid was never really a problem, and I don’t think even he realized how he was helping us with the knowledge.

In the war, once he revealed himself it was different. He tried to stay out of it, protect the girls, and the town. Sometimes he got drawn into it, but he always just seemed to bounce back. He would support me when I came home after a week on the field. Help me roll out tense muscles, bring out herbal rub, talk to me about it a bit, try to help. It had been warmth and safety for a tiny bit, enough to heal.

Sometimes he fought beside me, and we worked in tandem. Engetsu was just beautiful in it’s work, Isshin could wield it as if he had never stopped, but with years of temperance and maturity, a different sense of life that other Shinigami just couldn’t posses. Afterwards he would walk around the battlefield, check the bodies there, for dead and living. Aid in the healing with what materialistic skills he possessed.

Sometimes we sat and drank sake in the gardens of Kukkaku’s home, or one of the divisions. He would tell me about entering into the academy, what his schooling was like, what his family was like. He would talk about these two nephews and a niece of his that he loved to pieces. It was different occasionally, conversations about battle, how to wield Zangetsu, what the girls might be when they finished growing up.

On nights at home, or in the barracks with him, the nightmares would come. He would hold me to his chest as I trembled. Whisper soft and soothing things. He may not have always been the best parent, but he had become one with the course of time.”

Ichigo finished slightly out of breath, his eyes were slightly misty as he stared up at the moon, rough voice echoing in Kaien’s mind as he processed the information laid out before him. Recalled the emotion and feelings in each of Ichigo’s words, as if he could see the story playing out in his head, see the Isshin, Ichigo spoke of.

It knocked his own breath out of his lungs, and he took time to just breathe deeply, contemplate the life Ichigo had lived. The life the uncle he had known his entire life, had lived. This future where there had been war(s), but Isshin had raised such a kami damn beautiful son. Sure, Ichigo was fractured, but he was strong, in ways not even the top fighters could boast, time and other’s influences shaping Ichigo into the man he was today.

Ichigo’s words just continued to bounce inside his head, the things left unsaid, and the way his voice fluctuated as he spoke of his nightmares. Or the almost soft longing in his voice at the mention of their late-night talks. It left Kaien dizzy where he was lying, trying to identify the tune breathing between the two. It left Kaen looking at the faint happiness and nostalgia that seemed to cling to Ichigo like a second skin, as much as it must have been painful to speak of his father, Kaien was sure it was also a touch healing. Kami knows how long Ichigo had held the information, the stories of those who shaped him, and lived with him, to his breast.

He smiled widely, as he recalled another select few of Ichigo’s words, Isshin-Jii hadn’t forgotten them, even when he had left. Kaien looked at the faint happiness and nostalgia that seemed to cling to Ichigo like a second skin, as must as it must have been painful to speak of his father, Kaien was sure it was also a touch healing. Kami knows how long Ichigo had held the information, the stories of those who shaped him, and lived with him, to his breast.

Ichigo hummed a bit under his breath drawing Kaien’s attention in the overwhelming quiet, the older lieutenant chose to remain silent providing Ichigo with an ear to listen if he felt like continuing. Idly he twisted to look up at the sky, trying to identify the tune breathing between the two. It was
something quiet and deep, made Kaien think of woods and ancient things.

“I was fifteen when the first was started you know?”

Ichigo ventured somewhat hesitantly and lax, a shrug running his shoulders as one of his hands twisted to grab at Zangetsu’s blade, in a familiar seeking act of comfort. Kaien breathed in at the confirmation that the orange-haired Shinigami had been fifteen when the war started. Ichigo had stated that was when he had entered the realm of the Shinigami, but Kaien had hoped that he hadn’t fought in the war for another few years.

It was a strange and harsh concept to consider, especially when Kaien thought of it in terms of the mortal realm. Ichigo would have only been a child in the eyes of any adult, and yet the weight to lead a whole society had been thrust onto his young shoulders. Kaien took another deep breath to calm himself, Ichigo had already explained his actions in the best way he could, what was past was past.

Instead he responded with a vague, “Yeah.” That he hoped didn’t betray his tumultuous inner workings. Looking at Ichigo though, Kaien could see that he probably didn’t need to worry about Ichigo reacting to Kaien; his gaze was a thousand miles away distant and yet right in front of Kaien.

“Mmm you see there was this thing called the Hogyoku, and Kisuke invented it because he’s a curious idiot. But it grants a soul their deepest desire.” Here Ichigo paused for a moment as if to dwell on the thought of the object, the Hogyoku. Leaving Kaien to wonder about the power and creation of such a device; before Ichigo sighed and continued, “In any case, Kisuke was in the mortal world, along with the other Vizard, and Yoruichi and A-… okay Kaien I’m going to tell you something and you have to promise not to kill that person, and or at least give them a chance.”

The clan heir thought about the serious tone in Ichigo’s voice, as he rolled over to stare into Kaien’s own eyes, amber orbs keen and piercing. He had an uncertain idea of who the mysterious figure, Ichigo didn’t want Kaien to kill, was.

He stared at his brother, he had a feeling he wouldn’t like the information Ichigo would relay. So instead he asked himself if he could hold himself back for Ichigo’s sake, if he could give the person a chance because his little brother asked him to. The answer was, of course, a resounding yes, it was easy enough now, but Kaien believed he could do it.

The older lieutenant nodded his agreement, a grin slipped onto Ichigo’s lips at the gesture; a touch feral in the moonlight. Kaien smiled back in return, running a hand through spiky locks as he shifted into a comfortable position. Ichigo stared for a moment longer (he could feel it), before the youth rolled onto his back.

“Sosuke Aizen was a man who possessed great power, and because of such power believed himself utterly alone in the world, even among powerful Shinigami. He disliked Soul Society, and was curious about hollows, and hollowfication. I believe he wasn’t always what he became, but somewhere along the way for his goals, he became twisted.

He created his own Hogyoku, and sought Kisuke’s to perfect his own. The Hogyoku in a manner managed to affect one of my friends, giving her the power to reject, or rather heal injuries. When Aizen broke off from Soul Society, and fled to Hueco Mundo to build his own army, he took interest and kidnapped my friend.

I would have attempted to stay out of the war, before the incident. But when Soul Society refused to send a rescue mission, my friends and I invaded Hueco Mundo to save her. It’s a barren place, sand everywhere for miles on end, suffocating. The sky is just as endless. We met a child-like Espada, and two others, later they would become valuable allies, but at the time they were quite annoying… but
Nelliel was kind of cute. Two Shinigami who I knew from a certain invasion of a certain society, joined us.

It was a disaster doomed from the start, I was just beginning to understand the bond I held with Shiro, and the Espada were powerful, as strong as any Captain. At one point, I was literally slain by one of the Espada, I died, but was saved ultimately by Shiro. Though I’m told what happened afterwards was terrifying, a fully-hollowfied form that was mindless instinct.

At that point while we were in Hueco Mundo, Aizen chose to attack the human world, he did this in order to create a key to the Spirit King’s realm. He wanted to kill him like Bach and create a new world, but well forewarning it’s a very bad idea to kill the Spirit King, kind of destroys the whole world.

I don’t think Aizen expected the battle to last as long as it did, maybe a week max. I don’t think in the beginning he wanted mass casualties of warfare; instead we met his opposing forces head-on, something must have pulled him back, some warning or whisper. He retreated.

From there it was opposing invasions, attacking the white sand of Hueco Mundo. Defending Soul Society from the multiple Garganta that appeared near daily. It just stretched on in the way war does; at a stand still.

There were times when it wasn’t all bad, sometimes the battles were senseless and easy. Shinji would always challenge me in those, see who could pull out the flashiest manoeuvres; I usually won. Sometimes Chad and I would be sent on oversea missions, America was a right riot, or just to the mortal realm for certain tasks, like Kisuke and his never-ending inventions. As part of the war effort, sometimes Byakuya and I would walk through Rungokai to try and bolster moral, I was infinitely better at it then the Noble, who in my time still had a stick up his ass. But he was still helpful.

Renji and Rukia always liked to drag me out to the bars at night, and because I didn’t drink they liked to get piss-ass drunk and make me take care of them. But Renji was like a brother to me, we bonded over our love of fighting and the adrenaline. Rukia, Kami she was just a pivot in my life; I think I mostly considered her a sister, but it’s hard to describe our bond sometimes. Uryuu loved to try and fix our clothing, and by fix, I mean add certain aesthetic additions. We always had to watch as he sewed everything up, but man he was killer with a needle and thread.

Eventually during the course of the war some of the Espada joined us. Nelliel had always been on our side really, her Resurrección was incredibly powerful when unleashed, but most of the time she was a small child. Starrk and Lilinette when they got tired of Aizen, joined too but really just wanted to chill. Shunsui and Starrk always had this weird rivalry, where it was like they were trying to out-lazy each other. Even though it was an incredibly passive aggressive thing.

Grimmjow was a loose canon, who kind of just appeared where the blood shed was and fought where he felt like. Zaraki and Grimmjow kept challenging each other, but one Captain or lieutenant always endeavoured to intervene before they could destroy Soul Society. Harribel joined us after the death of her Fracción, she was cold but underneath she held a real gentleness.

Once, when there was a lull in the war, I had been running negotiations between the Espada and the rest of Soul Society for… a week, maybe two. I was walking to my temporary barracks when I was snatched out of an alleyway. When I could see again I was in a warehouse with the Espada and the Vizard. It was a strange kind of party, the weird misfits of Soul Society and Hueco Mundo, but man, what happened that night.”

Ichigo paused for a moment, an easy light smile curving his lips, and his eyes were mirthful, sharing some hidden secret. Kaien couldn’t help but smile at the expression, idly wondering what had
happened at the party Ichigo spoke of. Reflecting on the Espada he spoke of, and his own journey into the war. Eventually after catching his breath, Ichigo began again eyes centred on the horizon, wistful and sad.

“All that time I was struggling to gain power, become strong enough to defeat the megalomaniac. But it wasn’t working. His mastery over the Hogyoku grew stronger as each day passed, he appeared less and less on the fields, but more so in horrifying creations. But when he did appear the field was caked with the blood of our side. We needed an end; Isshin offered me a way to do it.

A final form that could defeat Aizen, but at the cost of my powers. At that point, it had been three years, years that seemed to slip from my hand and mind like dust. I just wanted the battle to end, to save the lives of my friends and family, my powers were a small cost.

So, I did it, learned the technique. We defeated him for the most part, Kisuke designed a kido to encase him, and we left him in Mugen. And I returned to the mortal realm, slowly losing my powers day by day… but perhaps those times are best saved for sake.”

Ichigo finished with a touch of melancholy chest heavy where it rose and fell softly. Kaien sat rock still, he felt numb at the completion of the story, as if all the emotions that could possibly build up inside him, had deserted at the sheer force of the information. He knew on a somewhat baser level that he felt anger, burning something fierce in his chest; he knew he must have felt horror at the concept of losing one’s zanpaktou (and it had to be Ichigo to sacrifice everything). Knew he must have felt a deep-rooted sadness at all the youth before him had suffered, all that was left untold hanging in the air like heavy draughts of thunder.

Instead he felt numb, as if there was a complete disconnect. Ichigo had turned to look at Kaien, maybe sensing his lack of distress, or the stillness to the air. It was the movement that triggered his own reaction, and awkwardly in clearly coordinated movements, he slid forward to wrap his arms around Ichigo in a tight hug.

His younger brother eventually slumped in Kaien’s arms after a moment, where Ichigo always remained stiff at contact. The older brother thought he could feel Ichigo shake in his arms, but it could have been his imagination.

Instead, he tried to convey the sorrow he felt that Ichigo had had to fight a war; there was some elation in there too. The way Ichigo spoke about his friends or some Espada that just caught in his breath and made the night flicker briefly.

Kaien couldn’t offer advice like Unohana could, he couldn’t advise Ichigo on how best to deal with what he was feeling. But he knew his own strengths and he knew Ichigo, he pulled back slightly, pushed back the bangs hanging over Ichigo’s face like dreads and smiled softly.

Ichigo looked up, blinked a bit before an amused and exasperated smile settled on his features. He reached up and carefully wiped at Kaien’s cheeks gathering cool liquid that pooled there. The older brother blinked in muted surprise, having not even realised he had been crying (a stunningly hard thing to miss).

Ichigo laughed at the puzzlement on Kaien’s features and muttered under his breath, “Stupid idiot, no need to cry over me.”
Kaien laughed in response, and reached up to ruffle Ichigo’s hair, which earned him a swat and a pout even as Kaien replied, “But you’re my favourite person to cry over Ichi.”

The orange-haired Shinigami huffed and shook his head, rolling his eyes repeatedly and mouthing something about annoying older brothers. Kaien faked mock hurt placing a hand over his wounded heart.

Ichigo just shot Kaien a bland look, and he dropped the act to gently bump his shoulder against Ichigo’s. The youth repeated the gesture, gaze travelling back to stare at the sky. The endless horizon blanketed in darkness with the occasional light like a firefly in the darkness.

Feeling that Ichigo was better now Kaien grinned and leaned back a bit. He debated sharing a story of his own, to the amusement of Nejibana who was subdued in the presence she left in his mind, thoughtful and quiet in the moonlight. Eventually he decided that it was only fair, considering the stories Ichigo had himself shared.

“Before I attended the academy, Kukkaku, Ganju, and I went on a sabbatical of sorts. We went and visited Rungokai, stopping off at whatever relation was nearby. It was a chance to explore and satiate my wanderlust, Ganju had it too, but I think it’s less severe than the both of us. Anyways we walked, travelled, talked to the locals, experienced the culture they boasted, the tiny markets that only opened on Sunday. It was just a spirit opening trip, I could just see things that I’d never really seen or experienced.

I didn’t know at the time what I really wanted to do; I mean I felt I had to be a Shinigami for the clan. But I wasn’t sure if it was what I wanted to do. One day we were taking a ‘less’ known path and stumbled across a passed-out Shinigami. He didn’t have a haori, or a lieutenant’s badge, but had one discerning feature. The unconscious man had long white hair. Never one to leave a random man passed out, I carried him back to our temporary residence, Kukkaku beside me and Ganju ahead of us.

We were almost home when the hollow attacked; I had my arms full, but attempted to cast a kido barrier. It worked for the most part, and with Ganju and Kukkaku behind me, I felt less concerned. We were still trapped and probably would have suffered some injury. But the Shinigami suddenly woke up, drew his zanpaktou and without even thinking dispatched the hollow.

We cared for Taicho for a week before Kyroraku Taicho found us. Ukitake-san told us a lot about what it really was to be a Shinigami during that time. His words were kind, but I liked the truth in his eyes, the prospect and ability to defend my family and help people. I think Taicho can certainly be many things, but he’s always wanted to aid people.

When I joined the academy, after our sabbatical, I knew which division I wanted to join, and who I wanted as my Captain.”

Kaien finished; voice a touch hoarse from all the speaking (and maybe emotion too). Ichigo was slouched against Kaien, eyes half-lidded, but he was obviously still awake if the fondness in his eyes was any indication. The older brother felt warmth in his chest at recalling the memories, even as he looked at his younger brother and the feeling doubled.

Teasingly he poked Ichigo’s cheek after a moment of silence, earning a swat and a glare once more. Kaien shrugged aside the gesture and asked, “Did you enjoy my story Ichi?”

Because of course Kaien had to ask, it was only right to hear his brother’s honest opinion. Mischief lurked on Ichigo’s features as he shook his head in the negative. Kaien faked a heart attack, hands splayed over his chest.
Ichigo laughed at the gesture and Kaien joined in, the noise bouncing off into the darkness in wavering echoes. Ichigo rested his head against Kaien’s shoulder again and the two continued to sit staring at the sky above in quiet reflection.

Eventually, Kaien looked down to check on the orange-haired youth, only to find Ichigo asleep. Breath even and soft, eyes closed, features at peace. He chuckled softly; shaking his head in amusement as picked his younger sibling up, and carefully delivered him into the waiting care of his bed.

He paused at the doorway, studying the shadowed figure on the bed with a fond smile, Kaien wasn’t able to provide Ichigo with counselling, but no matter the odds he would be there for his younger brother.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! I hope you all enjoyed the chapter; it was fun to get into Ichigo’s experience of the war from another’s perspective, and also write Ichigo sunbathing and the subsequent reactions. Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Till next time!

Mango!!
Strikhedonia

Chapter Summary

Ichigo chats with Byakuya and has some fun with Shinji

Chapter Notes

Strikhedonia
(n.) The pleasure of being able to say, “to hell with it”

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 37. I’ve had a few comments recently about speeding things up with the storyline. The story is at a slower pace right now for a reason, think of Ichigo collapsing as the end of one arc, and these newer chapters are the beginning of another. You have to set up for a new arc, and that’s what these are doing providing the plot for the next arc. Thank you all for understanding; the story will be beginning with Isshin’s arc within the next 3-4 chapters. Also happy thanksgiving to everyone who celebrated it this weekend! Enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo wondered why he had let Byakuya choose their meeting place, as he stared dubiously at the building in front of him. It was the kind of place that a Noble, and most certainly an heir wouldn’t be caught dead in, if only for the whole run-down like aura of the place, all old moss-covered wood, and crumbling stone. Ichigo checked the location of the meeting place once more, pulling a worn and crumpled note from his pocket.

With furrowed brows he studied the sheet and Byakuya’s graceful sprawl and confirmed that yes, he was at the right location. Though why of all places this one, Ichigo had no idea. Byakuya had seemed particularly keen on the location, ebony eyes lively from where they peered out at Ichigo.

The orange-haired Shinigami sighed and ran a hand through his hair, settling into Zangetsu’s presence. He walked forward and pushed open the tattered sliding door that had certainly seen better days.

Ichigo gaped at the interior of the place, or well on the inside he was shocked silent. To the patrons of the bar, for that was what it was, he raised a brow and stepped to the side. The interior of the
restaurant/bar like place was all rich paneled wood, the heavy smell of tobacco prevailing like a fine mist, and a wide eclectic assortment of people seated at the canopy of low tables and high stools placed at high bar tables.

He did a slight double take at a few of the faces in the sea of the bar, as his gaze swept over the veritable ocean, mapping out exits, and potential hazards. Somethings were familiar but in a modern sense, far reaching from the time period he now resided in. Ichigo supposed this was a product of the time manipulation caused by the Dangai precipice that Kisuke had spoken of, that or one of those weird out-of-time spots that just appeared everywhere once in awhile.

Finally, landing on the familiar spring of light off of Kenseikan Ichigo padded over to Byakuya who was nursing a cup of tea (or what he supposed was tea) to his chest. There was a distant kind of thoughtfulness to his gaze.

The heir to the Kuchiki clan startled slightly as Ichigo plopped into the small secluded booth, sidled along a long wall with a thin screen sheltering them from the other occupants of the bar. Byakuya smiled at Ichigo, warm and welcoming as his hand reached out over the table to grasp Ichigo’s own hand in a tight hold for a brief moment.

“Hello Ichigo.”

The youth said with a light kind of smile; like blossoms in the spring. Ichigo laughed softly at the gesture, not quite sure as to why, but amused nonetheless. He inclined his head and gaily responded, “Good afternoon Byakuya.”

The other lieutenant rolled his eyes, whether in fondness or annoyance Ichigo couldn’t care to tell, as Byakuya slid one of the menus sequestered in the corner, over to Ichigo and asked, “Have you eaten yet?” Ichigo shook his head, and Byakuya beamed and continued, “Good, the food here is to die for… well die again.”

Ichigo chuckled softly at the joke, throwing an accusing mirthful stare in Byakuya’s direction before he skimmed the menu placed before him. It was like the rest of the restaurant, a rather foreign choice of foods, combinations that even Orihime would not likely have dreamed of (if only because she didn’t usually cook with wild herbs found in the forty-fifth Rungokai district).

After deciding on one of the safer options, not involving questionable herbs (mushrooms were not always safe no matter the business practice) he set the menu down, and glanced up to see Byakuya curled back against his seat continuing to sip at his drink.

“So, how’d you find this place?”

Ichigo asked with a quirk of his brow, and a touch of curiosity, gesturing slightly at the encompassing space. Byakuya chewed on his lip for a moment in thought (a moment where Ichigo did not stare, most assuredly not), before he shrugged and grinned, “It was kind of an amalgamation of things. I think Ginrei wanted to take me here, and Kami knows how he knows of the place, but in any case, I sort of stumbled upon it on my own?”

“Oh?”

Ichigo asked wanting to hear the story that his friend was keeping to his chest, locked up behind his eyes. Byakuya grinned at Ichigo’s curiosity, no doubt taking pleasure in the reversed tables. It was usually Ichigo who was leaving Byakuya puzzled and hanging on the edge of his seat, while Ichigo taunted him with mischievous smirks and leading words.
“Well one night I was just wandering about, you see Ginrei has recently informed me that he’s going to retire soon-“

“He is?”

Ichigo interjected earnestly, pride beginning to glimmer on his cheeks at the thought of Byakuya taking up a Captain’s position within the Gotei 13. There was a kind of happiness at the thought of his friend stepping into the position Ichigo always saw however briefly, when he glimpsed Byakuya. Even when they had first met, stilted friendship, and Byakuya’s hard-headed determination and stubbornness to become his friend, he had seen it. The way he persevered in the face of challenge (even if Ichigo usually provided said challenge), the leadership he could adapt within one breath and the next. Not to mention the skills he possessed with his zanpaktou, which Ichigo had helped to polish. Byakuya would be a great Captain in the future, wholly different from the Byakuya of his timeline; who had run his division strictly but with care. This Byakuya possessed a gentler touch… most of the time; he could still muster the Kuchiki stone coldness with ease.

Byakuya glared faintly at Ichigo for the interruption, huffing a touch indignantly. Ichigo smiled apologetically, running a hand through his hair as he gestured for the heir to continue. Opposite Ichigo, Byakuya studied him for a few moments, as if determining whether Ichigo was going to interrupt again, that or some other fancy before he continued.

“Anyways, I felt in need of spirit, something to help settle my mind. Really, I just wandered throughout the streets, and there this place was squished in between two buildings radiating a kind of soul to it. So, I entered, and found that as you already know, appearances can be deceiving.”

Ichigo nodded at the story sharing a knowing look with Byakuya at the subtle jab, before he rolled his eyes and leaned back in his own seat. Byakuya waved over a passing server, asking for another order of what was apparently a tea (probably jasmine knowing Byakuya) mixed with sake. He was tempted to order the same, just to satisfy his curiosity of the taste, but decided against such and just ordered a chai. After the refreshments were ordered Byakuya rattled off his choice for their impromptu lunch, leaving Ichigo to fill the silence afterwards with his own order. The waiter nodded with a flourish of the vermillion cap upon his head and strutted off.

Ichigo giggled faintly at the man’s walk, and the vibrancy he had displayed in every movement. Before he returned his attention to Byakuya who was staring at Ichigo again, a soft smile playing on his features, eyes like the trenches of the ocean deep and unreadable.

In response, he teasingly waved his fingers and batted his eyelashes, just to see what reaction it would garner from his friend. Byakuya was mostly used to Ichigo’s unique sense of humour (at least for the seventeenth century or whatever time period they were stuck in forever), but he still liked to tease the older soul.

Byakuya sputtered for a moment at having been caught staring, sparking laughter from Ichigo’s chest and lilting upon the air. Byakuya pouted for a minute at Ichigo’s laughter, before he joined in an exasperated expression painting his features as he laughed.

They settled down as the waiter returned placing the two mugs down with a wink and a sly grin that involuntarily made Ichigo think of Yoruichi, who flirted relentlessly. Idly he studied the mug and its unique shape; it was obviously of original make, with beautiful crenellations and a rather unique design of an oni.

Byakuya’s own mug had tiny little creatures running about its frame, making Ichigo recall old animated movies from his childhood that sent nostalgia through his chest. Studying the swirling deep
rose-coloured liquid, Ichigo shrugged and took a sip. It was a good blend, he decided with a nod, wondering how it would taste with the addition of sake.

As if sensing Ichigo’s thoughts Byakuya passed his own mug into Ichigo’s hands and deftly snatched Ichigo’s own patterned glass. Ichigo glared affronted and haughty for a moment in a familiar act, he had adopted from Kaien or Isshin. He dropped it after a moment with a grin and took a tentative sip of the steaming liquid. It was a jasmine as Ichigo had guessed, but with a kick that sent fire curling down his throat.

Shaking his head, he sent a bemused glance Byakuya’s way before he passed the mug back and took his own in return. They settled into silence for a moment savouring the warmth of their drinks.

“So Ginrei’s really thinking of retiring and handing over the Captain position?”

Ichigo asked, pulling Byakuya out of whatever reverie he had drawn himself into. The heir nodded at the question, taking a moment to think on it before he responded in greater depth with a kind of warring weary and excitement in his voice, “Yes, he informed me a few days ago, he feels I am ready to uphold the responsibilities of the clan and the Division.”

“So you think you’re ready?”

Ichigo asked, taking note of Byakuya’s careful mention of Ginrei’s approval but the lack of Byakuya’s own thoughts and opinions, evident only in the drawl of his voice. Byakuya shrugged in the universal gesture that indicated his vague concern and the underlying thought that how could he ever really be ready and responded, “I’m a bit nervous about it all, but… if he thinks I’m ready then I guess I can give it a shot.”

“You’ll do excellent regardless. Just remember you’re your own self, not your grandfather. So, if you want to give the elders hell then go for it.”

Ichigo reassured Byakuya, encouragement shining through honestly in his voice. He grinned in a particularly vicious manner as he mentioned the elders, always happy to trash-talk the batty old geezers.

The soon to be clan head laughed at Ichigo’s words, exhaling and tapping his fingers against the sleeve of his kimono, a simpler piece, and responded, “That’s easy for you to say Ichigo, you don’t have to worry about becoming the clan head, and dealing with them all hours of the day. Besides you just don’t care shit about their words.”

The orange-haired Shinigami could only nod honestly at the truth delivered from his friend’s lips. The orange-haired Shinigami was infinitely happy that he would never have to occupy the position Isshin held (and one that Kaien would likely hold). If ever there were the prospect of him holding the position he would sooner run away then hold it.

As if seeing it written clearly on Ichigo’s features Byakuya laughed under his breath knocking one of his hands against Ichigo’s own, to jolt him out of the frankly terrifying thoughts. Ichigo grinned at the action, as their server returned and carefully set their dishes down, leaving a few parting phrases before bouncing off.

Studying the picture before him, Ichigo shrugged his shoulders, ignoring Shiro’s rather vile comments that no doubt would still paint his skin red even after years, and tried the lunch. It was a spicy affair but was combatted nicely by a rather sweet sauce. Looking over Byakuya seemed content with his own food, and for a few minutes it was just the two Shinigami dining in companionable silence.
“So how are you feeling Ichigo?”

Byakuya asked after a few moments, where they were able to cut their focus on the food, to include conversation. Ichigo shrugged and nodded at the question, trying to commute the complexity of the answer before he thought over it for a moment, and answered, “A lot better than our earlier meeting.”

“You’ve been getting sleep?”

Byakuya asked, eyes pinning Ichigo to his seat pulling his soul forth from his lips, damn why were his family and friends all so intense about his well-being. Ichigo reflected that he should be used to it by now, they had overwhelmed him during the war, and they continued to do so in a completely different timeline.

“Yes mom.”

Ichigo responded with snark, earning a glare and an eye roll from the heir. Byakuya stared at Ichigo all serious quiet, and asked, “Honestly?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I’m taking care of myself now… or at least as much as I can. Kaien likes to help by yelling.”

Ichigo responded lightly and comforting, trying to assure his friend of the truth, he would likely shoulder the weight of that one bad decision for a long while. Byakuya nodded and settled back from where he had leant forward, as if in closing the space between them the intensity of his presence would procure the truth (which Ichigo supposed did veritably work in interrogation settings).

“Like at dinner earlier in the week, when he yelled across the table about you consuming alcohol?”

Byakuya questioned with an innocent smile, Ichigo nodded a grave expression stealing over his features as he thought of the incident and leaned forward, and with all the seriousness of the dead (which was apparently a lot) responded, “Of course.”

Byakuya shook his head at the over the top gesture but it was backed by content and familiarity at the infamous antics and dramatics (that Ichigo had no idea he had picked up, till Uryuu had commented on it one night). Silently in good humour they finished the rest of their food, with liberal amounts of tea, idly they made light conversation about the past week; about the Sixth’s training schedule, how Shunsui had finally caught Ichigo sunbathing.

The waiter arrived and took the plates away after asking about the food, promising to bring back more tea (though this time sans alcohol). As if just remembering something, Byakuya perked up running his fingers along the table. Sending his friend, a curious look, Ichigo patiently, well mostly patiently, waited for his friend to divulge whatever information rested on his lips.

“Is there something you would like to share?”

Ichigo asked after a moment, where Shiro’s constant nagging to ask him won out. Byakuya grinned a touch triumphantly at having outlasted Ichigo, who pouted at the gesture but continued to wait on Byakuya’s answer.

“Well I uh might have proposed to Hisana.”

Byakuya started out uncertainly ending in a fast blur that Ichigo caught nothing of. The heir likely seeing the confusion on his friend’s face rubbed a hand over his face and repeated again a touch slower, “I proposed to Hisana.”
Ichigo sat stock still, frozen. Before a very wide grin settled on his lips, and he had to resist the urge to dart across the table and pick his friend up in a great bear hug that would make Kaien proud. Instead he congratulated Byakuya over and over again, watching the relief bleed across his friend’s face accompanied by a warm happiness that just pulsed through his soul.

Ichigo was honestly happy for the heir, because he knew Hisana would make him happy (mental note search for Rukia), they were good together, both appreciated the silence, the profundness of life. The orange-haired Shinigami knew it had a bitter ending, as stories of life often did, but it was the happiness before then that mattered. Afterwards if he couldn’t fix it, Ichigo and maybe Rukia would be there to put the Kuchiki back together again.

“So how did it go down? Give me all the details.”

Ichigo asked with a sly wink, earning a snort from Byakuya who laughed happily, cheeks flushed with the emotion. He studied the tea swirling in his cup for a moment before he relented and replied, “Well have I told you about her?” Ichigo shook his head and mouthed “Only every other sentence” before letting Byakuya continue, “Anyways we just... you know connect, as it’s just... the way she smiles and looks at the sky. Life is just so beautiful in her movements.

But back to proposing, well I got permission from Ginrei to officially court her about a month ago or so. He met her first, just watched us interact and at the end said to me, ‘There are many burdens you will shoulder, to have someone you love, people you love support you is essential.’ And that was that, he gave me the blessing when I asked, with that proud smile... exactly like the one you’re wearing right now.

So, I took her out to dinner two nights ago, and afterwards we went and walked along this one path near the falls, she told me about her sister, we talked about trying to find her, Hisana’s illness, and in the end well I still proposed. She said yes. I feel like I’ve been floating since.”

Byakuya admitted, eyes impossibly bright, just seeming to reach out and ensnare the life around it. Ichigo smiled in return just as bright, reaitsu warm and happy between the two. The orange-haired Shinigami reflected on the story, slightly surprised that Ginrei had given Byakuya permission to marry Hisana, and had not instead insisted on an arranged marriage (or the fact that Hisana had actually said yes). It left a warmth that just seemed to saturate his soul.

“I’m so happy for you Byakuya.”

Ichigo said sincerely, smiling at his friend across the table, Byakuya nodded his thanks aura bright and airy around him. Idly Ichigo picked up his mug, warming the cooling tea with his reaitsu he took a sip and settled with a content sigh.

“What about you Ichigo? Any romance in your life?”

Byakuya asked with a grin, all mischievous and cunning, jolting Ichigo from his thoughts. He pinned Byakuya with a serious deadpan glance and replied, “The only love of my life is that of tea.”

The lieutenant laughed at Ichigo’s response; Ichigo soon joining in on the contagious laughter, panting for breath at the end. Byakuya always managed to incite Ichigo’s mirth, just bringing out a certain radiance with him.

“In all seriousness, I’m really not interested much, it’s not like I want anything deeply physical out of relationship anyway.”

Ichigo responded nonchalantly with a shrug, Byakuya’s piercing silver eyes that glowed in the
dimming light of the bar, studied Ichigo for a moment before he nodded in understanding. After a minute Byakuya jokingly responded, “I would watch out then, I think Yoruichi keeps trying to hook you up with her lieutenant.”

Ichigo groaned at the news, knowing it was more than likely true, he shared an exasperated glance with Byakuya before they were laughing again. It was good to be with his friend again, he had missed this, the gentle teasing and laughter. Calming slightly Ichigo carefully sipped at his tea and perched his elbows on the table, so that he could lean forward and stare at Byakuya with all the intensity the heir had displayed previously.

“So, who’s invited to the wedding, I better be invited.”

Byakuya laughed at Ichigo’s gossiping tones, perfectly mimicking some of the members of the Shinigami Women’s Association, that they had happened to spy on in the past. Byakuya pretended to think over the question leaning back with his fingers perched under his jaw.

Ichigo laughed at the image, startling the heir into laughing with him for no abrupt reason. Eventually they settled sharing a few fond looks, as Byakuya continued to provoke Ichigo and draw out his answer. The orange-haired Shinigami pouted but continued to play the waiting game with a laugh happy to be with his friend.

X

Shinji bounced on his feet across from Ichigo, a cocky smirk adorning his features, hair brilliantly gold in the afternoon sunlight filtering into the Fifth’s division. Really the lieutenant had only stopped by briefly to drop off a few papers, but then Shinji had by some magic coerced Ichigo into a spar. Maybe it had been the teasing drawl, knowing eyes tempting, asking Ichigo if he was willing to play a game.

Ichigo had been debating a game of his own for a while, wondering over it out loud and in the confidence of his Captain. He had been unsure about the spar, but ultimately had accepted the offer (and Shiro’s insistent whining was definitely not a deciding factor); because sparing with Shinji was always fun. The man just managed a way with his blade, that was less a dance of elegance like Ichigo was well familiar with in spars with Byakuya, and more so rising adrenaline, the challenge that revolved around flashy moves, and intellectual chessboards.

If he did follow through with the half-baked plan simmering at the back of his mind, it would be mostly fun to experience the fall-out. And in any circumstance, most of his family and friends were furious at him for one thing or another. So, adding another great reveal would likely only earn Ichigo a few more lectures than he had originally accounted for.

Running a hand through his hair and shaking aside running thoughts, Ichigo looked up into Shinji’s eyes. Playful and challenging, he drew Zangetsu from the sheathe resting at his waist, letting the blade rest comfortingly within his grasp, catching the light off the metal.

“Ya sure ya ready to fight me Ichi?”

Shinji asked with a teasing grin, bright with anticipation. Ichigo grinned in return, feeling the same emotions, excited to spar with his friend again, the challenge of it, and the simple pleasure of it. Raising a brow in contrite amusement, Ichigo laughed and responded, “Last I remember I won our most recent spar.”

Shinji pouted at the truthful words, rolling his eyes and mouthing something about ‘pretentious brats’ and said out loud with a touch of scorn and fondness, “Brat.”
Ichigo let his laughter bounce freely around the training sal, ignorant of their collection of onlookers slowly growing in size. He could almost feel Sosuke’s gaze through the division wall, likely peering out from a window however much the man had placidly declined to come and watch.

Ichigo knew Sosuke still employed the demure and kind persona within the barracks, and his appearance throughout Soul Society. Partially to maintain appearances, but also partially to annoy Shinji, who would much prefer the real Sosuke.

Gin was off in a corner, slit eyes watching the engaging battle with thinly veiled interest. Ichigo was pretty sure Shinji, or Sosuke had herded the young Shinigami out, and settled him onto a step. Otherwise their viewers were inconsequential in Ichigo’s mind.

Flicking Zangetsu up, Ichigo swayed loosely on the balls of his feet, sending a last questioning gesture to the Captain still grinning like a loon. Shinji nodded, and Ichigo centered himself with a breath before he darted forward ground rushing underneath his feet as he appeared in Shinji’s personal space.

Sakande was hastily brought up to deflect Zangetsu’s blade, as Ichigo forced the weight of his upper body onto the blade, satisfied with the vague surprise painting Shinji’s features. They forced their zanpaktou blades against the other for a moment, Ichigo pushed against Shinji trying to force him back, a touch successful as sandaled soles slid against paved stone. There was a fierce brightness on Shinji’s features as he pushed back in return.

Shinji sprung back suddenly, swinging Sakande loosely as he considered Ichigo before he took up the offensive and was careening forward wildly. Tracking the pace of his feet, Ichigo swung to the side to intercept the blade flying towards Ichigo’s neck with slick speed.

The metal of their blades clashed again with a loud shriek and the echoing sparks of metal like burnished magma. Ichigo ducked under Shinji’s blade and brought Zangetsu up and under, hilt aiming towards Shinji’s unprotected jaw.

The blond side stepped the assault crouching low to swing Sakande at Ichigo’s unprotected side. Jumping back Ichigo brought Zangetsu under the Captain’s blade forcing it higher to parry the attack.

The orange-haired Shinigami stepped into a merciless rhythm for a few moments, slash, duck, parry, struggle for a moment, spring back, duck again, taunt Shinji with a grin. Blades flickering against each like a frothing hurricane of steel. Slowly they warmed up, blood pumping, adrenaline roaring in his ear along with Shiro’s bloodlust.

Springing back, the two fighters paused to study each other, assessing the condition of the other; before Shinji flashed a familiar Cheshire grin, and Ichigo flashed his own mischief laced one in return. Immediately Shinji launched into the air disappearing in bursts of mirage laden images meant to confuse Ichigo.

Deftly Ichigo turned and raised his hand casting a silent kido shield that Sakande skittered against uselessly, with the unpleasing sound of nails on a chalkboard. Shinji pouted at the barrier before he darted around it, stretching the blade out in an overextension even as underneath with his other hand he carefully formed another kido.

Ichigo executed a swift uppercut to push the blade away, hastily raising his other arm up to intercept the byakurai zipping towards him in shots of electric light. It impacted against his forearm with a dull sting as his blut vein activated stealing away most of the pain (if only to soothe Kaien’s future worries), and leaving a torn sleeve and a thin gash.
Leaving no time for the blond Captain to retaliate, Ichigo channeled some of his reiatsu along Zangetsu’s sealed state and allowed it to surge forward, impacting the concrete and kicking up dust into the air like a cloud of confusion.

Ichigo cut through the dust, tracking Shinji’s presence he appeared behind the older soul, an unstable Shakkahō exploding as Shinji turned around in a brilliant burst of crimson that flung the dust high into the air. Shinji growled something low and pleased, the hollow portion of his powers shining through as he stepped out of the smoke.

The orange-haired Shinigami, caught the incoming blade, ducking as Shinji reversed his grip and brought the blade out before bringing the hilt careening towards Ichigo’s temple. The lieutenant sprung back and kicked out with his left leg to create distance even as he attempted to analyse the tactics Shinji was employing in their battle.

Idea sparking his thoughts Ichigo darted back waiting for Shinji to make the next move he called out, “Keep up old man!”

The blond grinned from across the rubble filled training area before he flew forward. Ichigo stepped aside from the fast impact, sticking a foot out to trip the sudden appearance of his friend.

Shinji carefully caught himself, as Ichigo brought the dull side of zanpaktou’s sealed form to crash into the back of Shinji’s next, his other hand holding a simple hado. The blond ducked the blow before it could make contact but as he swung out away from Ichigo’s fist glowing with a hado Ichigo snapped his foot to the left and caught Shinji’s side.

The blond let out a ragged gasp as he darted away with a small hiss. Ichigo laughed at the sound, knowing the kick would leave a large bruise the next day; he winced in slight sympathy, though he didn’t possess enough empathy to regret the attack. Not when his rib cage pulsed with a twang of pain, where Shinji had decided it a great idea to plant his fist in Ichigo’s side.

“Hey Ichi, think we can go Shikai?”

Shinji asked with a certain mania to his face that was still light hearted, but possessed all the darkness of his hollow side. Ichigo rolled his eyes but submitted to the request with a nod and a small smile that was all rain and sunlight.

The orange-haired Shinigami watched as Shinji let Sakande rotate between his fingers, echoing her release phrase, Ichigo quickly snapped his eyes shut. He winced at the touch of vertigo that overtook his senses and left him feeling dizzy on his feet. The lieutenant took a breath drawing on and submerging himself in Zangetsu-Ossan’s presence, allowing Zangetsu-Shiro’s instincts to guide him.

He loosened his tense posture swaying on his feet, he connected with his zanpaktou and whirled and deflected the blade splicing towards his head with a loud squawk of metal on metal. Shinji made a vaguely flabbergasted noise, and Ichigo chuckled. He wondered if the Captain would ever get use to Ichigo’s ability to deflect the attacks of the inverted world.

Ichigo had more experience then he would have liked to admit dealing with illusion type zanpaktou. While Sakande was certainly different from Kyoka Suigetsu the concept remained the same. The senses were deceiving and the only way to stand in such a battle, was instinct, and even that was tricky.

Darting to the side, as the keen whistle of a blade passing overhead. Ichigo’s fist darted out in the opposite direction briefly clipping the sleeve of Shinji’s shihaksho before he pulled back and resumed his balance on the balls of his feet.
Shinji pounded Ichigo with a flurry of attacks, darting soft whispers of cloth, and Shiro’s presence guiding his arms. Narrowly blocking the intense strike with pressure that felt like a hurricane at times and sometimes soft as western skies.

Occasionally he opened his eyes for a moment, revelling in the challenge it presented; it was a unique way to train his senses and his mind. He had to focus on moving his blade in the opposite direction he was expecting.

Shinji slipped forward on Ichigo’s left and he carefully brought his blade out to the right to intercept the swing, ducking into a lower stance for stability. Their blades clashed with the grind of metal, and Shinji’s weight behind the blade. Ichigo quickly reversed Zangetsu down and outwards in his hand, allowing the blade in the inverted world to swing upwards and in. The blond grin and commented in the tight closed spaces, “Ya a damn protégé aren’t you Ichigo? Figuring out how to fight in my inverted world with ease.”

Ichigo just smiled innocently at the question, reflecting as he pushed Sakande closer to Shinji’s chest, that in some ways when he had been a youth it had seemed that way. Instead he channelled reaisutsu along his blade leaning forward, and said, “When I’ve fought your Shikai well over ten times it’s easier.”

“Tell that to the first two times we fought.”

Shinji yelled back as he ducked away and darted off circling around Ichigo. Ichigo hastily brought Zangetsu up behind him catching the incoming blade he kicked his back leg out in a low side sweep and pivoted on his other foot in the opposite direction to end up facing the blonde again.

It was like a game of cat and mouse, where Ichigo was left blind as a mouse and the cat, Shinji who personified the animal quite well, could strike out at his fancy. But it was fun nonetheless, the overbearing rush of adrenaline, the thrill in trying to predict and combat Shinji’s attacks.

“Oy Ichi gonna bring out Zangetsu, or ya gonna keep playing with the little toy.”

Shinji jeered with a laugh, all light mocking amusement as the blond brought Sakande in an overhead strike that Ichigo blocked at the last minute, bringing Zangetsu up with fluid ease. Shiro cheered in Ichigo’s ear for him to succumb to the pressure, and his thoughts of late. Ossan echoed it with whispering reassurances. Ichigo had wanted to reveal Zangetsu.

He was tired of hiding his blade, the wonderful product of his soul that carried his strength. Tired of always having to modulate his power to such an extreme so that he could maintain a blade that felt unsure in his hands.

Ichigo had already made peace with the consequences. And sometimes it was the time to throw caution to the wind. Backing a few paces away from Shinji, Ichigo flashed the blond a knowing grin, and brought the sleek blade out to point forwards in front of him.

Channelling his reaisutsu along the blade, Ichigo laughed at Shiro’s glee, and Ossan’s content, as he called out, “Tear the heavens asunder Zangetsu.”

The dust from the rubble no doubt littering the sparring area was thrown into the air, thick as winter’s frost, blocking everyone’s sight. Ichigo smiled, fond and like the sunshine on early mornings as the familiar weight of Zangetsu rested in both of his hands, the large and small blade balanced perfectly.

With a swing of Ossan’s smaller Khyber blade, the dust cleared and Shinji across from him, stark in his shihaksho against the still pumice of white from the dust grinned, his hollow reflected in the wide
curve of his lips. Ichigo thought he could hear the gasps and feel the shock of the audience at his sudden dramatic reveal, but it was lost in the moment of battle. The Captain casually swung Sakande in lazy circles, easily dropping the inverted world with a laugh that Ichigo recognized as anticipation, feeling the same emotion kindling in his own chest.

Crossing Zangetsu’s dual forms before his chest, he pooled his reaitsu into the blades, crackling and vibrating in his hands, he sent the rampant energy forward. Racing across the debris littered ground towards the blond. Shinji hastily cut Sakande upwards to catch the reaitsu as it dispersed around the blade in a terrifying display of crimson and ebony.

Shinji darted from under the remaining dredges of the Getsuga Tenshō letting it pass harmlessly overhead where it dissipated upon contact against the surrounding walls. Ichigo watched the blond approach from the right and as the blond leaped, the lieutenant turned and raised the Khyber blade to the left catching the outside strike on the blade. The infamous Cheshire grin was still there as Sakande slipped away from Ossan’s smaller blade and slashed in a rapid blinding wide arc towards Ichigo’s neck.

Ichigo ducked evenly and turned to the right, to block where the blade had suddenly appeared Shinji’s face close to Ichigo’s own as the blade caught against Shiro’s blade, arced over Ichigo’s head. Few had probably even realised Shinji’s ulterior form of his Shikai, the inverted world turned inwards.

Shinji was able to switch whatever angle he was fighting from in an instant, an inversion of where he was previously aiming, it allowed for a nasty surprise in battle. However, Ichigo had learned how to combat it for the most part, though the blond never ceased to surprise.

Ichigo ducked and released the larger blade, lunging low to the ground to appear in Shinji’s personal space he brought up the Khyber blade, aiming for Shinji’s neck. The blond grimaced before he cast a quick Shakkahō exploding in both of their faces. It threw Ichigo back, as he hastily brought Ossan’s smaller blade up to block the worst of the damage, feet digging into the rubble as he braced himself. Shinji coughed but appeared otherwise unharmed if not a bit singed, likely transitioning the trajectory of the explosion.

Then the blond was in front of him once more and there was no time to ponder the blond’s techniques. It was another rush and flurry of movements, ducking Sakande, jabbing with an uppercut with Shiro’s hilt, slashing at the Captain’s ankles with Ossan.

Shinji retaliated with vigour, slashing relentlessly, in quick sharp darting movements that appeared out of the corner of his eyes. His arms moving out of instincts to catch the blade, even as Shinji released a kido from his other palm, in addition to the strike.

Ichigo skidded back as Shinji pushed the advantage he precariously held. Suddenly Ichigo dropped and rolled to the side kicking out at Shinji’s exposed calf. He clipped the leg earning one of Shinji’s favourite nicknames even as he rose to a knee catching Sakande’s low strike. He pushed the blade away with a rise catching it in the X shape of Zangetsu’s form held together, before Ossan’s blade was darting out to catch the blond’s jaw.

Shinji leaned back, reaitsu sparking along his fist, and Ichigo’s eyes widened in surprise as one hand was thrust forward a cero arcing out in a crackle of power. Ichigo skidded back Zangetsu catching the brute power and dispersing it along their blade. There was a wild feral grin on Ichigo’s features backed by the pride at how far Shinji had come since their training.

Deciding to finish the spar, Ichigo darted forward light as air and appeared behind Shinji who was watching where Ichigo had stood with sceptical eyes. The blond pivoted and caught Ichigo’s blade
on the back of Sakande, Ichigo quickly brought the Khyber blade up to rest on the exposed hollow of Shinji’s throat.

“I surrender Ichi.”

Shinji said with a laugh, panting with exertion, skin flushed, eyes bright as a nuclear explosion. Ichigo grinned and dropped Ossan from Shinji’s neck, sheathing the smaller blade at his side, as he brought Shiro’s blade down and repeated the action. He could just feel the satisfaction emanating from his spirits, feeling his senses with a warm drowsy content that left Ichigo feeling a bit high.

Shinji rubbed at his neck as he sheathed Sakande, running the same hand through his hair, he stretched his legs out a bit. Ichigo copied the movement rotating his arms, knowing he would be sore the next day, but the good kind, as supposed to the ‘why did I even try’ kind of sore, Ichigo was familiar with.

Idly he checked over the few wounds littering his body, a few light kido burns, and a few thin scratches from where Sakande had gotten her claws into Ichigo. There was a particularly large gash on his collarbone, staining the hem of his shihaksho and leaving a trail of sluggishly drying blood down the side of his chest. Shaking his head at the thought of Kukkaku’s complaints he raised a hand and let a light healing kido radiate from his palm. It was all he could manage; bruises and light cuts, anything else was far beyond his reach, as with most ‘simple’ kido.

Glancing over at Shinji, he checked the blond for wounds, and caught the cut he had left on the Captain’s leg. Bending down he easily healed the wound earning an amused snort from the blond above him. Springing back to his feet with a waver of balance, he rolled on the balls of his feet, and glanced around.

There was quite a crowd, Ichigo noticed with a somewhat abashed smile. Most of the division had apparently come out, and Ichigo thought he could see Sosuke’s smug visage somewhere there. Gin had a surprised but interested expression on his fox-like features from where he was seated in the shade.

Shinji yelled something loud about heading back to work, and reluctantly most of the Shinigami cleared out grumbling good-heartedly about their task-masking Captain. Shinji winked at Ichigo and sauntered over to the porches shadowed in shade plopping down with a flirtatious wave.

Ichigo shook his head in amusement at the Captain’s antics and padded over to join the man. The lieutenant plopped onto the porch with a relieved sigh, stretching his legs out in front of him, as Shinji chuckled beside him. He leant back, briefly glancing at the Captain; he wondered what their recent spar would spell for the rest of Soul Society.

“Come on don’t worry, it’ll be fine.”

Shinji assured Ichigo as he wacked Ichigo upside the head with knowing eyes. Ichigo frowned but nodded, and instead returned a small proud smile and said, “That cero was really nice.”

The blond beamed in response at the praise, cocky and proud, and Ichigo rolled his eyes. It had been a good spar, challenging enough for Ichigo that he didn’t have to worry about holding back, just not going overboard. Laughing softly to himself at Shiro’s comment on Shinji’s sloppy technique Ichigo studied the rubble littered courtyard with a grimace. At least he didn’t have to clean it up.

X
Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, and the spar between Ichigo and Shinji which was fun to choreograph. Review/comments are always appreciated!

Salt!!
Ichigo shifted in the chair he was settled in; it was one of those chairs that were lumpy and sunk like quicksand when Ichigo sat in it. Idly he stared out the window at the pleasant morning brewing on the horizon in splashes of rouge and light blue. In front of him, Unohana was regarding Ichigo with a look of amusement; lightly curled lips forming a small smile that was all gentle motherliness. Ichigo wondered when the female Captain had adapted such an expression for him; perhaps after their first session.

The orange-haired Shinigami sipped from the still searing hot cup of tea in his hands and just sat in the quiet for a minute. Much of the time Ichigo spent in Unohana’s office was that, filled with silence, the kind that Ichigo was content to sit and stew in. It was just a silence that was there like the air, lightened with the occasional thread of the female Captain’s reaitsu.

Ichigo wondered what they would discuss in this session, the past few sessions had been good, for the most part. It was the reason Ichigo had agreed to come back. he had placed his trust in Unohana, and so far, Ichigo was not regretting the action.
They had spoken, about what Ichigo thought of the war, his own feelings, fears, worries, and not the ones of everybody around him; which had been both refreshing and strange. Sometimes he had to stop himself and wonder what were his own thoughts, and not those that Soul Society posed. What he had wanted to do with his life before Soul Society and how that had changed. What were some of the things he had learned in the war.

And sometimes there was anger, or sorrow that just blossomed in his chest, closed up his throat and left him gasping for breath; all raw wounds. But Unohana had taken it in stride helped Ichigo to calm down with gentle coaching and a reassuring presence.

Just the same it felt like he was walking out of a darkened room, one that Ichigo had pulled the curtains aside to shine light within; but had never found the opportunity to step outside of it. See the pain from a distance, discuss the reasons behind it.

The healer had also given Ichigo methods to cope and how to deal with the panic attacks he sometimes found himself having, how to soothe his restless thoughts. Deep breathing exercises, counting backwards in his mind, repeating the names of his friends; anything to focus on seemed to help.

When Ichigo had mentioned speaking to Kaien about his father, the healer had nodded a sort of pride to the lines of her face. She had encouraged the action; told Ichigo that when he felt like talking about the past than to do it because it was healing.

They had talked about meditation and how most Shinigami when they learned to contact their zanpaktou, they learned first how to meditate. Ichigo had, before the war started, only ever learned how to fall into his inner world. It was after the first war that he had really delved into a deeper kind of meditation.

Still, the women had spoken of different types of meditation, and sometimes just meditative actions, like just flipping mindlessly through a book for half an hour, or stretching in the morning. They had talked about what Ichigo himself felt comfortable with, who he thought his personality was.

It had been strange to look at himself again, really ask himself who he was. Somewhere along the way he had stopped looking, knew he was alright and that had been good enough, but revisiting interests, motives, dreams had been an awakening experience.

Ideals and topics, they were still exploring. Ichigo knew it would be a long time before he could even consider dropping their sessions, but looking up at the healer idly stirring her tea, ebony hair cascading down her shoulders in waves, the youth acknowledged that even then perhaps he wouldn’t.

Unohana and Ichigo clicked on a strange level, one that had rarely been present in his own timeline. In both times, it was clear that the women had possessed a slightly mothering touch towards Ichigo; if in his own timeline only because of how often he was in her care (he got injured a lot, through some fault of his own). But here in this timeline, she seemed to have taken Ichigo’s healing into her own hands. Idly he had discussed it with Ossan, staring up at the sometimes-perpetual rain clouds of his inner world.

The wise spirit had considered Ichigo for a moment before the corners of his eyes had crinkled in amusement and curvy locks had swayed about his head, as Ossan shook it. He had murmured soft words about maternal presences, and Ichigo’s own lack of them with careful eyes. Some of that lingering guilt that always escaped the older spirit’s iron control, when he thought of his real-life counterpart.
Ichigo had taken the spirit’s jaw into his hand, whispered familiar words till the guilt had passed. He knew that Ossan was not a reflection of that man. Ichigo would save the Masaki of this timeline, he had already made peace with the fate of his own timeline.

“Ichigo?”

Unohana’s voice pierced the silence and broke Ichigo from his musings, he looked up to catch the healer’s gaze and responded with a sleepy, “Mm?”

The woman laughed all quiet regality, covering her mouth with a dainty hand she continued, “What would you like to discuss today?”

The youth furrowed his brows at the question, unsure about his answer. Usually, he walked in with a question or topic in mind, something he felt they needed to discuss first, but today there was no burning words pressing against his lips. Unsure he shrugged his shoulders with an apologetic gaze.

The healer rolled her eyes in good-natured amusement, shaking her hand laxly to communicate it was alright. She tilted her head and pursed her lips for a moment before asking, “How are the pills working?”

Ichigo thought over the question, the answer was mostly uncomplicated. But as in everything in Ichigo’s life that was always some twist. The pills were working as far as Ichigo could tell, sometimes he was left jolting out of bed, mind hazy with whispered dreams. But those were early mornings and few and far compared to the mockery of sleep Ichigo had once experienced. Still, there were a few strange side effects, he often found himself holding onto a latent weary in the morning, as if his body had not yet abandoned the comforts of his bed.

Still, Ichigo supposed they were working their intended purpose. Allowing him to wake up in the morning feeling rested, and able to fall asleep in the evenings. The orange-haired Shinigami wondered why the pills Unohana had administered worked in comparison to the ones Kisuke had prescribed. He assumed that it had something to do with Unohana’s medical knowledge in comparison to Kisuke’s as well as the content of the pills. Unohana had revealed they primarily relied on herbs, while Kisuke had employed synthetic methods.

Unohana lightly tapped Ichigo’s hand to bring his attention back to her. Smiling sheepishly Ichigo rubbed the back of his neck and answered, “They’re working, the only side effect is drowsiness in the morning.”

Unohana nodded, looking a touch pleased as she pencilled in a few notes on one of her sheets (the folder she always pulled out when Ichigo arrived). She nodded and mumbled something to herself before she sat back in her chair across from Ichigo.

The youth was glad she had chosen the set up they were currently seated in, and not the famous therapist setting seen in the western movies. One where Ichigo would have been left staring at the ceiling, listening to a disembodied voice. Instead, there was a quarter of the desk between them, allowing for a slight barrier, Unohana seated in a chair of the same height as Ichigo’s though far lest sinkable, with the youth opposite her.

“Ichigo are you okay with discussing Soul Society, and how they may have hurt you?”

Unohana asked out of the seeming blue, drawing Ichigo from his idle musings, musings that often drifted into his thoughts in the early mornings, and quiet evenings. He considered the question with a drawn-out sigh, and the crease of his eyebrows.
The damage Soul Society had wrought on Ichigo, was a pool that Ichigo stuffed at the back of his mind, and never swam in. he acknowledged the existence of said pool, but he had chosen to remember the better parts of Soul Society, the people, and just actions.

Looking up at Unohana, who was studying Ichigo patient and warm, Ichigo supposed that as this was a therapy session, he could afford to dip his toes into the pool a little. He knew otherwise the issues that sometimes stalked forth in thorny spikes of irritation and rampant bitterness would remain as they were.

Finally, after a moment’s more deliberation Ichigo nodded and replied, “I am okay talking about it.”

Unohana liked to encourage that Ichigo speak his consent out loud, something about affirmations for both sides. Regardless Ichigo took a sip of the scorching tea to distract his thoughts. They perched together in silence for a few more moments, the sun beginning its lazy ascent upwards as time passed.

She was leaving the silence for Ichigo to speak. It was up to the youth whether he spoke about the past or not, what he chose to speak of. Unohana was only able to work with what Ichigo willingly gave. Otherwise, it was a useless attempt, at least in the healer’s eyes. Ichigo thought in dull amusement that she probably also enjoyed the silence, and didn’t want to pressure him.

Unsure what to speak of Ichigo turned his attention to Zangetsu, who knew his wielder better than himself, or at least it seemed that way. Sometimes it was best to ask for Ossan’s opinion on any matter, the older man possessed a wisdom that was more often than not that of riddles, but also always held the right the answer.

“Ichigo, why not speak of either the time you went undercover or when you… lost us.”

The spirit suggested, deep baritone soothing Ichigo’s nerves, but hesitating as he drifted over a time that had been a cataclysm within Ichigo’s soul, for all parts of him. The orange-haired Shinigami considered his spirit’s choices, they were not the only times that Soul Society had caused some deal of harm to Ichigo, but they were perhaps the most devastating.

At least in comparison to the constant negligence shown to the Vizard, or how they handled certain issues… Ichigo took a deep breath letting Zangetsu’s presence wash over him, he didn’t want the anger associated with those times, it was tiring, and he was past it.

Still unsure of which to speak of, Ichigo decided to broach the topic with Unohana, and gain the female Captain’s opinion. Looking towards the healer, from where his eyes had strayed to the window, Ichigo said, “There are two notable incidents… both were devastating but I don’t know which to speak of.”

There that was done, one less worry off of his chest, Ichigo said more to himself as Unohana considered the orange-haired Shinigami, a kind of weight to her eyes, like that of a divine being forced to watch the suffering of mortals unable to aid them. The healer pursed her lips and rested a hand against her chin for a moment before she responded, “You can speak of both if you want, but I think you should choose the one you are most hesitant to speak of, at least first.”

Ichigo nodded and wondered again at what he would speak of. Brushing his hand through his hair Ichigo sighed and decided before he spoke up, “During our war with the Quincy, the time came that we were running out of tactics. In an effort to gain an advantage, someone suggested espionage, another infiltration. The only thing was… no one held a Quincy bloodline, Uryuu was still on the opposing side, but my sisters and I,” Ichigo laughed a touch bitterly at the memory, how every gaze in the room had landed on him, as if closing in like one preys on their victim leaving no escape, “I
felt trapped… and scared thinking of how I could die there. I wouldn’t let my sisters do it, and I was the only one able. At least that is what was parroted my way. I felt they could see my own hesitance, but I pushed it aside because I knew it would aid us.

To infiltrate the Quincy, we staged a murder, one that would involve my zanpaktou as the weapon. It was supposed to be an act of treason; the death of one of the powerhouses of Soul Society. Only a few were in on the plot, maybe three Captains, and a lieutenant. But I was caught in the act before I could even attempt the fake murder… they didn’t even doubt. Or perhaps they did but in times of war, everything’s blurred.

There was a chase, no time to defend, baying for blood, hounds at my feet. There was such fear and devastation in that moment… my… the women who had served as my lieutenant had stared into my eyes with such betrayal. I had no time for even a word of opposition. Byakuya had nearly caught me; eyes confused, with a touch of betrayal in them. I-I sometimes wonder if that was how it was meant to go down in the upper echelon’s plans. It wouldn’t be the first time…”

Ichigo paused and took a few deep breaths, counting backwards till he felt like he wasn’t going to storm out of his seat and pace her office for five minutes. Relaxing his tight grasp on Zangetsu’s hilt, Ichigo let Unohana’s reaitsu reassure him, help centre him along with Zangetsu for a moment before he nodded and prepared to continue.

“So, I fled to the Quincy, and they accepted me. It was so strange, always an edge of fear, living in the Siberian fortress, at least Uryuu understood. But it was always cold, blindingly so in that it seemed to steal hope from the air. It was a constant game of cutthroats and backstabbing in the presence of their emperor. His presence was like an unsheathed blade, unforger metal raw and tainted.

I tried to contact Soul Society but was unable to, I couldn’t even make it to the outer districts. I felt utterly alone, lost and floating in a sea of enemies. I had brief bouts of contact with Soul Society, where I could see the hate and disgust, such vigour that it made me sick with self-loathing, and doubt. Sometimes I was forcefully reminded of the fact that I was only maybe twenty at the time, and I don’t know if that hurts more.

My friends and allies, they had believed I had really done it; not my family, or Rukia, Orihime, Chad, Renji. But everyone else was mostly fair game. And the conspirators of the plot did nothing to dissuade the thoughts, probably could do nothing at the time. not till the infiltration was finished.

Those months were harrowing, constantly watching my back, a sudden enemy on both sides. Bach was always watching my movements, sometimes we talked, and it was like speaking to the void. And there was endless harassment from the Quincy, and I-I had just wanted to go home, for the nightmare to end. If we had followed through with the original plan, the whole of Soul Society would have seen the murder for what it was, things would have been different. But life is cruel.

It was eventually resolved but it took six months before I was able to rejoin Soul Society’s ranks once more. And even then, for months afterwards people still stared at me as if in one sudden movement I would turn and kill them all. When I had saved them all before.”

Ichigo finished with a shaky breath, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at his side, breath fluttering in his lungs as if desperate to escape. Taking a moment Ichigo closed his eyes, took a deep breath and just let all of his emotions out with an exhale.

The healer was still silent when Ichigo looked up, her face was closed off, blank and emotionless, like Ichigo sometimes saw in the mirror. But underneath he could see the frown feathering the corners of her lips, the way her eyes seemed to reflect and glow like bronze in sunlight.
After a minute, the fierce expression was gone, and she was considering Ichigo, a thoughtful expression lingering on her features. The female Captain pursed her lips and asked, “Ichigo did you feel betrayed by Soul Society for their reactions, and part in what happened.”

“H-For the most part yes. It felt like… it’s hard to put it into words, but imagine you are holding a string with another person. They chose to cut the string without your consent, and the only negative effects are on your end. It was far too easy for everyone to fall into the belief that I had turned treason. And I understood why the conspirators of the mission couldn’t reveal it, but not why they couldn’t to the upper echelon. It just hurts, and I can’t help but see their disdain and mistrust sometimes. The lingering fear of my mission, and the desolate solitude.”

Ichigo responded slowly, trying to think over his words, analyzing the feelings that seemed to flutter just out of his grasp. He wanted to run away from it all, now that he had said it out loud. It was something that had appeared in misty waking hours to torment him; whispered thoughts of what ifs, and could have been. Saying it out loud didn’t change anything of the past, Ichigo knew what had happened, had spent time staring at a cup and wondering, but it took the sting away to say it aloud.

Sweeping a hand through his hair, Ichigo curled back into the chair, hugging the mug tight to his chest, listening to Zangetsu’s whispers like a hymn. He just needed time to decompress, let it be within his soul again. In discussing it Ichigo had relived those events in his mind, but experience cast a different light, time made the fear and betrayal distant (and what did it matter in a time that would never exist again, what happened had happened).

Unohana remained quietly seated across from him, a soothing cast to her presence, she had learned or maybe decided that telling Ichigo how wrong Soul Society was for doing whatever action was useless. Not when Ichigo knew it. Perhaps it was not completely useless although it was nice to hear someone agree, but when he talked with Unohana, it allowed him to analyze, take a step back, and just be raw with his emotions.

When he spoke to Kaien, it was of the good memories, soft fond things. Although it hurt to remember them, it was fond nostalgic pain that meant something (someone he knew would have said, to feel pain was to be alive). So, to speak of what hurt, what he didn’t want to speak of, it helped to heal wounds that had only scabbed over.

Looking up Ichigo caught the faint impression of laugh lines around Unohana’s eyes. Quirking a brow in curiosity at the expression dancing across the healer’s features, he caught the Captain’s attention and tilted his head in question.

“I am just recalling the times of the early Blood War.”

Ichigo perked up at the answer, anticipation trailing along his fingers as they fluttered against Zangetsu’s hilt. The female Captain had promised to share some of her life with Ichigo, a life that had seemed shrouded in mystery. She had always seemed that way, even in his own timeline. As if sensing his curiosity, Unohana gently shook her head and poured herself another cup of tea before gesturing for Ichigo’s mug. Handing it over Ichigo let his eyes flash upwards to catch Unohana’s own as he received his re-filled mug.

The woman let out a sigh but continued, “War is very much the same, and like you have related we find comrades everywhere. Of course, you’ve probably heard the Gotei 13 of the past were bloodthirsty, and I was a very different woman then, but nonetheless, I was recalling a time where Isamu thought it wise to challenge me to a contest of strengths. The man was an expert tactician upon the fields, and a master with kido, however outside of battle his brains often abandoned him. He lost horribly, and each time he failed he would parade around and make excuses and boast his strength
like a cockerel. It was a show to amuse others and take their minds away from the battle. Lightheartedness and all that.

The time before the Blood War seems strange in my mind, distant like a dream. I suppose it is much the same for you Ichigo. But I think I can recall arriving in Soul Society, and what substituted as Rungokai before then. Holding my zanpaktou for the first time, meeting Yamamoto-san. Time is a completely nonlinear concept.”

Unohana finished with a kind of breathless smile, as she considered Ichigo. He acknowledged the information with a wide grin, humorous at the story of her comrade, understanding well her points of war, and gratuitous that she could see time for what it paraded as.

Settling in the seat once more, Ichigo idly sipped at his tea, he wondered how different the past had been, what the first war had been like. While he never wanted to experience it (he was more than happy with the time he had arrived in), he wondered how it had shaped Unohana into who she was.

Peering at the tea Ichigo contemplated speaking of the other event, asking for more of Unohana’s life, or simply basking in the morning’s quiet. The healer smiled at Ichigo from under the crown of her hair while she idly stirred her tea. The youth smiled in response and decided to let the quiet be for a moment longer before he needed to decide.

X

Kisuke looked up startled as a sudden presence squished itself between where Kisuke and Aizen had been huddled at the hip, heads bent over deep in discussion. His first glance was of disturbingly glaring orange hair and from there most of his irritation dissipated to a sort of dull ire and mostly amusement at the appearance of their young friend. On the other side of Ichigo, Aizen flashed Kisuke an exasperated look as the man shifted to make space on the bench.

The two scientists had encamped themselves in one of the labs in the Twelfth, one buried particularly deep underground, where Kisuke’s more radical inventions often took place (he left his office for other more ‘safe’ inventions). Or where more often than not Kisuke designed prototypes, and returned to the drawing board.

After their return from their little ‘hollow’ escapade, Kisuke had opened up the lab to the curly haired scientist, with piercing eyes and a threat that left the sometimes-smug looking lieutenant pale and shaky. Benihime had crowed her pleasure at the threat within his mind.

So, he had portioned off a little section (and no he most certainly did not paint a line on the floor for clarification thank you very much Ichigo) and gave it to Aizen for his own experiments. Considering Ichigo would probably frown if Aizen went off and built a giant base in the middle of nowhere (at least not when they already had one).

In any case, they had been studying the effects of hollowification upon the cells and were still collecting data. It was their pet project of sorts, as they were the main conspirators of the incident (really it was Aizen, but Kisuke was far too involved by this point to care).

Returning his attention to the orange haired menace seated between them, Kisuke noted the open curiosity on Ichigo’s features as he read over their notes, brows furrowing every once in a while. Kisuke sometimes forgot, or he supposed didn’t remember to look beneath the surface of the youth, Ichigo was incredibly intelligent. Part of it was his knowledge from the future, things they were just discovering in Soul Society, and the other part was a weird amalgamation of knowledge that Ichigo had seemed to randomly absorb like a magnet (ranging from anatomy to poetry).
The blond resisted the urge to swat the youth as Ichigo pencilled in a few notes over their pre-existing ones, adding data they would have no possible way of collecting (like how a hollow matured?) and crossing out a few theories. Sosuke chuckled on Ichigo’s other side, that deep velvet laugh that was pleasant and at the same time foreboding. Kisuke could sympathize with the brunette’s amusement though, watching as Ichigo destroyed some of their work with reckless abandon, and added new topics of inquisition with a grin that spelt some whispered doom.

“Ichigo perhaps you could enlighten us, as to the reason for your visit?”

Sosuke questioned after a few minutes of watching the youth work, where Kisuke occupied himself with another sheet. It depicted modifications on the mod souls, the ones Soul Society had introduced a near century past.

Ichigo craned his head up, dropping the pencil with a shrug he grinned all teasing flint sharp edges and asked, “What, can’t I visit my favourite two scientists in the world?”

Sosuke shot the young man a bland look, and Kisuke shook his head at the cocky response, lingering with the familiar Shiba dramatics. Ichigo pouted at the lack of response looking a millisecond away from falling into a fit worthy of Kaien; though Kisuke doubted Ichigo would ever lower himself to such a thing.

“We’re delighted by your presence as always Ichigo.”

Kisuke said with a tip of his hat, shadowing his eyes, and voice a deadpan monotone that cracked a smile. He really liked the hat Ichigo had gotten him, had he said that to himself before? Benihime’s dry hum of amusement assured Kisuke that the sentiment had been repeated far too frequently for her liking. But it was a lovely hat, great for adding an aura of mystery.

Ichigo grinned at the response, but before he could speak Aizen interjected, “But as much as we love seeing your outrageous hair, perhaps you could tell as to why you decided to grace us with your presence?”

Ichigo pouted again and mouthed ‘spoilsport’ in Kisuke’s direction before the orange-haired Shinigami furrowed his brow in thought for a moment. After a second the youth straightened as if having lit the proverbial light bulb he said, “Oh yeah, I wanted to talk to you guys about the future.”

Instantly Kisuke and Sosuke’s attention was riveted on the youth at the mention of his rather impressive time travelling abilities. Ichigo blushed faintly under the sudden microscope of inspection at the statement, but otherwise remained seated.

“And why would you like to speak to us about the future Ichi?”

Kisuke questioned, reignining back the hundred other questions perched at the forefront of his mind. Aizen nodded beside Ichigo, pivoting slightly so that he could face Ichigo, and consequently Kisuke. The Shiba lieutenant frowned faintly, as if concerned about his sudden proposition, his eyes flickered between the two before some tension seemed to drain from his shoulders.

“Well as you see, there are some rather big things coming closer in the timeline. And I thought it would be a good idea to discuss it with two rather intellectual friends of mine, rather than try and wing it.”

Ichigo admitted with a trace of embarrassment, abashedly rubbing the back of his head as he grinned apologetically at the two of them. Kisuke both felt trepidation and anticipation at Ichigo’s words, eager to see and help plan for what would happen. But hesitant about what had happened in Ichigo’s
original timeline. He also supposed that if they were to have this war council, or rather time council or whatever it was, that they would be able to spend greater time with Ichigo, which was an entertaining idea.

“So, you would like us to aid you in planning out the future events?”

Sosuke asked precisely and to the point, as the man usually was (though he could get quite long-winded about certain topics, then again so could Kisuke). Ichigo nodded, before shaking his head a bit and responding, “It’s slightly more complicated than that, but yes, for the most part, I would like your aid in planning the future.”

Kisuke nodded at Ichigo’s unsure explanation, already on board to aid the kid. Ichigo had earned Kisuke’s loyalty the day he had decided to save the Vizard rather than let them suffer for his own motives. He had driven the nail into the proverbial coffin with the lengths Ichigo had gone to for their sakes, and the personality beneath the sometimes-rough exterior (the famous Ichigo scowl, icy enough to make a man’s blood run cold).

“So, what do you need us to do Ichi?”

The blond asked wondering how they could aid the youth. Of course, they could provide suggestions, implement their own opinions, or they could help factor and create events. Or if Ichigo wished them to start a war, then Kisuke was sure they could manage that too.

Ichigo thumbed Zangetsu sheathed at his side as he bit his lip before he pulled out a sheet of paper and began jotting things down in a list. Letting the youth create whatever preparation was necessary for his explanation, Kisuke winked over Ichigo’s head at Sosuke.

The older lieutenant was peering at Ichigo, watching the orange-haired Shinigami work, with pensiveness and thought in his features. The brunette sighed resolutely at Kisuke’s gesture (he was spending far too much time with Yoruichi), before the man scrubbed a hand down his face.

“Okay, so I’ve created a rough timeline, which you two can look at to get a basic idea of what’s coming.”

Ichigo said out of the blue, setting down his pencil and passing over the sheet with a tiny yet hopeful smile. Kisuke skimmed the sheet, frown marring his brow as he read of wars, and Bounts, Quincy and Shinigami.

Passing the sheet over to Sosuke, Kisuke continued to reflect on the sheet memorizing pivotal points as best as he could. Sosuke stared intensely at the sheet at Ichigo’s elbow; aura dark, Kisuke presumed the enigma was at the part where the Gotei 13 had banished the Vizard, that or the unsettling liminal space of time between when Ichigo became a Shinigami and fought in a war.

Brushing it aside temporarily for further contemplation; Benihime’s wordless mutterings drifting like threads throughout his mind. Ichigo snatched the sheet back from Sosuke’s hands after a moment, and pulled out another pencil... a pencil crayon? It was bright red, and Ichigo considered the sheet for a moment before he circled a few things and passed the sheet back to Kisuke.

He studied the sheet once more, eyes drawn to the bright red that just glared at him, whispering of foreboding tides. Circled in red were the topics; Winter War, Isshin Kurosaki, Quincy and human world.

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He studied the sheet once more, eyes drawn to the bright red that just glared at him, whispering of foreboding tides. Circled in red were the topics; Winter War, Isshin Kurosaki, Quincy, human world. It was a strange amalgamation with only a few familiar connections. Kisuke recognized the name Quincy, but as that of a race who had been thought of as extinct for centuries. The other name that rang a bell was Isshin’s, how anyone could think of anything else knowing the clan head, was beyond Kisuke.
Passing the sheet to Sosuke, Kisuke leaned back against the bench and studied Ichigo, who looked like he wanted to pace around the room to release the nervous energy showing itself in tapping fingers. Sosuke made a faint noise of confusion under his breath, barely audible over the warm running whirl of the various engines and machinery, least to mention the Hogyoku locked up somewhere in the room.

“What would be priority number one Ichigo?”

The older lieutenant asked as he set the sheets down, and rubbed at his forehead. Ichigo furrowed his brow before he responded, “The Winter War will be occurring pretty soon, and is a pretty major issue.”

Kisuke thought over Ichigo’s words, running them through his head. Identifying the hesitance in Ichigo’s voice as he spoke of the war in vague terms, and paused and struggled to describe the issue as it was.

Sosuke was staring at Ichigo, in that way that the megalomaniac (okay partial megalomaniac) seemed to get when he was contemplating something that tilted on the axis between morally right and wrong. Kisuke wondered what Ichigo was planning, to gain a look like that from the curly-haired lieutenant.

Ichigo leant back against the lab bench with a weary sigh, deep and with the weight of the future, before he began, “In my timeline, the Winter War was primarily waged between the two factions of hollows and Shinigami. The hollows were able to evolve into Espada and gain power equal to that of a Shinigami Captain, just so you know. The thing is I think the war needs to happen…”

Kisuke and Aizen turned to face Ichigo, both with looks of surprise, though Kisuke managed to hide some of it beneath the brim of his cap. When Ichigo had invaded their personal space and sat down at their table, he had not been expecting anything remotely close to Ichigo’s words.

The concept of the Espada hollows as powerful as Shinigami caught Kisuke’s attention for a minute before it was swept away to the final sentence. Ichigo thought a war needed to happen. A war that the veteran had fought in, and lived through. One that obviously had lasting impact, in Ichigo’s eyes, and his actions alone. Kisuke wasn’t sure how to feel about the sentiment, only knowing that there had better be a reason behind such tremulous words.

“Hear me out. The Quincy will invade no matter what, it’s inevitable a thing that will happen. I wouldn’t be able to handle the whole of the Quincy regiment on my own. Sometimes that’s how the universe is, certain things will come to pass no matter what we try. The Winter War occurred because of the leadership of a rogue Shinigami. However, in this timeline, the rogue Shinigami is sitting here so the possibility of the war is slim.

As much as the war was devastating… it allowed us to gain the power necessary to fight the Quincy. Without that experience, it would have been complete and utter slaughter within a week.

We need that experience, but it doesn’t have to be a three-year-long war campaign, it doesn’t have to involve the torture and suffering that it held in my time. War has the ability to draw people together, helps them grow. It will encourage training and inner strength within Soul Society, and from the war, we may be able to gain allies.

I don’t want to go through another war… but I don’t want to see Soul Society fall, more than I care for my own whims. Sometimes there are necessary evils.”

Ichigo finished, visage visibly pale and shaky, the youth was breathing deeply gaining control over his emotions. Kisuke analysed Ichigo’s words, took the raw truth that hurt in Ichigo’s voice but was
unavoidable. A sentiment he wanted to vehemently deny, but one that he could not blind himself to, now that Ichigo had made it clear how essential it was that the Shinigami receive that experience.

Ichigo cared so much for his family, for the whole of Soul Society. That he would rather them face a war and be ready for the next than suffer greater injury. It was as Ichigo had said a necessary evil, and it left Kisuke wondering how long it had taken for Ichigo to reach such a conclusion.

Unconsciously his gaze drifted to Sosuke whose own face was shuttered off, eyes betraying the scene whirling with emotion. There had been an acknowledgement over tea, in the quiet morning, that without Ichigo’s intervention, Sosuke would have fallen off the deep end, and into the abyss. It was proven in the future Ichigo had lived.

But Kisuke knew, understood it in the way Sosuke sometimes watched the world pass with soft awe and observance that Sosuke would never follow that path now. Because of Ichigo, the man had changed, and Kisuke was glad that he was able to speak with him. That they were on the same side, that the intelligence behind obtuse framed could flourish.

Still to think the youth would go to such measures to save everyone he could. It was something unexpected and yet so completely Ichigo, that Kisuke couldn’t find it in his heart to bemoan the youth’s course of action (not really).

“How do you propose going about this?”

Sosuke asked in the quiet the lingered, filled with wondering thoughts, and a sorrow for their younger companion and the choices he had been driven to. Ichigo cocked his head up from where it had drifted to stare at the workstation with an absent gaze.

“Do you have a chalkboard?”

Was Ichigo’s answering question. Sharing a bemused glance with the older lieutenant, Kisuke pointed out one pushed against a wall and blocked by a ton of scrap metal. Ichigo stood up and paced over to pull out the ancient thing. It was, as he was walking, that Kisuke noticed the zanpaktou strapped to his waist. Ichigo was sporting two familiar blades one on either hip, a long blade that seemed inherently instinctive, and a smaller one with a knife-like shape, all fluid grace.

So, the rumours flying around Soul Society had held truth, for the rare occasion it occurred. Kisuke had heard all about the supposed duel between Ichigo and Shinji, as the Shihōin princess had sprawled in his lap, Kisuke working idly as she spoke (his attention had been one hundred percent riveted to her anyway). She had mentioned Ichigo releasing a new Shikai, one that some might confuse for a Bankai, but there had apparently been no build up, no prior release.

Kisuke and Yoruichi had shared a knowing grin, as she continued to relate the gossip, and the increasingly absurd rumours. The scientist was just happy that Ichigo had finally decided to show the Gotei 13 the true form of his zanpaktou, it had been high time he at least showed a fraction of his power. And who wasn’t to say that Ichigo just held a different aura when he walked around with Zangetsu’s true form at his waist.

Ichigo with a final huff wedged the board out from beneath the scrap. While Kisuke had been musing on the blades glinting like oil light, Ichigo had picked up a stray stub of chalk and had begun to write.

“Nee Ichigo, finally decided to show everyone Zangetsu?”

Kisuke asked, interrupting the lieutenant’s work. Ichigo huffed and ran a hand through his hair, as he
continued to write he said, “You wouldn’t believe the reactions. Kaien damn near fainted in between all the blubbering, and Taicho stared with this knowing look in his eyes. Not to mention Ukitake-san’s joy at another dual wielder.”

The scientist laughed at Ichigo’s dilemma, mirth painting his features. Ichigo just huffed and continued to work, pushing annoying strands of hair out of his eyes.

The only Captain (though probably not for much longer) glanced over to Sosuke who was also deep in thought. Kisuke grinned and resisted the temptation to disturb the man, instead of letting his curiosity wonder what the man was himself thinking about.

After a minute Ichigo dropped the chalk with a resounding clink and stepped back from the board scrawled with writing, dusting his hands off in the air with a vaguely proud look about his face. Kisuke studied the board, reaching over in a well-practised motion, to tap Aizen on the shoulder and aid him in returning to the conversation.

The two scientists stared at the board analysing its content, as Ichigo shifted beside it, like a child in school presenting their project. On the board was a list of names (and had Ichigo really drawn symbols or faces?) ranked in power, and aligned with their position of hierarchy in the Winter War Ichigo had spoken of. Filling up the other side of the board were randomly jotted notes, or so they appeared, Kisuke was certain they had some purpose.

“Would you care to elaborate for us Ichigo?”

Sosuke asked when they both felt they had adequately grasped all the knowledge held on the board. Ichigo nodded fidgeted a bit, before he straightened and his eyes sharpened into the likeness of a hawk, the previous unsure demeanour gone. It was as if they were really in a war council, and here was an Ichigo who could not afford to make a mistake in his explanation.

“Baraggan Louisenbairn, the self-proclaimed king of Hueco Mundo at the moment. This is merely so because none of the others have bothered to claim the title, or are as of yet not ready. To create a strong opposing force, we will need to use the Hogyoku to speed along the process of evolution and allow the Espada to truly form

We will also need to deal with creating an echelon of sorts within their ranks. Some of the Espada like Harribel, Starrk, Grimmjow, and so forth would never serve under Baraggan, or at least not without good reason. Which the purveyor of time cannot provide.

We however can. And Baraggan is a foolish hollow, one who could be worked to perform like a puppet on a string. Using the Vizard or even just Shiro and me, we can coach the self-proclaimed king into amassing a force of Espada to combat the Shinigami. We pull the strings, how the faction is run, who is voted into power, what training is required. But Baraggan is all most of the world will see.

Some like those I’ve circled in red will not serve under the false king, and may only ally themselves with us. If we can guarantee a statute of peace for them, or a pardon upon the conclusion of the war they may agree to fight. I can talk to Yamamoto and likely gain these. The only discourse is management once the war begins, as we will need to be present on both sides to coach the war. And we are not repeating a certain faking of someone’s death.”

Ichigo finished nodding more to himself, likely congratulating himself on saying the whole thing in one piece. Kisuke thought over the words, the set up was a good one, open with need or room for ideas. A good base and Ichigo’s wisdom in seeking the two of them out for aid was also good because how the orange-haired youth would have handled the mess on his own, Kisuke had no idea.
Silently Kisuke wondered at it all, the strangeness of planning how to oppose Soul Society for their own good, and the plausible companionship of the Espada Ichigo spoke of. It was all very tricky, a thing that if it went wrong could spell disaster for Soul Society.

Looking at Ichigo’s features he could see no hesitance there. Instead, there was a sort of contemplation, and resolution, no matter the outcome Ichigo would face. Or so his features seemed to tell. Turning his attention inwards he focused on Benihime’s opinions, his zanpaktou spirit was as cunning as her wielder, but where Kisuke stopped for his (rather shaky) morals, Benihime thought past it.

Resurfacing to notice Ichigo sprawled in a chair, all gangly limbs everywhere Kisuke shook his head in amusement and spoke up, “Ichigo would you be able to leave during that time and not garner suspicion, perhaps state you are visiting the human world?”

Ichigo hummed for a moment in thought before he shook his head. He paused cocked his head and turned to Kisuke and said, “That reminds me, we need to set up in the mortal realm soon. Which I will be helping with. Don’t worry we can talk about the details later.”

The youth smiled softly at the end of his sentence as if he had not just kindled that deep-seated curiosity about the mortal realm and its sciences, that ran deep in his heart. Shrugging it aside Kisuke nodded in return and banished the slight elation at the thought and listened as Ichigo replied, “It wouldn’t work, because certain Shinigami will be stationed in the mortal realm, and could clue into the deception.”

Kisuke nodded easily and the simple explanation, curiosity temporarily satisfied, though he could sense more behind Ichigo’s words he let it rest. Aizen frowned and ran a hand through naturally curly locks before he spoke up, “How would we control Baraggan? Or are you suggesting the use of my zanpaktou, as well as coercion?” Ichigo nodded his head smiling sheepishly at the faint glare turning Sosuke’s lips before the older lieutenant continued, “And the Espada, the ones who don’t join what will happen to them?”

Ichigo grimaced but did not pause for a long period of time, as if the answer pained him, but was one already well-known, before replying, “Some will die in the war… one I might kill just because he’s a dick. But those who survive may flee into Hueco Mundo to rebuild what they have lost, some will perish in the battles.”

“And how will you prevent the death of our allies if you can’t be in two places at once?”

Sosuke asked, rapid questions alighting on his face like sunlight. Ichigo grinned that sharp expression that was a mirror of the grin his hollow counterpart wore, and responded, “There is only one of me, but there’s also Shiro and Ossan. No one has seen our fully hollowfied form, and they can also meld into Tensa Zangetsu. Which might allow them in the heat of battle to intervene briefly.”

As if echoing his words, the air grew heavy with Shiro’s presence before it disappeared. Kisuke thought it was a well-planned solution, there were still some kinks in the plan, such as how to fool Soul Society into entering a war but Ichigo seemed to have laid the bones and now they only needed to construct the rest.

Reflecting on Ichigo’s words Kisuke chirped out with a grin, “Ma Ichigo your zanpaktou sure does have a lot of forms.”

Ichigo bristled defensively for a moment before he deflated and nodded with an easy kind of accepting smile. Rolling his eyes at the youth’s actions, Kisuke settled against the lab bench and wondered what Ichigo would speak of next.
The youth turned the chalkboard around so that a blank screen of black was facing them, and scrawled out three subjects in large text; Quincy, Isshin, radiation poisoning. Kisuke assumed Ichigo’s reminder of the human world earlier in the conversation had already covered what he had wanted to speak of regarding that topic for the day. The blond quirked his brow at the last point and wondered out loud, “Radiation poisoning?”

Ichigo rubbed the back of his head before he shuffled his hand into his sleeve and pulled out a few notes pacing over to hand them to Kisuke he explained with a sigh, “It’s more of a side-project but maybe you two can look at my notes?”

It wasn’t an explanation in the slightest, but staring up into pleading amber orbs, Kisuke dangerously couldn’t say no. So, he nodded and Aizen deflated and repeated the motion, in response he watched as a small smile blossomed throughout Ichigo’s features.

The orange-haired Shinigami padded over and erased the topic of radiation poisoning (really it was a productive day after all), and instead circled Isshin’s name. Ichigo hesitated for a few moments occupying his fingers with his sleeves before he explained, “Isshin Shiba is my father. He meets my mother in about forty years I think, maybe fifty. In any case, I think that will still happen in the timeline, but just so you know that’s a thing that happens.”

The younger lieutenant really seemed to be making a bad habit of dropping unexpected surprises on his friend. It seemed near everyone Kisuke spoke to who knew the youth had experienced it at one time or another. It was mind-boggling to consider the notion of Isshin being a father, but at this point, Kisuke was beginning to accept that the future was a strange place. And that perhaps that was for the best.

Ichigo settled into his chair and curled up into it as if preparing to fall asleep, instead, he kept his eyes on the two of them, and Kisuke acknowledged that it would indeed be a long night. If only because his mind would be computing everything for a few days. Smiling at Ichigo, he received a bright grin in return and decided that at least the future would be interesting with Ichigo there.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope I did the therapy scene justice, and if you have any tips for improvement (on that scene in particular), it is always welcome.
Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Till next time!

Bermuda!!
Hisana and Ichigo formally meet, and Kisuke and Ichigo unpack.

Cynefin

A Welsh word for a place where a being feels it ought to live. It is where nature around you feels right and welcoming.

Hello everyone, here again with chapter 39. Dealing with some fun changes of scenery and character. To note I have been working on a timeline to somehow work out the series, but it may take a bit longer to finalize things. Also should Ichigo become a Captain? The question remains. Opinions are appreciated. I hope you enjoy, read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X

Hisana settled beside Byakuya on the couch in a slow manner, that was all careful, shifting movement; her fiancé beside her ready to aid her. It sparked a small smile to her lips, just the thought of the man who she would soon be married to (she ignored the spark of annoyance at her state, and the tiny voice that whispered in the back of her mind, of illness and grief). Instead, she rested her hand on top of Byakuya's in a show of gratitude and shifted into a comfortable position beside the heir.

A servant entered the room, quiet and dignified like all of the servants in the Kuchiki service. It was still such a novel experience, really all of it was; seeing the luxury that the nobles lived in. The food, the attendance and constant care for her well-being, and even the fabric of her sheets. It was such a contrast to her life in Rungokai that she sometimes had to pause and remind herself that it wasn't a dream. She only believed it, on the nature that she would never have been able to imagine that small smile, the one that tuck the corners of Byakuya's lips and left him looking like a divine being, a god instilled among men; which Hisana supposed the nobles were, at least in comparison to the people of Rungokai. Or at least some nobles believed such. Shaking away idle musing thoughts, Hisana grasped the mug set before her, gratefully taking a sip of the hot liquid. She was always chilled these days as if ice lived inside her skin.

Turning her head to look at Byakuya, she watched as her fiancé took a sip of the burning tea, a content look passing over his features. Likely sensing her gaze, he set the mug down and turned to face her, offering one of those smiles she liked so much, the real ones that showed her Byakuya, and not the noble heir.

She had originally never seen it possible to like the man who appeared cold and stone featured, all
mechanical movements and actions, changed once only by the presence of his friend. But as she had
gotten to know Byakuya, the famous Kuchiki presence had seemed to melt away like summer days
under the onslaught of fall, leaving the man behind who held feathery smiles, and caring eyes.

The young woman blushed faintly under the intense gaze, before casting back a smile of her own,
one that seemed reflected in Byakuya's features. He gently took her hand giving it a light squeeze
that was embracing warmth and unspoken words before he returned his grip to the mug of tea, still
drifting lazy steam in the light air.

Copying his actions, Hisana savoured the taste, as she had begun to savour most things in this
strange new paradox of life. Her thoughts drifting as they always did to Rukia, thinking of the young
child she had left, blue eyes chasing her waking thoughts. Hisana had to find Rukia. It was a promise
she had made, one that was there always, and she wouldn't stop looking till she found her younger
sister. Her sickness wouldn't stop her, nor would her future husband's wishes (though he had offered
to aid Hisana, which endeared himself to her further)

A loud knock startled Hisana from her thoughts and she looked up from her tea; which was suddenly
half-empty in her time musing, and in the direction of the doorway. After a moment where Byakuya
called out a warm expectant greeting the thin rice frame slid open to admit Byakuya's closest friend.
As before, bright orange hair instantly caught Hisana's eyes, as the lieutenant entered the room
padding over to the table set in the centre of the room.

Byakuya fluidly rose from his seat and pulled his friend into a tight embrace, Ichigo's features were
just visible over her fiancé's shoulder, a warm look about his expression. After a moment Byakuya
released Ichigo and the young man plopped onto the cushions on the other side of the table with a
lack of grace and dignity, that unconsciously made Hisana smile.

"I don't think we've been formally introduced, Ichigo Shiba lieutenant of the Eighth Division."

Ichigo said with a grin, bowing his head in a show of respect. Hisana repeated the motion inclining
her head a touch lower she responded, "Hisana, it is a pleasure to meet you Ichigo."

Lifting her head up once more, Hisana caught a strange look to Ichigo's features. There seemed to
her a wonder in his eyes, as if he held the universe there, and yet felt the weight of it immeasurably.

Byakuya had warned Hisana of the peculiarities of his best friend with glowing eyes, and a broad
grin. Spoken of his best friend with such a love and warmth that it seemed to hang off his shoulders
and brighten the room. He had spoken of mischief, and care, the support they shared with each other,
and the laughter that flowed freely between the two.

Through his words alone Hisana had been able to see how much Ichigo had meant to Byakuya, and
how he had shaped her fiancé into who he was. So, to say the least, she was curious about Ichigo,
wanting to meet and understand the strange man herself. The man who was likened often to the
mystery of Soul Society upon the streets.

Ichigo lifted the teapot and with a graceful arch poured the deep berry red liquid into his own mug,
taking the moment to sip at the tea with a keen expression. As he drank the still scorching liquid
Hisana studied the man in front of her.

She looked at his features, angular and sharp, almost gauntly so. The weariness that clung to his
presence like those of the veterans who walked down the streets at the pace of one whose life had
passed and now there was only the road and amusement of life. Beyond that weariness, there was a
strange sense to Ichigo, as if a great miasma of things built the character in front of her. It seemed,
that even if she had known the lieutenant all her life she would never have glimpsed all there was of
the man.

Byakuya had likened it to the same thing, while they had stared at the clouds in the soft paisley fall air. His words had been said like a factor of the universe, and they still lingered in her mind occasionally.

"The eyes are the window to the soul, Ichigo's are like cathedral doors, made of glass mosaic, hard to see the whole picture, but beautiful nonetheless."

It made her wonder what Byakuya saw in her eyes, and contemplate what she saw in his own. The love he held for her reflected back, the deep pride he carried as a Kuchiki, the quiet contemplation of life, and the worry about whatever inane task.

Coughing slightly into the sleeve of her kimono Hisana shifted and took another sip of the tea, content to wait in the silence as the two friends shared secretive glances over the table. Winks and raised eyebrows and sharp fluttery hand gestures.

She wondered if they actually thought she couldn't see them. It left an amused smile dancing across her features as she watched it play out, their moves becoming increasingly exaggerated, to the point it was blatantly obvious.

"Boys, you can speak out loud, instead of posturing for statues."

Hisana said with a light tone, the hint of sarcasm reaching the two, as Byakuya's ears burned and Ichigo flashed a wry grin her way. It was mischievous, like the wind, and seemed to declare some right move in her words.

"You heard the women Byakuya."

Ichigo said, mustering a deep voice, that rumbled like some behemoth of a man, it elicited light laughter from Hisana and a chuckle from Byakuya who was pinning his friend with an amused stare.

"Ah yes forgive me, and only me for acting."

Byakuya responded in a bland tone, earning a dramatic and haughty huff from Ichigo, hands splayed at his breast. The exaggerated movement was gone in the next second, as Ichigo rolled his eyes and leaned forward on the table hands planted under his chin.

"So Hisana, when did you decide that you actually like this hunk of stone?"

The orange-haired Shinigami asked with a lax teasing grin, Byakuya frowned reprovingly and reached over to swat his friend on the arm though it was an all playful gesture. Ichigo winced and with faux panic checked over his arms as if searching for a grave wound, received by the light swats. Hisana laughed lightly under her breath at the dynamic of the two friends, all while pondering Ichigo's question.

She found an answer eventually but chose to wait and watch as Ichigo and Byakuya squabbled, about how Byakuya wasn't in charge thank you, about how that was going to change with a certain promotion. It kept falling further off topic as the two continued to talk for another minute before Byakuya looked over and winced, an apologetic look to his features.

Hisana shook her head but didn't feel any annoyance at the two for slipping into their own little world, it was to be expected. They were close as Hisana had observed before, but she could see it here all the more clearly in the soft warm looks they shared with each other, whether unconsciously or not.
“So dear lady you were going to regale us with tales of how you fell for my stone-faced brethren?” Ichigo inquired with a raised eyebrow, and a voice lined with haughtiness and accented vowels. Hisana shook her head, unbidden a smile dancing across her features before she responded, "It was perhaps our third date, we were walking and he paused darting off before he returned with a flower in his hand and the words, 'I'm sorry I saw these and thought of you.' "

Hisana sighed happily at the memory, recalling it with easy nostalgia. Ichigo glanced between the two of them for a moment, mouth hanging slightly open as if the words were caught in his throat. There was happiness that radiated in his eyes, that dispelled any fears of Hisana; that Ichigo would disapprove of their relationship or the small memory she had shared. Instead, he gawked for a moment more before his gaze swerved to Byakuya and he exclaimed, "You're such a sap! Kami if I'd have known you were such a freaking sap Byakuya." 

Her fiancé blushed the rouge staining his cheeks and the tips of his ears, there was an indignation to his features. One that was overwhelmed by Byakuya's own acceptance of the truth, and the subsequent embarrassment of it. Hisana soothingly patted Byakuya on the arm, sharing a teasing wink with Ichigo, whose countenance brightened at the gesture.

The heir glanced between the two of them suspiciously before he struggled to regain his composure, and took a dignified sip of his tea ignoring the two of them. Ichigo scoffed at the act and reached over to flick Byakuya on the side of the head, in a now familiar playful manner.

Hisana raised an eyebrow at the act, but said nothing as her fiancé turned an annoyed glare on the orange-haired Shinigami. It was easy to see the light nature between the two's bickering. Byakuya raised up one hand in submission, fixing Ichigo with a slight glare he said, "Alright, alright, I'll stop mopping, now can you please stop acting like a three-year-old?"

"That's like asking me to stop being a Shiba Byakuya."

Ichigo responded to the resigned words Byakuya had spoken, earning a groan at the reply, and one that left a hidden smile dancing across her lips. Hisana had to agree with the other lieutenant's sentiments though. The Shiba's were known near everywhere for their behaviour, which bordered on childish or simply too much energy.

"Imagine if he was like Shiba-Taicho Byakuya."

Hisana suggested with a grin and a touch of cautious sympathy, sharing a knowing look with Ichigo who already had mischief plainly revealed on his features. Byakuya scoffed and mumbled something like, "I don't need to imagine," under his breath but instead glared at Ichigo turning the light stare at Hisana he sighed rubbing a hand over his forehead he asked, "Are you two going to stop picking on me?"

"But it's my favourite past time!"

Ichigo protested with a happy twist to his smile, Byakuya just groaned at the sentiment in long-standing resignation. Ichigo shook his head and sent a cheery grin Byakuya's way before he said, "Fine, fine you're safe for now."

Byakuya shook his head but accepted the statement with a small smile that betrayed his own amusement at his friend's actions. Hisana shook her head and took a sip of her tea still warm in the mug; abandoned during the length of their conversation. Copying her movements Byakuya picked up his own mug and peered at Ichigo from over the lip of the porcelain. Ichigo waved his fingers at her fiancé's glance and picked up his own mug, new wisps of steam drifting with elegance into the
"So Ichigo you have a dual blade zanpaktou."

Byakuya bit out after a moment, where the air had seemed to stretch and coil, the sudden aura of wrath seeming to twist around him. Hisana's eyes widened at the heir's words, having heard rumours but no confirmation of Ichigo's zanpaktou. The orange-haired Shinigami blushed, the colour painting his cheeks and the tips of his ears, he abashedly reached up to rub the back of his head, apology heavy on his features.

"Yes?"

Ichigo replied uncertainly, Byakuya glared the full weight of the winter storms behind it; Hisana could almost sense the sparking tension and wondered if it was always like this between the two. The heir had cautioned that Ichigo was a man of secrets and that he hardly revealed them, but when Ichigo did it was usually a matter of great importance.

Byakuya beside her slumped, the tension draining from his shoulders as he ran his fingers over the shell of the mug and commented, "I'm not even really surprised anymore," Ichigo raised a brow at those words, and Hisana wondered how someone could get used to such mysteries and revelations, before Byakuya continued, "But I would have appreciated the knowledge when we were in the academy, or even in the mock duels we've had."

There was subtext beneath those words, things Hisana couldn't detect, not when she didn't know the history between the two. Only she guessed that it had something to do with their days in the academy, and their training together that Byakuya spoke of with a great deal of fondness.

Ichigo nodded but refused to break eye contact with Byakuya staring as if through the gesture alone he could convey some hidden meaning. Hisana supposed their bond was something like that, though she wished they had saved their conversation for another time, where the tension didn't weigh on the room like a blanket.

She contemplated stepping out of the room, out onto the veranda for a breath of fresh air, to give the two a moment of peace when Ichigo cracked a smile, all weak edges, and wiry humour he said, "At least you don't have to put up with Kaien's whining, or the Shinigami Women's Association. They've returned with a vengeance."

Byakuya studied Ichigo for a few seconds longer before he nodded his head in sympathy and grimaced at the sound of Ichigo's likely traumatic experiences. Byakuya then reached across the table and snatched Ichigo's mug with a deft hand, a challenging look in his eyes as he set the mug on the table and easily poured the amber liquid from the teapot set on the table.

Teasingly with a gesture forwards he took a sip from Ichigo's cup as if testing for poison, before passing it back to the orange-haired man. Ichigo rolled his eyes at the antics and gratefully took the tea with a nod of thanks. They had a very close friendship, one that left Hisana wondering, but content to watch all the same.

"So Hisana how has it been like, adapting to living with Byakuya?"

Ichigo asked after another moment of silence, Hisana pursed her lips running her fingers along the interior of her kimono she thought of the question. It had been lovely their dinners together or walks through Rungokai, or whatever else her fiancé had whipped up. There had been no political movements behind it, no nobility or honour. Just the two of them.
Then she had been introduced to the Kuchiki household, and it was so very different from Rungokai, there was food and water whenever she needed it, fresh clothes. At first, she had felt extremely unsure, lost in a world she couldn't comprehend. But Byakuya had been so welcoming and helpful, open to her questions and seemingly always there when she needed him. Without her fiancé, she would have floundered and despairsed in her new environment.

"It was very strange at first, and still is very strange. But Byakuya has helped me immensely, he was there for me the whole time. It has become a strange matter of filling sudden new time, mostly I spend it looking for my sister, but Byakuya had persuaded me to attempt other things."

Hisana responded after a moment, thoughtfulness and warmth heavy on her brow and voice. Byakuya beside her reached out to squeeze her hand comfortingly, sharing some of his warmth, which she gladly leech.

Ichigo nodded a faux of a smile on his lips as his expression became distant, his sights in some other realm. The expression held a deep sense of thought as if through his distant gaze the windows of the future creaked open.

After a minute the younger lieutenant visibly shook himself out of whatever reverie he had fallen into, and asked, "What has Byakuya attempted to persuade you to do? Hopefully not Zanjutsu?"

It was asked with a curiosity and a lick of humour as Ichigo shifted in his seat, taking a sip from the mug in his hands. Hisana recalled the memories with smile, wondering if Ichigo already knew about Rukia due to his lack of curiosity. She shrugged aside the idle thought and answered, "We've been reading together, and he's attempting to get me to draw. But he has refrained from Zanjutsu, I think he would rather I spend my time learning the art of kido if anything."

Hisana finished with a light smile that was all teasing, in her fiancé's direction. Byakuya grinned and commented, "She's really rather good at drawing, but I think kido is the Shinigami art for her."

Ichigo hummed and leaned forward to rest his chin on the palms of his hand, scrutinizing her with a playful wink he responded with sincere honesty, "Hmm I can see it. I bet your art is beautiful Hisana, and if you ever need any good reading suggestions I have a few, although it would definitely be interesting to watch Byakuya attempt to teach you Zanjutsu."

Hisana blushed at the compliment from the younger lieutenant and briefly pondered taking Ichigo up on the offer of reading material. At first glance, he didn't seem like the kind of person to read in great quantities, but many things upon first glance concerning Ichigo were incorrect (and he still most certainly did look like a yakuza).

"I am not opposed to Zanjutsu Byakuya."

Hisana replied in a straight-laced voice before she dismissed the words with the curve of her lips and humour in her eyes. Byakuya huffed at their antics, likely regretting introducing the two of them, and sipped at his tea.

"Good thing, Byakuya's a horrible teacher. I'm greatly experienced compared to Bya."

Ichigo chirped with a grin, Byakuya frowned and sent a dubious stare in Ichigo's direction, all arching eyebrows, provoking laughter from Hisana's lips. Ichigo had such a strange manner of speaking she acknowledged as she puzzled out his words, sometimes certain phrases were just lost on her. She wondered where he had picked up such a strange accent.

A knock on the door disturbed her musings, and the content silence, like that of early summer. A
moment later the door slid open to reveal a flustered servant whose eyes scanned the room before landing on Byakuya. The man darted inside and crouched at the heir's side whispering something in Byakuya's ear Hisana couldn't quite catch.

Byakuya's face paled at whatever news was delivered and after a moment he nodded speaking in hushed tones with the servant before he cast an apologetic and apprehensive look their way and said, "My apologies Ichigo, Hisana, my grandfather had a fall and I need to see him, do you need anything? Can I?"

"It's okay Byakuya go ahead, I can find the exit, and I'm sure Hisana can manage fine without you for a few hours."

Ichigo assured the discombobulated heir, Byakuya nodded a wry smile painting his lips as he turned his concerned attention to Hisana. She nodded, eyes shaping like steel, backing Ichigo's statement. Byakuya nodded gratefully, leaning over to chastely place a kiss on her cheek. Flashing a parting wave and grateful smile in Ichigo's direction before Byakuya was out the door in a flurry of sable robes.

Silence reigned between the two remaining occupants of the room, and Ichigo awkwardly sipped his tea before flashing Hisana a shrug and a smile. She grinned in kind, lifting her own mug to her lips she took a sip of the warm liquid and wondered what would happen next.

They sat in the silence for a few more minutes, and to Hisana's surprise and content, it was neither awkward or oppressive. It was the kind of silence for those who appreciated it, and it helped Hisana to understand the orange-haired Shinigami a touch more. During that time, she prayed that Ginrei-san would be alright, Byakuya loved his grandfather, and Hisana had grown to respect the clan head for the devotion to his family, and his hardworking nature.

After another minute Ichigo drained his cup and rose to his feet with a tired exhale stretching out his arms. Hisana after a breath rose to her own feet ignoring the lingering pain in her joints. Immediately caution and worry steeled over Ichigo's voice and he said, "You don't have to worry about me, I can find the exit, Kami knows I've been here enough times."

Ichigo trailed off and Hisana shook her head at the lieutenant's actions before she looked Ichigo in the eyes so that the intent of her words could be seen and responded, "As our guest it's only right, besides I could use a breath of fresh air."

Ichigo looked like he wanted to protest her decision a moment more before he subsided and nodded following as Hisana stepped out into the hallway and glided towards the exit. They walked in relaxed silence through the winding hallways of the Kuchiki compound till they reached the exit, stepping outside into the coolness of the oncoming winter.

Hisana shivered in the sudden chill air and Ichigo turned concerned eyes her way, but the young women shook it off with a hand and a smile. Ichigo nodded gaze falling on the horizon, trees twisting like mist into the distance.

"I'm glad you found each other Hisana, I believe you'll both make each other very happy."

Ichigo whispered into the wind, audible just so that Hisana could catch the words and the warmth they carried. She blushed at Ichigo's statement, surprisingly touched by the words and honesty, unsure of how to react she nodded her head and joined Ichigo in staring at the skyline.

The orange-haired Shinigami turned to Hisana, eyes heavy beneath his brow, and the words he wanted to speak seemed like thunder in the air about him. The lieutenant leaned in close, taking her
hand, he placed a kiss on the back and looking up into her eyes he whispered, "If you need help finding Rukia, I can help you. She is still in the Seventy-Eighth district."

Hisana's eyes widened at Ichigo's words, she wondered how he even knew her sister's name when he had never met her before or heard Hisana speak her name. Likely sensing her confusion Ichigo showed Hisana a smile, more real than any she had seen all night and wavering with honesty. It reassured her of Ichigo's words and thoughts (and left questions in its wake). He believed them true, and if Byakuya was to be believed then it was likely true.

The lieutenant nodded once more and then turned walking off the porch and the winding pathway. She watched him go with a small frown, wondering at the clairvoyance Ichigo seemed to possess, and if it would indeed be able to help Hisana in finding Rukia.

Ichigo Shiba, as Byakuya had warned, was a complete and utter enigma. But an enigma that read and had suggestions, cherished his friends, liked green tea, and possessed the universe. As she turned and entered the house, she wondered at the hope in her chest, and the thought of finding Rukia.

The thought and memories of their interactions, Ichigo's innate maturity that swept like a veteran, the warmth and teasing, boundless energy and endless weary. It assured her that Ichigo was incredibly strange, but nonetheless, one who could likely become a close friend with time.

X

Kisuke huffed as he set down one of the large boxes in his arms onto the floor. With a groan, he looked back at the collection of boxes littering the front hallway of their new base of operations in the mortal realm. Or as Kisuke liked to think of it, his shop, and wasn't that an enterprising idea that spilt a grin across his features.

A shift of movement out of the corner of his eyes caught his attention and he turned to watch Ichigo plod inside and set down another box with an absent-minded kind of look. It was weird seeing the Shinigami without the traditional shihakusho or even a kimono, and instead in simple pants and a dress shirt. But as they were in the mortal realm, and consequently gigai they had decided to try and fit in. Try, being the key word, considering the massive leaps in technology and culture the mortal realm continued to make at every turn.

Rather Ichigo had scrutinized Kisuke for a full minute before tossing a bundle of clothing at him and pointing to the run-down washroom located in the back. Looking around the place once more, Kisuke wondered how he would have found it in Ichigo's original timeline. It was on the edge of the city, dilapidated looking, and of all things completely lacking an air of anything living. The lieutenant had arrived a day earlier then Kisuke and purchased the building with whatever funds he had managed to grab.

It didn't look like much, an old wooden shack with a few necessities, and an overall feeling of decay and abandonment. But it had potential, and the scientist really couldn't complain if it meant he was able to spend time in the human world.

"Nee Ichigo, how did you even find this place?"

Kisuke asked as he leaned against a wooden support pillar the question lingering at the forefront of his mind. Ichigo looked up, wiping the sweat beading his brow away, he paused and furrowed his brow, he responded, "I went to a real estate agent, the place's been abandoned for years and she was eager to sell it. So, I got it dirt cheap as well."

The Captain nodded his head at the answer before another question occurred, to Benihime's bland
Ichigo stared at Kisuke for a moment as if assessing the question (and there was a certain flint to Ichigo's eyes) before he settled on a stack of boxes with a huff and answered, "When I went to speak to Yam-jii about a week ago he offered the funds to aid in purchasing the place. Originally I was just going to steal from some rich corporation."

He stared at Ichigo brow raised in mute surprise, even as he tilted the brim of his hat forward to shade his features, it added to the mysterious aura. It was hardly surprising that Ichigo had received the funds from the Soutaicho (or even the fact that the youth had private conversations with the old man), the Soutaicho seemed to regard Ichigo as some kind of protégé or nephew. Whatever the case the old man watched over the orange-haired Shinigami (and didn't they all really?).

What was remotely surprising was Ichigo's nonchalance and blatant willingness to steal the money. For as long as Kisuke had known Ichigo, he had seemed like the sort of man to rebel against whatever causes he denoted immoral. But also, one who believed in the values of chivalry and what was right in general. But that still didn't prepare Kisuke for such a lax attitude towards the act of stealing.

"You would have stolen the money Ichi?"

Kisuke asked a touch incredulously, Ichigo blinked his face painted with confusion for a moment as he nodded and uncertainly said, "Yeah?"

The scientist studied the youth and shook his head, leave it to Ichigo to be completely comfortable with stealing. Ichigo pursed his lips at the gesture and commented, "When we were in the war, we did supply runs, and really stealing from the rich isn't a bad thing every once in awhile."

"Okay, Ichigo, whatever you say."

The scientist responded to the youth's story, thoughts vaguely wondering what Ichigo had stolen in the past, and why. How it had come to such a point that the act didn't trouble Ichigo in the slightest.

Glancing at the doorway again Kisuke sighed and levered himself to his feet before padding forward to grab another box, Ichigo followed closely behind with a huff of his own. The Captain lifted the two heavy boxes into his arms and re-entered the main portion of the building where they were currently dividing the things Ichigo had bought, or supplies they had brought from the barracks.

Most of the supplies from the barracks, were those of a scientific nature, mostly tools and the like. So Ichigo had had the unfortunate job of going out to purchase the furniture and other fixtures. Though thankfully some small things remained in the abandoned shack, most of it unusable.

Kisuke said unfortunate when thinking of Ichigo shopping, because of the youth's reluctance. Ichigo just seemed hesitant to even step out the door, and Kisuke suspected it had something to do with their timeline drawing closer to the original point of Ichigo's own timeline. Not to mention the location they had chosen for the shop, one that Kisuke suspected was Ichigo's hometown if only for the lingering nostalgia about his eyes, which reminded Kisuke.

Turning his head over his shoulder to look at Ichigo Kisuke asked, "Why did we choose Karakura town as our base of residence?"

Ichigo frowned at the questioning gaze turned inwards in thought for a moment before he surfaced and setting a box down he replied, "Well it is the location of my birth, and consequently will likely see action in the near future in any case. But additionally, it is the jūreichi, where the concentration of
those with reiatsu is highest."

"And the way for someone to make the King's Key is to destroy it."

Kisuke finished as he acknowledged that his suspicions regarding it being Ichigo's birthplace were correct. But also, the concerning information correlating to the town's situation with the afterlife. Ichigo nodded a weary sort of cast to his features but it was gone in a flash as the youth turned and lumbered out to pick up another few boxes.

Glancing up at the clock sitting on the wall, an old derelict thing that Kisuke doubted was correct, the scientist determined that it was a good time to take a break. If only on the basis of because he wanted one.

"Ichigo I'm making some tea; would you like some?"

The Captain called out to the youth, he received a vague shout of agreement in return. Rolling his eyes in amusement Kisuke dusted his hands off and wandered into the kitchen, which really wasn't his domain (Tessai continued to insist that Kisuke couldn't cook to save his life), but he could manage tea. The rest of the cooking Ichigo could handle, considering the man's skills.

There was a lone box resting on the counter, one of the first to have been brought in, and with a sigh, Kisuke pulled a small knife out of his pocket (for opening boxes not stabbing) and opened the box.

Pulling out the clay pot, and the matching set of mugs, Kisuke looked over at the sink and wondered if the water had been turned on (because running water was an easily accessible thing, and that was just cool). Deeming it unlikely Kisuke looked around the kitchen in a slight dilemma before his gaze landed on a rickety old bucket that looked ready to fall apart. Shrugging Kisuke plodded out to the yard, where the well stood ancient and stooped. Hesitantly he filled the bucket peering at the water skeptically. It seemed clean enough.

After filling the teapot with water, and leaving the bucket in the corner, Kisuke approached another problem. There was no easy way to heat the water, at least without building a fire. Shaking his head, he wondered when the appliances Ichigo had talked about would be introduced, it seemed the shack had been built sometime early in the century they were in (the twentieth century? And it was what the 1950's?), before the development of certain additions.

Cupping the ceramic pot in his hands, Kisuke channelled his reiatsu throughout the solid clay, till thin wisps of steam were drifting from the spout like frost in the afternoon air. Marching back into the main room, Kisuke hid a grin at the sight of the lieutenant sprawled on one of the larger boxes a relaxed expression on his features.

The scientist pulled out another box and set it between the two to serve as a table as he poured the liquid into two pale green mugs. Ichigo grinned in thanks and gratefully reached forward to take a sip of the scorching tea, it was a mint blend, which Kisuke hoped would be somewhat invigorating.

They sat in silence for a while, there was a sort of timelessness about the air, in the faint afternoon sunlight, dust feathering the air like whispers of spring. There was just a peace in the abandoned building one that belonged to the two of them for a short time.

Eventually, Kisuke shifted and pinned Ichigo with a glance and asked, "So how was your conversation with the Soutaicho?"

Ichigo looked up from his tea and smiled, like sunshine caught in the dew, and said, "It was nice, we talked a bit about how this is going to work," Here he gestured at the surroundings with a pause, then
continued, "And a bit about the future. I think he's finally agreed to have a duel with me, now that I've revealed Zangetsu."

Ichigo finished with a bemused smile at the likely flabbergasted expression on Kisuke's features, because of course, only Ichigo would challenge the Soutaicho, head of the Gotei 13 to a duel. But you know it was fine, just something no one could, but absolutely would expect of Ichigo.

Kisuke choked out a laugh with a shake of his head, taking a sip of his tea, he chose to dwell on that information another time. He wondered though, if they would ever duel. It most definitely would sweep Soul Society off their collective feet.

Instead, he tilted his head at another question and asked, "How long are you staying in the mortal realm?"

"A month."

Ichigo replied with a shrug, Kisuke raised a brow in surprise at the answer having expected a shorter time frame, he asked as much in his next question, "Not shorter? Won't Kaien, or Kyroraku, or even Unohana freak out at such an extended time period?"

Ichigo grimaced slightly at the point before it slipped away to a more reassured smile and he responded, "Unohana thinks some time away from Soul Society and in my hometown will be good for me. Nostalgia, dealing with emotions, the whole thing. Kaien is understanding, he knows the truth, and I can still visit him, which mind you I have to do, same with Shunsui. Plus, he still has Lisa to help him manage. Plus, someone has to teach you how to function in the mortal world. What about you Kisuke? How long are you staying?"

Kisuke processed the information with a nod, happy that Ichigo was able to escape from Soul Society with the consent of his Captain, and Kaien (who was probably the most over-protective when it came to Ichigo). Thinking over the lieutenant's question, and how yes, the older Shinigami would most definitely be depending on Ichigo to learn how to function, Kisuke let out a slightly aggrieved sigh and responded, "I'll probably stay for two to three months but I sort of wish that I could stay forever. There's just so much to see and learn, and it's peaceful here in a way the barracks are not."

Ichigo nodded his sympathy before a shudder passed over him and he responded, "But then Mayuri would be in charge of the division."

Kisuke shuddered at the thought, while his third seat was certainly intelligent, he often strayed the lines between moral and immorality, a sort of mad scientist (though Kisuke was certainly guilty of the notion himself). Kisuke at least knew what was right and wrong, and how to hold himself back. If Kurotsuchi became Captain (which he would likely do so over Hiyori, who just wasn't suited to the position), then the division would see significant changes, hardly any of them positive.

"Still…"

Kisuke bemoaned with a sad tilt of his head, Ichigo laughed faintly and flicked the scientist's hat and said, "You're already likely going to be staying for half the year, right? Besides Tessai will also be here, along with the other roster of Shinigami."

"There's a roster now?"

Kisuke asked, acknowledging Ichigo's point with a nod and sip of his tea. He would likely spread his time out evenly between the two realms if only to make sure Mayuri didn't destroy the barracks along
with Hiyori. That and his remaining duties as a Captain. Still, the knowledge of a roster of Shinigami was new, from what Kisuke had understood before, it had just been volunteers from each division who would stay for a month.

"Mm I think two to three Shinigami were picked from each division, and it's supposed to be, there's one Twelfth division member at all times, and one Fourth division member. Then one to two others from different divisions. And I think there always has to be a Captain to third seat present, you know for safety measures."

Kisuke nodded, though the words were certainly a confusing jumble, he got the basic idea of how it would work. It was a system Ichigo and Kisuke had worked out, which had then been brought to the Soutaicho. It would allow for greater cultivation in Soul Society, and the development of their own society if a wide variety of members were able to experience and learn about the mortal realm outside of patrols. It would also provide a base of operation for divisions on patrol or Shinigami in need.

They settled once more with their tea, Kisuke refilling the mugs as outside daily life passed them by. Ichigo across from the Captain furrowed his brow in thought, biting his lip as if hesitating to share with Kisuke. Curious, but knowing that pushing Ichigo wouldn't gain anything, Kisuke shifted and settled patiently in his seat.

"I was contemplating bringing an idea to the Soutaicho."

Ichigo finally stated in the silence, peering at Kisuke from over the lip of his mug, Kisuke always found that gesture slightly funny and endearing. Instead, he nodded leaning forward to rest his head on his palms he asked, "Oh?"

"Well if the inclusion of the Espada does happen, I was thinking it would be wise to invest in the creation of a Fourteenth division, for both the Espada and Vizard. Sort of like a special task force. But…"

Ichigo trailed off, gaze searching the liquid inside his cup for an answer. Kisuke considered the proposition with a touch of surprise, it was an interesting one, with sound logic. But Kisuke could also sense some argument against it. For one thing, the sense of unity they were trying to achieve by allowing the Vizard to remain in their former positions within Soul Society before the incident.

"But?"

Kisuke asked waiting for the youth to finish. Ichigo shrugged his shoulders and continued, "But I think the way we have the Gotei 13 structured right now is pretty decent. I mean yes there is quite a bit of mess but the way we have it now, all of our power is consolidated evenly between the Thirteen divisions. Whereas if there was a Fourteenth division much of the power would filter into that division. In my original timeline with the loss of the Vizard, the Gotei 13 struggled frantically to fill those empty positions, and we were left with Captains lacking experience. So, as it is right now the Gotei 13 are vastly stronger than in my original timeline's current state of affairs."

The scientist hummed at Ichigo's statement, acknowledging that both points were well thought out, it was indeed an interesting concept to consider. Especially in comparison to Ichigo's original timeline, where the Vizard incident had occurred in a very different manner, and the power balance of Soul Society had fluctuated greatly.

"I think both choices have positives and negatives. But as the way things are now, I would wait and see if how the Espada are received, and from there decide on whether a Fourteenth division would be positive."
Kisuke suggested after another moment of thought. Ichigo grinned his thanks, eyes bright beneath the fringe of orange as he took another sip of tea draining the cup. Idly the youth's eyes strayed to the boxes and the sunlight beginning to fade in the sky. Kisuke could almost sense the youth's train of thought and really did not want to get up and finish unpacking.

"We should probably start assembling some of the furniture, at least it's not Ikea."

Ichigo suggested with mirth and mischief dancing along his features. Kisuke sighed and silently lamented old bones, to Benihime's amusement before he propped a brow at Ichigo ending reference.

"Ikea?"

The scientist asked, Ichigo blushed faintly, and ran a hand through the back of his hair before he shrugged and replied, "Right they're just getting established, future reference oops."

Ichigo didn't seem concerned about the slip, and it brought a warmth to Kisuke's chest as he picked up the teapot, and Ichigo darted in to bring the mugs to the kitchen sink for washing later. Idly turning to Ichigo, Kisuke commented "We'll need to see about getting the water running. And other appliances."

Ichigo nodded with a grin before he paced back out into the living room, a familiar knife in his hands. He hadn't even felt the brat pickpocket him. Kisuke wondered where Ichigo had picked up the skill as he followed the youth and settled beside the largest box in the room, already being torn up.

It was so strange and left excitement briefly flaring through his veins at the thought of what the old building would become. Filled with furniture, maybe a training ground underneath, a lab for experiments. It left him giddy, and Benihime content at the back of his mind.

A set of manuals was flung his way, pulling him from his thoughts, and Kisuke wondered if whatever they were building would actually remain standing at the end. Ichigo beamed at Kisuke from the other side of the box as if sensing his thoughts, and Kisuke knew it would turn out somewhat alright.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed the scene from Hisana’s perspective, it was very interesting to write in the mindset of a character who has little presence in the scene. To clarify right now it is roughly 1950-1960 in the mortal realm. Fun fact Ikea was first established in 1943. Also should Ichigo become a Captain in the future? Reader opinions (on that) are welcome. Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Thank you all for reading, till next time!
A meeting is called and Ichi and Byakuya have a chat.

Aspectabund
(adj.) Letting or being able to let expressive emotion show easily through one’s face and eyes.

Hello everyone, we are back with chapter 40 (yay!!), can you believe it? 40 chapters already. Many thanks to everyone who has stuck with the story, showed support, and reviewed! Additionally, thank you to all of you who commented last chapter, it has really helped me to decide how to play the story out, hopefully some things will be resolved slightly in this chapter. As a note there has been a time skip of about roughly 30-40 years. Well I hope you all enjoy, read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

X

“Ichigo wake up… Ichigo…. Wake up… Now, or else I’ll fetch Kaien.”

The orange haired lieutenant jerked awake at the threatening voice, waking from a mostly murky dream of whispers and the homey smell of Yuzu’s cooking. Lifting his head from where he had been enjoying a nap on his desk, Ichigo blearily blinked at the heavy afternoon sunlight filtering in through the blinds, as if a messenger itself of unfortunate news. Running a hand through his hair, Ichigo turned his attention to the door. Where a familiar (and sometimes completely unfamiliar) midget hovered arms crossed over her chest, a frown decorating her features.

Leaning back in his chair with faux nonchalance, Ichigo raised a brow in question, wondering why the seventh (eighth?) seat of the Thirteenth division had elected to visit the Eighth division. Especially considering that last Ichigo had checked, Shunsui was having tea with Jushiro, and Lisa was out with Rangiku and Hiyori for some Shinigami Women’s Association business (and he wasn’t afraid, not at all, at that thought).

Rukia huffed, the frown on her features deepening before she stepped inside the office and glided
forward till she was in front of Ichigo’s desk which was cluttered with paperwork and an eclectic mix of notes and spindly bound novels. He did not discreetly survey the young Kuchiki, taking in her features, the life in her eyes as he idly fiddled with Zangetsu’s hilt at his waist.

“So, what brings you here to my lovely corner of Soul Society Rukia?”

Ichigo asked centre, earning a bland stare from the raven-haired Shinigami, though there was some fondness behind the gesture. Rukia pursed her lips for a minute before she responded, “A Captain’s meeting has been called, and it was requested that lieutenants were to attend.”

The lieutenant furrowed his brow at the knowledge, a small pout filtering onto his features as he thought of the dull monochrome affair of their meetings. They were usually just as dull as the paperwork the upper echelon were required to fill out.

“So I have to?”

Ichigo asked with slumped shoulders, knowing he sounded like a young child, but not possessing the energy to care for it. Rukia rolled her eyes in light annoyance with a shake of her head before a wicked and achingly familiar grin slipped across her lips. It was a grin that had always pervaded certain gestures from the midget that left Ichigo scarred or fearful depending on the circumstance.

“Kaien sent me to fetch you Ichigo, and he threatened that if you didn’t come he would make you sit through one of the council sessions with the elders. Kyroraku-taicho also sent me with words along the lines of sleeping lieutenants, and paperwork.”

The orange-haired Shinigami groaned faintly, though it was belayed by the amusement flashing in Rukia’s eyes. Making no move to remove himself from the vicinity of his desk, Ichigo leaned back content to wait a few more minutes before he made his way to the First Division (it wasn’t like he couldn’t be there in seconds).

Rukia turned her infamous glare on Ichigo, the one with all arched eyebrows and disapproving azure and dangerously said, “Ichigo.”

“Hmm?”

Ichigo replied absent-mindedly, purposefully letting his gaze laxly drift to the open windows, where a pleasant breeze drifted about, and the white sprawling scape of Soul Society stretched out far as the eye could see. Even after a near century apart, and a completely different dynamic (that wasn’t that different, she still liked to yell at him, and lecture him with crappy drawings, ones that Hisana had only encouraged), Ichigo couldn’t resist the temptation to tease her. It was just in his nature, and she didn’t mind much if the mirth he often caught in her eyes was a true indication.

“Ichigo if you don’t go to the meeting I will drag you there.”

The seventh seat (he was pretty sure it was the seventh seat) warned; voice dangerously low. Slowly Ichigo let his eyes slide back to focus on the petite Shinigami and with Shiro’s laughter ringing about his head Ichigo asked, “What you? How would you do that with your height?”

Azure eyes blazed like living hellfire; Ichigo resisted the urge to lean back in caution, a well-placed survival instinct that still remained. Instead, he let the corners of his mouth curve up in faint amusement. The midget looked like she wanted to punch Ichigo, that or pull out Sode no Shirayuki and run Ichigo through with the cool blade, he suspected the only reason she didn’t was that she wanted him to at least look presentable at the Captain’s meeting. That and actually get there on time.

Instead, she gritted her teeth; hands balled into fists at her sides and warningly ground out, “Ichigo.”
Raising his hands in deference at the tone that even now sent shivers curling down his spine, Ichigo rolled his eyes, sighed and placated the younger Shinigami, “Fine, fine I’m coming.”

Heaving himself from the small desk, Ichigo caught the dissipating fury fade away on Rukia’s features, replaced with longsuffering resignation and a hint of amusement at Ichigo’s games. Nodding to herself the young Kuchiki straightened imperceptibly and turned from the room with a Kuchiki flourish, she began leading Ichigo out of the building as if she expected him to run away (a veritable concern).

The lieutenant thought it humorous how Rukia shifted from a prim and proper Kuchiki, all abiding by the laws. To a familiar brat, who was more than happy to squabble with Ichigo, or beat both Kaien and him upside the head.

Speaking of brats, a mischievous grin settled onto his lips from behind Rukia as they stepped out into the courtyard, the afternoon’s warm sun immediately felt in their all-black uniforms. Tapping Rukia on the shoulder Ichigo darted ahead to the exit in a half-paced flash-step and called out, “I’ll race you there Rukia!”

Ichigo darted away, the distant sound of Rukia’s protests growing faint, as he easily crossed over the terracotta tiling that formed the roofs of the buildings of Soul Society.

Stopping in front of the First division, Ichigo received a few surprised and amused glances from the division members idly strolling about the barracks. Briefly, Ichigo caught an amused glance from Shinji as the blond entered, Hiyori hot on his heels, their squabbling ringing throughout the courtyard.

Pretending to check a watch on his wrist, Ichigo glanced around the streets of Serieteti, wondering if Rukia would follow him just to ensure that Ichigo did actually make it to the barracks (he honestly wasn’t that much of a slacker) and didn’t return to the office after she left. Or like a sensible person might, she probably had returned to her division to help manage the normally monstrous amounts of paperwork.

Obviously, Ichigo remarked to himself as Rukia landed in the courtyard flashing him a heavy glare, Rukia Kuchiki was not a purveyor of sensibility. Gaily waving his fingers in greeting, Ichigo slouched against the wall behind him, as the shorter Shinigami fixed the lieutenant with a piercing stare (it was slightly less intimidating considering she was on the balls of her toes to look into Ichigo’s eyes).

With a huff, Rukia rolled her eyes and made a shooing motion in the direction of the barracks where Love and Rose were standing, watching their interaction with clear amusement. Ichigo slouched and received another glare for the action.

Shaking his head in amusement, Ichigo flashed Rukia a fond smile, reached down to ruffle her hair, earning himself a swat and a grumble. Laughing Ichigo turned and entered the gate throwing a last wave over his shoulder and a parting call, “Stay safe Rukia.”

The young Kuchiki said nothing audible in return, though Ichigo could hear indiscernible mumbling as he passed through the gate and glided over to the two Captains, amusement clearly written on their features.

“Enjoy the show, did we?”

The orange-haired Shinigami asked with a grin as the three turned to enter the ornate division. Love chuckled, that low bass that was like the deepening hearth of a forest, and hummed his agreement
and commented, “Course gotta love watching the fights between you and the Kuchiki brat Ichi, they’re always amusing; sort of nostalgic.”

Ichigo laughed and shook his head at the answer, flashing a roll of annoyance at the suggestion of Ichigo and Kaien being the same when they were younger (which was partially true). Turning his attention to the blond, Rose flashed Ichigo a thin amused smile and curled his fingers into a vague dramatic gesture that Ichigo interpreted to mean something along the lines of, “Of course.”

“Do you two know what the meeting is about?”

The lieutenant asked, rubbing at his arm where an old scar was bothering him. The two Captains traded a look, before following with simultaneous shrugs of unfound knowledge. Ichigo shook his head and lowly remarked, “Great, glad to see we have our priorities together.”

Rose’s musical laughter drifted on the air, as Love reached over and patted Ichigo on the back in a friendly manner, though perhaps a touch too forceful. Smiling at the two, Ichigo followed them as they entered the main meeting room slowly walking over to Kyroraku who was trading glances and raised eyebrows with Ukitake.

Catching Byakuya’s eyes where he stood in the formation of Captains, Ichigo flashed his friend a quick grin and waggle of his fingers, before he fell to the shadows pacing to where he could see Lisa’s lens catching the light.

Idly as he surveyed the room once more, he noted the lack of a familiar blond scientist and acknowledged with some amusement that Kisuke was likely in the human world again, and thus the chilling presence of Mayuri.

Lisa flashed Ichigo an amused grin as he came to a stop beside her, slouching behind their Captain. He winked at her in the darkness of the meeting room (it always seemed half-lit, Ichigo thought it was for dramatic effect), and quirked a brow before pointing to Rangiku.

Confusion passed over his fellow lieutenant’s features, so Ichigo repeated the gesture. Lisa grinned and flashed Ichigo a low thumbs up, eyes bright behind the red frames of her glasses. At that moment Shunsui looked over his shoulder at his two lieutenants, flashing a small warm smile in Ichigo’s direction and a grin in Lisa’s before he returned his attention to Jushiro.

As Ichigo was about to engage Lisa in another riveting conversation of hand symbols, or daring whispers, the doorway to the Soutaicho’s office opened with a soft whishing sound, speaking of well-oiled hinges. The old man stepped out, to the hush of silence, followed by his lieutenant and the heavy tap of his cane upon the floor. Ember deep eyes roved over the collection of lieutenants and Captains, with an old pride and warmth, like the old man was gazing at his family (and Ichigo thought he sometimes saw it that way).

Once the noise had died down, and the nervous shuffle of cloth had stilled, the wise eyes of the Soutaicho peeked out from under his brows peripheral and he slammed his cane to the floor with a certain sense of formality. Ichigo had a strange feeling of what the meeting was to be about, gaze drifting over familiar features, but he was curious nonetheless.

“I have called this meeting, as it has been reported that a hollow of unknown strength has appeared in the mortal realm, it has already claimed the lives of five Shinigami.”

The Soutaicho stated, pausing as nervous whispers and mutters broke out between the collection of Shinigami. Ichigo furrowed his brow, wondering at the existence of the creature. He had always supposed that when it came time for Isshin to meet Masaki, it would be through a normal trip to the
mortal realm, and not through Shiro’s intervention (the Shiro of Aizen’s creation). Though perhaps it was not Shiro?

The question also remained of how a creature of such a nature had come into existence when as far as Ichigo knew Sosuke had been keeping away from large hollowfication experiments. Not to mention the fact that Aizen wasn’t really the sort anymore to create something of that nature, at least not without gushing or boasting.

Glancing over at the lieutenant, mauve in the shadows of his Captain, Ichigo was certain he caught a flash of guilt in cunning amber orbs. But whether the creation was of Sosuke’s nature lingered at the front of his mind. In any case, there was a hollow of greater power running freely on the streets of Karakura.

He acknowledged with a weary sigh that it was exactly what he thought it was in the end because fate liked to play the same hand over and over again. And the timelines really were drawing close together once more.

Ossan’s soothing presence washed over Ichigo, lightening some unfelt burden that settled on his chest.

“We need an experienced and capable Captain dispatched to deal with the creature.”

The old man continued; the silence of the room deafening and serious. Glancing across the room at the long lines of parrying black and white, Ichigo caught the features of his uncle, father in another life. Stern and serious, rife of his usual jovial good-heartedness that hung about him like an armour. He held the breath in his lungs, wondering if another would step forward and change the timeline. If the head of the Shiba clan would remain in line.

It would throw off the balance of Ichigo’s plans, and at the same time prove the dangers and consequences of his travel through time. If Isshin did not step forward and take the mission, then Yuzu and Karin would never be born, and his old man would never meet Masaki.

“I will take the mission, with your permission Head Captain.”

Isshin’s familiar voice rang throughout the vastness of the meeting room, like the fell executioner’s blade finding its mark, as the strings of fate wound themselves together once more. The Captain stepped forward pivoting to face Yamamoto with all the poise of a true leader. The Soutaicho considered the clan head, gaze briefly flickering to Ichigo, catching the orange-haired Shinigami’s eye, he nodded imperceptibly. And in that moment the old man seemed both infinitely older and relieved of some great burden.

“Very well, Captain Shiba, you will depart for the mortal realm a week hence.”

The old man stated in the contained steel tightened silence that was wound like wire around Ichigo’s chest. It was a strange mix of fear, anticipation, and excitement at what was happening. How close they were drawing to the timeline, the grand cascade of events that would sweep Soul Society as the greatest storm it had known.

His uncle (father) nodded, spine straight, head held proud he returned to the twin lines. The Soutaicho surveyed the features of the gathered lieutenants and Captains for a moment ripe with tension and stated, “We will be employing a new training regiment, the paperwork and guidelines have been deployed to all Captains.”

Ichigo blinked, not entirely surprised at the announcement, though he did wonder if they had already
received it, and it was buried under the mountain of paperwork lying about the office, the glean in Lisa’s eyes suggested thoughts of the same nature. A low ripple of conversation passed throughout the hall, as the gathered Captain’s and lieutenants spoke their opinions, and questioned the introduction of a new training regimen.

The orange-haired lieutenant remained silent, listening to the conversations slide around him; so far the responses were a mix of neutral curiosity and a kind of excitement at the prospect. It pleased Ichigo slightly, considering he had been the one to suggest such a thing to the Captain, something to help prepare the foot soldiers for coming battles so the casualties wouldn’t be so great.

Sight gliding over to the head Captain, Ichigo briefly caught Yamamoto's eyes letting a small open smile fall onto his lips he nodded. The old man’s eyes crinkled, the laugh lines folding about in as much of a smile as possible. He only hoped Soul Society would be prepared for the invading forces of the future, he had a feeling like a sapling in his heart that they would survive this time.

The conversation drifted for a minute more, and Ichigo looked across the hallway to briefly catch his uncle’s eyes, the man smiled reassuringly as if hoping to ease some of the concerns of his family, and nodded once. Ichigo couldn’t muster the will to do anything but nod in return and flash a hopefully supportive grin.

The crack of the Soutaicho’s cane meeting the floor was met with silence, and there was a moment of pause before the old man nodded imperceptibly and stated, “This meeting is dismissed.”

With those words, a few of the Captain’s and lieutenants scattered, off to deal with delicate manners or perhaps more beneficial things to occupy their time. Ichigo pinned Sosuke with a look from across the hall, daring the brunette to dart out and run away. The scientist scowled for a moment but slumped in submission nonetheless.

Shunsui rested a warm hand on Ichigo’s shoulders startling him from the staring contest he had been holding with Sosuke. There was concern in his radiant eyes, accompanied by the warmth that filled Ichigo’s chest whenever they spoke. There was a silent question in his eyes and the curve of his brow, asking if Ichigo was okay.

Ichigo nodded, letting a small and easy smile slip onto his lips he tilted his head and made a vague gesture in the direction of the gates and then pointed behind his Captain to where Lisa was perched arms crossed in front of her chest. Shunsui shook his head in amusement, mirth plaintive on his features, he squeezed Ichigo’s arm once more in reassurance before darting out of the large meeting room. Lisa followed quickly behind their Captain, after sharing a parting look with Ichigo that was all fondness like a sibling, and cautious warning.

Turning his attention to the spectacled brunette still hovering in the corner, a sullen aura about him, Ichigo shook his head and glided over. Sosuke glanced up as Ichigo approached lips tightening before his expression relaxed, and Ichigo could catch familiar emotions in the scientist’s eyes.

With a nod the two began to walk out of the First Division (because hey it was a lovely day), dully Ichigo could feel Shinji’s keen eyes drilling a hole into the back of his skull. He let it be, knowing if the Captain really wanted to know he would follow them, that or approach (read corner) Ichigo later.

Ichigo preened in the sunlight as they exited the First, basking in the warmer temperatures compared to the slight draft of the large meeting room. Sosuke flashed Ichigo an amused glance one full of mirth as they paced along the streets, just two Shinigami walking about, definitely not conversing about illegal topics.

“So, did you create the hollow?”
The orange-haired Shinigami questioned casually, hands easily resting at his side, he had no use for light conversation, and it was never to be said that the Shiba family weren’t blunt. Sosuke glanced up a touch startled, though he hid it well behind the hulking glasses balanced on the bridge of his nose. The scientist let the silence be filled with thought as they continued to glide down the street slowly angling towards the Fifth division.

“No.”

Sosuke announced softly in the empty streets of Serieteti. Ichigo cast the lieutenant a smile, pleased that Aizen hadn’t decided to embrace his inner mad scientist megalomaniac (though there was nothing wrong with that… well yes there was).

Catching his friend’s eyes, the orange-haired lieutenant raised a brow in question. Sosuke blanched, visage temporarily paling, and Ichigo sighed though it was more the sigh a parent casts when they know their child has misbehaved in some way. Though Ichigo supposed it was of a very different manner, Sosuke was his own person after all.

“I was exploring some of the abandoned labs, and one of the creatures escaped… they’re just so interesting, the research notes, I mean they’re twisted and vile, but there’s also ideas there as well. Like one note detailed how one might perceivably use a zanpaktou to render a soul split in half.”

The lieutenant said, starting off hesitantly before picking up speed, a kind of frantic excitement to his eyes, one that Ichigo saw between the two scientists far too often. Ichigo couldn’t even feel aggrieved that Sosuke had released the creature, not when the man still possessed a moral code, and simply far too much curiosity.

Still, he wondered at the nature of the hollow, was it of the same nature of Shiro, or something of a different species altogether?

“Are you mad that I didn’t tell you Ichigo?”

His friend questioned, and Ichigo belatedly realized he had been quite apathetic in his musings. Flashing the lieutenant, the barest curve upwards of his lips he shook his head and responded, “I’m not mad, a little disappointed, but not mad. It’s really quite funny how fate works out though Sosuke.”

The scientist winced a bit at Ichigo’s words of disappointment before keen eyes were picking apart the second part of his sentence with a wide eagerness that reminded Ichigo of a young child. Sosuke glanced back furtively in the rough direction of the Tenth and back at Ichigo for a moment before he quirked a brow with a soft knowing smile. Ichigo nodded and the other lieutenant grinned, a sort of relief that his mistake wasn’t too grave.

Before they could discuss how the timeline had aligned itself of its own accord, a pair of arms slung around Ichigo’s neck and exasperated to his neck yelling, “Strawberry!”

He supposed it made sense that Yachiru had gravitated to Ichigo once again in this lifetime (if only because of his hair), but he sighed nonetheless and swung the youth over his head holding her easily on his shoulder.

Yachiru looked only the age of about a young child maybe five, but it did nothing to diminish the bounciness of her personality and the bright pink of her hair. Sosuke laughed softly at Ichigo’s side, fond affection at the scene lignin his voice.

“Oi Ichi finally picked up a child, did we?”
A familiar drawl sounded behind Ichigo and he turned to catch a face full of grinning teeth stretched like a Cheshire smile. Shinji was leaning casually against one of the nearby buildings, half shaded in shadows just for dramatic effect.

Ichigo just flashed a wide grin, neither denying nor accepting the statement, even as he attempted to make peace with the fact that he would most definitely not return to his division anytime soon.

Yachiru giggled in Ichigo’s arms, and the blond slunk forward to perch beside Sosuke, sending his lieutenant an amused glance at the thinly veiled irritation splicing the scientist’s features (he wondered when Sosuke was finally going to make the transfer to the Twelfth division, he assumed it was a matter of pride).

“So, what were ya two lovebirds chatting about over here?”

Shinji asked as he slung an arm around Sosuke’s shoulder, grinning at the blush that faintly coloured his lieutenant’s ears. Ichigo just shifted Yachiru in his arms, wondering if Kenpachi was even anywhere nearby, as he rolled his eyes in fond amusement at Shinji’s prodding, and responded, “Conspiring on how to deal with annoying blonds.”

Shinji faked hurt, grasping dramatically at his chest, earning a look of weary disbelief and a faint grin from Ichigo. Before he could detail how they were advancing their plan, Yachiru tugged at his hair and Ichigo pulled a piece of candy he kept on hand (one should always be prepared) out of his pocket handing it to the pink-haired girl with a grin.

He received twin grins for the gesture, and Ichigo lamented that his reputation would never be the same (not that it had ever been excellent). As if sensing his thoughts Sosuke chortled softly, and Shinji devolved into full-blown cackles, eliciting laughter from Ichigo’s own lips, and glee from Yachiru’s. Their collective laughter drifted high into the streets of Soul Society, echoing the light summer breeze.

X

Ichigo pretended to search the area in a kind of distant daze, eyes taking in achingly familiar buildings, ones that had been part of his daily life, fifteen years of his life. The grocery down the street that Ms.Akami ran and who always gave candy to Yuzu and Karin, his high school and the roof where he had eaten more times than he could count with his friends, and where he had taught Rukia how to use a juice box.

Rukia who was alive, and already a member of the Gotei 13. Whose sister was still alive, frail and bed-ridden most days but clinging to life for a little longer, in a way that made Ichigo’s heart both shudder at the thought of her passing. He admired her perseverance to take care of Rukia (and Byakuya). The same Shinigami who had introduced Ichigo to the realm after death, in a smooth glide into his room through the window.

He firmly avoided the area he knew the Kurosaki clinic to be in. His home or what once was.

As much as Unohana had advised Ichigo to visit Karakura, embrace the nostalgia and dull heartache, see it all again, on his first visit to the human world in centuries. Ichigo had avoided his old home then, there had just been too much raw pain at the time, and too many memories in the small building that had been his home.

Now Ichigo wasn’t so sure if he could handle it, but he didn’t believe that it would incapacitate him, he could try. There was a pull in his chest, one that snapped against his rib cage, and beckoned him to walk streets he would know blindfolded. Zangetsu hummed reassuringly along the threads of
Ichigo’s mind, a constant support.

That was still no cause to willingly go there (and he was avoiding it, he admitted it), see overlapping images of the rubble, the ruined furniture and remains of his old life, replacing a peaceful neighbourhood. Hear faint screams, the acrid scent of blood, voices detailing the past in heavy mist.

So, he searched around the area, pausing every once and awhile when it all just became too much.

He would huddle in the shadows, take a few deep breaths, pull on Zangetsu’s presence till he felt together enough to brace Karakura town once more. Almost a constant presence on Ichigo’s senses was Byakuya, who was supposedly still in Soul Society, in the Sixth division filling out endless paperwork.

It sent a curl of warmth that his friend had come with Ichigo to the human world, not even knowing the true circumstances (and the guilt ate away at Ichigo each night, as he thought of how his best friend was one of the few people he was close to that didn’t know, but he would know soon enough), had ventured forth anyways. Having seen some pulling danger in Ichigo’s eyes as he had stood at the shoji gates, asking in a faint barely there whisper.

The lieutenant could also feel their presences, together now, even amongst the hundreds of other presences cloistering about the city, he could feel Isshin’s fire, burning to protect, and Masaki’s, her gentle nature, and the own fire of her soul. It ached something deep inside of his chest, but it was a shifting ache, one of happiness at their meeting, and the expected loss, still fresh after years, but also tempered at the same hand of time.

Landing on one of the largest skyscrapers within Karakura town, Ichigo perched on the edge, gaze looking out over the sprawling city, reminiscent of his inner world (or perhaps it was the other way around), though lacking the torrential downpour, or budding greenery. Swinging his legs off the edge of the building, he ignored the persistent urge to jump, one that corralled any soul at the edge of a precipice, and instead tracked the small force of Shinigami scoping the city.

A force of maybe ten Shinigami, none of the Second Division which was known for its skill in tracking; and instead those of the Eleventh. But most were from the Thirteenth division, as the region was under their jurisdiction. All souls who had barely known Isshin, and could hardly tell the man from Shunsui if asked, but also there to see if the hollow had been dealt with. Ichigo had pointed them in varying directions, sent them on wild chases knowing they wouldn’t find Isshin and Masaki, but giving the two the best chances he could in any case.

The Soutaicho had done the same. For as much as the old man had to uphold the law, he had always regarded Isshin as a nephew (or so he had been regaled with tales of youth and time), and for the way that Ichigo had spoken about their love, he had aided the search in his own way. It left a kind happiness sitting lightly on his shoulders at the thought, and care of the old man, even beneath his somewhat gruff exterior. It was why Ichigo was even in Karakura once more when he wasn’t stationed with Kisuke.

A soft whistle of air across the roof of the building announced his friend’s familiar presence, that and the always hovering faint scent of sakura blossoms. Ichigo remained hovered on the ledge of the building, gaze watching the sky began its fair descent into earthy night tones. The soft sound of footsteps reached Ichigo, as Byakuya paused beside Ichigo, shihakusho billowing just out of his peripheral vision, accompanied by his haori, one that seemed odd in the sprawling metal jungle.

“Ichigo.”

Byakuya said in acknowledgement, and Ichigo could almost see the normal respectful head tilt
accompanied with the words, that and the unspoken words spelt across Byakuya’s face. Patting the ground beside himself, as an invitation to sit Ichigo responded, “Byakuya.”

His friend huffed muttering something low under his breath before lacking any grace he dropped to the ground beside Ichigo fixing him with an exasperated stare. Ichigo just smiled and shrugged, gaze returning to the world stretched out before him. That same pull in his chest, as if he needed, had to see his old home grew loud in Ichigo’s ears and he sighed suddenly weary.

Byakuya glanced over in concern, and Ichigo could feel it pierce his skull, dip deep into his cranium to pull at all of Ichigo’s nerves in a soothing manner. Shiro growled something rough and low in the back of Ichigo’s mind, half encouragement, half teasing tones that were backed by fondness.

Debating for a moment, Ichigo shook his head more to himself, and then leaned against his friend. Byakuya stiffened, surprised for a moment before he relaxed and the land continued to reach before them. On the edge of some great precipice beyond the skyscraper’s ledge.

Hesitating for a moment in indecision, Ichigo watched small cars bustle on the streets like ants below. It was a whim, but he needed to see it, as much as he was conflicted at the same time. It was a mark that it was all real, and just a sense of need.

Heaving himself to his feet, Ichigo turned and offered a hand to Byakuya looking into familiar silver eyes, the Captain must have seen something on Ichigo’s features, as he blanched softly. He fixed Ichigo with another piercing look, asking a thousand questions, but took the proffered hand with an amused shake of his head, Kenseikan glittering like a dragon’s hoard.

“Think you can keep up Captain-san?”

Ichigo teased with a grin and a wink, holding his toes over the ledge with reckless abandon. The Kuchiki head balked at the challenge, though it looked more like he wanted to rush forward to pull Ichigo back from the edge than respond. Rolling his eyes Ichigo waggled his eyebrows and swayed easily on the balls of his feet.

Byakuya twitched and shook his head with irritated amusement and responded, “What keep up with you? I could outpace you anytime Ichigo.”

Which was complete and utter bullshit but Ichigo appreciated the bluff. Sending the Captain, a look of easy disbelief, Ichigo let a mischievous grin slip across his features as he let himself fall forward off the building.

He laughed as the rush of air surrounded him, gravity pulling him frighteningly closer and closer to the ground. Solidifying the reaitsu beneath his feet Ichigo righted himself in mid-air, peering up into the slowly falling sky, and at his friend peering at Ichigo from above.

Flashing Byakuya a large wave, Ichigo chuckled softly to himself before he was darting over Karakura’s familiar roofs, heading towards a small neighbourhood that Ichigo both wanted to avoid, and was easily drawn to.

Glancing back briefly as Ichigo landed on the flat roof of a hospital, Ichigo caught the brief glare of light on Byakuya’s elaborate hair pieces as the Captain followed along. Likely irritated with Ichigo’s reckless actions (though probably also secretly amused).

Ichigo eventually landed on the familiar stretch of road, the one that ran down the center of his old neighbourhood and seemed to kiss the sky. The fading blue of daylight stretched above and around the orange-haired Shinigami as he glanced at houses that were both unfamiliar in their form, and
completely familiar.

Byakuya landed beside Ichigo with the gentle whistle of the leaves clustering the trees, the Captain gazed about the place with something akin to confusion etched onto his features. But there seemed a sense of wonder there.

Tilting his head back Ichigo took in a deep lungful of air, letting the feel of Karakura surround him, the presences of people who would grow over the years, and inherent buzz of reaitsu that hummed like cicadas on the dull edge of his conscious.

Ichigo began walking forward after another moment, the silence between the two stretched and comfortable as the raven-haired Shinigami caught up with Ichigo, the lieutenant could feel Byakuya’s occasional assessing glances, but he said nothing determined to follow through with his (sort of) sudden whim, he knew the scene would change once they landed upon his home.

It was as near to as he remembered it being, though lacking the clinic portion, Ichigo could see it in his mind’s eyes; Yuzu in the kitchen, the heavenly scent of her cooking wafting about the place. Karin’s soccer equipment shoved off in one corner, as she played some console on the TV. His room tucked up in one corner of the house. Isshin’s giant poster of Masaki.

The three of them running throughout the clinic’s halls as children; Ichigo being chased by the twins, before submitting to their greater strength. Watching a movie together as a family, while Isshin sobbed at the action scenes, and Karin commented on every such fancy. Standing in the kitchen with his mother as she carefully taught him how to prepare dinner. His own lessons with Yuzu, boiling water, adding rice. Isshin stubbornly dragging Ichigo into the living room after a harsh battle, peeling away his layers to look at the superficial wounds.

It was all there, present in his mind, a pool of memories he drew upon whenever he felt at his lowest. Just the sensations and feelings that accompanied the memories, it left Ichigo blinking away the tears fogging his vision, but refusing to fall. His hand easily fell to Zangetsu’s hilt and he drew upon the blade’s strength, looking at what once was, and could one day be again.

Byakuya’s hand reached out and snatched Ichigo’s unoccupied hand, squeezing tightly in a silent show of support, but refusing to let go. Ichigo glanced at his friend, really stared at the Kuchiki clan head, before he turned his attention to the streets opposite and commented slowly, “Some three to five years from now I was born. Fifteen years after that and I met Rukia Kuchiki. It was a strange stirring of fate that allowed the son of a Shinigami, and a Quincy to enter into the world of Soul Society at that age.”

Ichigo fell quiet, gaze lingering on the doorway catching fading rays of light and reflecting them like pools of fractured water. Byakuya breathed in sharply but Ichigo didn't look at his friend, just remained staring, past images superseding the world in front of him.

“Rukia lent me her powers to save my life, the night I met her. She taught me about the world of the Shinigami with her normal crappy drawings and afterwards was forced to deal with the hollow. In the fight, she was wounded and had to give me her powers. For that crime, she is returned to Soul Society but sentenced to execution. I was a teenager, and nonetheless, a Shiba who possessed a determination and will to protect my friends.

I first met you the night Rukia was retrieved, you and your lieutenant were there, and you moved so fast I couldn’t even see you. My friends and I entered Soul Society and fought battle after battle. And I fought you again, cold brutal bastard Kuchiki who didn’t care for his sister; made you care in the end. Then Aizen revealed himself, and war sparked.
One war ended, peace stayed like the summer, gone too soon, and then another war arose. Casualties were immense by which I mean I was the only survivor, and well the world wasn’t looking too good. So here I am.”

Ichigo finished with a shrug, voice there but a bit cracked; his heart beat like a drum, deep and sparingly in his ears, as it always did when he thought of his past. But there was the familiar relief of telling his friend that hung over him as well.

Byakuya had gasped sometime during his tale and then had fallen silent. And silent he remained, pulled between the two, taut like a bow. Ichigo didn’t look over, didn’t move other than to shift his stance and seek Ossan’s presence where it soothed the nerves rushing about his chest and threatening to pull him under and into a panic attack. Shiro helped smooth back the memories, leaving Ichigo to stare at the small soon to be clinic and reminiscence.

“Ichigo.”

His name again, like the sound of the early tides, open with so many emotions that Ichigo could hardly sort through them all as he turned to look into Byakuya’s eyes. There was a great storm there, one that roiled and crashed greater than any natural disaster. Relief, fear, confusion, loss, grief, and anger, it stretched on and on flickering like lightning from one thing to the next.

Byakuya’s hand still clenched firmly in Ichigo’s own, tightened another fraction, looking about the place, the familiar buildings one last time, Ichigo decided, not here. He glanced up briefly into the Captain’s face once, before he looked away and pulled his friend forward, over the rapidly blurring landscape.

The grass decorating the hill was burying itself in weak shades of green and night patterned darkness as Ichigo landed the two in a cluster of trees perched to look out over the sprawling curves of shadowed stone.

The Kuchiki head’s eyes regained some coherency and Byakuya cast a quick glance around, noticing their location before he returned his attention to Ichigo. Placing a hand upon his friend’s jaw Ichigo pulled Byakuya’s head forward and leaned towards him so that their foreheads were resting against each other; breathe mingling in the space between, eyes bright and up close.

Slowly Ichigo let the seal on his reaitsu fall away, the great pressure briefly descending on the city for an errant moment before it abated and left Byakuya’s eyes wide with shock. The grass around Ichigo curled lovingly inwards and the trees seemed to reach for the two from their great height above.

Byakuya made to open his mouth, but Ichigo shook his own head faintly and let his reaitsu be around them, carrying with it the great sensations of his life, embedded in the energy of his soul.

“Yuzu had blond hair; it was like honey in the light. She was sweet like our mother and seemed to possess the same spirit; always willing to help, to care for the family. She was an excellent cook, able to make meals that were divine. And she had the cutest sneeze; it was like a kitten, soft and completely unexpected. Her laughter was bright and airy, as if stolen from a sprite. She had a mischievous side too, though you would never have guessed it with the way she acted. One time she baked cookies, but instead of putting cinnamon she added cayenne. She said it was an accident, but confessed to me later that night as we chatted.

Karin was fire and ice, warm and yet frigid. She had raven hair and was like Isshin and me more so than our mother. Tough and strong, into sports, and occasionally fighting; she wasn’t as sensitive underneath as Yuzu but she was thoughtful and possessed a different kind of wisdom. She always
seemed to understand certain things; life wasn’t a riddle to her. Death was just the next step. We often went out to the fields in the morning, and kicked the ball around; she complained to me about my lack of skills, I criticized her skills anyway.”

Ichigo trailed off; breath hitching in his chest, between the quiet breathiness of his voice. It felt like he couldn’t draw air into his lungs, a strange mix of overwhelming nostalgia and heartbreak, and his own heart laughing with joy, paralyzing his lungs.

Byakuya gingerly and tentatively rubbed a thumb over Ichigo’s cheek, making soft soothing noises in the back of his throat he looked into Ichigo’s eyes. The world was there, the universe dazzling bands of colour and stars. Ichigo took a breath leaning into Byakuya’s presence in front of him, taking comfort in Zangetsu’s presence. He was okay he could do this.

It hurt to talk about them. But it wasn't the gaping hole in his chest it had once been. Talking with Unohana, about them, about everything had softened it, helped Ichigo to heal and it allowed him to speak of his family with a smile and only the occasional hitch in his breath.

He continued as night fell and a Jigokuchō landed between them, whispered words carrying a message to the rest of the deployed Shinigami. The orange-haired Shinigami continued to speak until early morning light’s boughs reached their faces, of loss, of family, of the people he had known, and the years that had passed since he had stumbled upon the new timeline.

Byakuya listened, emotions playing across his features as the seasons changed. Eyes understanding and deep, letting Ichigo speak and accepting everything he said. They would pause and Ichigo would choke on his own words, the Kuchiki head ushering soft soothing noises, and calm reaitsu till Ichigo picked up again.

In the morning light Ichigo was stiff, his voice sore, his eyes irritated. Across from him, Byakuya was weary, that weary that portrayed itself in one’s eyes and not just the lining of his features. Ichigo only pressed closer drawing his friend into a half hug before he stood, offering a hand with a smile. It was firmly grasped and Byakuya fluidly rose to the same standing as Ichigo, the night lingering about their actions in soft looks, and unspoken words and promises.

There would be more talking, Byakuya asking questions, Ichigo elaborating. But for now, there was content, and twin sighs of misery at the thought of the paperwork in the division, early morning sound reflecting twin laughter.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! I hope Ichigo’s healing showed through in the second scene, which I have fondly dubbed the “Say no to Toxic Masculinity” scene. I tried to show it in the case that Ichigo didn’t break down at seeing his old home/town, and additionally, was able to speak about his life semi-easily. Of course, it would still be hard, but he managed to do it, and with a smile. Right now, we are about roughly 17-19 years before canon starts, where Ichigo would be 15 in the original canon Bleach universe. Also, does anyone want to guess if it was Shiro or something else? I hope everyone has a safe and happy Halloween! Reviews/comments are always appreciated, thanks for reading, till next time!
Thantophobia

Chapter Summary

Byakuya contemplates, and Ichigo talks with the Soutaicho

Chapter Notes

Thantophobia
(n.) The fear of losing someone you love.

Hello everyone, we are back with chapter 41! I probably won’t update next week, forewarning, as I’m going to be working on a Remembrance Day piece; but after that back to the normal schedule. Thank you all for understanding. I hope you enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

It was a cool night, the kind of chill that seeped into Byakuya’s bones, lifted his lungs, and invigorated the spirit. He felt awake in the inordinate sense of timelessness that hung about the small veranda in the beaconing light of the moon above.

There was tea in his hands, but the clan head was quite sure it had gone cold in the long hours. He had been sitting out there for quite a while; just staring at his surroundings in absent-minded observance, thoughts circulating other topics; thinking. Two days ago. Two days that seemed like a lifetime away now; some distant hazy dream where he was unaware of the truth of his closest friend, or well not wholly unaware.

Byakuya had always known Ichigo was strange, wasn’t all correct in a rather strange manner of speaking. He had never seemed a full part of the world around him as if some part of Ichigo had remained elsewhere distant; a disconnect. It had shown itself in unconscious movements, a hesitance when he looked at the world around him (and sometimes a haunting nostalgia), the catch of his eyes full of wrought emotion, and the soft manner of speaking he had adapted, strange vocal tics and all.

And sometimes he had looked at Byakuya with such lost, and a depth he couldn’t possibly understand. Other times words seemed to hover on his lips, crease the corners of his eyes, and it seemed some great burden became visible if only briefly on Ichigo’s shoulders before he fell to silence.
But knowing all that, it had not, and would never in a hundred years have prepared the young Captain for Ichigo’s rather eccentric displacement of time. He had wondered at it before, of course, he had the familiarity in their first meeting; the looks like one would share with an old friend upon meeting for the first time, even though they were complete strangers. How sometimes Ichigo had just seemed to know events, facts, and all manner of things before it was even possible.

And Byakuya was still attempting to come to terms with it all.

The things his friend had shared with him (he pushed aside the blush that painted his cheeks at the memory, the way their breaths had mingled, spirits impossibly close), that fading night to morning, under the groves of ancient sentinels, tombstones rising misty in the distance. Stories of family, friends, love and loss, and war and peace. A whole lifetime, yet incredibly short for what the orange-haired Shinigami had seen and lived.

It wrecked his own emotions asunder. How was Byakuya supposed to deal with the knowledge that Ichigo had lived through not one, but two wars? Byakuya had always known that Ichigo had experienced some trauma in his past because there was nothing else possible to explain the scars that littered his torso, the desolation of his eyes, and the fractured nature of his soul. But Byakuya hadn’t expected a world forsaken by whatever kami ruled above, and two wars upon Ichigo’s hands.

Then there was the knowledge of the other Byakuya. Byakuya from a different timeline; where he hadn’t encountered the sometimes-abrasive orange-haired youth till the twenty-first century. From what Ichigo had detailed, he had been cold, unfeeling, and very much honour bound.

It left a sort of hollowness in his chest at the thoughts; one that Senbonzakura helped to soothe. It trialled his thoughts, matters of what if, wondering why he would have become the way he had. What could have changed him so much? It left Byakuya contemplating his own identity, how much of him was affected by Ichigo?

The warmth in Ichigo’s voice as he talked about their developing friendship in the other timeline, lightened some of the burden, at the same time pushing at his eyes. How they had all changed during the war, grown in all ways speaking, far faster than they needed too.

He wondered if when Ichigo looked at him, all he saw was the Byakuya of his past, if he constantly compared Byakuya to a figure lost to time. Did Ichigo always see friends and family of the past? Did it shape how he interacted with everyone?

It was like he was analyzing every single moment he had shared with Ichigo in a vague attempt to try to make sense of the tangled mass of threads of thought coiled up within his mind. Byakuya knew there was no answer, no clear-cut answer, and he would have to determine his thoughts for himself.

There were still just so many questions unanswered. Details that were left unsaid, but hinted at with the quirk of his brow or the corner of his lips; words that he kept replaying over and over again. Events that Byakuya needed to hear again to even comprehend its possibility, and to hear Ichigo’s good memories, if only to see that true sincere smile once more.

Then there had been Ichigo’s sisters, Yuzu and Karin (and he would never forget their names). His closest friend had spoken of them with such a bright vividness to his eyes that Byakuya for a short moment had wondered if it was the sun reflected in amber. His mortal friends, his father, Ichigo’s friends and family that he recognized within Soul Society’s ranks and who were yet completely different strangers that Ichigo recalled, they had been so close, breaths mingling, a point of contact between their souls and at their connected foreheads. The clan head had been able to see all of it, every flash of emotion, and every twist. There had been nothing that Ichigo could hide, and he was certain it was the same for himself. It had allowed the strange sensation of peering into one’s soul,
and Byakuya was both unsettled and endeared by what he saw there.

It struck Byakuya all the more for it, like observing a storm in the eye of the hurricane, sweeping past at galling speeds. It had surrounded him, consumed his senses, till the outer world had drifted away and it was just the two of them and the words between them.

Feeling Ichigo’s reiatsu; all of it, for the first time had left his heart buried six feet underground. The clan head had always known his friend was powerful; it had been evident from their first spar, even at Byakuya’s then novice level. Zangetsu had sung with restrained power, and though it was well contained it had always been apparent.

Then Ichigo had released his dual blade after the Vizard incident and Ichigo’s own breakdown. And of course, it just made so much fucking sense in a cynical manner that Ichigo had a dual blade (because he was born of Shinigami Captain and a Quincy). Byakuya felt some deep sympathy or empathy in his chest at the fate that had been embedded in Ichigo’s very bloodline.

He could barely stomach it. His friend at the age of fifteen had fought in a war. Ichigo had been a child at the time, in the eyes of any adult. From there it had only apparently spiralled, and Byakuya still couldn’t comprehend it all. His friend had seen countless unimaginable horrors, and yet still had found the courage to smile and move forward years in the past. It heightened Byakuya’s respect for Ichigo to a new level.

How a teenager had been forced (however much Ichigo denied it) into bearing the brunt of the Gotei 13. How Ichigo’s power was extensive, something that reached out and touched the world around it because of necessity, and his bloodline. It made sense and at the same time utterly confused Byakuya.

Byakuya sighed; he had a headache. Looking down Byakuya swished the amber liquid in his cup before he took a sip wincing at the cold tea. He took a breath and tilted his head back rubbing at the bridge of his nose in a vain attempt of soothing the building headache that had occurred sometime somewhere when he had begun to fall into an ever-growing pit of thoughts all centered on a certain orange-haired Shinigami.

The shoji door behind Byakuya suddenly slid open, loud as a gunshot in the stillness of the night. Craning his head around Byakuya’s eyes widened in surprise at the slim frame within the doorway. Rather quickly he set his mug of horribly cold tea down and sprung to his feet.

“Hisana what are you doing out of bed?”

Byakuya questioned clear concern in his voice as he paced over to his wife leaning heavily against the door frame. She was so pale he noted as his eyes roved over appearance, taking her in like a man takes to gold. There was a sickly cast to her skin, a dullness starting to take hold in her eyes. She was fading fast.

It was a painful realization that Byakuya was still attempting to come to terms with (on top of everything else), but one that he had inevitably made peace with when he agreed to marry Hisana. He had always known she wouldn’t be with him long, her illness wouldn’t allow it. And while Ichigo had searched for a cure with his more science inclined friends (desperately searched, he had seen it), and Byakuya had whispered weak prayers in the dead of night to whatever kami above. There was no cure. Hisana was going to die.

His wife smiled softly at him, so much love and happiness in her eyes that it always took his breath away and replied, “Hush now, you can’t expect me to live in our room. Besides you’ve been out here all night, I’m sure the trees are not the best of company.”
“I’ll have you know they are fine company.”

Byakuya responded with a slight grin before he took a step forward as Hisana shakily stepped onto the veranda. Carefully he guided her to the ledge he had been perched on, cheering slightly at the airy laughter that sprinkled the air at his comment. Helping her settle slightly Byakuya placed himself close beside Hisana sharing his body warmth. With a loving gaze at his wife studying the scenery, Byakuya reached over and picked up his tea, allowing reaitsu to surge through his fingers and coax warm spirals of steam from the porcelain in his hands.

Passing the mug to Hisana she smiled gratefully and took a sip of the now warm tea. He watched her drink the tea, savouring every moment with her, inscribing them within his memory. She shot him a knowing look, all big blue eyes, over the lip of her mug and a hidden smile.

“So, what has been plaguing my dear husband?”

Hisana questioned lilting on the word husband, and gently rubbing her shoulder against his own. Byakuya sighed, running a hand through his hair, and likely displacing his Kenseikan. Instantly concern was playing across Hisana’s features at the nonverbal answer and actions displaying his distress. There was an open honesty there on her features as well, and a willingness to listen.

“Ichigo told me the truth about his past.”

Byakuya stated hesitantly, feeling the inexplicable need to share the absurdity of the situation with someone. Who better than the second person in the world who understood him best. Hisana’s lips quirked a bit but she said nothing, only resting her hand on top of his in a comforting gesture.

“He’s- He’s from the future Hisana.”

Byakuya struggled to say, receiving wide eyes for the statement (because she was friends with Ichigo too) before Hisana composed herself and with a smile that held the stars of the universe she cocked her head and asked, “Does it really change anything?”

The clan head opened his mouth to reply that yes it did change everything. But then the weight of her words reached him like a sharp ocean breeze, and the fight drained from his form at the realization. Nothing had changed Ichigo was still Ichigo. If there was more depth to his character revealed, then that was still Ichigo. He wouldn’t suddenly become cruel and callous, or ignore Byakuya in favour of focusing on the future.

Ichigo would always be Ichigo; there would have been no way for the orange-haired Shinigami to hide such a façade for so long. No, his friend would remain the sometimes-clueless lieutenant, who was blunt, a mystery, serious and open at the same time, loving family and friends, and in particular teasing Byakuya.

“What would I do without you, my love?”

The Captain responded fondly (but the words were heavy in his throat and mind) after a minute of computing his new resolve and the truth of the matter. A flicker of some shade passed over Hisana’s features, dark and sorrowful before it was gone, and she was smirking at him though it was a fragile gesture she joked, “Probably accidentally walk off a cliff.”

Soft laughter filled the space between them, and Byakuya stared at his wife with immense fondness warmly grasping her smaller hand in his own. Hisana faintly squeezed back before she took another sip of the tea gaze drifting to the horizon beyond them. They sat in that silence for a moment. Byakuya was less troubled, but there were matters that still weighed heavily on his shoulders. It must
have shown as Hisana turned to gaze at Byakuya.

“What else troubles you Byakuya?”

She questioned hand resting lightly on his jaw as she turned his face towards her own. Features softening slightly Byakuya held the hand against his cheek and looked into his wife’s eyes. It was there like a seed planted in his skull, whispering always of how she would soon be gone.

He wouldn’t see her smile in the morning when he woke up with her beside him, or hear her gently admonish him for working on his paperwork for too long, or watch her chase after Rukia in the fields careless and freer than any noble could ever possibly be. He wouldn’t see that ochre blue kimono he loved which highlighted her features and the depth of her eyes, or be able to discuss books and art with cradled tea. He would miss the companionship in the dark night when sometimes it became all too much; her laughter that just brightened his spirit.

Tears welled up and trailed slowly down his face, a wordless answer. Hisana’s features softened more so (if that was at all possible) and she leaned forward to kiss his brow (their relationship had never been about love through sexuality, it was in their bond, laughter and warm touches) and wiped away his tears. Like he had watched her do with Rukia, when the stress of the academy, or adjusting to a new life as a noble, had gotten to the young raven.

“I’m sorry.”

Byakuya apologized in the tender space between them. The laugh lines around Hisana’s eyes (and her life had always been full of such laughter) creased and a sad smile slipped across her features as she reprimanded, “You have nothing to apologize for Byakuya. It’s okay.”

He knew that he did, but there was still the inevitable truth of it all. It felt like his world was curling in around him, first with Ichigo’s revelation and the startling questions it had brought forth, the inner turmoil and wondering. Then Hisana’s failing health that Byakuya could see wouldn’t last much longer.

“It’s just…”

Byakuya trailed off, never one who was excellent with his emotions. Hisana nodded sage and so very wise, and in the space between them whispered, “I know. My time here is almost at an end Byakuya.”

The tears had stopped as Byakuya cradled Hisana’s hand tightly in his own and in his own whisper replied, “I-I just don’t know how I’m going to cope.”

“Then don’t cope, remember I’ll always be with you Byakuya, with you and Rukia.”

Hisana said her voice holding such a weight that Byakuya could feel it in the air as his heart leapt up into his throat. Wordlessly he pulled the slighter frame of his wife into his arms; resting his face in the crook of her neck he tried to memorize every detail. The lingering scent of jasmine and some wildflower, the way her kimono shifted as she settled in his arms.

“Rukia will still be with you Byakuya. You’ll take care of her for me?”

Her voice questioned close to his ear, Byakuya nodded and assured his wife, he said, “Of course I consider her my own younger sister.”

She laughed at that knowing it to be true. From the first day Byakuya had met Rukia, when Hisana had appeared Ichigo beside her carrying the brat over his shoulder, he had fallen in love with the then
child. Rukia had only deepened that love over the years, with her snark and ‘creative drawing’ skills, her laughter so like her sister’s, her aspirations and drive (and no he most certainly did not spoil her at all).

Hisana knew it and so did near everyone else in the Kuchiki compound. Still, he assured his sick wife. Hisana grinned up at him from his chest and said, “I swear you would have adopted her even without me.”

“Hmm, I don’t know. Though Ichigo would have probably bugged me into it.”

Byakuya replied with a straight deadpan knowing his wife’s words to be true. She just shot him a disbelieving look and reached up to brush a lock of hair out of his face she commented, “You’ll have Ichigo too. I’ve seen the way you two look at each other. Even this time travel won’t change anything much.”

The Captain of the Sixth blushed at the insinuating smirk Hisana levelled his way when she spoke of Ichigo and Byakuya’s relationship. Still what she said was true, Byakuya already knew in his heart, soul; whatever that Ichigo would have his back just as Byakuya would have his. Still, they didn’t stare at each other, much, in the way she was suggesting. Thinking over it for a moment he defended, “It’s not like that… we’re more than friends but deeper than brothers. It’s just…”

Byakuya fell short lost for words. Hisana revealed a knowledgeable smiled and gently assured her husband, “I know Byakuya. It’s okay. I’ve been so lucky to have your love for these many years, and to be able to share my love with you. But afterwards, don’t let what we had to hold you back from what you have with Ichigo. Your bond doesn’t need a label. You two are irreversibly connected, just as we are; only a fool would be blind to it.”

He blushed at her words but didn’t deny them, only smiling gently in return to her knowing smile. Shifting Byakuya tightened his arms around Hisana and let his gaze drift over her head, to the surrounding darkness and the vague blurry skeletons of trees in the distance.

“I love you Hisana.”

He whispered muffled into the crown of her raven-shine hair. She laughed in his arms, the night suddenly warm and welcoming. Hisana looked at him and the corners of her lips curved up in the barest hint of a smile and she replied, “And I you Byakuya.”

She shivered slightly then in his arms and Byakuya scowled down at her reprimanding though it lacked any heat and determinedly declared, “Alright time for bed.”

Hisana scowled at him and playfully swatted him on the arm, under her breath with fondness she mumbled, “Mother hen.”

But didn’t protest as Byakuya carefully helped her to stand, gently guiding her towards the shoji doors, still half a creak open and emitting halo light. Hisana paused in the doorway and reached up to place a chaste kiss on his cheek, eyes so very warm that the Captain’s heart fluttered in his chest.

“Don’t stay out too late dear.”

She whispered half in the light so that she just seemed to glow ethereally as if her soul’s radiance had been set free. Byakuya wanted to protest and state his intention to follow her inside but he knew he needed a little more time before his spirit would settle. Instead, he pulled her slight form close and hugged her like one might hug glass, incredibly fragile but with all his strength. He basked in the feel of her arms around him, her presence along with his senses.
Then he whispered a soft parting of loving words before he pulled away and she smiled, so graceful and beautiful before she dipped inside. Byakuya sighed, as utterly in love as the first day he had met her. Senbonzakura laughed, that smooth rustle of metal against sheath, and Byakuya could only shake his head and lean against the pillar of the veranda gaze on the lone teacup highlighted by the moonlight.

There was a storm brewing, it whispered along the air, some strange stirring of the sands of time. One that Ichigo was likely at the center of. He would speak to the orange-haired Shinigami soon, and in the meantime, he’d spoil Rukia, and laugh with Hisana, and cherish every moment, every smile, and every wink from those he loved.

X

The office of the Soutaicho was as imposing as ever, as Ichigo stole into the room, watching the apparently undisturbed old man dutifully fill out papers with a sceptic's eye. He wondered if the old man had noticed his presence, he likely had. Still, Ichigo made it a point of trying to sneak into the old man’s office whenever he entered. Why? Because he could.

There was bright sunlight colouring the room in rich hues Ichigo noted with a half-scowl (because he loved the sun and loved basking in it, but it created a world of problems for sneaking around in). Usually, the heavy drapery decorating the window frames was closed letting the room rest in dramatic tones of shadow. But today the sight afforded was the broad white glimmering board of Soul Society stretching out before Ichigo’s eyes.

He very much could have likely stood there for minutes on end, just staring out at Soul Society, safe, whole. But instead, he darted through what little patches of shadow there were till he plopped himself in the slightly less stiff chair of the two placed in front of Yamamoto’s desk.

The old man didn’t even twitch, only looked up from the papers for a moment, with knowing coal eyes peeking out from under caterpillar-like eyebrows before back down again at the rather dusty stacks of paper. Ichigo huffed and crossed his arms, but remained silent. He tried to ignore the way his chest still hurt, and his how eyes stung, or the image of Rukia’s tear-stained face as he comforted her. Rather he focused on an ornate paperweight resting on the Soutaicho’s desk.

Zangetsu hummed melodiously around Ichigo, soothing unsettled nerves, and the dull sorrow running like a river in the back of his mind, as the two Shinigami sat together in amicable silence. Only the dull monotonous scratch of paperwork dutifully being filled out disturbed the silence.

After another few moments where the silence promoted his thoughts; images of her smile and Byakuya’s grief, Ichigo rose to his feet and paced to the large window. He leaned on the sturdy frame with a sigh, dragging his hand over his features he stared out at the world unseeing.

There was the rough noise of shuffling behind Ichigo a few moments later, but he ignored it content to rest his hand on Zangetsu’s hilt taking physical reassurance from the blade. He hadn’t bothered to notice it, that is until a weathered palm landed on his shoulder and the Soutaicho’s warm reaitsu (like a hearth, welcoming and homely) wrapped around Ichigo in a comforting gesture. Yam-jii wasn’t a man of words and emotions, had never been one as far as Ichigo could tell, more of man of actions and gestures. Ichigo could appreciate it after dealing with the clan elders for hours as Kaien assumed the position of clan head, and he comforted Byakuya and Rukia. He felt incredibly and utterly drained.

Ichigo shot a small smile over his shoulder at the old man, who received it with a raised brow and the bare hint of a smile. The Soutaicho glided around to stand beside Ichigo, providing silent support, looking out over the whole of Soul Society. Softly Ichigo murmured, “It’s still just as beautiful.”
Yamamoto nodded and Ichigo grinned short and distant before he curled his hands into the interior of his sleeves. They stood together in silence for a moment more, where the universe took its proverbial breath between one moment and the next, time beginning to rush forward unerringly. The old man hummed for a moment as if sensing what Ichigo could feel in his bones before the Head Captain turned away; the absent echoing sound of his cane striking the floor as he walked. Ichigo shook his head with a soundless laugh and followed the Captain.

The gardens were a bit cool, but the weather was pleasant enough as they settled on one of the verandas overlooking the garden, safe from buffeting wind, and a place where the Soutaicho could light up his pipe without the scolding of his lieutenant. If Shunsui had gotten his habit of drinking on the job, and annoying his lieutenants from anywhere it certainly wasn’t from his family. Not that that was a widely known fact.

Chōjirō appeared a few moments later, pushing open the thin rice frame with his hip, a tray of tea balanced on his arms. He set it down before raising a brow at the old man and the smoke still drifting innocently from his pipe. He levelled a glare at the Soutaicho, one that could make any lesser man shiver, before turning and giving Ichigo a small smile. The orange-haired Shinigami grinned thankfully in response. In his opinion, Chōjirō was vastly underappreciated.

He could have become a Captain many years before but through his unwavering sense of loyalty and his own morals continued to serve under the Soutaicho as his lieutenant. He was dedicated, hard-working, had a wonderful sense of dry humour, and made some of the best tea Ichigo ever tasted. Knowing the man would probably not accept such a heartfelt thanks or praise Ichigo endeavoured to always smile for the man, or thank him for the lovely tea.

The duelist’s countenance brightened for a moment before he bowed to the two, shooting one last glare at his Captain, and backed away with the dull clack of his shoes upon the tiled flooring. Ichigo gratefully sipped at the tea, eyes drifting shut in the peace for a moment.

“Are your plans to start a war progressing well?”

The Soutaicho asked in the living quiet of the garden, voice amused and sardonic, Ichigo nodded, a slight grin there, and pursed his lips at the phrasing. Well yes, he was planning to start and facilitate a war, that didn’t mean the Soutaicho had to be so blunt about it. The young Shinigami knew it was all in good humour in any case.

“I would like to think so. Sosuke and I have been scouting out Hueco Mundo, and potential power levels. Additionally, we’ve been experimenting with the Hogyoku.”

Ichigo stated gaze searching out the gardens as he recalled their most recent foray into the sands of Hueco Mundo with a grin. It had certainly been interesting. The old man harrumphed and hummed a bit but remained silent. The matters of the coming war were mostly in Ichigo’s hands.

“Are you planning on informing the Captains and lieutenants?”

The Soutaicho asked, and Ichigo shrugged because he didn’t have an answer (not one beyond, do not tell Zaraki). Kisuke, Sosuke and Ichigo had been plotting things for months that had turned to years after that first visit. It was nostalgic in the slightly morose sense that it was rather like the war councils of Ichigo’s time. And while some events were more greatly set in stone and would come to pass no matter what, others were more like driftwood.

“It would be good to inform them, I just don’t know how they would handle it. Plus, the more the information is shared, the lesser chance it has of remaining confidential. I think it’s better to keep it to inside informants and the corresponding party.”
Ichigo replied, rubbing the bridge of his nose he briefly and ruefully mumbled about crazy eccentric Captain and lieutenants (which was sort of a basic requirement for the upper scion). The Soutaicho gave Ichigo a piercing discerning look but said nothing, letting Ichigo know of the old man’s opinion. He likely still wanted Ichigo to share it but saw his point. Perhaps after the war, Ichigo would share everything. He wondered if he would ever share the truth of his past, and a prospective future so causally among many people.

Still, he considered the Soutaicho’s unsaid words. His was an opinion Ichigo dearly cherished after it had proven invaluable more than a few times. Still, Ichigo wished there was some way to prevent a war and yet continue to expand on the skill sets of the soldiers. But well, training a force of Soul Society’s numbers was not easy (they had already improved barrack training at the baser levels, and were working on academy training). At least some things had changed from Ichigo’s timeline, especially technology, and Unohana’s healing tactics.

"Are you still considering the formation of a Fourteenth division?"

Yamamoto questioned, old hard voice vibrating between them. Ichigo gazed out at the gardens before he lightly shrugged his shoulders in indecision (and probably subsequently annoyed the old man) and replied, “It depends on how it all goes really; power level, animosity within the ranks, whether they would feel more comfortable within another division or their own. What do you think Taicho?”

Ichigo replied thoughtfully, ending with an honest question. The future was full of variables. The Soutaicho nodded, whether approving of Ichigo’s words or in reflection Ichigo couldn’t tell. Ichigo already knew he held the support of the Soutaicho if he did decide that a Fourteenth division would be a good idea. But it would be reassuring to hear the old man’s thought on the matter. Pursing his lips Ichigo leaned back on the balls of his feet and sipped at his tea for a moment.

He thought of warm blue eyes, like summer fields stretching out before his fingertips; knowing eyes and light smiles as they shared jokes over favourite pieces of literature. Guiding and aiding Rukia; watching the love in her eyes so warm like a hearth that chased away cool spirits. Laughter like early morning and wicked wire wit. His chest hurt, and he could feel it biting at him, a mixture of grief and guilt because he couldn’t save her; she was gone passed in the early morning holding Byakuya’s hand. Because Hisana would never see Rukia become a lieutenant, and Byakuya and Hisana would never share a fifty-year anniversary because a friend he had come to love and cherish was gone.

But he would talk to Unohana tomorrow at least, because he could feel it bubbling up in his chest, shaking his hands, and leaving his soul aching. She was gone. And there was nothing he could have done to stop it. He had to accept that and know that she had lived a life of love, had found and helped raised Rukia. She had lived a beautiful life, one suiting her brilliant soul.

“The points you have raised for both sides of the argument are both sound. It is as you have said; it depends on the Espada you recruit. However, consider also the remodelling of a pre-existing division as well Ichigo. Know that I will support either decision.”

The old man stated eyes warm where they gazed at Ichigo, it curled a great fondness in his chest for the old man (and temporarily banished the heaviness clinging to every action), that and the confidence and trust he placed in Ichigo. Nodding his head at the Soutaicho’s words, Ichigo flashed the man a small grateful smile and turned his gaze to the cup of tea cradled in his hands.

He looked over after studying the grain of the veranda for a moment, ignoring lingering dredges of thoughts, having felt the Soutaicho’s heavy gaze. The old man was drinking his own tea, but he was turned to face Ichigo in such a manner that they could easily face each other. The Soutaicho studied him for a moment before he set the large clay mug down beside him and said, “So Isshin has met the
woman who became your mother.”

It was a statement, and as such Ichigo responded with a nod noting the somewhat satisfied look to the Soutaicho’s features (okay and he was also fucking thrilled as well). Bastard old man Ichigo thought with light humour.

Still, he understood the Captain of the First division’s happiness at the matter. Rumour had it (and it was a rumour) that one of Yamamoto’s brothers had married into the Shiba line, and thus he had always held a bit of favouritism towards the clan (though that didn’t explain what happened with Kaien and his death; Ichigo suspected Aizen). Apparently, the Soutaicho and Isshin had been pretty close, and really your nephew, son, whatever finding their life mate was a thing to be happy about.

The old man had helped Isshin get away, sending out Shinigami he knew weren’t battle ready, or wouldn’t be able to find the now retired Captain. It was nice to know the old man was in his figurative corner for most things.

“There is an open Captain’s position.”

Yamamoto stated nonchalantly as the conniving old man sipped at his tea. Ichigo gritted his teeth at the not wholly unexpected words. Because of course, the Soutaicho would try to get Ichigo to take up a Captaincy like he had been for the last some fifty years.

“There are other candidates.”

Ichigo evaded, suggesting such with a kind of deflective nothingness to his voice. The Soutaicho raised a brow over the lip of his cup, a gesture that seemed to articulate something along the lines of, “Your point is?” or “And?”

“I’m not ready to be a Captain. I would make a horrible one anyway.”

Ichigo pointed out believing it to be true. As much as Ichigo could lead a soldier into battle, yelling orders and managing the health and well-being of his division members were two very different things. He wasn’t at all experienced in how to aid the Shinigami under his command, and what about the paperwork?

Ichigo had seen more than enough to last his lifetime in the war itself (because war generated a surprising amount of the stuff, though hardly anyone touched it) a Captain’s position would mean an increased workload. Not to mention less freedom and more restrictions, with eyes always on his every move. And the captain’s meetings, Ichigo would not want to sit through any of those ever again.

The Soutaicho scoffed under his breath mumbling something about rebellious idiotic youths before he returned that piercing gaze, one that seemed to render all past arguments void. Ichigo stared the aged Captain straight in the eyes head on, even as he shifted slightly.

“You would make a fine Captain.”

Yamamoto stated easily, gaze pointing first at Zangetsu resting at Ichigo’s side, and then at his chest where his heart still beat like a war drum stuttering every once in awhile. Ichigo rolled his eyes but understood the message the Soutaicho was trying to convey. Yes, Ichigo had strength and experience enough to best even Shunsui (but definitely not Jushiro), and yes, he had a good heart or something of the sort as his friend’s constant insistence of the matter suggested.

But that didn’t mean Ichigo was ready to become a Captain, and to become Captain of the Tenth? It would feel strange taking the position he knew his father held, it would be a strange fate of full circle.
If anyone deserved the position it was Kaien, even if the lieutenant wanted to continue to serve under Ukitake.

“We could always shuffle the command around. Aizen is ready to be a Captain, though he would probably much rather take over the Twelfth and let Kisuke retreat entirely to the mortal realm. And Kaien could become a Captain with ease.”

The Soutaicho hummed, smoking his pipe in silence for a moment before he turned key eyes Ichigo’s way and stated, “Who says I am not already considering moving lieutenant Aizen? In any case, we both know lieutenant Shiba will not leave the command of Ukitake. However, third-seat Hitsugaya has the potential to become Captain.”

The old man stated easily, drawing Ichigo’s attention in a way that he knew would likely leave his neck sore for days. The damn tricky old man, likely playing on Ichigo’s grievances of children of war. Not to mention the truth of the matter concerning Kaien, one that they did indeed both know. And okay yes maybe the Soutaicho had been considering promoting Sosuke and finally freeing Kisuke. But of course, Ichigo had forgotten about the rather frosty Shinigami, not to mention Rangiku.

Did he really want to put the weight of Captainscy on a Shinigami who still had not reached maturity? Gin had only just reached Shinji’s height a few years ago. Ichigo knew the youth in the future had managed to somehow pull out an older mature form (out of nowhere?) but that didn’t mean he had it now. He was young and inexperienced, and it would likely hurt Soul Society in the long run if the youth was forced to step up to the plate too early.

Maybe if he took the Captainscy he could hand the position off once Tōshirō was ready? He doubted anyone would be happy about it. But again, that would actually involve Ichigo as a Captain, and him caring about what others thought.

Also, if he became Captain he would have to deal with Rangiku as a lieutenant, and that would be, well entertaining but also an utter nightmare considering her position in the Shinigami Women’s Association. They had hounded him for years, and the publicity had been especially bad after his return from the Vizard training.

Kaien would be a much better Captain in any case. He was just charismatic and light and really Ichigo’s brother was like a puppy sometimes. But Ichigo remotely knew that Kaien would never consider it, and wouldn’t accept even unlikely under threat of duress. He still held such devotion in his eyes for Ukitake, and Ichigo could respect it.

Still, Ichigo had always sort of felt as if he was a Captain among the upper echelon. Maybe it had been the way they had treated him with respect from day one, or his own advanced knowledge. But Ichigo was content under Shunsui’s command. They had just finished a new dual technique for Kami’s sake.

Okay, maybe he chafed slightly under someone else’s command. He would always at heart be that rebellious teenager who refused to listen to orders and followed his heart. And maybe he still desired that freedom occasionally. But he was managing, as with all things.

Sighing Ichigo ran a hand through his hair and said, “I’ll think about it.”

It was the best he could do with too many thoughts on his mind, and the grief still hovering over him like a cloud. The Soutaicho nodded a satisfaction to the lines of his face as he sipped at his tea in the contemplative silence for a moment.
“You still owe me a duel young one.”

Yamamoto commented lightly with a hint of mirth. Ichigo gave the old man a disbelieving shake of his head before he grinned, all eager anticipation and feral teeth that reflected Shiro’s untamed bloodlust and replied, “You’re on any day, old man. Though I doubt the rest of Soul Society will appreciate the mess.”

“Cocky brat.”

The Soutaicho said fondly shaking his head, at Ichigo’s suggestion that a duel between the two would cause mass destruction. In all probability, if they were to duel, even just with blades it would still cause high levels of destruction. That’s just how powerful they were, plain and simple.

Chortling softly Ichigo sipped at his tea watching the peaceful scenery drift about. The future was drawing ever closer and with it changes that Ichigo couldn’t predict nor even expect. But he felt settled nonetheless surrounded by his family and friends.

Turning to the old man Ichigo grinned and suggested, “Why not a mock duel right now?”

The old man raised a particularly bushy brow which was answer enough for Ichigo, eliciting bright laughter he grasped Zangetsu’s blade and sipped at his tea. If they did fight it would certainly stir Soul Society into a frenzy.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed (and sorry to everyone who was hoping Hisana was going to get better). Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Bone!!
Virago

Chapter Summary

Ichigo visits family, and sees some old friends.

Chapter Notes

Virago
(n.) A strong, brave, or warlike woman; a woman who demonstrates exemplary and heroic qualities.

Hello everyone, I’m back with chapter 42. Sorry for the long wait, I was working on a Remembrance Day piece for the week before. But here we are again, and things are moving forward. I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ichigo stood outside the familiar door, shifting idly (more nervously as Shiro happily pointed out, but he was in denial of the fact) from foot to foot. It was a strange sensation to be knocking on the door to what had once been his home. Then again as the timelines drew closer together, and events sped closer and closer, everything seemed stranger and stranger to Ichigo these days. Like the idea that behind the doors of the Kurosaki clinic, Masaki Kurosaki was alive and well.

The door slid open suddenly interrupting Ichigo’s thoughts; he sharply glanced up and resisted the urge to flinch at the familiar face that greeted him. Isshin was still young, and Kami sometimes Ichigo remembered what his father had looked like after losing Masaki, that hidden weight on his shoulders, simmering grief in his eyes, and he couldn’t help but just stare at the former Captain’s features occasionally, take in the unlined face, warm smiling eyes.

Isshin blinked, shock falling over his features in an almost comical manner. He leaned out the doorway, gaze swinging about wildly around the streets, seemingly uselessly. But Ichigo could tell that the former Captain’s eyes had tracked the exits the two-way street had to offer, and any locations that could be used in hiding by certain squad members. Almost unnoticed the man had rested his hand on his hip, where Engetsu would have been sheathed.

The former clan head pulled back after a few seconds and studied Ichigo, bore into him with eyes
made of molten fire as if asking why Ichigo had appeared out of nowhere. The elder Shiba nodded, more to himself, at whatever he had seen, and a bright grin slipped onto his features. He stepped forward, and before Ichigo could realize what was happening and attempt to escape, the enigmatic man had drawn Ichigo into a tight bear hug. The breath gleefully escaped Ichigo’s lungs as he struggled weakly in his uncle/father’s grip twisting about in a vague attempt to release himself without injuring the man. Fatally.

“Ichigo what are you doing here? Not that I’m not happy to see you.”

Isshin asked as he carefully set Ichigo down onto solid ground once more, with a fond ruffle of his hair, which earned the man a swat, and casually leaned against the door frame. Ichigo paused, a frown tugging the corners of his lips before he smiled a touch apologetically and rubbed the back of his head for a moment and replied, “Can’t a nephew visit their favourite uncle?”

Sharp eyes focused on Ichigo at the too casual reply (because Ichigo would rather vehemently deny anything of the sort). Isshin studied Ichigo in detail once more before he slid open the door to his home and with a beckoning gesture said, “Come on in Ichigo. We have a lot to catch up on.”

The orange haired Shinigami took the offer for what it was, still a slight bit hesitant at the thought of the upcoming discussion, however vital it was (and he had been procrastinating for a while till Kisuke had kicked him out of the shop with a firm stare). But he supposed, or rather he knew, it was a discussion he needed to have with Isshin, because he wouldn’t let the future fall to their children. And if fate would intercede no matter his hand, then he would make sure they were prepared.

Following Isshin into the hallway, Ichigo gently towed off his shoes and didn’t miss the way his whole being seemed to tense and relax before settling once more. If the strange questioning look Isshin shot Ichigo was any indication the old man had seen it as well. Ossan’s presence washed over Ichigo’s skin, leaving chills, and clearing his mind a touch. It was beyond nostalgic and a touch heartbreaking to be in his old home, walk through hallways he had traversed hundreds of times before. But he could do it.

They settled in the living room, which was both familiar, and strange without the presence Karin and Yuzu inflicted upon the room, or really the sense of the Kurosaki family, the scent of Yuzu’s cooking, Karin’s sports equipment, random medical papers strewn about, or his own sweater always hanging over the back of the couch. Ichigo had never really noticed, but it had only become apparent in its absence. Isshin made a wide sweeping gesture towards the ensconced furniture then happily crashed on the couch with a light goofy smile. Ichigo gingerly settled in a chair across from him (out of reach of grasping hands), in the faint background he could hear soft rustling noises from the kitchen.

“So, what’s been happening in Soul Society Ichi-chan? Did you finally get a girlfriend? Or become Captain?”

Isshin asked in teasing jovial tones, pulling Ichigo from straying thoughts, leaning forward on the couch so that the orange-haired Shinigami could almost physically feel the force of his attention. Ichigo huffed at the multitude of questions, shooting the older man a half-frown Ichigo paused and sighed dragging a hand over his features he answered, “Things have been changing slowly. The lower ranks have been receiving greater training, especially in specialized group formations. Aizen-san became Captain of the Twelfth, as you might have heard from Kisuke. The lucky bastard had pretty much retired to the mortal realm. I’m Captain of the Tenth now…. sort of. It’s more temporary till they find someone better to fill the position, or once Tōshirō reaches maturity, which really could be anytime now.”

The Captain replied, idly fingering the loops of his belt where Zangetsu would rest in his Shinigami
form (thank Kami for the gigai Kisuke had whipped up). Ichigo hadn’t wanted to become Captain of the Tenth. He would have preferred the position fall to Gin, or hell really anyone else, because it was confining and freeing in unequal measures. On one hand, he had the power the position granted, on the other hand, paperwork. That and Captain’s meetings, and division training activities, it was draining to support the lives of so many in a peaceful environment, he wondered how Byakuya and the other Captains did it.

Ichigo would admit, albeit reluctantly that he had been a good enough general in the war. It had been because he had cared for the lives of those under him plain and simple. That and the training he had received from everyone (few knew how much of a true drill sergeant Yoruichi could be or Kisuke’s rather ‘unique’ methods in teaching strategy). War was different from peace though.

But Ichigo had refused to let the weight of the position fall to Tōshirō. He had spoken to the kid before he had been promoted, and he had asked the icy brat if he had his adult form or well something along the same lines. There had been hesitance in those frigid shard eyes, but the kid had relented, honesty seeping in. And no, the kid wasn’t ready, not yet.

Ichigo had been training the brat, helping him master his Bankai (and he didn’t mind the ice burns just another few scars for the collection, though Byakuya liked to gripe about them) so that maybe in a few years Ichigo could step down. Where he could go to he didn’t really know. Though he knew the Soutaicho would always welcome Ichigo into his division with open arms (had been bugging the youth about it, that and sparring again sometime).

He had spoken truthfully when he mentioned the change in Soul Society; the whole upper command had shifted positions in short relatively. Soi-fon had finally risen to Yoruichi’s lieutenant, which kept the petite Shinigami endlessly happy (though the two collaborating for the Shinigami Women’s Association was nothing to be happy about). Hiyori had finally escaped the Twelfth division and had transferred to Love’s division of all places; the man had lost his lieutenant quite recently on an expedition. But to the surprise of most of the Gotei 13, the two got along well enough.

Love was like a rock and Hiyori a river that couldn’t move him in a thousand years, or something along those lines. Ichigo was pretty sure that it was their secret love of death metal that had united the two.

As he had mentioned, Sosuke had finally become Captain of the Twelfth (and he knew the man was quite happy about it) and had kept Mayuri, though with some great distaste (Ichigo was pretty sure the man was attempting to invent something to serve as his lieutenant as opposed to the clown). Shinji had with great reluctance and grumbling, accepted Gin as his lieutenant (though Ichigo was pretty sure Gin would find a place somewhere else soon enough. He and Shinji were not quite of the same devious kin). Rukia had risen through the ranks as well, having focused determination like iron rods since Hisana’s passing (and the image of her kind smile brought a soft warmth and dull ache to his chest). He sometimes missed the slightly more naïve petite Shinigami, (and the guilt was still there somewhat) but he was happy that the youth was content in Kaien and Jushiro’s division.

And he was a Captain. It was still a strange and unfamiliar concept to him. Almost like waking up a hundred something years in the past, every morning spent trying to come to terms with the fact. He had kept Rangiku as his official lieutenant, not having the heart to demote her (and besides he knew how to bribe certain redheads. Gossip was always handy). But Tōshirō had stepped up as a sort of co-lieutenant with a bit of gentle prodding, which was a blessing considering the white-haired Shinigami’s work ethic (and really there were beginning to be too many powerful people in the Gotei 13. What with Komamura recently entering the ranks).

Still filling out paperwork, and commanding a division just left a chill thrumming under his skin. It
had been fine leading his friends into battle, because he had known each of them; saw to their training and strength personally. But in a division, he was responsible for the lives of many Shinigami, some who he had talked to only briefly in passing.

“Ichigo…. Ichigo.”

Batting away the hand that had been drifting dangerously close to his nose, Ichigo blinked up at Isshin who was regarding the youth with a half-amused, half concerned smile. Bright expression faltering for a second the older Shiba asked, “Is being Captain really that bad?”

Ichigo blanched at the question before he vigorously shook his head, tilting between yes and no. He raised a placating hand, at the lost expression dancing across the elder’s features and replied, “It’s not… well, it’s not me, to be honest. I just believe I’m not suited to the position, I’m better among the ranks than above. But Tōshirō has been helping; Rangiku works once a month or so.”

“So, you’ve taken over my old division, how wonderful. A Shiba family tradition continued.”

Isshin exclaimed happily and a touch over dramatically, grandiose flourishes and all. The man warmly gripped Ichigo’s forearms, as if through the contact he could pass on the sensation of his pride or whatever else went through the ludicrous man’s mind. He shrugged away the arms along with the half-tilt annoyance. But his expressions softened slightly at the clearing of concern that had haunted the older man’s eyes. After all, it had been his abdication of his position that had led to Ichigo’s promotion, though the orange-haired Shinigami hardly cared for such. He preferred an Isshin happily married to Masaki.

“So, no girlfriend?”

The older Shiba asked with a bright humorous grin, after a few moments where the silence had settled familiarly between the two, and Ichigo’s stiff posture had relaxed some. Ichigo growled at his uncle/father and resisted the urge to lunge at the man and attempt to strangle him even with Shiro’s urging. Nonetheless, he could feel the blush on his cheeks, and really come on he was over a hundred, he wasn’t a teenager anymore (though his concept of the definition felt slightly screwed). And yet there he was blushing at the thought of a certain Shinigami.

A knowing look was sent Ichigo’s way, and he firmly ignored it with a shake of his head and listened instead to the faint traces of Zangetsu’s amusement. The older spirit always seemed to find amusement in things correlating to Ichigo’s half-baked innocent nature. Isshin laughed to himself at whatever he had seen, low and rumbling in that way that made Ichigo’s heart clench in his chest, but the elder said nothing in response and didn’t continue teasing which Ichigo was more than thankful for.

The faint sound of a door closing on the second floor pulled Ichigo from whatever reverie had settled in the comfortable silence between the two. It was almost a familiar silence. They hadn’t been close like Kaien and Ichigo were; it had always been impossible for Ichigo. But he had respected the clan head and had wanted to know more of the man who had been his father, so they had talked, and Ichigo could easily think of the numerous times they had gone off on some random errand together.

He could feel Isshin’s gaze and with a reluctant sigh Ichigo pulled himself from drifting thoughts and turned to face the man who had been his father in a past or rather future life. The silly goofy demeanour had disappeared and in its place was a serious façade cold as stone, but warm enough for Ichigo to brave sharp silver eyes. They stared at each other for a moment, before Isshin ran a hand through his short spiky hair and asked, “Ichigo why are you here?”

Ichigo sighed and dragged a hand over his features repeating Isshin’s motion, he wanted to
procrastinate answering; wanted to sit there in the living room and continue to talk about Soul Society’s rather crazy schemes of late, or even how Kaien was a fine clan head. But he knew he couldn’t, so instead Ichigo settled his hands together and looked the former Captain in the eye, honesty plain on his features.

“I haven’t really told you all of my past,” Isshin raised a brow at the strange wording, but there was some dawning understanding there and Ichigo continued on, “I was born the son of a Quincy and a Shinigami roughly a year or so from now. I grew up loved by my parents until my mother was killed by a hollow. It was not the first time I would experience the realm of the Shinigami, nor the last.

When I was fifteen I met Rukia Kuchiki of the thirteenth division. A hollow attacked and to save my family she leant me her powers. It was the tipping point. She was taken to Soul Society to be executed for the act. I followed intent on saving her…”

Ichigo continued talking watching the emotions play across his uncle/father’s features as he spoke of the countless battles he had fought against the Gotei 13, the reveal of the true enemy, the following war. Watched the way the light behind his old man’s eyes flickered and grew shaping into something incomprehensible to Ichigo as he detailed the way the war had ended and Ichigo’s own struggles. He saw the man’s own grief echoing fiercely for Ichigo as he in clipped sentences spoke about the war with the Quincy.

He paused before the end breath caught in his throat. Ichigo looked away from his father, glanced at the lamp sitting innocently in the corner and in the solemn quiet stated, “And the war ended, but so did everyone’s lives. I guess sometimes time and space screw up a bit. So here I am.”

Finished in the silence Ichigo idly twisted his fingers together, wishing he had a cup of tea to nervously sip if only to give him an action to quell his racing thoughts. Ichigo took a breath in, Unohana’s voice echoing the action before he looked up again.

His eyes were on fire. If there was a way to describe what Ichigo saw in Isshin’s eyes it would be such, they glowed and flickered, consuming one emotion after the other, flickering interchangeably seeping into lukewarm temperatures before crackling like pale white.

It was both fearsome and a reminder of the Isshin Ichigo had seen on the battlefields. The man who had wielded Engetsu with deadly ferocity, and the fire that spread like moonlight. Ichigo remained in his seat, quiet in the intense silence between the two as the man struggled to comprehend the rather complex and somewhat devastating information Ichigo had handed to the man.

“Ichigo…”

Isshin trailed off eyes irrevocably filled with a deep grief for the orange-haired Shinigami. Sympathy without pity and a flicker of that fire that burned with the need to aid the person before the former Captain or enact vengeance. The elder Shiba sighed and Ichigo gently reached out to rest a hand on Isshin’s own slightly larger one.

Gazing through his fingers Isshin studied Ichigo for a moment, one where Ichigo wondered if the man would ask endless questions, or whisper meaningless platitudes and comfort Ichigo when he was okay. The orange-haired Shinigami had made peace with his past as much as he could be. But the former Captain continued to surprise Ichigo when he asked in a voice tinged with new weary, “Why are you telling me this Ichigo?”

“Because if you do have children, you should know what might happen, what could happen. I-I was unprepared for everything; I knew nothing of my heritage. You don’t have to train them in the blade or kido, or how to create a bow. Just please inform them so they know, so they don’t walk into a war
blind. I’m going to do everything in my power to keep them out of it. But fate and destiny are fickle mistresses. And because I owe it to you.”

Ichigo finished reatsu spiking slightly as the finite determination of any Shiba protecting their family shone in his eyes. Isshin nodded at Ichigo’s reasoning, taking the words and pulling what he could from them. The orange-haired Shinigami leaned back in the chair and idly ran his hand over the bridge of his jeans. He had meant every word he had spoken. He was already attempting everything within his power, but that hadn’t stopped fate before. Even with the power to go against the endless grinding wheels of fate, Ichigo couldn’t always escape. The Captain only hoped Isshin would listen to him.

“Thank you, Ichigo.”

The former Captain stated in the silence, surprising a jerk out of Ichigo who turned and acknowledged the words with a half-smile far more real than anything else he had worn in the man’s presence (not for lack of trying). Isshin just nodded, there was a seriousness to his eyes, but backed by the radiating love for his family both the one he had with Masaki and the Shiba clan.

“Isshin?”

Her voice rang out from behind the doorframe and Ichigo tensed minutely, as Isshin’s eyes filled with a great warmth as he called out an answer. Something that drifted by his attention in the sudden vague distortion of his mind. She entered the room and the breath seemed to escape Ichigo’s lungs once more, as he took in her healthy, radiant, smiling, and alive. The characteristic orange hair, the slight catch of light on the Quincy cross hanging off her wrist. It was like the sun had decided to come out from behind the cover of the clouds.

She settled behind Isshin on the couch eyes darting to their guest, welcoming, but with forged guardian steel beneath, as if challenging Ichigo to step out of line. It reminded him something fierce of Yuzu and the likely inherited expression, kindness and threat playing yin and yang. Ichigo nodded his head in greeting and Isshin twisted so that he could face the two of them before he happily declared, “Ichigo this is my lovely wife Masaki. My dear this is Ichigo, my nephew.”

The tense cast to Masaki’s shoulders dipped slightly and a warm smile lilted across her features (there was tamed thorn underneath though) she easily responded, “It’s nice to meet you Ichigo. Isshin doesn’t often bring family over.’”

The last part was directed at Isshin with a particularly stern look that Ichigo vaguely recalled from his youth with a soft half-smile. The man blushed and rubbed at his head from the vaguely accusing stare his wife had sent him before flashing the woman puppy dog eyes. Ichigo smiled at the scene, though it was a soft sad kind of smile, like looking into a mirror of what had once been before everything had happened.

He knew it then and there easily enough, that even if for whatever reason some twisted message was delivered that Masaki had to die, Ichigo would disobey without hesitation. Her children whoever they could be didn’t need to suffer through what Ichigo had, and he wouldn’t let Uryū suffer either.

“So Ichigo are you from Soul Society?”

Masaki asked settling beside Isshin on the couch, leaning forward on the palms of her elbows to fix Ichigo with a curious stare. At a loss, Ichigo glanced between Masaki and Isshin hoping for some aid or clue in the elder Shiba’s features. He received nothing but prodding energetic eyes, so Ichigo nodded. The Quincy pursed her lips as if she had solved some great clue, her intense eyes sweeping over Ichigo. It felt like the woman was pulling out every inch of his soul, laying each layer bear to
pick apart, all with those burning amber eyes.

Isshin turned to Masaki probably to comment something about how Ichigo was still upholding the Shiba family honour, or something of the sort when there was a spike of reaitsu. Small and so infinitely minuscule that Ichigo wouldn’t have noticed it if he hadn’t been so settled in his former parent’s presence. Evidently, the couple didn’t sense anything as Masaki raised a vaguely disbelieving eyebrow at her husband though belied by the humoured smile dancing across her features.

Ichigo held his breath and waited, reaitsu tentatively reaching out into the open. It spiked again and Ichigo blanked as he traced the reaitsu. Alighting on the source with dawning surprise and realization No. He wasn’t doing this. Couldn’t do this now. Ichigo thought mildly to himself, a feeling like a canon blossoming throughout his chest, a ripped disconnect. It felt as if his whole world had shifted vertically, or that the water in his inner world had finally leaked into his skull and was drowning out his thoughts. Kami.

Ichigo had known that it was plausible. That it could have happened. Because really what else could one expect with time travel. There were no great rules or declarations, or even stone-set laws. Kisuke and he had theorized about it. Wondered what his place in the timeline would affect. They had ascertained that Ichigo had essentially created a new timeline separate from his old one through his intervention, but they had no idea what his presence had affected, such as the matter of his birth if it would even occur.

Life seemed to still have a way of twisting fate’s strings cruelly Ichigo thought to himself, as his reaitsu reached out to interact with the twin-bound one that seemed as if one, already so powerful. Fuck. That was an apt way to describe it.

Zangetsu’s soothing reaitsu rustled about his senses pulling Ichigo from the spiralling train of thought that would have led deeper and deeper. Till he would be crouched on the kitchen floor at four in the morning trying to absolve his own head.

Looking up Ichigo was greeted with the worried faces of the couple in front of him; it sent nostalgia like a gunshot through his chest. The almost fatherly concern in Isshin’s eyes, the sudden new dawning mother-like concern in Masaki’s gaze. Nostalgia, and memories of early mornings in the kitchen helping his mother prepare the rice, or standing in his father’s clinic watching him tend to the patients.

“Ichigo are you alright?”

The woman asked gently, and Ichigo belatedly realized, that yes, he had been staring into space for the past few minutes, reaitsu likely fluctuating something wild. Ichigo grimaced at the question but nodded his head in the positive. He was okay. He was fine; for the most part.

The two in front of him shared a look but said no more on the matter, something he was thankful for, though Ichigo was certain Masaki’s aura had changed slightly. Isshin suddenly caught Ichigo’s attention raising a questioning brow and making badly hidden abbreviated movements. Ichigo stared in confusion for a few moments attempting to puzzle out what the elder Shiba was attempting to sign.

Eventually catching on (with a significant amount of difficulty) Ichigo pursed his lips and furrowed his brow for a moment of thought. Would Masaki negatively harm the timeline? What effect would her knowing of the future have on pre-existing events? Curving his head into his hand Ichigo frowned. Perhaps only the bare bones, like the really simple stuff. Ichigo supposed it could work.
But not now; this was only their first meeting, and well it was Ichigo’s past (and in some ways what their lives could have been), it would probably be better to have Isshin present the information. Nodding more to himself than to Isshin, Ichigo looked up and caught the former Captain’s eyes subtly shaking his head before he responded, “Masaki-san, uh what do you do for a living?”

Isshin blanched slightly at the awkward question, concerned gaze straying to his nephew. Ichigo tried to convey his desire to speak of the past another time through his eyes alone, and Isshin peered at Ichigo for a long moment tense and assessing before the former nodded sharply. Masaki glanced between the two for a brief moment, eyes careful and observing she warmly said, “You can call me Masaki Ichigo, we’re family now. I for the most part work in the clinic, and am continuing my university degree.”

It was strange, so unbelievably disconnected and ethereal to his normal life to hear how his mother was still in university. Or watch the two lovebirds interact with each other in a way that just lingered in his expressions. And kami he wanted to be close to them again. He wanted to know his mother’s favourite colour, her favourite dish to prepare. He wanted to watch Isshin interact with her and watch them dance around the room with her in his arms.

“So Ichigo what is it like being Captain? Isshin’s talked a bit about you before, but he’s very tight-lipped about his family.”

Masaki asked pulling Ichigo from floating thoughts, there was a strange light in her eyes and Ichigo briefly wondered at its appearance. Kami it left his chest warm like a hearth, heart drumming loud and fervently, to be talking to his mother. Taking a deep breath, Ichigo pulled at the frayed sleeves of his shirt as he thought over the answer before reluctantly with a half-sigh (never one comfortable with extrapolating about himself) Ichigo replied, “It’s been difficult but I’m managing, though my lieutenant needs to work on her management skills. I uh don’t really know what to say about myself Masaki-san. I mean I was born into a small sect of the Shiba family, so I’ve only known Isshin for a little while compared to Kaien. I like reading and tea? How about you Masaki-san?”

Ichigo questioned awkwardly at the end, earning a soft encouraging smile from the women in front of him. Masaki nodded to herself a dainty hand brushing back a lock of vibrant hair and with a smile replied, “Hmm I see what you mean when you say it is difficult Ichigo, I can hardly believe some of the stories Isshin has told me. I’m sorry for putting you on the spot like that Ichigo. I am for the most part interested in practising my technique, and spending time in the kitchen.”

“You don’t have to apologize Masaki-san.”

Ichigo replied abashedly running a hand through his hair. The woman shook her head sharing a strange look with husband before she turned to face Ichigo once more. Isshin who had been quiet, a surprising feat considering the man’s boundless energy suddenly interjected, “You should see his zanpaktou, Masaki, they’re beautiful.”

Ichigo looked down at the praise, even as Shiro rumbled his agreement with the sentiment in the back of his mind. Masaki laughed at Isshin’s boasting, casting a minute glance Ichigo’s way before she brightened faintly and disappeared from the room for a moment before reappearing with a tray of drinks.

“Thank you, Masaki-san.”

Ichigo said quietly, earning a light glare from the woman, and a cyanide smile as she corrected, “Masaki, Ichigo.”

He nodded his appeasement even knowing that it would take a bit more time before he would be
even remotely comfortable calling his mother by her name without affixations. It was already seven levels of strange to be speaking to her as an adult on equal footing and trying to correlate with the image of her he had as a child.

Isshin grinned at the interactions between the two, casting a loving look at his wife as he sipped the tea and happily exclaimed about skills the gods would be jealous of. Masaki only blushed and swatted her husband’s shoulder.

A silence settled between the three as Masaki settled on the couch beside Isshin, and Ichigo savoured the tea and their presence. There seemed a thousand questions hovering on the edge of his mind, and he wanted to shout out that the woman in front of him was pregnant just to see the joy on the soon to be parents faces. Instead, he took another sip of his tea and glanced up to catch Masaki’s own curious stare.

“So how did you two meet?”

Ichigo asked tentatively, Masaki smiled while Isshin beamed. The two shared a glance before Isshin with a breath launched into the story emotions playing across his features like a summer storm, Masaki interjecting every so often to correct Isshin’s more fanciful notions.

As the tale drew to a close Ichigo couldn’t help but recall the first time he had heard it (however slightly varied it was), the way Isshin had spoken as if carrying some great weight, the distance in his gaze. Here and now the two were sharing soft looks and Ichigo couldn’t help the tiny smile that unbeknown had slipped across his lips.

Glancing up at the clock Ichigo acknowledged with a half-sigh that Kisuke would yell at him if he wasn’t back soon, as the scientist had cheerfully asked (though it was more of a demand) for help with his experiment. Ichigo was simply thrilled at the prospect.

Ichigo stood up and the two in front of him followed suit, Masaki stepped forward and drew Ichigo into a tight hug, ignoring the obvious way he tensed up she whispered, “It was lovely to meet you Ichigo. Please come visit us again.”

He mumbled back a like response, dazed but understanding well enough the tone of her voice. She pulled back with a smile and allowed Isshin to sling an arm around Ichigo’s shoulders and guide him to the door with a blur of happy chatter.

Pausing half out of the doorway, the orange-haired Shinigami turned to face Isshin, their eyes connecting, serious and solemn aware of unspoken words. Isshin nodded once minutely and that was all Ichigo needed. He left with a wave over his shoulder idly wondering what Kisuke would be testing in the semi-recently constructed underground training area.

X

Hueco Mundo was cold, the kind of desert chill that seemed to inherit the place that was only illuminated by the crescent moon hanging in the skies above. Ichigo didn’t normally notice the chill, but it had been strikingly apparent in the barren nights of the Winter War. As he continued across the sands, distantly tracking a presence familiar in an old way, Ichigo let his thoughts drift. He had crossed the endless desert hundreds of times, and he knew with the familiar bone mask settled on his features, and Shiro’s presence rising along his skin, that no hollow would be so idiotic as to attack them.

Well other than Grimmjow or maybe Nnoitra. Kami Ichigo hated the dick. Thinking of the fifth Espada always set his blood boiling, but Ichigo supposed the cocky hollow would get his karma
when he faced one of the captains (and likely Zaraki because they were both too insatiable fighters for anything else). He was just glad Aizen had offered to deal with Nnoitra, as otherwise, Ichigo suspected he would have killed the hollow.

Thinking of the arrogant hollow, reminded him of Nelliel, he had only recently found the former third Espada. Though from what Ichigo could sense she still possessed her adult form. He had encountered her only briefly in passing when he had been dealing with Harribel. That had been a trial and a half considering the Espada despised most men on the best of days, and he wasn’t swooping in like some megalomaniac avenger. But they had talked civilly. Somewhat.

He would try to speak to Nelliel when he had the chance. Being a Captain meant responsibilities, it also meant Ichigo couldn’t randomly disappear for a month at a time to seek out all of the Espada consecutively. Thus, he had to travel to Hueco Mundo whenever he had the chance. Ichigo was beyond thankful he had Byakuya as the Captain of the Sixth to cover for Ichigo’s disappearance. The time before that had been his trip to the mortal realm to visit Kisuke.

The scientist had had a heart attack and a half when Ichigo came back mostly dead of exhaustion from fighting Grimmjow. It wasn’t that the sixth Espada could pose much of a challenge if Ichigo went all out, but he had left some catches in place. It didn’t help that the cat-like Espada liked, or rather would fight till he couldn’t move a muscle. Shiro had revelled in the battle in any case.

Drawing closer to their presence Ichigo slowed to a halt, idly surveying the unchanging landscape of endless sand, he could almost taste their presence. They were powerful, near Shunsui and Jushiro’s level, and if they received training they could probably go up against Shunsui for a draw. Pushing aside musing thoughts Ichigo walked forward till he could see the endless bodies stacked around the two, dissipating slowly with whispered grains.

The orange-haired Shinigami had wanted to see the two earlier, if only for knowing their struggles of loneliness, but fate had intervened. First in Grimmjow; finding Ichigo before he could track them, and before that the urgency of dealing with certain other Espada.

He respected the two; they had aided Soul Society immensely in the war, once they had broken from Aizen’s clutches. Although Starrk was quite lazy, and always possessed an aura of weary he could hold deep conversations at the drop of a hat. Shunsui and Starrk had clicked together much to the woe of the other occupants of Soul Society. Lilynette reminded Ichigo far too much of a child, but she also carried a contagious energy that seemed to brighten the room. The loss of the two Espada had stung deeply, if he could Ichigo would prevent such a fate.

Reaitsu spiked and whipped the sand about like a storm temporarily blinding Ichigo’s vision as the two powerful hollows took note of his appearance. Calmly standing still Ichigo waited for the torrent of reaitsu to succeed idly listening to Shiro’s good-natured grumbling.

The winds settled after a moment so that Ichigo could see the two figures settled on the sand, almost camouflaged with the cloaks hiding their forms. Starrk looked up first, eyes surprised from underneath the hood of the cloak. He was holding Lilynette down Ichigo noted with some surprise, likely remaining cautious of the new visitor.

Walking forward Ichigo tried to refrain from being intimidating, knowing their eyes were watching him. Imperceptibly Starrk shifted and Ichigo caught the length of his blade on Zangetsu’s blade. Coyote’s hood was blown back in the resulting force of their clash, revealing those stark blue eyes. Starrk growled low and feral, reaitsu pushing forcefully against Ichigo.

The orange-haired Shinigami remained locked against Starrk letting his reaitsu broadcast his lack of intent to harm. Starrk faltered slightly, and distantly Ichigo could hear Lilynette yelling something at
Pulling back a few paces Ichigo stared at the duo, letting the tense atmosphere thicken before he slowly reached up and pulled Shiro’s mask off his face. The two drew back in slight surprise at Ichigo’s features, contradicting whatever they had been expecting. Or perhaps they were surprised that he could take off his mask so easily?

“Who are you?”

Starrk questioned cautiously gaze like cut steel as they stared at Ichigo, Lilynette beside Starrk gripped her other half’s arm tightly. Ichigo tucked Shiro’s mask into the sash of his shihakusho, one that was a variation of the typical Shinigami outfit, considering he was in hollow territory. Running a hand through his hair Ichigo looked up and responded, “Ichigo Kurosaki. You?”

“Coyote Starrk, and my partner Lilynette Gingerbuck.”

Starrk responded after another tense moment where the older hollow seemed to be debating killing Ichigo there and then, even for the hesitance in his eyes. Ichigo nodded his greeting letting Zangetsu swing to rest at his side.

There was a period of silence where either side seemed lost on what next step to take, the air heavy between the two forces. That is until Lilynette stepped out from behind Starrk where had protectively shushed the girl.

“What do you want?”

Lilynette asked with complete lack of tack, or anything of diplomacy. Ichigo snorted laughing faintly to the surprise of the two hollows. Calming himself Ichigo shook off his amusement and regarded the two letting his demeanour change to show the seriousness of the situation.

“A war is coming between the Shinigami and the Hollow. A force of Vasto Lorde are assembling at Las Noches to combat the coming threat.”

Ichigo stated nonchalantly serious eyes belaying the casualness of the conversation. The two baulked at the news, perhaps at the mention of other Vasto Lorde, perhaps that a war was coming. Lilynette stared Ichigo down sceptically for a moment before she whisper-yelled, “What does this have to do with us idiot, we’re perf-“

“Lilynette.”

Her partner interrupted stopping the younger hollow mid-sentence. Starrk stared at Ichigo for a moment before saying, “You want us to join the war. Why?”

“There are many hollows of a powerful nature. Ones that won’t be destroyed by your reaitsu.”

Ichigo answered avoiding his own reasons for drawing the two into the war (he understood loneliness). Starrk blinked gaze striking like a serpent at Ichigo’s words. The Vasto Lorde’s eyes fell to Ichigo’s blade even as Lilynette’s eyes brightened and she gently tugged on Starrk’s sleeve.

“What do you get out of it? Why should we come and risk death?”

Starrk asked question falling heavy in the echoing landscapes of Hueco Mundo. Ichigo pursed his lips knowing he couldn’t simple promise fighting or companionship like with Grimmjow. Instead, Ichigo replied, “There are clauses in place that will prevent the needless death of certain hollows. Let’s just say I play for both sides in this battle.”
Ichigo finished with a reveal of his Shinigami reaitsu, Starrk stared a grim look to his features as the man caught on to Ichigo’s wordings. Lilynette glanced at the orange haired Shinigami suspiciously before sharing a glance with her other half.

“And would we be certain hollows?”

The coyote hollow asked, a gnat’s sliver of interest flickering within those blue eyes. Ichigo grinned easily some of the tenseness lining his shoulders disappearing slightly he replied, “I would hope so. Baraggan Louisebairn heads the forces of Las Noches.”

“But he does not command them.”

Starrk said the light behind his eyes flickering as he caught on to what Ichigo was suggesting. The Captain nodded curling his lips in minute displeasure even as he winked. Lilynette peaked at Ichigo and asked, “Will we fight the Shinigami?”

“Likely, but only ones of Captain level. But not for a time.”

Ichigo commented with a shrug. The smaller hollow brightened a wide grin slipping across her features, even Starrk looked interested. Ichigo could almost imagine coyote ears perking with attention to Shiro’s amusement.

“And if I wanted to fight you instead?”

Starrk asked surprising Ichigo slightly before his lips curled up and he responded, “Why not both, I can visit Hueco Mundo anytime.”

Ichigo extended a hand then, the offer hanging between the three in the moment. Starrk stared at the orange haired Shinigami before his gaze fell to Ichigo’s hand and after another breath, he stepped forward and took the proffered hand, the promise of a challenge and purpose in the future, with a smile.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading I hope you enjoyed Ichigo and Masaki’s meeting, as well as Starrk and Lilynette’s appearance. Review/comments are always appreciated. Till next time!

Spruce!!
Bonhomie

Chapter Summary

Ichigo has a visit with certain family members.

Chapter Notes

Bonhomie
(n.) Frank and simple good-heartedness; a good-natured manner; friendliness

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 43. I hope you all enjoy this chapter and read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

X

It was raining. The sky painted in heady swirling shades of grey that seemed to fold over each other endlessly and cast the earth into shadows. Ichigo sat by the river, swollen with the heavy rainfall; he watched gaze distant, numb to the cold. It always rained. Every time the heavens seeming to paint the skies in preparation. There was a tenseness that seemed to hang on his chill fogged breath as Ichigo carefully watched the cars pass the busy streets. Eyes open for a familiar crown of red accompanied by two little figures in rain jackets.

Zangetsu at his side seemed to hum and vibrate, Shiro’s anticipation thrumming through Ichigo’s veins as much as Ossan’s chill. It was today many years in a future, that was Ichigo’s past, that Masaki had died, murdered by Grand Fisher on the same river bank, the same endless rain.

They appeared in the distance huddled under a faded blue umbrella that seemed to catch at the monotone background. Karin decked out in a little karate gi tucked underneath an absurdly red rain jacket. Yuzu, in a pale-yellow coat, was on Masaki’s other side looking up at their mother and speaking in fervent hushed tones with bright eyes. Ichigo could almost imagine what the youngest Kurosaki was speaking about, school or maybe what was for dinner, and how the karate lesson had gone for Karin, judging by the other’s sombre aura.

It was a strange parallel how well he knew the girls, and how much they continued to surprise him. Isshin gladly liked to message Ichigo out of the blue (now that technology was at a semi-working state within Soul Society), with whatever inane pieces of information on the girls (which was
irrelevant considering Ichigo visited every once a while, well more like once a month). How Yuzu was simply adorable when she was in the kitchen cooking with Masaki, or how Karin at the age of nine was already a little fireball who would do anything to protect Yuzu. Apparently, Tatsuki and Karin had actually started a rivalry, which both amused Ichigo and made his thoughts somewhat sombre at the thought of one of his best friends.

Sometimes he questioned why Isshin sent the little pictures, the tiny details. Ichigo hadn’t breathed a word of his younger siblings to Isshin when he had first revealed everything. He didn’t want the information to affect Isshin’s decision to have children in the future, and he didn’t need the added grief. So Ichigo supposed it was the man’s inane need to boast. But sometimes the intuitive twinkle in silver eyes suggested otherwise.

They were drawing closer, he noted absently, strolling along the sidewalk, Karin sulking even as Yuzu lifted the older twin’s mood somewhat. Masaki glanced around likely sensing the growing hollow presence; it flickered at the edge of his own senses.

The only reason he hadn’t trapped the three on the other side of the road or intervened was so that he could deal with Grand Fisher before he caused any more damage. He wouldn’t let other families suffer the way he had. The orange-haired Shinigami knew he could handle it; he would protect the three with his life. Ichigo could feel the pull in his chest, building and tugging at his navel as if attempting to drag him forward, but Ichigo would be fine. The orange-haired Shinigami knew Masaki was likely feeling the same, the Quincy King’s Auswählen.

The hollow’s presence flared sharply, and Masaki glanced over distressed just missing Ichigo’s presence before she glanced to her two children and tightened her hold on their much smaller hands flashing them a small reassuring smile.

The doll appeared a few feet away, and he knew Karin saw it when the little girl’s eyes widened, and she tugged at her mother’s hand. Standing up, Ichigo brushed off the water droplets still clinging to his jacket (he had opted a gigai that allowed reaitsu use for convenience) and shook his head before he stalked over to stand in front of the doll placing himself directly in Karin’s line of sight.

The doll leaned forward blank soulless eyes beckoning Ichigo forward, calling to the river. He sighed and stared at the creature resisting the urge to brutally attack it, instead Zangetsu was casually drawn from the sheath at his side.

Instantly the doll drew back, and he could feel the air crackle with tension as the hollow revealed itself, horrible matted green fur, and sickly ochre eyes. Ichigo’s tightly controlled reaitsu prickled beneath his skin as the hollow leered at him likely sensing next to nothing. Before tentacle-like hairs could creep along the soggy field Ichigo moved in a flash of the eye slicing cleanly through the hollow’s mask.

A look of great surprise fell upon the beast’s face before it fell like all hollows, quickly gone in the still heavy rainfall. A weight was lifted from Ichigo’s chest as he turned his attention back to the hill where Masaki was watching holding the two children back.

Elegantly sheathing Zangetsu, Ichigo slightly irritated pushed wet strands out of his eyes and tried the difficult task of trekking up the hill. He could almost feel the twins surprise at his presence, their dual reaitsu already strong, though Ichigo knew Isshin was teaching them some control (it was for that reason he believed Karin had made to check with their mother first).

“Ichigo-nii!”

Two voices called out in joy as the twins hopped forward, water splashing every which way, only to
jump into his arms. Stepping forward Ichigo caught the two and swung them around their light giggles bounding through the air and clearing the heavy weight settled on his shoulders.

Setting the two down Ichigo ushered them under the umbrella where Masaki looked vaguely pained, he could almost sense the erratic nature of her reaitsu. She caught his eyes and flashed Ichigo a small grateful smile (one that was hidden by questioning amber), before beckoning the girls forward Ichigo knowingly following behind. He likely wouldn’t escape without Masaki shoving some warm beverage into his hands, not with the way he likely looked like a swamped puppy (as Shiro so gladly informed him).

They had informed Masaki briefly, one night sometime after the twins had been born (and they had been adorable babies), the bare bones of it all. And Ichigo in the sobering silence had spoken of the coming war, a war he wished the girls to play no part in. He had been tense, expecting some violent reaction or rejection, even knowing Masaki (and Byakuya had chided Ichigo gently on his thoughts).

Instead, she had stared for a moment more before she had stepped forward and pulled Ichigo into a tight hug, that reminded him of early winters by the fire, the faint smell of jasmine filling his senses, and she had whispered comforting words. And Ichigo had almost broken down in tears. He had thanked her for understanding and she had smiled knowing and kind. That had been it, she hadn’t asked questions, hadn’t demanded answers. When Ichigo had questioned the lack of curiosity (because she was so incredibly curious no matter how well she hid it), the woman had simply responded, “I trust you Ichigo.”

That had left him positively glowing for the rest of the night; even he sometimes still worried about screwing everything up (Zangetsu had both scoffed and had nagged him). Pulling himself from drifting thoughts Ichigo glanced around and noted they were in his (technically old) neighbourhood. The twins had run ahead on the sidewalk, two bright splotches of colour, splashing in the puddles with joy and abandon. Masaki was staring at him a faintly amused look to her features even as he could see she was swaying on her feet.

Carefully Ichigo slid an arm under Masaki’s to help steady her, earning a grateful smile and a slightly flirtatious smile. Isshin had rubbed off on her. Maybe. He didn’t mind in the least as he responded with a wink, pausing slightly, as the pull behind his chest seemed to tighten minutely. He felt the almost gravitational pull from his Quincy half, but he could resist Yhwach’s call easily enough with his mixed heritage. But Masaki and in extension Kanae were not so fortunate. He wouldn’t let the two die just because of a mad king’s conquest for revenge (a somewhat understandable conquest but still an eye for an eye gained nothing).

The door to the Kurosaki family home was open when they arrived a few minutes after the twins, and Ichigo could see Isshin in the hallway carefully telling the girls to take off their rainboots and helping them with their coats. It was frankly adorable, and Kami Ichigo forgot how cute little siblings were sometimes. Closing the door with a click Isshin looked up and immediately caught sight of his wife’s pale skin, he sent a pleading gaze to Ichigo who nodded stepping forward to help the twins as Isshin guided Masaki inside.

“So, Karin how was karate?”

Ichigo asked idly as he helped Karin pull off the red raincoat and hang it on the just too tall hook. The raven-haired child huffed puffing her cheeks and crossing her arms, beside her twin, Yuzu laughed and happily interjected, “Tatsuki and Karin fought again, and Karin lost.”

Karin swatted lightly at Yuzu who just dodged her sister’s hit with a playful giggle, it left a wide grin on Ichigo’s own lips as he ushered the two into the living room and settled the two on the couch before asking, “Have you two had dinner?”
They shook their heads, and Ichigo nodded to himself sweeping into the kitchen to whip up something quick as the two began to play with whatever was in the living room (a sort of half-mess always lingering there). He would go and see Masaki when Isshin was ready, for now, he could watch over the girls.

Peering out over the small ledge that separated the kitchen from the dining room and the living room Ichigo called out, “Are you girls okay with gyudon?”

The orange-haired Shinigami received vague yells of agreement, which he took as a yes. Humming under his breath Ichigo swept about the kitchen idly gathering the ingredients as he listened to Yuzu and Karin’s light babble. Trust children to be totally un-curious about the recent situation, though he knew they would ask eventually. Stirring the pot as it simmered over the stove Ichigo watched amused as a familiar head of blond popped up beside him and Yuzu grinned up at Ichigo happily announcing, “Guess what Ichi-nii? Karin made the school soccer team.”

“Really? That’s awesome Karin.”

Ichigo directed his comment at the other Kurosaki twin hovering by the doorway. Karin cracked a small smile at the honest praise and listened contently as Yuzu continued to babble about why school was boring, and how Karin was super amazing in karate.

The orange-haired Shinigami listened with a light heart as he stirred the food, carefully plating it before directing the twins to the dining table with an easy smile. The two rushed to the dining table, and he murmured a small thanks to the small blonde who had already set out the cutlery. He waited till the twins were seated before he set their plates in front of them and retreated to let the two eat in peace.

“Ichi-nii was that a hollow you killed?”

Karin asked in the midst of eating, oh so intelligent silver eyes pinning Ichigo in place. She would be a force to be reckoned with when she was older, Ichigo could already tell with a happy kind of notion (and he ignored Shiro’s mumbles of certain famous glares). Ichigo nodded his head and replied, “Yes it was, has your dad informed you of anything else?”

The two nodded their heads and shared secretive looks that would probably lead to headaches in Ichigo’s future. It was good, well beyond good that Isshin had decided to inform the girls somewhat of the afterlife; if only to prevent future incidents. Still, he could feel their power, and even if it was slightly controlled Ichigo had no doubt that in the future they would be a force to be reckoned with.

It was strange to contemplate that they would one day enter Soul Society naturally, not through some chain of fate. That they would get to live out their whole lives, grow up, marry if they wanted, have jobs. A chance they had never had in Ichigo’s lifetime.

“Ichi-nii?”

Yuzu questioned softly, concerned eyes glancing up at him. Ichigo smiled reassuringly and gave the twins soft platitudes before he winked and asked, “Would you two like to hear how my lieutenant ran into a few problems?”

Again, the twins shared a look, before they turned to him at the same time and nodded, anticipatory smiles decorating their features. Ichigo grinned and launched into the tale casually detailing Rangiku’s many failed attempts at getting pictures of certain high-ranking Captains for the Shinigami Women’s Association. The girls laughed, and giggled the whole time, even as they attempted to finish their dinner.
Idly checking his watch as Ichigo finished the story, he assessed that Kisuke would probably arrive soon to entertain the children, or to provide some form of assistance to Ichigo (who was resolutely not thinking about what was happening in the clinic and instead focussing on the children).

Soft footsteps behind Ichigo alerted the young man to Isshin’s presence and he glided forward to place chaste kisses on the girls’ brows before he moved towards the hallway connecting to the clinic. Isshin stopped beside Ichigo, flashing the twins a reassuring smile over his shoulder, he shot Ichigo a look that seemed to convey the gravity of the situation wrapped in the tense lines crinkling his eyes and the small frown marring his handsome visage. Ichigo placed a comforting hand on the man’s shoulder, soothing some of his nerves with Ossan’s calm presence and a smile.

Isshin nodded and with one last look swept forward to talk to the girls, his excited tones bouncing behind Ichigo as he entered the clinic. The man had always been excellent with the girls.

Following Masaki’s weak presence, Ichigo entered one of the examination rooms on the left. The young woman was laid on the bed; still and breathing quietly just barely awake. Ichigo walked forward, rolling his shoulders, and taking a few deep breaths as he came to stand beside Masaki.

The loss of Masaki’s Quincy powers was putting a great force upon her body, as well as sapping her energy, as her remaining reaitsu tried to compensate for the sudden loss. It had literally been a part of her for all of her life. Ichigo would be attempting to merge a minuscule portion of his own Quincy powers with Masaki, which would allow her to recover, though she would likely be unable to wield any Quincy powers with great strength unless otherwise cultivated.

Ichigo knew it would work. Or at least the calculations with Kisuke had suggested it would. And Ichigo’s somewhat theoretical familial bonds with Masaki would hopefully aid him. It was Kanae Ichigo had a bit more doubt about, considering he didn’t know the woman at all. But he would try; he had to.

Taking Masaki’s somewhat chilled hand into his own, Ichigo ferried a small bit of reaitsu into her body, allowing tired amber eyes to slide open and glance at Ichigo. A soft smile creased her lips and Ichigo leaned close to the woman and murmured, “I’m going to be transferring a portion of my Quincy powers to you so that your body can continue to survive, this might be a touch painful, but I’ll try to be as quick as possible.”

Masaki nodded a soft hum and squeezed his hand before her eyes slid shut once more. Ichigo took a deep breath and closed his eyes letting his hand remain in Masaki’s as a physical point of contact as he descended into his inner world.

Zangetsu’s presence was like a balm to frayed nerves, calming and centring Ichigo’s focus as he settled on a skyscraper peaked with branches and focused on the Quincy portion of his powers. The familiar white ribbon that almost seemed steeped in a faint blue glow, hummed around him it’s presence flooding his veins, and clearing his lungs like crisp winter. Ichigo didn’t often use his Quincy powers. Not for lack of want. It was simply that as a Shinigami in Soul Society, it would be far too strange to use blut vein or any other technique. That didn’t stop him from practising of course.

For the longest time, there had been a strange disconnect between his powers, like too many wires tangled up and inserted into the wrong plug. It had taken Ichigo a good many years to sort it all out; plot out what of him was Quincy, Shinigami, and hollow. It wasn’t so much blame, as the knowledge that his upbringing had probably led to the inner mess.

Coiling the ribbon around the same wrist that held Masaki’s hand in the real world, Ichigo imagined the tiny tip of the ribbon breaking off, he could feel it in his chest, an almost brightness behind his eyes that seemed to feel breathless and gasping. It was a continuous feeling as the piece broke off
floating in front of his eyes, pulsing like the beating heart of a star.

Taking a deep breath Ichigo prepared himself for the delicate task of merging the piece with Masaki’s own reaitsu. Peripherally he could feel Kisuke’s presence, and he was thankful the scientist had appeared if only to ensure everything was okay.

Feeling Masaki’s corporal form, Ichigo pulled on the link of reaitsu humming beneath her skin, following and tracing the reaitsu till he came to where the ‘center’ of her powers would have been. Slowly but surely, he edged the tiny fraction of power along, following veins and capillaries till it was slotted neatly in the hole where her Quincy nature would have rested. Too small against the large gap, Ichigo gently siphoned reaitsu into the blossom of Quincy powers, as threads of Masaki’s reaitsu began to spiral and cling to the small portion of Quincy reaitsu. He continued to press reaitsu into the piece, forging the bond between Masaki’s reaitsu and the Quincy powers in what felt like an eternity of time that passed in the space of a breath, and the endless phases of the sun.

Ichigo finished with a final push of reaitsu locking the small ribbon that was settled around the threads of Masaki’s reaitsu into place. Gingerly Ichigo pulled himself from his inner world, knowing he would have to seek his spirits’ presence to help soothe and tame his reaitsu soon.

Ichigo blinked at the harsh bright light of the clinic, surprised at the weary that pulled at his eyes, and bit at his muscles. He felt as if he had gone head to head with Kenpachi for a full day. Glancing over, Ichigo saw with some relief that the colour had returned to Masaki’s features and her breathing had evened out. Releasing himself from her grip Ichigo shuffled back swaying on his feet.

Warm arms encircled Ichigo from behind and carefully supported him, Kisuke’s presence behind Ichigo was comforting and solid as the scientist guided Ichigo to a chair and in the solemn but happy quiet of the room stated, “You did amazing Ichigo.”

The orange-haired Shinigami nodded, too tired to properly respond as he collapsed in the chair and blinked a few times trying to stay awake to see his patient wake (which he knew was unlikely). At least if he fell asleep Isshin and Masaki had the guest room, and he could go and visit the Ishida family in the morning.

With the trailing thought process dissolving into Ossan’s presence, Ichigo ascertained once more that Masaki was okay before Kisuke mumbled something soft and Ichigo let his eyes slide shut with a soft exhale, retreating to his inner world.

X

Ichigo shifted in his seat, flipping the paperwork back and forth idly tracing the words in the humming emptiness of the office. His third seat who was more likely to actually aid Ichigo in filling out the paperwork was leading a squad training exercise (and Ichigo was proud of how far the kid was coming, and how he continued to defy Ichigo’s expectations), and Rangiku had wiggled her way out of the office with a coy wink, and a vague murmur of spending time with Gin. So once again Ichigo was alone in the office, windows cracked open to the pleasant bustle of Soul Society. He didn’t mind the silence, it was more so the paperwork.

Rolling his shoulders Ichigo glanced at the stacks of said paperwork dangerously crowding his desk and wondered when the Soutaicho would attempt to input the new system, one that would mean less paperwork for Ichigo. Things were progressing in Soul Society, in a way that was so far from Ichigo’s timeline he sometimes had to take a step back just to look at it all. The academy had changed and expanded its curriculum; technology was more common in Soul Society, along with a wider variant of knowledge about the mortal world.
The whole command system of the Gotei 13 was changing, or rather had slowly been changing inch by inch. Ichigo had spent a near endless amount of mornings discussing change, among other things with the Soutaicho. They were introducing secretaries to help limit paperwork, they were shuffling the hierarchy so that it resembled a more Western format, there would still be the same amount of Captains, but they were introducing the concept of two lieutenants, and the multiple third seats in each division were getting their own titles as sergeants. It was supposed to prompt ambition within the ranks, which Ichigo supported. Additionally, the patrols in Rungokai were being increased, along with the general state of living (of course there would always be the poor) much to the Central 46’s displeasure.

Pushing away procrastinating thoughts with a touch of resignation Ichigo glanced at the paper and picked up the pen he had nicked from one of his trips to the mortal realm. Dutifully he began filling out sheets detailing a few transfers, the recent reports and the like. He settled into a mindless numbing rhythm that always accompanied the menial task, thoughts idly drifting onto inane topics, musing on observing the training sessions, as he skimmed the multiple sheets.

A familiar presence pulled Ichigo from his thoughts, and gingerly setting his pen down Ichigo cracked his knuckles and glanced up as the door to his office slid open and a familiar visage appeared looking just a touch ruffled. Ichigo could almost see the breaths lingering in Sosuke’s chest as the man entered, he wondered if the scientist had flash-stepped at an increased speed, or if the man had just come from a particularly interesting experiment.

“Sosuke.”

Ichigo intoned in greeting as the brown-haired man swept a hand through his curly hair, took a composing breath and swept into the office with the fires of determination licking at his heels. The scientist nodded his own greeting pausing in front of Ichigo’s desk with a sort of minute urgency to his features. Intrigue and concern growing, Ichigo cocked a brow at his friend wondering what had drawn his presence.

“Ichigo. A large group of hollows have appeared in Karakura town.”

Sosuke stated pausing fondly on his name before he continued voice serious and knowing. Ichigo furrowed his brow, flowing through his mental calendar before it reached him like a chill. Springing up from his desk Ichigo shook his head and sarcastically asked, “And let me guess Kisuke decided to visit Yoruichi today?” He received a nod, so Ichigo continued, “And of course because he’s a Quincy the transfers either didn’t notice or don’t care,” Another nod pulling a small growl from Ichigo who stalked forward and turned to finally address Sosuke, “Thank you for telling me Sosuke.”

The scientist nodded, a certain light shining his eyes, one that Ichigo mirrored with a grateful smile as his fellow Captain fell into place beside him and commented as they swept into the courtyard, “You should have seen Kurotsuchi try to hide the information.”

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“Of course. I wouldn’t expect anything less from the psychopath.”

Ichigo responded to the comment with well-placed venom hidden under false cheer, Sosuke nodded knowingly beside Ichigo amusement catching at his grin. The two Captains shared an intense dislike of the man, who would likely only remain under Sosuke for another year before the scientist found someone better for the position.

Spotting Tōshirō’s obvious white hair, Ichigo turned to Sosuke and placed an arm on his forearm he flashed the older Shinigami a sincere smile and mumbled a thank you, to which he received a nod and a mirroring smile. He was beyond thankful he had convinced the scientist to forgo the path of his
destruction. The other Captain smiled once more as Ichigo swept off towards Tōshirō his soon to be official, other lieutenant.

“Ichigo-san?”

Tōshirō questioned as the youth paused where he was instructing a low seated member on how to execute an overhead strike in an easier and more efficient manner. Ichigo did the equivalent of a mental dance at the fact the kid had actually used his first name, even with affixations, as he nodded to the smaller Shinigami. He had spent years trying to get the youth to stop calling him Taicho, or Shiba-san at every corner. It had taken a while considering Tōshirō’s strict adherence to ceremony (which he was slowly weeding out of the kid).

“I have to make a quick trip to the mortal realm. You’re in charge, not Rangiku. You’re doing excellent, I’ll be back soon.”

Ichigo responded glancing about briefly for a second before his gaze fell to the younger Shinigami. Tōshirō blinked confusion at Ichigo’s abrupt nature flashing over his gaze quickly before he nodded steely determination filtering across young features (it was sort of adorable) though Ichigo could almost see the kid’s thoughts on Ichigo leaving for the mortal world, again.

Smiling at his lieutenant Ichigo turned and swept out of the barracks idly remarking that while yes, he left at random times to pursue whatever research or person of interest, or make tea. He was an okay Captain; he talked to his division members and helped them grow (he ignored Shiro’s mocking comments, and instead listened to Ossan’s hummed platitudes).

Finding an area of Rungokai that was scarcely populated, Ichigo took a breath and opened a Garganta with a pull of Shiro’s reaitsu, it was faster and a touch more efficient than opening a Senkaimon. Stepping through the portal that appeared like a crack in the fabric of the world, Ichigo appeared over Karakura town’s sprawling cityscape, the rise of skyscrapers settling some part of him that still thought of the city as home (he still had difficulty opening the portal closer to the ground sometimes).

Instantly Ichigo was on high alert, senses tracking the rampant Quincy reaitsu and the larger tainted presence of the hollows, Zangetsu slid comfortingly into his hand as he burst into a quick flash-step following the erratic presence. There were six hollows in the small clearing, and Ichigo could tell there had been a few more before the orange-haired Shinigami had arrived.

He landed unnoticed in the rampant fighting, the air sharp with Ishida-san’s reiatsu, and through a small gap he could see the old Quincy, breathing heavy, sweat beading his brow. Taking a breath, Ichigo ignored the clustered nature of the clearing and with Ossan’s presence singing in his veins he moved forward.

The first hollow fell easily to his blade, followed swiftly by two others. Ishida-san took notice of Ichigo then, eyes wide and thankful as Ichigo continued to flit about. He landed near the old man pausing for breath as the two remaining hollows locked beady famished eyes on the two powerful beings, the old man glanced briefly over at Ichigo and they shared a nod of understanding before Ichigo quickly dealt with the hollow on the left (a particularly amphibian looking creature), and the Quincy quickly defeated the other.

Lowering his guard for a second Ichigo took a deep breath when his senses went haywire and Zangetsu quickly swung up to block the incoming talon. Sallow yellow eyes, inhumane and wild, locked onto Ichigo’s own and he pushed back against the claw forcing itself against Zangetsu’s blade only to hiss as the hollow’s other limb came to slash at his side and arm. Submerged more heavily in Ossan’s presence, his blut vein activated blocking the attack damage and highlighting his veins in
blue.

Sighing Ichigo ducked under the claw and brought his blade cleanly through the hollow’s mask. Glancing around the clearing for any clear indication of hollow reaitsu remaining, Ichigo relaxed slightly when he could sense nothing. He nodded sharply to the old man, assuring their safety as Zangetsu was fluidly sheathed.

“Thank you for saving my life Shinigami.”

The old man said in the sudden silence of the clearing. Ichigo shifted lost for a moment on how to reply before he smiled and responded easily, “Ichigo Shiba sir. It was no problem.”

“Sōken Ishida, a pleasure. Shiba-san is there anything I could do to repay you?”

Ishida-san asked in the lingering awkward atmosphere of the clearing. Surprised at the offer, one he hadn’t been expecting even knowing the kind nature of the man through Uryu’s words, Ichigo shook his head and replied, “Please no, it was my duty.”

A crafty gleam entered the old man’s eyes, and Ichigo knew the excuse hardly constituted his appearance. The haori haphazardly draped over his shoulders hardly excused the simple matter that any nearby Shinigami could have intervened.

“Then at least let me make some tea?”

Ishida-san suggested, and there was an honest sincerity in his eyes that crushed any of Ichigo’s remaining willpower to deny the elder’s offer. Running a hand through his hair Ichigo tentatively nodded earning a small smile from the elder Quincy as he nodded to himself and turned from the clearing.

Ichigo after a last glance around the desolate area sighed and wondered what he was getting himself into before he followed after the old man. He knew he had made the right decision to save the old man, as he thought of Uryu, and felt the old man’s reaitsu settle happily about the earth around him.

The veranda was still warm in the rapidly fading rays of sunlight, squished against a backdrop of nature; it lingered with a sense of peace. He could hear the dull sound of Uryu’s grandfather shuffling around the small kitchen. When they had arrived Ichigo had offered to make the tea, but the elder had levelled Ichigo with a firm disapproving stare and sent him to the veranda. Ichigo had wisely followed the old man’s directions and had settled outside content to listen to the hum of nature and Zangetsu’s presence.

“You know my niece has hair like yours.”

Ishida-san commented sagely as he set down the tray bustling with mugs, and a clay teapot, decorated with lily flowers. Ichigo looked up as the old man slowly settled himself across from Ichigo on the veranda, and raised a brow. He knew Masaki well enough, more than well sometimes. The old man only smiled genially for a moment before he reached over and poured the tea, wisps of steam drifting into the coming evening air.

Ichigo nodded his head in gratitude and took the cup, blowing on the hot liquid to cool it as the calming scent of jasmine reached his senses. Taking a careful sip Ichigo savoured the taste and searched the night sky with his gaze, wondering what they would speak about, what would happen in the future.

“That was blut vein you used earlier wasn’t it Shiba-san?”
The elder asked in the lingering anticipatory silence, and it rung like a gong. Ichigo frowned faintly, the corners of his eyes crinkling before he nodded wondering what the old man would say, or rather what the expectant silence asked of him.

Taking a breath Ichigo closed his eyes for a moment in thought, wondering how much he should reveal, wondering at the little seed of trust that had settled itself in his palms, before he responded, “My mother was a Quincy.”

“And yet you’re a Shinigami.”

The man commented as if stating how lovely the night was. Ichigo nodded, the pad of his thumb tracing over Zangetsu’s hilt in thought, because his heritage was beyond complicated to be truthful and responded, “Yes. Though it’s a rather complicated matter on how it all works.”

Ishida-san nodded raising a brow he peered at Ichigo from beneath the circular lens of his glasses as if ascertaining something before he asked, “And you can wield a bow?”

Instead of vocalizing his answer Ichigo loosely held his hand in front of him and let Ossan’s presence fold over his senses and channel along his arms to spike glittering blue reaitsu into existence in the shape of a bow.

The elder Quincy appraised the bow, and Ichigo suddenly felt a touch self-conscious about his construct. Everything he had learned about his Quincy powers had been during the course of the war, a sort of mad-half dash to gain more power. Ishida had met him in the darkest hours of the morning, and painstakingly night after night he had guided Ichigo how to form a bow, how to wield Hirenkyaku, and what Vollständig was.

In return, Ichigo had helped ease the tension of his friend with their simple and familiar banter, and warm smiles. But Ichigo had always been on the move, and when he could form a bow well enough he had pushed forward, keen on achieving his Vollständig (which had been hell and a half). Then there had been those months in the Siberian fortress and the never-ending persistent cold that still sometimes made itself known in his bones.

Under the ever-watching eyes of the Quincy king, Ichigo had hidden the extent of his knowledge, in fact had claimed a lack of any knowledge. The man had believed it and had of all things assigned Uryu to teach him (once more) though Haschwalth occasionally made an appearance.

“It’s very good Shiba-san though try pulling your reaitsu into centre grounding points around where you hold the bow, and move your middle finger up just a bit, ah there.”

The Quincy commented pulling Ichigo from drifting memories, and the accompanying chill. He dutifully listened to the elder’s instructions and watched in faint awe as the bow solidified a touch more in his grip and suddenly felt as if it was thrumming in his hands.

The elder smiled approvingly and Ichigo let the blade fade in a scattered pattern of blue sparks as the old man took a sip of his drink. Keen eyes locked onto Ichigo assessing for a moment before he asked, “Then you felt Auswählen as well?”

Ichigo nodded pursing his lips, his brow furrowing, and the old man saw it for there was a sudden new kind lightness to his features as if he had expected some great joy at the mention of the horrible days that had followed and was impressed at Ichigo’s distaste of the matter.

“Your technique is very good Shiba-san.”

Ishida-san commented in the intermarry silence as Ichigo sipped at his tea, he nodded his head in
gratitude amber eyes open and honest as he replied, “Thank you Ishida-san that means a lot. I do not have as much experience with my Quincy power as my life has been… difficult to say the least.”

A strange light flickered through the old man’s eyes at Ichigo’s response, but it was gone in a flash before he could analyse it. Ossan hummed protectively around Ichigo, and softly he could feel Shiro’s wild presence purr beneath his skin.

“I’m sorry to hear that Shiba-san. If I may inquire how much do you know of our history?”

The elder Quincy asked, and Ichigo appreciated the true sentiment, furrowing his brow at the second part of the old man’s sentence Ichigo tapped his fingers over his knee before he responded, “I know about the Blood War, but it’s hard to tell what is fact between all the prejudices and selective views.”

The elder nodded wisely to Ichigo’s answer, it was how Ichigo had always felt. Soul Society shoving one bias down his throat, how the Quincy would destroy the balance, how they wouldn’t stop (and did that truly justify genocide), and the Quincy, how they hated the Gotei 13 for slaughtering their race, who wished to aid even if it was somewhat damaging.

“I’ve always believed that both sides suffered fault, but that the answer is easily in front of us now. But it doesn’t change the matters of the past or current plans.”

Ichigo commented sincerely voice tingeing bitter at the end. The two descendants of the Quincy knew of Bach’s plan well enough, and it pulled at Ichigo to know that the Blood War would begin again.

“I agree with you Shiba-san, I believe that even without the use of a reaitsu converter like you speak of. Quincy could still distract the hollow till the Shinigami respond. That’s what I have been teaching my grandson.”

The old man commented earning a smile from Ichigo, backed by faint loyalty. Already he liked the old man, he had never met Sōken in Ichigo’s timeline, but he had heard of the man’s kindness and wisdom. Uryu had always spoken fondly of the old man, of his virtues, and of the many lessons and shared smiles. His friend had been completely right.

“Will you fight if he calls?”

Ichigo asked softly and tentatively in the silence, Ishida-san glanced at Ichigo for a moment before he responded, “I am far too old now. If I can I will persuade my grandson away from such a path as well. I have seen the death of my kind far too much.”

The orange-haired Shinigami nodded his head in sympathy, understanding well the loss of one’s loved ones. His reaitsu reached out to comfort the old man as Ichigo took a sip of his tea, the old man nodded grey eyes sharp and sad the man responded in kind, “And you?”

“I will fight to ensure the least amount of casualties on both sides.”

Ichigo stated in between a breath and the next as he curled his hands around the mug; the elder nodded and the old man looked as if he was going to asked Ichigo another question when the small cell phone in his pocket chirped happily.

Pulling the electronic device out with a faint scowl, Ichigo scanned the message from his younger lieutenant and shook his head, before he set the phone down and turned to face elder man. The elder must have seen it on Ichigo’s features as the old man smiled encouragingly, and with a gesture let Ichigo rise to his feet.
“Thank you for saving my life Ichigo.”

The old man said solemn and with the warmth of the sun, Ichigo smiled as if the same sun rested in his chest and replied, “It was no problem Ishida-san.”

“Oh, and Ichigo, feel free to drop by when you are in town. I am always here if you want to discuss your heritage, or discuss technique.”

The old man offered, though there was almost a faint demand that Ichigo return somewhere in the mix, Ichigo grinned and replied easily, “Of course Ishida-san.”

The elder Quincy nodded and grasped Ichigo’s hand firmly reiatsu tingling between Ichigo’s fingers as the old man looked up into Ichigo’s eyes, and further into his soul, under his breath the old man stated, “You are perhaps one of the most interesting men I will ever meet, thank you for saving me.”

Ichigo’s chest warmed greatly at the comment, and he could tell the old man saw it by the sudden brightness to the elder’s features before he carefully let go of Ichigo’s hand allowing the orange-haired Shinigami to glide towards the gate. Passing one last wave over his shoulder at the old Quincy still settled on the veranda Ichigo happily called out, “I’ll see you soon old man.”

The comment earned Ichigo a scoff followed by quiet laughter as he exited the man’s home, chest still light, mind buzzing with the recent encounter. Ossan’s presence wrapped around Ichigo and gently filled the spaces with his reiatsu as he exited the home and began to enter the cobbled streets of Soul Society, prepared to deal with whatever worry Tōshirō had found. He would visit the old man again if only to discuss their shared history.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading; I hope the first scene satisfied some of your curiosity. Next chapter we are beginning with a certain fated night. Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Till next time!

Tinsel!!
Suton

Chapter Notes

Suton
(n.) Twilight; The approach of death or the end of something.

There’s not much about this chapter I can say other than sorry. So, I am apologizing in advance. This chapter does have a slightly different format from usual chapters, but the first three scenes all take place relatively close to each other. I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The air was heavy, tense in a way that seemed to sit on Kaien’s chest as he glanced around the small clearing settled in the deep forests of Rungokai. A few of the other squad members were settled a couple of paces away, swiftly scanning their surroundings and moving in pairs around the area. Rukia beside the clan head held a pensive look cast with thick determination, eyes like focused steel as she cautiously rested her palm on the pommel of her zanpaktou. Kaien reluctantly squashed down the urge to ruffle the young Kuchiki’s hair and instead tried to focus on sensing the hollow.

They had been following its trail for a week now, and if Ichigo wasn’t trapped in week-long meetings with the Soutaicho and Aizen-san, the elder Shiba would have called his younger brother out, if only for Ichigo’s incredible reiatsu sensing (seriously, he could sense Kaien across half of Soul Society sometimes). Just the thought of all the paperwork they would return to left him beyond glad that Miyako was also still at home to help with his siblings and take care of Ukitake -san.

The hollow was powerful, probably an Arrancar, Kaien assumed such based on it’s reaisu alone. It didn’t help that well the creature seemed physically weak it could camouflage itself better than anything Kaien had ever seen (and that included Kisuke’s cloaks which were excellent for espionage, but horrible in the hands of the Shinigami Women’s Association).

Some worry continued to gnaw at Kaien as he ran a hand through his hair, Nejibana’s humming voice drowning out some of his worries, even as he recalled the words Ichigo had said to him one quiet morning settled on the veranda, near half-asleep with a mug of cold tea clenched in his hands. The orange-haired Captain (and Kaien still flipped in his seat every time he heard the title in conjunction with his younger brother) had settled beside him with that familiar kind of consternation and troubled look playing over his features.

It was a look Kaien had come to associate with the future and Ichigo’s past, in particular, that desolate expression that personified everything Ichigo had shared with Kaien; the laughter and the
grieving, all captured in his eyes. They had settled there in the quiet, one where Kaien could almost visibly see the thoughts swirling around his brother’s mind. Then Ichigo had looked up, and he had spoken of war, and change, and Hueco Mundo all in a few breathless minutes, a fever catching in his eyes. Sometimes Kaien was harshly reminded that the youngest of the Shiba’s (technically) was far too much of an enigma to ever solve, and other times it seemed so breathtakingly simple.

Ichigo’s words of the future seemed to echo all around Soul Society, Kaien had noted with half-baked nostalgia and keen eyes. It didn’t help that Kaien had heard reports of souls using Quincy techniques in the far-reaching districts; he doubted they held any merit. But even the whisper of the Quincy’s coming presence was enough to chill his spine.

Kaien glanced around once more, suddenly alert as some sixth sense screamed at every fibre of his body, warned like a sailor’s care of the sea. He made an aborted movement to move, maybe draw his zanpaktou, or inch closer to Rukia, when a hollow lumbered out from the trees, just as the ground beneath his feet churned and rumbled.

It happened like a flash of lightning, so quick and blinding that all Kaien could see was the afterimages wavering in place, like shattered glass reflections. The ground had shifted and burst and all he knew was an immense pain in his left leg, Rukia crying out, Nejibana singing vengefully in his hands moving without thought, without conscious effort.

He heard the cries of his squad member, the growl of the other hollow and a third tainted presence that appeared drawn by the presence of blood. And oh kami whose blood? He could smell it in the air, but his mind was stuttering to a halt, vision flickering rapidly as pain, pain so blinding it swelled liked the tides seemed to drown his senses. And it was his blood.

Rukia was beside him suddenly, holding him up. When had he fallen to the ground? She was crying, tears that glistened like snow down her cheeks, and she was mumbling something, words that blurred and slashed through his mind like a dull knife. There was a great pressure on his left leg, or what felt as if his left leg, competing with pounding, echoing pain. Dully he could feel the other tainted presence disappear and he wondered where the one that could camouflage itself has disappeared to. He spared a faint thought of relief that the creature was gone.

“Kaien, please. Please stay with me. I need you, Miyako needs you, Ichigo needs you.”

The clan head blinked softly at the words that were oh so very desperate, the pain was still there, but there was a drowsy warmth flooding his body like a dream. The words pulled at his strength, Nejibana flowing through his fingers as he could almost see her smile or Ichigo’s soft-eyed grin. Gingerly and with shaking fingers his hand rested on Rukia’s cold cheek, she was always a touch cooler than normal due to the nature of her zanpaktou. His mind was fuzzy, but he could see the fear and concern playing like a painting over what was essentially his little sister’s features.

Mustering his voice Kaien took a pained breath and gently consoled, “Hey it’s okay Rukia you’ve got my heart, and I’m not going to leave you.”

She nodded wiping away tears with a few rattling intakes of breath. Kaien satisfied that the Kuchiki would be fine let his attention drift, the pain was there like a saw flaring up every once and awhile eliciting clenched teeth, and pained moans, but otherwise, he drifted awake only due to Rukia’s soft questioning.

There was a point where Kaien could feel arms holding his body, the disorienting sensation of floating on the waves as they ebbed and flowed filling his senses and rocking the pain through his core and vocalizing itself in faint groans of pain. A voice hushed him soft and familiar, sending warm reaitsu through his system, the voice whispered that everything was fine and that he could rest. Kaien
ignored the voice for a mere second pulling harshly at threads of fraying life in his hand till they tightened in his grasp. Then there was the comforting embrace of darkness.

X

Kaien stared at where it once was, the bandaged stump that seemed painfully bright and eye-catching, where the phantom sensation of it lingered and pulled at his mind in tiny filtered threads. His left leg was gone. Gone. It was such a simple term to say, but harder to articulate the weight behind the word, the sensations that bubbled and unclenched inside him like the churning sea, tamed only by Nejibana’s soothing presence. Her whispered assurances that she would never leave him; she was his soul and even missing a leg he was still a Shinigami.

But the hard truth was that Kaien while a Shinigami, in essence, would never again be a Shinigami serving under the Gotei 13. Not in the same sense, and not without a left leg. He was an amputee, a cripple.

Kaien was going to live. He wouldn’t waste the hours Unohana-san had spent beside him trying to maintain his life force, and Ichigo there as well, reaitsu reaching stretching in a way that almost lingered about the room, and seemed to clear his senses in half measures. He had promised Rukia as well. And he wouldn’t leave Miyako, never, not when her smile made the well of his heart swell and overfill.

But Kaien would never serve as Ukitake’s lieutenant in the same way, or at all. He could learn to walk, and he thanked kami for it, but wielding Nejibana in battle? That went far beyond Ukitake-san’s illness. He physically could not perform techniques in battle, couldn’t sway with the rhythm of the sea, and not in the wars that were coming.

He was balanced on an awfully thin precipice, one where the wrong shift in thoughts could send him tipping, falling, falling, and ultimately drowning in his own despair and self pity. The clan head tried to find it, that spark that normally lifted the corners of his lips, brightened his eyes. But his chest felt hollow, as if the loss were seeping inside him like a disease poisoning all he had ever known about himself in one fell blow. It left him winded, eyes blurred, but refusing to fall to tears because he was strong, he could get through this. Kaien kept telling himself that even as it flickered and scratched at his skin, at his throat and the words that seemed hanging there unable to fall like the final ring of a gong.

The sunlight seeping in from the windows seemed to embolden what remained of the light inside his chest, as it lingered there, threads of what he could still do. He would have more time to manage the clan, and he was thinking of investing more time in Rungokai (he had seen the changes Ichigo had started and they amazed him beyond end). He could teach at the academy, provide his knowledge and help the next generation of Shinigami to flourish. Or he could see what his younger brother and the others suggested. Somehow a feeling lingered that Ichigo would have some idea. Because Kami he was lost.

Sighing Kaien scrubbed a hand over his eyes, so deeply irrevocably tired he could feel it every inch of his body, like the constant draining thrum of the generators in the Twelfth. Idly he glanced around his small room in the Fourth, it was airy enough, and the window cracked open to let in a pleasant breeze. He had never liked being in the Fourth, too much sanitation and cleanliness for Kaien’s taste, but he had never held Ichigo’s deep aversion to the place; or Rukia’s stubborn unwillingness when it came to the Fourth. At least Kūkaku and Ganju had always been good patients.

The Fourth had changed over the years, technologically flying high and fast, always leaving Kaien spluttering after whatever new mystery they had solved, whatever new inventions were being employed. The countless lives saved. He firmly believed that without those advances Kaien would
have died because it hadn’t only been the blood replenishers, it had been the basic first aid all Shinigami were instructed in, the treatment for shock.

Unohana had entered and briefed him on crutches in the early morning while the dull realisation had still been setting in like a burn so deep he felt it beneath the layers of his skin. She had talked about options, and there had been a strange kind of light in her eyes, equally optimistic as much as it was desolation. Kaien was certain it was just a mirror of his own expressions.

Glancing at the doorway Kaien sighed, wondering who would visit first. The female Captain had returned around midday, eyes sharp and reassuring as she had checked his pulse and all manner of other things before declaring he was fit to have visitors. Kaien didn’t feel like arguing the point out loud, but he was slightly disinclined to agree with the healer. He knew his family and their rather energetic motions himself. And maybe it was that he wanted to save them the pain of seeing him like this.

The clan head knew Ukitake-san would also visit and he would likely tow along Kyroraku-san, and his Captain the wonderful man he was would probably have some wise words of understanding and some great understanding in his eyes. Kaien could appreciate the notion of it, even as it was more of a want for the man’s soothing presence.

Shifting under the sheets Kaien reached out and grasped Nejibana’s cross guard pulling the zanpaktou closer to him, he ignored the dull throb the sight movement provoked, doing so he thought over the battle, what little Unohana-san had decided to share. How Rukia had slain the camouflaged hollow and then rushed to attend to him. The tale almost left him grinning ear to ear as he thought of the stubborn midget; his prodigy keeping a level head, wielding her zanpaktou, taking care of him, with a catch of sadness following his trailing thoughts.

A knock on the door pulled Kaien from his thoughts, and gently he set Nejibana beside him and waited for the door to slide open. It did so slowly with all the suspense one could expect from someone who lived in Soul Society long enough (Kaien firmly believed that eventually any normalness one possessed was washed away in the Gotei 13).

The door paused half-way, as if the person on the other side of the door was hesitating (and if Unohana hadn’t lectured Kaien on overexerting himself he would have cajoled the visitor to enter with his reiatsu). Instead, Kaien took a breath and sighed quietly as the door finally slipped open and a familiar (always so familiar) face walked through the door. Kaien was hardly surprised it was Ichigo that had visited first, he knew the youth would be concerned; it was also likely in an attempt to escape the probable ensuing Shiba dogpile.

Kaien’s younger brother was pale, eyes deep with weary and sorrow; there was a shift to his stature that screamed defeat to Kaien, though it was probably hardly visible to others. He knew his brother better than anyone, excluding Byakuya. Of course, the clan head could also detect a touch of grief in that gaze that landed on Kaien burning and fierce, because his little brother and his still-existing hero complex would always blame himself even with the inevitable.

He caught Ichigo’s eyes, that magnificent kaleidoscope of colours, and they assessed one another in the lingering silence, slow and like molasses, it dragged out, till Ichigo’s shoulders slumped as if he had lost some invisible battle. He shook his head and plopped in the visitor’s chair, lacking any of the airs and graces he could pull out at a moment’s notice.

The silence sat between the two of them, both feeling as if words hung off their lips, and a sentence lingered in the back of their throats. Kaien glanced periodically at his younger brother, trying to absorb all he could of his brother’s appearance (Ichigo’s eyes were red, as if he had been crying, even though Kaien knew he never cried), it was better than letting his thoughts run astray.
Ichigo said, in heartbreaking simplicity, his name like some warning warmth. It sprinkled his eyes as he looked up at his younger brother and nodded, saying his younger brother’s name carefully and gently. Ichigo furrowed his brow and pursed his lips, emotions playing like a riverbed across his features before the youth hung his head and in a whisper stated, “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for Ichigo.”

Ichigo recoiled from the statement as if he’d been struck physically by the words; emotions burst across his features before he hung his head. In that moment he looked remarkably young and like the teenager he had once been before the war had taken that too. It left some part of Kaien that always thought of Ichigo hurting, but it was the kind of pain that acknowledged the youth was better then when they had first found him.

“But I-I should have known. I should have come on the mission. I should have stopped it.”

The orange-haired Shinigami responded voice fervent and almost loud, yet quiet as the ochre silence of the sunlight. Ichigo rose to his feet as if to exemplify his point but it fell from his shoulders and he deflated just as quickly.

It broke Kaien’s heart, more so than the loss of his leg, to see that oh so sickeningly familiar desolation in his younger brother’s eyes. He remembered that look from when the ginger had first arrived, how like a wraith he had seemed, drifting, lost. It scared him as much as Kaien’s own doubts about his future.

It didn’t surprise him, and he could almost picture the same words coming from Rukia’s lips because the two had always been more similar than anyone but Kaien had cared to notice. Ichigo’s breath startled in his lungs, pulling him from drifting thoughts, and when Kaien glanced over he looked as if he might have a panic attack in the sudden condemning silence.

Kaien reached out and grasped his brother’s hand, pulled him to the bed and pushed him down until he was awkwardly squished beside Kaien (he ignored the twinges of pain the shifting brought) with a tiny little smile echoing across his features at the somewhat motherly actions. It was tentative and oh so very light as if resting only on the surface; hiding what Kaien could see falling apart in those piercing amber orbs.

“It’s not your fault Ichigo. You couldn’t have known this would have happened, couldn’t have done anything to stop it. And that’s okay Ichigo, sometimes things happen for a reason.”

The clan head assured him with sincerity in his voice, and he shivered faintly at the warmth that seemed to seep into his skin suddenly as if in thanks, dulling the pain a slight bit. Ichigo shook his head; he frowned and bit his lip before he replied, “But you… you died in the other timeline. And I promised myself I would save you, save everyone.”

“Was it the same date?” He received a head shake representing no, Kaien continued, “Am I still alive; even if I’m missing a piece?” That cracked a small smile backed by a glare for the joke. Kaien considered his job finished as the wraith-like expression fell away just enough to reveal Ichigo’s familiar warmth.

The orange haired Shinigami grasped his hand, tight and sure, he looked Kaien in the eyes, and there was the future all of it, he said, “I promise I’ll help you Kaien.”

Kaien nodded, unable to formulate words to such brilliant emotion, and squeezed his brother’s hand
in a silent affirmation of that promise one of his own lingering in his eyes. There was so much shrouded in mystery in his life with the loss of his leg, but Kaien believed in Ichigo, and he believed in his family.

X

Kaien moved through the hallways slowly, carefully manoeuvring around the few bodies milling about, in a skill that had taken years to develop, his crutches tapped his arrival as he walked through the familiar halls of the Thirteenth division. He was tired, in a way that seemed near constant these days, sometimes he wondered if it was the teaching, other times dealing with the elders. It didn’t help that his upper body muscles were ripping into him for the extended period of walking he had partaken in throughout the day. At least Miyako had promised a massage. He was beyond thankful for his wonderful wife, and sometimes he still questioned why she had stayed. But it lightened his heart nonetheless, and he knew he would never take her for granted.

Shaking his head Kaien paused and leaned against a wall, propping his back against the structure he set aside one crutch and rested against the wall as he reached down to gently massage the stump that was all that remained of his left leg. It was aching and Kaien knew it meant rain, some heavy storm. He would have found it a somewhat helpful weather forecaster if Nejibana wasn’t able to do the same unsheathed (and she was far more often correct).

Sometimes though, his leg ached in a way that was all phantom pain, and Kaien felt as if it was echoes of the future, of the real coming storm; one that wouldn’t go quietly or just blow over. Those pains woke him in the chill mornings or blew like a breeze in Ichigo’s presence every so often. Dismissing dismal thoughts, Kaien mentally noted to visit Ichigo soon, the younger Shiba was currently residing with the Kuchiki heir (he liked to say for convenience but Kaien found the blush dusting the ginger’s cheeks too cute to object to the excuse). This meant a bit less of Ichigo at home, not that the Captain probably minded.

Still, with his injury, Ichigo had been more inclined to share his ideas and past, stories as boundless as the sea. Kaien suspected it was through a sense of guilt; even though Kaien had walked the younger through his lack of guilt a few times (it was just Ichigo’s nature in a sad way). Kaien didn’t mind the rambling, the soft nostalgia, he got to hear of Yuzu and Karin, Isshin’s kids and how they were growing up. Speaking of the twins always left a heavy warmth in Ichigo’s eyes, and Kaien almost felt as if he could reach out and touch that warmth. He also spoke of an old man, someone Ichigo had quickly come to look up to (what was it with random old man adopting Ichigo), how they talked about his mother’s side of the family. Then there were the talks of screwing Aizen’s data and crazy hollows.

It lightened his day some to hear his younger brother speak about things with a smile on his face, and Kami knows Kaien endeavoured to always find things to brighten his day. Curling his hand over his own face, Kaien brushed his bangs out of his eyes and carefully twisted to grab his other crutch slipping it under his arm before he began hobbling the rest of the way to Ukitake-san’s office.

Idly he reminded himself that Kūkaku would be visiting a few of the districts and that he had been apparently volunteered to come. He didn’t mind, in fact, he more than welcomed their forays into the outer districts. The children, the stories, the innate vibrancy of life soothed some part of his soul.

As he walked he could feel the squad members stares, and he wondered if he would ever stop being a strange sight among the Shinigami, or any of the souls for that matter. It wasn’t like there weren’t people missing limbs, Kenpachi wore an eyepatch (though it was fake), and that didn’t even compare to some of the Rungokai citizens who had suffered. But Kaien supposed it was some sense of curious familiarity.
Arriving at the office Kaien forcefully pushed away from the dwelling negative thoughts and let a positive smile swing onto his feature, replacing the lax laid-back smile he usually sported. A muffled voice beckoned Kaien to open the door and with a mental shrug, he complied, tense shoulders settling slightly at the familiar scent of ginger that was saturated in every corner of the room.

Hobbling inside, Kaien wiggled his fingers at Kyoraku-san where the elder man was lounging on Ukitake-san’s couch, a pleased satisfied look about his features that reminded Kaien of a cat. The Captain grinned slyly and nodded in greeting before tipping his hat forward to cover his eyes. Ukitake-san looked up from the paperwork he had been carefully going over and Kaien studied his former Captain (who was sort of his Captain still).

The white-haired man looked mostly the same, always holding onto that just slightly sickly look even with the developments Ichigo was making with his super secret magic rock (as Kaien had fondly dubbed the thing Ichigo wouldn’t name but talked about). There were more laugh lines in the corners of Ukitake’s eyes but Kaien reflected that it was the same for anyone these days.

His injury hadn’t helped. Kaien still remembered the stark paleness on his Captain’s features, the pure devastation and sorrow at what had befallen him. It had shocked and surprised Kaien when Ukitake hadn’t said anything; had wordlessly glided forward and taken Kaien’s hand there had been murmured words and soothing reaitsu.

The clan head had put a great deal of thought into his decision before he had submitted his resignation as lieutenant. Technically he was still a Shinigami, and still a member of the Thirteenth division, but really it was more like an early retirement. It wasn’t all bad Kaien had consoled himself before, he had more free time (and endless boredom because of it sometimes), and more time to spend with his siblings and family.

“How are you?”

Ukitake asked, smooth timbre punctuating the silence that had closed around the office swiftly and comfortably. Kaien shifted on his crutches before he flashed his former Captain a lopsided smile and responded, “I’m well Ukitake-san.”

“Please Kaien, you can call me Jūshirō now. Kami knows your brother does it enough now.”

Uki- Jūshirō-san lectured Kaien, who nodded unapologetically at the words. He had been trying to tame the habit of calling Ukitake Taicho for years, and he doubted he would just as easily slip to a first name base. Though he would endeavour to try, if only because Jūshirō had asked, and the man had those eyes that anyone had a hard time saying no to, least of all Kaien.

Kaien smiled mirthfully at the reminder of Ichigo, who had happily waltzed into Soul Society and completely disregarded customs and tradition from day one. Though most people found it charming of the fire-haired youth, Kaien understood the jest. When Ichigo had first entered the ranks, he had always caught himself on the higher-ups names as if edging on another familiar name. Which Kaien now understood was the intimacy granted through war.

“Ma how was the academy professor?”

Shunsui asked casually, tipping the brim of his straw hat so Kaien could see a peek of deep brown eyes. Resisting the faint urge to chuck something at Shunsui’s head because he could, Kaien flashed the older Captain a flirtatious wink instead. The sake-loving Captain placed a hand over his heart in an overdramatic flailing motion of hands and arms, as if having been struck by the western notion of cupid. Shaking his head in amusement Kaien crossed the room and settled in a chair, carefully resting his crutches beside him.
“It was good for the most part. The usual antics of course. I still don’t understand how some people could be so horribly incompetent at Zanjutsu and still pass the exams.”

Kaien responded, receiving a chuckle in return from the man sprawled across the couch, Ukitake hummed and shook his head in amusement, both likely recalling their own days in the academy; some of the stories of which Ukitake had fondly recalled in the blistering warmth of the summer. Idly Kaien ran his hand over Nejibana’s hilt tucked tightly against his hip drawing on the blade’s soothing presence as he watched his former Captain work, he asked, “Is it true Rukia’s being sent on a mission to the mortal realm?”

Ukitake paused it was minute, and if Kaien hadn’t been serving under the man for years on end he wouldn’t have caught it, but he had, and he wouldn’t trade the time for anything else. The Captain resumed filling out the form before carefully setting it aside in a few minutes of breathless silence.

“It is rumour still, unconfirmed.”

The Captain finished voice thick with hidden emotion, things the clan head couldn’t quite decipher. Kaien frowned lips curving down as he thought of his prodigy and asked, “But?”

“But I think she should go, it would be good experience for… and she needs to get away from Soul Society for a bit and be in her own power.”

Ukitake responded hesitantly words falling apart, hidden behind others of a lighter meaning. Kaien nodded, there was no jealousy, no envy that inevitably one-day Rukia would become the lieutenant of the Thirteenth. How could he begrudge his own prodigy? Not when he had spent hours helping her achieve her Shikai, not when Kaien knew he would never have the chance. He was content to watch Rukia go the distance instead. Ukitake must have seen it on Kaien’s features as the tense lines to his shoulders, and the furrow to his brow fell away.

It prompted Kaien’s own thoughts of Rukia, since the accident the midget had been going through a bit of a self-catalyst. Trying to find where to put the guilt, the new-found sense of pressure, the hundred other things Kaien wished he could aid the young woman with.

He remembered those first few days on the crutches, where he had hobbled around the Kuchiki mansion’s ground, Rukia watching with a perplexed expression that had shifted and swayed between desolation and an abject encouragement. She had eventually joined him on the pliant turf practising her katas with careful movements.

It had been hard, damn hard to learn how to use his crutches, the constant pain his upper body went through as the muscles were toned to the extreme, ones he didn’t know he had, and ones already toned. The midget and Ichigo had stayed the whole time ready to aid him if he needed it. The support from everyone had been overwhelming.

There had been falls, frustration like a tsunami that swept everything away, and ripped his control to shreds. There had been nights where Kaien wanted to stop, where the tears had come like a waterfall and his soul had keened something deep. Because saving people; protecting them had been his everything; his purpose. But he was here, he was alive. Kaien reassured himself with a like mantra every morning, Miyako stirring gently beside him, and Kami the world was worth it to look at her every day.

“She’ll be fine Ju.”

Kyroraku commented softly eyes warm where they glanced at the white-haired Captain; it stirred a faint smile to his features watching the two old Shinigami interact. They were sometimes such like an
old married couple that it was almost uncanny. It was also usually adorable in Kaien’s opinion.

The white-haired Captain smiled at Kyroraku before glancing at the paperwork with a familiar look of utter disgust, Kaien could relate even if he no longer had to read mission reports. Instead, it was endless business reports, and engagement proposals. Ever since he had retired from active duty, the elders had been piling him with paperwork (it was one of the few things they could do). With a near sadistic grin, Kaien contemplated setting Ichigo on their collective asses once more.

“You look like you could use a drink, Ju.”

Shunsui commented lightly, a touch of slyness to his features. Kaien scoffed levelling the Captain with a disbelieving stare Kaien responded, “And you are never in need of a drink because you’re always half-drunk.”

Ukitake chuckled at the mean comment which Kaien counted as a point towards himself (even if he did sound a touch like Ichigo- they rubbed off on each other). Shunsui scowled for a moment before he flopped back on the couch, hand raising to rest on his brow as another clutched at his chest and he asked, “Jūshirō will you defend my honour?”

“I don’t know Shu. What do you think Kaien should I defend his honour?”

The white-haired Captain asked teasingly revealing some of the personality Kaien hardly saw underneath the gentle sickly Captain. He liked the sarcasm, the wit, the deep conversations and contemplations of life. Grinning at his former Captain Kaien promptly responded, “I don’t know Captain, I don’t think he had much honour to defend in the first place.”

Shunsui pouted at Kaien’s words, mumbling about mean Shiba children, even as Ukitake smiled fondly in Kaien’s direction before he cast an appeasing smile in Shunsui’s. Slowly the white-haired Captain slipped from behind the desk to pad towards Kyroraku who was still resting in an overly dramatic pose.

“A drink, if not lunch does sound nice.”

Ukitake said lightly, casting a small inviting look Kaien’s way. He nodded minutely happy to join the two for lunch and a drink, it would give them a chance to catch up, and Kaien could observe what the two thought of Ichigo being Captain.

Shunsui grinned and perked up tipping his hat back so that he could reach over and hug what little of Jūshirō’s torso the older Shinigami could reach. His former Captain blushed slightly, even as it was tempered by familiar amusement.

It took a minute but eventually, Shunsui rose to his feet with a suave bow that elicited slight laughter. Kaien followed in the elder’s steps as he grasped his crutches and planted them on the ground using them to pull him up, before tucking them under his arms. With a nod, Shunsui twirled out of the room (really it was more of a glide), and Kaien followed at a more leisurely pace Jūshirō beside him.

As they walked Kaien could feel the pain in his leg flare up again, he wondered what it would all mean. Nejibana hummed soothing his worries and with a glance at his old Captain Kaien felt some of that worry slip away. Content he asked the white-haired Captain about the newest recruits with a fond half smile.

X

The room buzzed with dissonant chatter, that kind that came from a party of people far too different in nature to ever really be civil. Though it could be their hollow nature Ichigo supposed from where
he watched in the shadows as Barragan at the head of the table tried to calm the Espada with little success. It reminded him of the captain’s meetings, which were marginally more successful; some days more than others.

Ichigo scrubbed a hand over his eyes leaning back against a pillar half-cloaked in shadows as his eyes swept over the gathered Espada. Harribel was sitting in one of the cool spin chairs that Ichigo had convinced Aizen to supply the room with (more for his and Nelliel’s amusement than anything else), a bored look settled on her features. He had spoken to her before the meeting, received an update from one of the few Espada actually competent at such a thing, something about a hollow was more suited to chaos than order in any circumstance. After, they had settled in the quiet, content in each other’s presence. That was how their relationship was, it wasn’t one built on mutual interest or easy conversation; though they did share the mutual need to protect those under their circle of influence. It was a relationship that functioned well in the silence.

They had battled a few times in the recent years, sometimes it had been to test out whatever theory Sosuke was working on, or if the Hogyoku did increase Harribel’s power. But most of the time it was the two of them blowing off steam, or just revelling in a good spar. He was beyond thankful he had never fought Harribel when he was younger, he would have lost easily, her technique was amazing; patience and balance like a shark waiting for blood in the water.

Letting his eyes sweep further down the table, Ichigo’s lips curled in minute distaste as Nnoitra argued with Grimmjow, the two fighting like wild animals with biting words, and clawed gazes. The hollow had grown arrogant in his new position of power (not that he wasn’t arrogant before then), and every time Ichigo entered Los Noches he had to tame the urge to deal with the tick. There wasn’t much he could do about Grimmjow’s lust for battle, but at least the panther-like hollow had standards.

The orange-haired captain brightened slightly when he caught sight of Nelliel; soft olive eyes centred on his presence in the shadows. Grinning, because he had never been able to hide from the female Espada Ichigo wiggled his fingers in greeting. The two had connected instantly in this timeline (the first time they had met was a whole other story altogether), Nelliel was an eclectic mix of bubbly one moment and quiet contemplative in the next. She was also wicked fun to battle.

Ichigo laughed softly to himself as Barragan continued his failing attempts to regain control of the room. Ulquiorra was seated near the end of the table, and consequently had the look of utmost boredom on his apathetic face. Ichigo felt sympathy for the hollow, knowing apathy well enough, he wondered at such nihilism and how he could help. The hollow had, in the course of the Winter War, joined their side. Ulquiorra’s power was amazing, right next to Starrk with his second release. And when Orihime had finally drilled past the walls of emotionless teal Ichigo had gotten to see the hidden snark and dry comments, the love of nature to a fault.

Yammy blustered at Barragan’s words as if they had incited some challenge of leadership. Ichigo rolled his eyes and leaned back against the pillar, he was tired in a bone-deep way that seemed to reverberate in echoing waves throughout his mind’s eye. First, he had attempted to finish the ever-growing piles of paperwork, and lead a training exercise, then he had visited the Kurosaki family, and consequently Kisuke the mad-scientist he was, then finally Los Noches. It reminded him something fierce of when he had actually been able to pay attention in high school, the homework from four different courses, and multiple assignments all at once. Like holding grains of sand within the cupped palms of his hands, it was inevitable that some would escape, but holding them felt like a treacherous dance where he could lose all of it.

Catching a lazy wave out of the corner of his eyes, Ichigo’s gaze casually landed on Starrk sprawled in his chair, eyes lazily peering at Ichigo even if a somewhat wolfish smile decorated his lips. It
almost incited a grin upon Ichigo’s own features as the man mimicked a yawn and shifted his brows incriminatingly towards Barragan. The man was beyond sensible to have left Lilinette within their shared room considering the monotony and lack of any purpose of the meeting.

Subtly Ichigo studied the older hollow; in a half effort to make sure the coyote Espada was settling well. He had sparred with the pair a number of times over the years, it wasn’t often, Starrk’s own laziness and Ichigo’s endless responsibilities ensuring such, but when they did spar it went for hours straight. Starrk must have caught onto Ichigo’s mothering as he flashed the Captain a small half-hidden reassuring smile; it prompted something of a like nature across his own features.

Barragan stood up suddenly, his great posture commanding some attention from the hollows that were arguing amongst themselves or from the easily bored. The old man’s eyes scanned the faces of the gathered Espada as if searching for challenge or even a flicker of attention. The soldiers Ichigo had recruited for war. It hurt his head and beat at his temples to think of it like that.

After another minute of tense silence, the supposed ruler of Los Noches nodded to himself apparently satisfied and began speaking, drilling battle plans and information on their enemies (some of it willingly supplied, other facts false to a fault). It was the same thing the old man detailed every meeting, with a few exceptions and updates. It was mainly because Barragan held no real authority and was only parading around with a false sense of command, that and their plans were not yet ready for the Winter War to begin. That’s why their forces had been regulated to training for the how many years. In some ways the Espada were stronger than they had ever been under Aizen’s control. Those who Ichigo had bonded with still possessed free speech, the decision to back out if they needed to. That wasn’t to forget that Espada were stronger in the physical sense as well, their training had been rigorous and Ichigo knew that the battles would be different from the past. But that was half of what he was hoping for.

Starrk caught his eyes again as the words continued to drone on, dull like the humming buzz of the cicadas, the coyote -Espada made an aborted head movement towards one of the exits. Ichigo paused understanding the message, his gaze twitched around the room once more falling on Nelliel; he waved his fingers and received a knowing grin.

The hollow slipped from his seat, all silent tamed grace of a predator and Ichigo followed the Espada towards one of the exits. The hallway was cooler than the meeting room a chill hanging about it that sent shivers down Ichigo’s spine. Curling his hands into the baggy sleeves of his shihakusho Ichigo reclined idly against the cool stone; Starrk ran a hand through his curly hair mirroring Ichigo’s position, glancing around with faux casualness.

“It’s starting soon isn’t it?”

Starrk questioned gaze suddenly piercing and serious, Ichigo nodded a soft sigh leaving his lips at the statement. There were still so many unknown elements, things that could go either way. Not to mention the Bounts, or Muramasa. And somewhere he knew the twins would be involved even a tiny bit because fate was cruel.

With a nod to himself, Starrk crossed his arms over his chest, hand unconsciously straying to the hilt of his katana. Ichigo studied the hollow for a quiet moment before he asked, “What gave it away?”

Starrk shrugged an easy look slipping onto his features before the hollow looked up and with a quiet edge stated, “It’s in the air, it’s restless, like you.”

Ichigo shook his head fondly at the nonchalant answer even as he accepted his friend’s words for what they were. Tilting his head back Ichigo took a moment for a breath, for a second of eternity before Starrk asked, “What are you going to do next?”
“Wait for it to happen. The twins are the catalyst for it all to start. Barragan will see the minor turmoil, and the recent incident, in Soul Society as the grand opportunity to announce his intentions.”

Ichigo answered carelessly thoughts straying to the twins, and to Kaien, his brother. He ignored the flux of emotions that ran rampant across his skin and instead focused on the sly grin decorating his friend’s features as he asked, “And after the meeting?”

“Why I might just pop in to give your dear commander a visit.”

The orange-haired Shinigami replied with a tinge of mischief. Starrk chortled lowly a sound that was like a rolling purr, looking up with keen eyes the Espada said, “More like give him a heart attack. Up for a spar?”

Ichigo nodded his agreement to Starrk’s statement unapologetic about terrifying Barragan. Shiro could be beyond horrific when he wanted to. Rolling his shoulders Ichigo grinned at Starrk, one full of promise. The other’s lips only curled up in response.

Ichigo glanced out at the sprawling landscape of Hueco Mundo. Rukia would be deployed to the mortal realm soon, and Ichigo could feel it all building like the waves pulling back and rushing forward in preparation for a tsunami. He only prayed that they would make it through the future.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, and once again I’m sorry. Did anyone expect that? Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Till next time!

Bear!!
Karin was curled on the bed across from Yuzu, knees drawn up to her chest as she watched her slightly younger sister talk about what they had been learning in home ec. It was almost funny how much Karin liked listening to her twin talk, it was an inherent love of watching the emotions spell across Yuzu’s features, illuminate her eyes, curve her lips. It captured the older Kurosaki’s attention like watching their mother flutter about in the kitchen. The effect only compounded when the two of them were in the kitchen together; it felt like Karin couldn’t take her eyes away as if watching the stars pass along the sky in eternal rotation. It was simple fact for the Kurosaki family that Masaki and Yuzu were the centre of their world. That was why Karin from the moment she was old enough to recognize her sister and stare into those warm loving eyes had promised to protect her sister.

“Karin? Karin, are you listening?”

Yuzu asked with a huff, an indignant pout settling on her lips, hand planted on her hips. Karin jerked to attention at the words and nodded flashing her sister an appeasing smile which earned a pleased nod. The blonde tilted her head for a moment brow furrowed, and Karin could almost see her sister’s train of thought, could feel the threads of it like some echo in the back of her mind, before Yuzu asked, “Karin what do you think we should do about the spirit of the little girl?”

Karin shrugged lost for an immediate answer as she recalled the spirit Yuzu was speaking of; brown hair, large innocent eyes, it reminded Karin harshly of when Yuzu was younger. They had encountered her half a year ago on their walk home from school, and Yuzu being the ever-kind person she was, had stopped to speak to the spirit (and okay Karin also spoke to the spirits on occasion).

Recently on their walk to school, they had come upon a few delinquents who had broken the small vase of flowers that Karin begrudgingly (okay it wasn’t necessarily like that) brought fresh ones for every week. Suffice to say the delinquents had met her fist, and she would brag about it to Tatsuki
the next day. Only because the other girl was keen on insisting she was better than Karin at hand to hand fighting (which Karin would never admit was close to true).

The same day after school the ghost had sought them out and spoken of a hollow in the area. It had left the two puzzled as to why the hollow hadn’t already been cleansed, their cousin was still testing out his new converter, but he could easily deal with it. There was also the Shinigami patrol that Karin and Yuzu occasionally saw above the streets of Karakura, not to mention Hat-n-Clogs.

Looking up Karin received a look of consternation from Yuzu, and tamped down on the urge to smile at the look. Instead, she drummed her fingers along the covers and suggested, “We could speak to Uryu at school? Or Hat-n-Clogs?”

Yuzu brightened nodding her head a little even as her eyes sharpened minutely and she teasingly corrected Karin in a familiar game, “His name is Urahara-san Karin.”

“Then tell him to stop wearing such a ridiculous outfit!”

Karin replied with a grin and a dramatic wave of her hands that earned a giggle from her twin. Yuzu only nodded appraisingly a sage look about the movement, before a twinkle shone in her eyes and she responded, “The only one who would be able to get him to do that would be Ichi-nii.”

The two shared the silence with knowing looks for a moment before they both broke out into laughter imagining Ichigo coaching or rather cowing Urahara-san (which had happened before and was beyond amusing).

“Speaking of Ichi-nii, do you know when he’s supposed to visit again?”

Yuzu asked as they regained their breath, cheeks flushed with mirth. Karin shrugged once more earning a pout from her sister even as her gaze idly strayed around their room trying to recall their parents’ words.

“I think Tou-san said…”

Karin trailed off as a sharp spiritual pressure appeared nearby, it was powerful perhaps near a lieutenant from what they had seen of Kaizen’s reaitsu (they had only met him a few times, but he reminded Karin a touch too much of Isshin; he was nice enough under the over the top attitude). Cocking her head the elder Kurosaki turned her focus to the reaitsu following it as it entered their home and paused in the guest room. Sharing a look with her sister, the older twin could see that Yuzu had noticed as well. Probably before Karin considering how Yuzu was crazy good at controlling her reaitsu.

“Do you think its…?”

Yuzu mumbled soft and unsure, and Karin shook her head it wasn’t a hollow or a Quincy, but it was unmistakeably Shinigami. Crawling from her bed with careful silence Karin crept towards their door sparing a glance over her shoulder to find Yuzu close behind her, a reluctant expression decorating her features even as she rolled her eyes at the raven-haired Kurosaki.

Carefully twisting the doorknob open, Karin glanced into the hallway, cautiously listening for the sounds of her parents’ footsteps. Ever since that night on the riverbanks, their mother’s spiritual pressure had been weak, and sometimes after she exerted herself it was like she was a plus soul till she ‘recharged’ (as Yuzu had phrased it). And that wasn’t to mention Isshin, who had some of his reaitsu, but was utterly useless unless the situation was truly dire.

Sensing nothing of their parents awakening Karin turned her attention to the guest room, making a
small hand gesture over her shoulder as she crept forward and paused outside the doorway. Pressing her ear against the door the elder twin heard nothing for a moment before the soft rustle of cloth echoed faintly through the thin frame. Taking a breath to prepare herself Karin glanced back at her sister for a moment, tenderly taking the proffered hand and squeezing it for courage before she pushed open the door.

There was a Shinigami in the centre of the room, glancing at some hand-held gadget and muttering to herself. Unnoticed Karin and Yuzu hovered in the doorway studying the stranger, absently the older twin noted the traditional shihakusho, and the stark blue eyes focused on the screen. Shrugging to herself she shared a quick look with Yuzu before she called out, “Yo! What are you doing in our house?”

The Shinigami startled, and absently Karin suspected the Shinigami wouldn’t have even reacted if other people were in the room, but most people didn’t normally yell at empty rooms. The woman whirled around eyes wide as she stared at the two of them, and Karin made eye-contact with the Shinigami staring into piercing calculating eyes.

“You can see me?”

The twins nodded to the rather obvious question, and Yuzu hesitantly stepped forward and with a gentle smile, the one she offered to the multiple animals she had adopted, or the young kids at the elementary school she volunteered at, and said, “I’m Kurosaki Yuzu and this is Karin. You are?”

The Shinigami paused for a moment apparently flustered (Hat-n-Clogs probably hadn’t told her about them. He usually liked surprising the newbies) before she bowed her head in greeting and replied, “How rude of me, Kuchiki Rukia of the Thirteenth division of the Gotei 13.”

Yuzu and Karin nodded at the title, happy to place a name to the face. Karin tilted her head slightly at the words making the connection, and Yuzu ever knowing as she was, easily caught her sister’s train of thought; casually she touched her twin’s wrist indirectly communicating with the elder. Karin nodded minute and small at what her sister had been communicating and Yuzu’s shoulders slumped with a shred of relief; the younger had obviously made the easy correlation between Kaien who had been the lieutenant of the Thirteenth, and Rukia before Karin. It probably wasn’t sensitive to bring up the recently injured man if Kuchiki-san had known him. Yuzu had always had a good head for emotions and people, Karin was better with instinct and the inanimate.

“So why are you in our house Kuchiki-san?”

Karin asked after a moment where the silence hung between the three in unequal breaths. The Shinigami frowned slightly as if debating to share anything with the two of them, reminding Karin once more that they shouldn’t have even been able to see her as far as Kuchiki-san knew. Sensing the woman’s indecision Yuzu stepped a half-pace forward in an unthreatening manner and commented, “We know about the spirit realm Kuchiki-san.”

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The female Shinigami took the news with a raised brow, eyes taking in their appearance with closer scrutiny, as Karin idly noted that they did share much of the Shiba family traits. Kuchiki-san hesitated for a moment more before she glanced at the device, likely something to track reiatsu, and replied, “I was tracking a hollow when it’s reiatsu suddenly disappeared.”

Karin traded a look with Yuzu, and consciously checked her reiatsu wondering if the two were losing control and blocking the signal. Her reiatsu thrummed under her skin warm like the summer days past, wrapped tightly around her core and sparking beneath her fingertips but contained all the same. Yuzu was the same, she could tell from the small slump of relief to her sister’s shoulders, and the faint curl of her lips; they had lost control once and they weren’t keen to experience it again.
“And you can’t sense the hollow Kuchiki-san?”

Yuzu questioned softly and respectfully, knowing that the Shinigami who had been trained to fight hollows for longer than they had been alive would likely have a greater sense of reiatsu. All the same, Karin spread her senses, feeling Yuzu’s near identical presence humming and blossoming around her as she did the same.

Kuchiki-san shook her head, and there was a hint of shame across her features before she glanced at the device anxiously. It was then Karin noticed she was young, she wasn’t like Ichigo with his old, ancient eyes, or even their dad with the serious demeanour of a veteran that appeared occasionally. The female Shinigami held that timelessness about her that all Shinigami held but she appeared their age and it eased some unsettled nerves sitting on her chest. Yuzu must have felt the same empathy for she gently squeezed Karin’s hand and teasingly bumped a shoulder against her own.

The tense expectant silence was broken suddenly as hollow reaitsu flared and a loud crash came from below. Immediately the female Shinigami was at attention, a hand settled on the pommel of her zanpaktou she cast a quick glance at the twins, a world of emotions and concern flickering there, and with a commanding voice ordered, “Stay here, I’ll deal with the hollow.”

Then with a nod, she swept down the stairs and out of sight, reaitsu sparking the air around the Shinigami. Karin and Yuzu traded a glance full of unspoken words and a decision that lingered at the doorway. The eldest Kurosaki determined to aid the Shinigami stepped towards the doorway, Yuzu raised a brow, lips settling into a small frown. Karin studied her sister for a moment before she let her reiatsu visibly dance across her outstretched hand, the air thick with promise.

“We should help her.”

Yuzu studied Karin’s hand for a second, the words heavy between the two of them and equal in their hearts. Yuzu rolled her eyes, the softness of her demeanour falling away slightly as she grabbed the outstretched hand following Karin as she carefully led them down the stairs with an increasing worry and pace as they identified their mother’s presence on the first floor.

They arrived to chaos. The far wall of the home was gone, a gaping hole littering rubble onto the street and the floor of the living room, and on the ground Karin spotted their mother’s bright shock of hair. She was sprawled and oh so very still in a way that tightened her chest and pricked her eyes, but Karin could feel her presence fluttering there like a candle flame. Yuzu made a small noise of shock, reaitsu racing across her skin she immediately ran over, hands fluttering with a pale green Kidō that settled some unease. Karin with grim determination turned her attention to the fight happening in the streets.

Kuchiki-san was staring the hollow down, a cut nicking the sleeve of her shihakusho, and her zanpaktou hanging attentively by her side, stance ready to fight. Jumping over the magnanimous rubble in the quietest manner possible, Karin crouched by the new entry to their home and focused her reiatsu to her palms beginning the small incantation under her breath as she studied the hollow; it’s gruesome mask and the tainted reiatsu that spilled out and around the street.

“Bakudō number 4 Hainawa.”

Karin called out channelling her reaitsu as the Kidō encircled the hollow’s arms restraining its movements, lighting up the small street in bursts of flickering yellow. The Shinigami glanced in Karin’s directions startled at the incantation (and likely that she could cast Kidō), eyes wide with shock, and if Karin thought right, a touch impressed. The elder twin made an aborted shooing motion with her head as she maintained the Kidō, and Kuchiki-san took the hint and slipped forward in a burst of flash-step before she carefully brought her zanpaktou through the hollow’s mask.
It dissipated quickly, drifting on the sudden wind, and the knot in her chest that tightened her heartstrings loosened as Karin stepped out of the rubble and into the street, carefully drawing closer to the female Shinigami. Kuchiki-san glanced up at her approach as she cautiously sheathed her zanpaktou, a small warm smile slipping across her features. It kindled a faint warmth in Karin’s chest to see the true smile even as she warily glanced around after flashing the Shinigami a mirroring smile.

“Are you injured anywhere Kuchiki-san?”

The elder Kurosaki sibling asked as her eyes pointedly strayed to the tear of fabric on the sleeve of the Shinigami’s shihakusho. Kuchiki-san glanced down for a moment pursing her lips in thought before she nodded.

Yuzu appeared from the hole in their house as Karin was about to respond. Shoving blonde locks out of her eyes Yuzu padded over and settled beside Karin she placed a gentle hand on her wrist, warm reiatsu skittering across her skin. Their mother was okay.

“What’s this I hear about an injury?”

The younger Kurosaki sibling asked, eyes serious as she swept first over Karin, taking in every inch of her sister before her gaze switched to Kuchiki-san landing on the small tear in her clothing. Yuzu made an aborted motion towards her arm, asking faintly for permission. Kuchiki-san hesitated for a fraction of a second then nodded, and Yuzu stepped forward to carefully slide the sleeve up, revealing a thin gash that was more likely caused by a projectile than the hollow’s claws.

Instincts rumbling erringly in her mind Karin frowned and glanced at the surrounding buildings, as in the background the pulse of Yuzu’s healing Kidō glowed around the Shinigami’s arm. Turning her attention back to her sister, when she felt the gentle tug on her arm, Karin was greeted with a soft relieved smile even as reiatsu sparked along the streets and Karin made an aborted motion moving directly to protect her sister’s back even as she glanced over her shoulder.

Another hollow had appeared suddenly, form menacing and eyes like cold fury piercing Karin’s lungs and drowning her veins in cold fear. It was too close she wouldn’t be able to move them both in time, she had to protect her sister.

Belatedly Karin heard Kuchiki-san yelling something, as the elder-sibling pushed her sister to the ground moving her out of harm’s way. She glanced over her shoulder only to stop in shock.

The female Shinigami was in front of Karin as if in slow motion the hollow’s claws dragged across the front of the Shinigami’s chest in a sickening motion of blood that sent her heart thudding loudly in her ears.

Whipping around to face the hollow, Karin yelled her sister’s name unconsciously even as she directed her hands forward channelling her reiatsu like living fire as it flowed through her nearly uncontained she released a potent Shakkahō. The hollow flew back and landed against a wall, stunned, for the time being. Karin erringly turned her back on the creature and skidded towards her sister and the fallen Shinigami who were leaning against the rubble of their wall, where Yuzu had moved them.

Yuzu glanced up from the halo of healing Kidō surrounding her, eyes glowing an ethereal blue even with the tears streaming down her cheeks. Karin pressed a chaste kiss to her sister’s brow reiatsu swelling in comfort even as she crouched by the Shinigami.

“Kurosaki.”
The twins jerked to attention focusing on the pale gaze hazed with pain, Kuchiki-san weakly tugged at her zanpaktou, and even beneath the pain, Karin could see some great desperation to live. The young woman had the knowing feeling that even if they had failed they would have survived, it was almost a sixth sense whispering about a certain scientist who would surely be yelled at by their uncle. The sound of the hollow moving in the distance shot stark in the silence of the night and the tension filled their veins with adrenaline, glancing between the two Kuchiki-san made a decision and said, “Kurosaki one of you must take my zanpaktou and stab it through the center of your being, I will transfer some of my Shinigami powers so that you can defeat the hollow.”

Karin and Yuzu shared a look, words passing between them as quick as the wind, the time to ponder such decisions wasn’t with them. They both knew that taking Kuchiki-san’s zanpaktou would spark their own dormant powers, and draw the attention of Soul Society. But they couldn’t let the hollow attack their family, or the Shinigami who had thrown herself in front of the hollow to save them.

Moving in front of Kuchiki-san, Karin took the handle of the zanpaktou, feeling the cool presence that rushed and rippled along the blade, behind her Yuzu curled herself around Karin’s back knowing that if they were to do it, it would be together. As it had always been.

“Call me Rukia.”

The Shinigami, Rukia, said with a grin full of nervous tension and the echoes of the night, Karin nodded and even as the hollow drew closer replied, “Then we are Karin and Yuzu.”

With a nod, and the comforting press of Yuzu’s familiar reiatsu behind her, Karin pierced the center of her being with the zanpaktou, pushing through so that it entered Yuzu as well. There was a blinding pressure as Rukia’s reiatsu surged through the blade, cold, cold as ice it felt like it was freezing their veins. Then there was sharp crack that seemed audible only to them as fire roared within their soul, and the small portion of reiatsu given was absorbed and channeled.

Karin moved on instinct, the katana a strange mix of familiar and unfamiliar in her hands as the hollow lumbered into view, Yuzu behind her mumbled Kidō under breath. Taking a breath that felt as if it moved with both siblings, Karin pushed back the overwhelming sensations and the fire dancing beneath her eyes. She lit her feet with reiatsu moving in a blur to slice through the hollow’s mask as Yuzu’s Kidō firmly restrained the beast.

It dissipated, and Karin slumped, suddenly utterly drained, breath heavy in her lungs. Reaching back, she grabbed Yuzu’s hand fingers tracing the pulse point, fluttering warm and alive beneath her fingers. They dragged themselves back to Rukia who held a look of soft astonishment even as Karin could see the same weary reflected in her eyes.

Feeling his presence among the street Karin turned eyes cold as steel she called out, “You better not doing anything to Kuchiki-san Hat-n-Clogs! And don’t forget about Ichi-nii.”

Assured the scientist was sufficiently cowed Karin slumped bonelessly against the rubble, the pale green of Yuzu’s healing Kidō fluctuating sluggishly as tired eyes tried to stay awake long enough to heal Rukia. Grasping her sister’s hand, Karin wondered at the fire rumbling beneath her skin, eyes guarding the street.

Their whole life was changed, she wouldn’t be so mysterious or obtuse as to say she could sense it like some tide of forbearing. But the nature that had awakened inside their soul was proof enough for Karin. Squeezing Yuzu’s hand, Karin vowed, repeating the same promise that had lingered closest to her heart for years on end, that she would protect her sister, that they would stay together.
There was a strange sense of nothingness around him as Ichigo slowly became aware of his
surroundings in tiny trinkets of time. It seemed to wrap around his skin like a blanket warm in an
inordinate sense, as if tickling the edges of his senses. There was the faint almost non-existent feel of
a breeze caressing his features, and accompanying it was a sense of weightlessness as if his body
weighed nothing more than the grains of sand that filled the hour glass on Shinji’s desk.

Carefully letting his eyes drift open, he blinked in strange distant confusion at the lack of anything
tangible surrounding him. There was space around him that seemed to twist and fold unto itself,
shimmering gossamer threads of colours weaving themselves between the space. He was lying down
on the strange plane, reminiscent of the one from which he had entered when he had fallen into a
coma. And the knowledge calmed racing thoughts in a gentle manner.

Staring at the endless rippling space above him Ichigo let the strange sensations of tranquility wash
over him in equal breaths, thoughts hazily drifting to idle topics and the feel of his soul humming in
resonance.

It felt like an eternity later that a new presence made itself known, if it could even be called a
presence for the way it sent invisible shivers down Ichigo’s spine and seemed to pull at the space
around it. Slowly he moved to a standing position coaxing his unwilling form (and it was more of a
form, the components of his soul laid bare so that it was the energy of it all composing him), into an
upright position.

There was a moment where it felt as if a thread wrapped his hand, and turning would inevitably snap
the thin barrier, a sense of the great unknown lingering in pulses of the space around him before
Ichigo turned his body.

The light of the being in front of him was near blinding, a swirling mass of colours that shifted and
interchanged inevitably, always balancing heavily between white and black, a yin-yang sense to the
motions. The being was vaguely human in form, and it was a near-instant knowledge that had Ichigo
bowing his head in respect, words deserted in the suddenness of the meeting.

The being stepped forward and an appendage tilted Ichigo’s chin up, shocks travelling through his
skin at the contact and chasing his breath. The face before him shifted and swayed never staying in
one true cast, but there was such deep emotion on the being's features that Ichigo felt as if he had to
turn his eyes away.

Instead as if by some strange force between the two Ichigo remained drowning in vast orbs that
seemed to stretch like the universe; boundless and undefined. It felt as if the being was studying him,
laying bare everything Ichigo was, every piece of his soul, every memory, thought, idea. The colours
forming the being flickered restlessly and in a distant sense, Ichigo felt that the being was upset or
troubled by what it had seen.

The orange-haired man wasn’t necessarily surprised when he considered the vast voids that
comprised the wars he had fought; his soul was not comprised of light more so than darkness. In the
stretched nothingness of time, the being looked up and Ichigo felt the keen sense of sorrow from the
being, almost lingering heaviness of apology and grief.

Ichigo shook his head minutely inclining his head in respect to wordlessly convey his thoughts on the
matter. All that had happened had happened and there was nothing to change it, the old Soul King
had in the rise of the Quincy lost its life, but some things even primordial beings could not alter. He
had made peace with it that aching night in the rain, fate was a mill and he knew how best to fight
against it.
The being studied Ichigo for a moment more before a hand was extended between the two, wisps of blue coalescing to form a thin needle as Ichigo looked down studying the object. With a nod to itself the being pressed the thin smooth object into Ichigo’s hands and looked into his eyes a deep empathy there that Ichigo felt in that part of his soul that reached the earth.

With a last movement forward the being pressed a kiss to Ichigo’s forehead, the action was like falling into cold water, and in the same instant submerging oneself in a forge. Comfort like some distant dreams, warning and tides of foreboding, and a trailing sense of something indescribable. The last Ichigo saw was the universe boundlessly stretched between them.

And then the Soul King was gone and Ichigo jerked awake in the sudden darkness, the weight of his body strange and unfamiliar as he glanced around trying to place his surroundings. He settled slightly when he identified the familiar room furniture casting strange shadows in mere half-light, and in a hesitant manner glanced at his hand.

There resting in his palm was a small cylinder about the size of his pinkie, it radiated soft light that shifted like a kaleidoscope in his palm and sparked reaiitsu lightly across his skin. Ichigo closed his eyes and took a breath, tethering himself to his spirit’s presence, to the presence next to him, as he thought of what had occurred.

The Soul King, the one of the new timeline. It had been a conversation without words, between two beings that stood on separate planes. But Ichigo understood the being’s intention, his apology for a timeline that had ended and would never be, and the faint feverish hopes dwelling about the souls of the world.

Opening his eyes for a moment, Ichigo slipped from under the sheets and paced to the shoji doors, where with a discreet glance back at the lump resting under the sheets Ichigo silently slid the door open and stepped out into the night.

The cool air invigorated his lungs and helped to tame the buzzing that had swelled within his mind, reaiitsu flickering beneath his fingertips as he glanced at the darkness around him. Ichigo had never expected to meet the Soul King, the being who had been something akin to a statue in his own dimension. Nor did Ichigo expect the kinship that acknowledged itself in his mind’s eyes.

Glancing once more down at the cylinder Ichigo wondered at its purpose as the light shifted around it. He would know when to use it, the sense of such seemed to settle itself into his mind. With a soft exhale Ichigo leaned his head back against the support pillar, dragging a hand over his eyes. It was all drawing closer, and Ichigo knew every plan (if there truly existed any) had likely already succumbed to the Kurosaki logic as Orihime had once dubbed it over dinner.

Letting his eyes slide close Ichigo’s lips curved faintly as he thought of Byakuya finding him in the morning. Unconsciously his hand tightened on the vial and a wave of warmth settled over his skin dragging him into drowsy unconsciousness.

X

Yuzu woke slowly, everything hazy like a fine mist, but for the ache that had settled itself firmly beneath her skin. She could feel Karin beside her, feel the breaths echoing in her own chest. It was like a physical presence wrapped around her as she opened her eyes and glanced at her sister, that dark hair so like their father's that seemed to glow in half-light peeking out at her. Karin was staring at the ceiling, a disconnect to her presence there that reminded Yuzu of those times after a fight when the adrenaline faded away and there were just the consequences.

It rippled through Yuzu that indomitable concern and love for her sister that had always been there, a
part of her in any notion, and in an effort to return her twin to her Yuzu moved over to curl around her sister. Karin startled slightly at the new contact before she relaxed in Yuzu’s arms, the limbs of their body tangling together under the covers in a familiar motion. Her sister turned to face Yuzu, features still soft with sleep, it was there between them almost painfully aware. It was rustling voices that shifted like the wind, and Karin’s presence there pulsing like fire in her mind’s eyes so close she could reach out and touch it. Closer like it had never been, but the sense was the same.

Karin reached out and gripped Yuzu’s slightly smaller hands bearing far fewer callouses than her sister, reflected in her eyes were a myriad of thoughts and emotions that resonated within Yuzu’s own conscience. She nodded and gently the younger Kurosaki squeezed her sister’s hand silently communicating. They needed to figure out what had happened to their reaitsu. The way it flowed around the two was different. Theirs but not quite the same.

It returned to her slowly, the actions and events of the night before in increasing exhalations that were calmed only by Karin’s presence. The hollow, Rukia-san, their mother, and a zanpaktou glinting in the streetlight. In that moment Yuzu wanted nothing more than to dash out of the room to make sure their mother was okay, or to ascertain if it had all been a strange vivid dream.

Her slightly older sister made a soft hushing noise, eyes crinkling with understanding, and Yuzu nodded letting Karin’s silent assurances wash over her, settle her racing heart and panicked thoughts. They needed to sort themselves out first then they could worry about what had happened. Taking another calming breath Yuzu tentatively extended enough of her reaitsu to find her parent’s familiar presence within their home. It was a breath of relief in her lungs as she found them, her mother’s warmth humming about the kitchen their father’s own presence flowing about the house as the man pattered about the clinic.

With a small smile, Yuzu looked Karin in the eyes and nodded assuring her older sister. Karin was amazing with her hands, her willpower always left Yuzu struggling to form words (and Yuzu had her own will, it was just a bit tempered), but Karin would likely never be the most graceful with her reaitsu. And knowing that Yuzu had ascertained her sister’s silent words. But Karin could control her reaitsu, and privately Yuzu thanked their mother (and father) once more for teaching them what she could then passing the two off to Ojii-san.

Karin waved a hand in front of Yuzu’s eyes, pulling her from days in the woods hiding from their grandfather, running through the forest with light feet and airy spirits. The raven-haired Kurosaki flashed Yuzu a knowing smile, taking mirth at Yuzu’s near-constant quiet thoughts and pensive musings. Seeing the intent in her twin’s eyes, and feeling the warmth swell beneath her fingers Yuzu nodded with an affectionate smile.

They started with the slow breathing exercises their father had taught them when he first introduced them at a young age to the idea of reaitsu and the spirit realm (then their mother had taken over, thankfully). It had sounded like a fantasy to Yuzu then, some fae tale told to all young children. But over the years Yuzu had seen enough evidence to delay doubting her father’s words.

Together they focused on the reaitsu around them and within them, felt the increased pressure that seemed to settle on Yuzu’s chest, and the broader definitions to its structure. The voice whispered again soft and enchanting as if the cries of far-off gulls, encouraging them as the twins locked eyes.

Karin quirked a brow as if asking if they were willing to take the step forward, the last chance to turn back and delay what was pressing beneath her skin for another time. Yuzu hesitated for a moment biting her lip in thought as she furrowed her brow if they ventured further there was no telling what they would encounter. The battles their power would automatically enter them into, the world they were entering vastly different from their own (though she knew their uncle would always be with
them). But already in her heart Yuzu knew there was no escaping the events of the night before; just the same as her sister.

When Rukia had attempted to infuse her powers within them, she had only awoken Yuzu and Karin’s dormant Shinigami powers. They had always been able to wield their reaiatsu, manipulate it into Kidō and even some of the other techniques; the voices were whispering of something far different.

Feeling the rays of sunlight start to dance across her skin with the coming of the morning’s exhalation Yuzu nodded and closed her eyes, their minds slowly settled always in unison as they continued to focus on their breathing. The gentle inhale and exhale between the two syncing till it was as if one lung, one heart controlled their bodies. Their grandfather’s deep humming bass reverberating throughout her mind as he instructed them how to meditate, that twinkle he only got in his eyes when he loved his work shining at the two.

It was slow, like molasses dripping off a spoon, and then it was incredibly fast, and there was the strange sensation of something pulling at their navel. They resisted for a moment, unsure and lost, before the presence appeared once more, like beckoning will-o-the-wisps, a voice like leaves rustling in the wind, or the crackle of wood in the fire.

Yuzu opened her eyes slowly, the pleasant breeze heavily staged with fire passing over her features unfamiliar, and the quiet lilt that seemed to hum in the background strange. Glancing briefly around her surroundings, the younger Kurosaki pushed herself into a seated position. Her eyes found a familiar head of raven and relief surged through her even as the feel of the world seemed to pulse with that relief. Temporarily satisfied that her sister was there Yuzu let her attention lingering at their surroundings sparking her senses and pulling a soft gasp from her lips.

They were in a forest, it hung about them every inch in mottled shades of greens and browns that were so rich in texture they seemed to thrum with life. The trees were ancient reaching far off into the skies, hidden by a layer of mist, vines hung from their branches, and drops of dew caught on leaves like fae tears. Running her fingers through the spongy earth, Yuzu glanced around the forest floor and her eyes widened in surprise when the shell of a building rose in the distance. It glimmered like the sunset, warmed sandstone holding up three walls.

Turning her head, she could see another of the same stone and trailing away through the forest was a dirt path that echoed with sharp cracks. Light flickered crimson in the bowels of the forest and Yuzu tilted her head back feeling the cool mist and the sense of home that permeated their inner world.

As her sister shifted into a seated position Yuzu turned to Karin, the younger twin caught a mirror of her own surprise as the elder Kurosaki glanced around their inner world in silent awe. It simmered there in Yuzu’s chest in the same space, the feeling of right and peace that seemed to hover about the land.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

The blonde asked faintly voice quiet and muffled in the depth of the forest, Karin turned to face Yuzu and nodded words escaping the elder for a moment before a roguish grin danced across her sister’s features and they were suddenly rolling across the forest floor, tickling each other and laughing like they had when they were little. When it had just been the two of them, and their own world.

Settling in the leaves and dirt with a breathless huff, head resting on Karin’s lap Yuzu basked in the silence and warmth lingering throughout the world, knowing that soon they would have to walk forward, take the path towards their centre.
Karin weaved a crown of emeralds and twigs into Yuzu’s hair for a moment more before their eyes locked a sea of amber against steel. With a fond shake of her head, Yuzu sat up rising to her feet before extending a hand to Karin who took it with a grin. Together they turned to face the path, one that glimmered like hot coals in the misty atmosphere, with a mischievous grin Yuzu rushed forward leaving her sister to catch up. Laughing as the pathway stretched on, fires appearing in the distance crackling merrily, and her lungs burning pleasantly.

They arrived panting and with smiles etched onto their features as they straightened and took in their centre. A large bonfire rested there, flames merrily spitting and crackling about the wood in an elegant dance that rippled and formed inane patterns. The trees were taller here, reaching higher into the heavens, and their trunks were so round that Yuzu idly supposed that one could fit a car within it. Submerged within the great sentinels were the remains loitering about the forest in a beautiful crash of glimmering sandstone, and bark.

Surrounding the great fire were stones arranged in intricate patterns, and sprouting unafraid through cracks in the stones were small sprouts of grass. There was a tug in Yuzu’s chest that only then made itself apparent, but felt as if it had existed her whole life always drawing the twins to the moment there.

United they stepped forward into the clearing. The fire crackled and grew, flames bursting in burnished colours of blue and white before they shifted aside, and a form revealed itself within the fire, it took a graceful step forward, body living crackling fire. It stepped out of the fire and onto the cool stone, the ground shifting beneath its feet. The twins stared in half awe at their zanpaktou.

X

Chapter End Notes

A cliff-hanger! Yay. In which I am both apologetic and cackling with glee. So, did you guys like how the scenes played out? Rukia and the twin’s meetings, their inner world? Do you guys want to see more of the twins? Does anyone have any guesses about what the spirit king gave Ichigo? Your opinions are always appreciated. Review/comments (and guesses) are always welcome, thank you all for reading. Till next time!
Aleatory

Chapter Notes

Aleatory
(adj.) Relying on chance or uncontrolled element in the details of life or in the creation of art.

Hello everyone, we are back. I’m sorry for the unwarned short hiatus, but the week before I had the flu and was unable to write, and then I was just feeling uninspired. But we’re here now, and back on schedule. I hope everyone had a Merry Christmas (or whatever else they celebrate) and that everyone has a happy new year! I hope you all enjoy the chapter!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The walk to school was almost oddly quiet; odd in that Yuzu usually filled such silence with senseless babble about whatever inane topics. It was chatter that settled Karin’s nerves and filled the silence pleasantly, but their walk was quiet, heavy with the events of the previous night. A warmth was still singing through Karin’s veins, the presence of their zanpaktou spirit hummed beneath her fingertips as if they could catch fire, and there were senseless words that hovered on the edge of her consciousness.

There was also the quiet of contemplation, about a future that had seemed to unfold the moment they stepped outside of their door and left the relative sanctuary of their home. Their father’s prattle to his mother about fixing the remaining hole in the wall following them out the door (and the morning had in of itself been nothing short of hectic).

They passed by the streetlamp where the tiny vase of flowers was sheathed in the morning’s early shadows. There was an awakening sense to the scene, and unconsciously Karin’s eyes strained to find the little girl’s spirit, wondering if she had already met a Shinigami or the hollows from the night before. The thought unsettled something in her chest, the sense that had flourished when faced with their uncle’s undying will to protect his family.

Yuzu as if sensing Karin's turbulent thoughts began humming under her breath, some aimless tune that jumped and skipped in a way that sounded reminiscent of their childhood. Karin listened, noticing hesitantly in the vanquished silence, the expectation that seemed to hover over the town akin to a blanket, electricity caught under the covers waiting to escape.

The rest of the walk passed in a companionable silence and before Karin even realized it they were
in front of the school gates. The twins paused, that unexplainable tension seemed to press on the moment. Distracted, Karin could almost see their friends in the distance even as she turned to face Yuzu. There was an unsure expression dotting her sister’s features and Karin could only smile encouragingly understanding Yuzu’s concern. She caught the younger twin's gaze and the moment suspended itself in indecision before with a nod they passed through the gates.

Tatsuki, sight sharp like a hawk and just as fearsome, noticed them first. A smile slipped onto her features for Yuzu, who was admittedly impossible to hate, which turned to a glare when her gaze landed on the elder Kurosaki. With a challenging grin in Tatsuki’s direction, one born of partial excitement at seeing their friends, the two made their way over to the female fighter, who was accompanied by a bubbly Orihime, who was mid-story and waving her hands about her head.

“Yuzu-san, Karin-san!”

Orihime greeted with a cheerful wave and a bright smile as the curvy teen took notice of them; Yuzu beamed in return cheerfully waving at her friend. Yuzu paused a half step and sent a questioning glance in Karin’s direction, which received an encouraging smile before she glided forward to speak with Orihime, likely about the brunette’s strange dreams.

“Kurosaki.”

Tatsuki greeted with a playful light in her eyes, stance nonchalant and open as Karin stopped a few feet away. The raven-haired teen scoffed at the pleasant greeting and dramatically rolled her eyes before responding with snark, “What forget my first name Tatsuki?”

“Always, it’s just so incredibly forgettable.”

Tatsuki snapped back with familiar sarcasm, it was always a game between the two of them. It had been like that since they had been entered in the same karate lessons. Every week they had fought, and at first, Tatsuki had always won, completely dominating the mats; she was a near natural at the sport. But Karin was nothing if not determined and soon enough it had ended in ties more often than not. She had stopped with the actual classes a while ago finding them a touch too repetitive, but the two still liked to spar on occasion.

“Of course, just like your skills in karate.”

Karin parroted earning an arched brow and a half glare for the insult against the fighter’s skill. Tatsuki paused for a moment ire playing across her sharp features before she straightened and said, “At least I don’t rely on beating up thugs for entertainment.”

Retort hot on her lips at their playful game and Tatsuki’s accusation (which held no merit and they both knew it), Karin was interrupted as Orihime suddenly turned away from Yuzu to face the group as a whole.

“Oh yeah! Yuzu, Karin are you alright? I heard about the truck that crashed into your house. Was it the government? Have you been found out?”

The question was asked with complete honesty and sincerity, and really Orihime was a breath of fresh air sometimes Karin mused; even with her less than stellar cooking. Yuzu nodded placing a placating hand on Orihime’s arm for a moment even as the elder Kurosaki responded, “We’re all fine, there were no real injuries, the wall should be fixed by the end of the week, and our secret is safe.”

A voice that was a low rustle like fire over coals, drifted through their mind in sweet laughter and
Karin had the vague sensation that their spirit was amused by Karin’s words, or perhaps something else. Tatsuki’s gaze focused on the twins, intense like the summer heat, and Karin belatedly recalled once more that while Tatsuki was vicious beyond a doubt she did care for her friends and was a complete mother hen like Yuzu on occasion.

A wide interested look had stolen over Orihime’s features at the elder Kurosaki’s explanation, and Karin shook her head fondly as her twin and the brunette started conversing once more, from what Karin could catch it was something about monster trucks and the future.

Instinctively, some sixth sense whispering like always, Karin turned and batted away Keigo’s attempt at a hug, which was a seemingly random occurrence. He had attempted it every once in awhile since she had aided the teen and his sister against some typical Karakura thugs. Mizuiro in the background waved, that plain smile on his features that was always just a touch off.

Keigo began blabbering, talking at a speed where the elder Kurosaki was only able to understand every other word. After a minute she plastered a pleading glance on her features, or perhaps one more akin to long-suffering, in Mizuiro’s direction. The calm teen took pity on her and after a moment appeared to drag his friend off towards the school, placating whatever Keigo was complaining about with sharp words.

Turning to face Tatsuki once more, Karin was greeted by a questioning stare, one that hinted that as always her friend was far more perceptive than she seemed. The elder Kurosaki shook her head communicating that they were all fine, or as well as could be. Tatsuki moved to respond at the non-answer only to be interrupted as Chad appeared at the gates of the school.

The tall man stood like a bronze statue in the early morning, and it recalled to Karin’s mind the vague images of marble carvings of kings from their history textbooks. The half-Mexican spotted the small group after a minute, and with of strides squished himself between Karin and Tatsuki.

Chad shared a deep bond with the twins; one forged under a bridge with a golden coin swinging like a pendulum, and the other an inordinate understanding of true gentleness. Chad and Yuzu had a strange bond, but one that was a connection, and sometimes Karin acknowledged that the half-Mexican likely thought of the youngest Kurosaki as a sibling. However, the man still spent half of his time with the male populace of the school it wasn’t a surprising fact considering that the twins’ circle of friends was mainly comprised of females, but it still made Karin grin every time he settled into their small circle.

From underneath the fringe of his hair, Karin caught a concerned glance from Chad, barely noticeable if one didn’t know the gentle giant, but the elder Kurosaki was lucky to know the man. Karin smiled reassuringly and received a nod, the gesture conveying his meaning more effectively than any words, the teen’s tense shoulders deflated slightly.

Orihime turned to say something again to the rest of the group, and likely actually greet Chad other than her exaggerated waving. When the bell rung shrill and loud in that way Karin knew would likely follow her for the rest of her life, she still lamented attending high school on occasion. The small group shuffled around, picking up backpacks and light chatter as they entered the school and moved towards their class. As they ascended the stairs full of the usual bustle of students, Uryuu appeared beside the twins, his demeanour was wound like a spring, all tense shoulders and stiff posture even with his ever-present grace and Karin instinctively cringed away at the thought of their future conversation. Even as she wondered at his appearance, usually their cousin was one of the first in class, always impeccable when it came to timing.

Their cousin looked at them once out of the corner of his eye, his pupils reflecting like a gem from behind the lens of his glasses in an all too telling way. There was a sort of a half-tamed fury there,
accompanied by what Karin thought might be understanding. Their cousin had always been difficult, at least on the outside, Yuzu seemed to have the Quincy figured out, but she was a near empath. Some days Karin thought she understood the man and his struggles, knew what it was like to live with one foot in the spirit world, and difficult parents. Other days it seemed as if they were on separate planes.

Karin reached out tentatively, fingers just skimming the cloth of his uniform in a light plea for him to see them and their reason. Uryuu paused a half-step and glanced at her and nodded, Karin knew that was all they would have for the moment; there would be time later, a promise in that simple gesture. She put the matter to rest and listened to the strange hum of their zanpaktou in the presence of the Quincy. Their heritage had never made anything simple.

They settled in their usual seats, Yuzu by the window so she could gaze at the grounds and watch life pass by with a soft look that the raven-haired teen utterly adored, and Karin to her right; as it had always been. The anticipation that had seemed to crackle like static electricity on their walk suddenly returned in full force and Karin gritted her teeth wondering what fate had in store for them next.

She found out when the teacher opened the classroom door and glided in with her usual air of seriousness, she paused just outside the doorway surveying the classroom before she ducked out once more heels clacking on the linoleum in some staccato pace of the clock and returned with another shorter (so incredibly short) figure. Karin resisted the urge to bang her head against the desk, even as beside her Yuzu went stiff, mouth parting in a silent o.

The elder Kurosaki was both surprised by the Shinigami’s presence, and yet totally unsurprised that Rukia was in their classroom. In some ways it made complete sense (in other ways not so much) they were a loose end to Soul Society, unpredictable in the grand scheme of things, and events the night before had been left in half-finished syllables that were still yet unsaid.

That didn’t ease the partial dread that appeared at the Shinigami’s presence, thoughts of their father who had fled Soul Society, or of their own Quincy heritage. Somehow out of all the things their uncle had told them (and there was another tender situation; their uncle) what likely stood out most in her mind was how backwards Soul Society was or rather had been. She could already see things clearly enough and they were balanced scales at risk of tipping. Yuzu would take Rukia under her wings, it was a simple fact because she was mothering like that, and Karin would get to know the woman as best as possible, and likely form a friendship, if only for the aura around the Shinigami that quirked a smile to Karin’s lips.

The teacher announced the presence of a new student with her typical drole and niceties, before gesturing for Kuchiki-san to speak. Rukia introduced herself simply and with a small friendly smile and when directed took the seat directly behind Yuzu and to the left of Karin. As she passed the twins, Karin caught a glimpse of words sprawled across a sticky note, accompanied by a brush of icy reaitsu, warning them against saying anything. Karin only shrugged, they had dealt with the knowledge of the spirit realm for years on end. They could hold a secret.

The rest of the period flashed by in a blur, with the voice of their spirit whispering in her ear, Yuzu casually paying attention as Karin attempted the same endeavour, and the feel of Rukia’s eyes on the back of her head. It was slightly unnerving, and Karin tried desperately to resist the urge to turn her head around, just to see why the Shinigami was staring so intently. Instead, she devoted most of her attention to their teacher who prattled on about their English lessons.

Karin sighed with relief when the teacher finally finished for their lunch break, and the gaze like cold water slipping down her neck disappeared for a moment. A glance was cast in her sister’s direction before Karin stretched and rose to her feet moving fluidly to stand beside Yuzu’s desk as the younger
packed her bag.

She could almost see her sister’s actions before they occurred as she watched Yuzu glance unsubtly at Rukia looking adrift in the classroom. Karin spared a millisecond of a thought to stop her, to stop them from getting too close to Soul Society, but inevitably Yuzu had rubbed off on her too much she was forced to concede.

“Kuchiki-san would you like to eat lunch with us?”

The younger Kurosaki asked as she stood by her desk, bag slung over her shoulder, in that voice that was all warm and inviting. The Shinigami hesitated for a moment, gaze darting to Karin, which secretly impressed the older sister as she nodded before accepting the offer with a gracious incline of her head. Yuzu beamed, and the room seemed brighter for a split moment as her younger sister began pulling the unfortunate Kuchiki out of the classroom and into the hallway towing the new student towards the stairwell. Karin followed at a more sedate pace amusement playing across her features at the sight, she was soon joined by Tatsuki and Orihime the two chatting aimlessly.

The ditzy brunette glanced at Yuzu and Rukia in the distance, some flicker of emotion passing over her features. With a glance back at the two of them as if to assess if they would be fine on their own, she nodded determinedly and bounced off to join the two, likely wishing to welcome the new student. She could almost feel Tatsuki’s inquisitive stare beside her as the bubbly teenager introduced herself to Rukia. She only shook her head, some unspoken promise for answers in the future, even though Karin knew such a promise was as fickle as the wind.

It had always been difficult with their friends, the knowledge of the spiritual realm, and their friends’ own inability to see anything. They had always had Uryuu to speak to, and the slightly older teen had always stared at the two for a moment, eyes flickering with understanding before they would be sipping tea and discussing matters of death. But lately, Karin could swear she had seen her friend glancing and squinting at the air as if beginning to see the faint outlines of souls. It shattered and forged something inside her chest at the thought of her friend involved.

The rooftop was slightly cold with the fleeting dredges of spring as they entered, carefully settling into their usual area. Rukia stared around her with some wonderment on her features and unguided she glided to the edge of the building where the fence separated them from a bird’s flight. Yuzu carefully passed Karin the appropriate homemade bento as they both watched the Shinigami; a strange figure silhouetted against the skies on the rooftops, then she turned and glided back sitting next to Yuzu and Orihime with a softer crinkle around piercing blue eyes.

Before Rukia could even ask (not that she likely would considering her last name) Yuzu was handing her half of her bento, and leaning in to whisper cautious words about accepting food from their bubbly friend, even as Orihime unwrapped whatever bizarre combination of food she had for lunch.

Light conversation sprung up among the group, Yuzu and Orihime chatted about their dreams or Orihime’s vivid descriptions of the future which somehow usually involved technology and always vaguely sounded as if something out of a sci-fi novel. Tatsuki subtly stared at Rukia for a few minutes, all assessing and questioning as if demanding a reason for her sudden existence or seeing beneath the exterior before she began asking bland questions about Rukia’s background, which were dutifully answered in a polite tone.

Later in their lunch period, after the food had been consumed and everyone had drifted to their own states, Karin was helping the Shinigami with a juice box and its corresponding straw, and the other three (and Chad had stopped by briefly, as well as Chizuru who had been significantly less welcomed both by Tatsuki and Karin) were settled in their own discussion. Animatedly chatting
about their school work and joking about the tv show with a ghost hunter or something.

The elder Kurosaki fixed the Shinigami with a stare, the silence boundless between the two. Rukia-san straightened at the attention as if noticing the tense barrier to their sudden conversation, her piercing blue eyes seemed fixated on Karin, cajoling her into speaking.

“Why are you at our school Rukia-san?”

Karin questioned seriously, and there must have been something there in her voice as the young Shinigami’s eyes suddenly reflected like cold steel, and the elder Kurosaki mused lightly on the hidden vindictiveness in the gesture, another face of the woman one among seemingly many. She plastered a bright, oh so very fake, smile on her features and like a robot reading off a script cheerfully declared, “Shinigami are stationed in the living world for the purpose of cultural enrichment and protection of the innocent. Often Shinigami are enrolled in temporary positions to gain an understanding of the mortal realm.”

The raven-haired teen nodded at the answer which was all well and good if Karin had been a three-year-old. She turned ember-like eyes glowing in the noon-day light to Rukia, deciding that antagonizing the Shinigami could wait till after they were acquainted, who blinked at the sudden change from an aggressive approach to a lighter feel, before she could question it Karin looked on softly and then asked, “But why here? Are you okay Rukia-san?”

The spirit blinked for a moment in contemplation; there was touch of warmth in that expression, at the twins’ shared concern, before a smaller smile flitted across her features and they glowed like Yuzu after spending an hour in the kitchen, she responded, “A school is best for my age range, and I will be able to understand mortal schooling and teenage mannerisms which have not previously been covered,” she paused expression strange and a touch morose before she continued, “And I am alright, it will take a few days maybe a week to recover my powers fully, but they will return soon.”

The young Shinigami paused again indecision playing across her features as she glanced between Karin and her sister before continuing, “But we do not have another Shinigami here on rotation… and you two hold some of my reaitsu if you two are able…?”

She considered the words, the half-hanging unspoken question and some part of her wept with silent joy that the Shinigami still had her powers and would regain them soon, because as much as Karin loved their uncle, and knew that Soul Society was inevitable she would prefer to remain on the sidelines. Protect her family always, but they could do that without the eye of Soul Society focused on them.

There was also the relief that the Shinigami hadn’t been injured permanently. Some part of her had guiltily played the same actions over and over again endlessly wondering in the night if the woman was okay, wondering if there had been another option, another path. Even as their zanpaktou spirit chided her softly.

As if sensing the sensitive question, Yuzu’s gaze fell onto the two, it was that far away gaze that sometimes made it seem as if the blonde wasn’t all there in a way different from Orihime. She leaned over and murmured something to the other two before she picked her way to her feet making her way towards Karin and Rukia.

Their eyes connected, and the question was acknowledged with a slight tilt of Yuzu’s head, eyes wide, and lips pursed considering the implications of helping Rukia. In the end, it felt inevitable that their answer would be yes. She had willingly thrown herself into harm’s way to save Karin, they owed her their lives. And some part of Karin still wanted to be a hero, still wanted to protect her family and friends.
Yuzu squished herself beside Karin, taking her sister’s hand and squeezing it lightly, it was all the affirmation and reassurance Karin needed. With a breath that seemed to resonate like ripples in time, the eldest Kurosaki glanced up and stared into those eternal eyes and responded, “We can definitely help out Rukia.”

A smile slipped across the Kuchiki’s features, and mirroring expressions slipped across the twins’ features. Yuzu ever curious hesitantly asked Rukia about her job, and what she was expected to do and how they could aid her. Idly Karin let her attention drift trusting her sister to gather the information as her eyes fell about the sky, the gentle hum of their zanpaktou filling the void.

X

They watched the screens flicker and change with a strange glee as a hollow appeared followed by the image of a figure clad in ebony robes. Their plans were reaching fruition, drawing closer, they would protect them. Only them. The figure turned away from the screens flowing into the darkened room, eyes trailing across the cages lining the walls with beady ochre eyes staring out. An alert sounded behind them, and the strange figure only laughed.

X

They knew, the three of them, the moment Chad appeared on the roof during lunch with the birdcage in his large hands and a vague determined cast to his eyes, and there was a slump to his shoulder as he walked that rung every warning bell Yuzu possessed. Eyes that Yuzu had always found contained some great hint of terrifying awe, and the other the common gentleness were almost hidden behind his fringe but all the same, the younger Kurosaki thought she saw a hint of pain.

She observed the bird with a small sad smile, it was a beautiful bird, all subtle plumage and shifting colours caught like a prism in the afternoon light. But the eyes of the bird held such sadness that the image was distorted, and all Yuzu could see was the young spirit trapped within the bird’s body. She could feel its emotions radiating outwards in a way that almost brought tears to her eyes, a desolate mix of grief and desperation. She knew in a half put together way what it was like to lose your mother, or rather almost lose your mother. They had come close that night with the rain, and again years later in the same downpour.

Her smile became a touch less fake, she touched the ground again as Karin softly squeezed her hand reassuring Yuzu with her presence. The older sister had likely picked up on the presence of a spirit within the bird, though not likely the nature of it; otherwise, Yuzu doubted Karin would possess any patience with the matter.

Karin had never been overly sensitive to emotions or feelings, the way they sometimes filled the air like whispers of the wind, or travelled around someone’s reitsu and reminded her of spring, or the scent of homemade food. And the blond twin had always been slightly thankful for the fact, but Karin had always reflected what Yuzu felt like a mirror. Rukia across from Yuzu looked alarmed, features shifting rapidly as her gaze remained steadfast on the bird, obviously understanding the gravity of the situation.

At that point, Chad turned towards the twins and something of it all must have shown on their features, for from underneath the fringe of his hair Yuzu caught his concern. She shook her head minutely trying to convey the seriousness of the matter even as her gaze once more strayed to the bird who was happily greeting Tatsuki in a voice that drifted with innocence. Chad nodded once, and she wasn’t sure if he truly understood everything, only that something was wrong, but it was enough for Yuzu.

“When should we speak to Chad-san?”
Rukia leaned in and whispered as Orihime continued to speak to the bird, pure enchantment dazzling across her features, and revealing the dimples in her cheeks. It was good to see her friend bounce back from the incident the other night. Seeing her brother had been hard, but Orihime managed to pull through as always, she just carried that positivity with her like a halo.

Karin pursed her lips, brow furrowed in thought for a moment; Yuzu considered the question, and what they knew of their friend who was somewhat of a recluse at times. So, trying to find him in the evening would be difficult, not to mention their own semi-hectic schedule in the afternoons; Karin still insisted on playing soccer, and Yuzu would never miss cooking with their mother.

“It would be best to catch him after school, considering lunch is almost finished. He’s not in any clubs as far as I know so it should be easy.”

Karin suggested after a collective moment of thought between the three, their gazes collectively darting towards Chad and the small bird. Yuzu nodded, the logic behind the idea easily connecting her thoughts. Rukia repeated the motion a determined fire blazing in her eyes, one that Yuzu had come to admire over the short time they had come to know the female Shinigami.

Rukia was quick to action, she always thought things out, she was mischievous and enjoyed having fun, and she always strived to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves. Her own experiences with the mortal realm (particularly juice boxes) were always entertaining. Yuzu found herself glad the Kuchiki had stepped into their lives, just as she had glided in through the window. It was Rukia who had allowed them to save Orihime from the hollowfied spirit of her brother, and it was her quick wit that provided the group with bright laughter.

She glanced at the cage where it was settled beside Chad, Orihime was chatting happily to the bird about her day, while Tatsuki studied the small creature with a sceptical gaze. Deciding to join the three, or rather four, Yuzu cast a last glance at Rukia and Karin the two were talking lowly about Zanjutsu from what Yuzu could gather, it left a small smile decorating her features.

She knew the two had never expected to strike up a close friendship, but Yuzu had seen it coming from that first night, it was their playful arguments and their companionship. Shaking her head in fondness Yuzu made her way over to the group.

Introductions were made, and Yuzu tentatively said hello to the bird, Yūichi, listening as Chad detailed how he had come across the bird with his typical short phrases. The inevitable worry that surged through her veins as he spoke about the construction accident appeared as the younger twin studied her friend. Subtly she shifted to his side staring up at the giant who had a set cast to his features, he was determined to take care of the bird even with the cursed luck that was already following him. In some measures, it broke Yuzu’s heart even as she knew her friend well enough to acknowledge it with a touch of fondness.

Setting a gentle hand on his shoulder; knowing it had been injured, Yuzu channelled her reaitsu let it flow and ebb beneath her fingers as their spirit’s presence hummed in the back of Yuzu’s mind, she gently allowed it to take on the healing qualities of kido. A barely noticeable hum of green light, the colour of which had always fascinated her and reminded her of summer with all of its nature, surrounded her palm.

Chad glanced at her in surprise likely feeling the subtle effects of the healing, before he nodded his thanks (he had seen more than any of the others through his own muted heritage) gratitude lined his features in warmth and Yuzu smiled in kind. She liked how Chad communicated with little to no vocalization it was an art form to speak with him, something that was wonderfully uncomplicated in comparison to people.
Chad quirked a brow in the direction of the bird before his gaze swung to Karin and Rukia still huddled around their lunch. Yuzu nodded and shrugged her shoulder with a hapless smile that earned the slightest curve of the giant’s lips. They would protect Chad and the boy trapped in the bird’s body from the hollow no matter what.

They moved quickly once class ended, the three of them following Chad’s figure as it disappeared into the school courtyard and out the gates, birdcage swinging to and fro, catching the light like a beacon. Pausing outside of the gates Yuzu’s eyes traced her friend’s figure as he meandered down the street likely wanting to escape the hustle and bustle of the school before she turned back to Karin who was watching the situation with quiet serious eyes; the kind that gave her shivers.

Rukia impatiently tugged on the glove eyes flickering to Chad who had stopped in the distance appearing like a pinprick on the horizon, as the hollow presence that had lurked outside the school all day, likely only dissuaded by their presence, became vibrant upon the air in the acrid taint of hollow. Yuzu reflexively cringed, the hair on the back of her neck standing up as the feeling brushed across her skin.

Rukia beside the twins let out a pleased noise as the glove finally slipped on and with little relish or grace she let her hand collide with Karin’s forehead. Yuzu stepped forward and with an exhale of air caught her sister’s significantly heavier body, it wasn’t really that much, only the muscle Karin had built over the years.

The raven-haired Kurosaki appeared in her Shinigami shihakusho, the black cloth sweeping her form into fierce elegance, practised image of death as the zanpaktou sheathed at her hip gleamed in the afternoon sunlight.

“You two go ahead and catch up with Chad, I’ll place your body somewhere safe Karin.”

Rukia ordered with a gentle coax of her head as she easily took Karin’s body into her arms and made an aborted shooing motion. The two nodded, the movement in unison as Karin traded a glance with her, eyes focused and blazing in that way that reminded Yuzu of their uncle. Her feet picked up with flash-step and she appeared on the roof of a nearby building, balance wobbling slightly even as a grin danced across her features. The elder Kurosaki still hadn’t mastered the skill, but it was certainly a difficult one, to say the least, she would have it with time.

Channeling her reitsu through her feet, Yuzu embraced her what she knew as the Quincy portion of their powers, the cool presence that always felt like ice and the snow, their mother’s heritage, a challenging smile mirroring her own features. She glanced back once at Rukia who was watching with pursed lips and a furrowed brow, the Kuchiki teen smiled encouragingly, shifting Karin’s body in her arms with a grace Yuzu sometimes envied.

With a nod, Yuzu disappeared appearing on a building nearby, as Karin started to speed ahead, the sensation of a challenge lingering between the two. Yuzu knew the situation was serious, but she also knew that their game was harmless. So, she let the reitsu surge beneath her feet as she moved across Karakura’s skies Karin a short distance ahead of her, laughter breathless and inaudible between the two.

Chad was leaning against a pole, stance tense as his head swivelled around aware of the danger surrounding him. Karin spotted the hollow first, it’s reitsu was like a beacon where it crouched on one of the buildings eyeing Chad and the bird with a monstrous leer.

Her sister landed beside her with a bare caress of the air, hand already settled on the sheathed
zanpaktou at her waist; she was the picture of war. They shared a quick glance devising a well-known, already practiced battleplan that flowed between the two.

Karin paused, a hesitance resonating through her form before she shot an inquisitive look towards Yuzu. They could both sense the hollow was of a higher power level than the few they had faced before, though Yuzu doubted it would truly challenge them not when they fought together. She nodded hand reaching out to ensnare Karin’s briefly for a moment of reassurance, reiaitsu light between them before Yuzu stepped off of the building with easy grace.

She landed in an alleyway with a slight huff, reiaitsu cushioning her feet. Shaking herself Yuzu walked out of the alleyway and towards Chad who raised a hand in greeting, eyes still and alert beneath his bangs. In her peripheral vision, she could see the hollow crouched on the building behind them, gaze solely focused on it’s perceived targets. Chad’s sight strayed to the hollow, brows furrowing even as he continued to convey fake nonchalance with his posture. The younger Kurosaki wondered how much their friend could see of the hollow.

The bird, Yūichi, suddenly raised his voice in concern, trying to convey to the two of them the danger they were in. He began to speak of the hollow when Yuzu stiffened feeling the creature’s reiaitsu spike, under her breath she chanted, “Bakudō number forty-four, Sekisho.”

Her reiaitsu leapt at the incantation as Yuzu focused the energy on forming a shield protecting Chad and the bird. The assessment sprung into place and she heard the hollow’s angered incoherent yells as the attack it was to attempt was stopped.

Chad’s eyes were wide from where they were hidden behind his hair, and Yuzu flashed her friend a reassuring smile before turning to face the hollow. It was in front of her now it’s large form just across the street.

Her eyes widened as it’s tongue vibrated; creatures that looked akin to slugs appeared. Valiantly Yuzu ducked under the onslaught, casting a quick low-powered shihaksho to deflect one of the insects. The hollow growled, its large form towering over Yuzu, even as the younger twin prayed that her sister would wait till she gave her the signal.

She felt it as the kidō fell, unable to maintain it as she focused on the hollow, prepared to defend herself. Chad stepped closer the birdcage still settled firmly behind the half-Mexican teen. The hollow cocked its head staring past the two of them to the bird, Yūichi was crying out for the two of them to flee, to run, to escape. A wicked grin split the hollow’s lips and it began a long monologue about how it had dragged the poor boy’s spirit from victim to victim, all with the false promise of bringing back his mother.

Yuzu’s heart wept in her chest just as much as it beat like the drums of war. She vaguely remembered that night, and the days afterwards where their mother had seemed so fragile, like the porcelain figures they were never able to hold, like one strong breath might shatter her. There had been such rampant fear and worry, she could barely imagine what Yūichi had gone through. As if sensing her wandering thoughts, the hollow moved forward to attack swinging one of its large mast like arms even as its mouth made a sound, it’s tongue vibrating.

Before Yuzu could spring back or duck the blow the few insects that had managed to stick to her exploded, Yuzu fell to her knees with a cry of pain as, Chad slid forward and slammed his fist into the hollow’s mask, a cold ruthlessness to his person that clawed at the very air. The hollow stumbled back and Yuzu with a breath of strength rose to her feet and pulled Chad back before the hollow could retaliate and release more of the insects. With a shaky breath, she directed her reiaitsu to her fingers, focusing on the still dazed hollow she called out, “Carriage of thunder, bridge of a spinning wheel. With light, divide this into six. Bakudō number sixty-one Rikujōkōrō.”
The golden rods appeared, spearing the hollow’s chest and immobilising the creature where it stood in the light of the early afternoon. With a flourish of reaitsu, Karin appeared behind the hollow, zanpaktou unsheathed and glinting like living fire.

In a swift motion, carrying some embrace of Karin’s anger at what she had heard, the blade sliced through the immobile hollow’s mask. The air seemed to shake and grow cold with the hollow’s demise and before their eyes, two gates appeared opening with a rattling sound like that of the dying’s breath, chains appeared and dragged the creature into their depths with a final slam of the gates. Silence lingered for a moment, before Karin turned her concerned gaze Yuzu’s way, even as Rukia appeared around the corner, slightly out of breath.

Yuzu flashed her sister a small reassuring smile hiding a grimace of pain as she turned to face Chad and the bird. Her friend looked lost, conflict spattering across his features even as the teen also turned to face Yūichi.

Slowly Yuzu crouched beside the cage, opening it and allowing the bird to hop out on her arm, those too intelligent eyes looking up at her as the boy asked about his mother. Carefully Yuzu explained what had actually happened to his mother, how she had gone to Rungokai which was like heaven. Even if it was more like a stop in between. With a gentle encouraging tone, she asked Yūichi if he wanted to join his mother.

Karin crouched beside her then, handing the hilt of her zanpaktou to Yuzu with carefully coordinated movement. Yūichi paused in the silence and Yuzu could feel the young boy’s indecision even as Chad appeared eyes for once unreadable as he also crouched down, carefully taking the bird onto his arm.

Yuzu and Karin turned away for a moment to give the two privacy, Karin’s hand finding Yuzu’s unoccupied one and squeezing it tightly. Yuzu had never been in too much danger, but she had still been hurt and she knew Karin would beat herself up over the fact. Yuzu squeezed back even as Chad turned to face them a delicate war playing across his features, sorrow and happiness.

Yuichi hopped forward and murmured something about seeing his mother again. Yuzu smiled softly, something pulled from her heart rather than will, and gently pressed the pommel of their zanpaktou to the spirit’s head. The bird glowed for a moment before that deep intelligence left its eyes and it began to chirp happily.

Chad ushered the bird into a cage as the twins rose to their feet, Yuzu’s gaze travelled to Rukia who had been watching the scene with an indistinguishable look, nonetheless backed by some deep warmth.

“What were those gates?”

Karin asked as Yuzu leaned against her sister, beginning to feel where the explosions would likely bruise, as well as the adrenaline drain. Karin glanced over in concern before returning her focus to Rukia who looked away for a moment before refocusing she replied, “They were the gates to hell. Souls who have committed truly heinous crimes in life are sentenced to hell upon their death.”

The Kurosaki siblings nodded, and Yuzu stored the information in the back of her mind, remembering the chill the gates had brought. Feeling a tap on her shoulder Yuzu turned to face Chad who was considering the three with a half-cocked brow conveying curiosity and a certain curve to his lips.

Trading a glance with the other two, the blond teen silently asked if she could spill about the afterlife to their friend. Rukia pursed her lips before nodding, receiving a beaming smile that settled into a half
smile as she turned to face Chad leading him out of the neighbourhood and towards her own home, cage swinging merrily beside him.

“I’m treating your wounds when we get home.”

Karin announced from behind Yuzu likely having followed the two of them. Yuzu only nodded appeasingly, knowing her sister would likely help Yuzu slather some cream on and then be content. Chad faced Yuzu with the faintest corner of his lips curved into a smile. Deciding to start from the beginning Yuzu began describing plus souls.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading. The next chapter will have some more Yuzu and Karin but then we’ll be moving on to the Winter War and Ichigo. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Blanket!!
Depaysement

Chapter Notes

Dépaysement

(n.) When someone is taken out of their own familiar world into a new one.

Hello everyone, we are back with chapter 47. I hope you all enjoy the chapter, read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

It was the day after Rukia’s powers returned enough that she could manifest her zanpaktou, that their cousin dragged them away to talk. Well, drag was an excessive term, as he merely pointed his eyes in the shadows of the school gates and kept walking.

They had continued walking, past Uryū’s home, away from his still somewhat cold father and kind mother, and towards his (their) grandfather’s home. The walk was spent in relative silence, considering Yuzu’s talkative nature, though from the slight hints of amusement she could see curling their cousin’s lips she knew he didn’t mind. Yuzu’s chatter while usually inane, and easy to tune out was still something the two were fond of.

Sōken, when he saw the three of them in the doorway, beamed; the smile lighting up his lined face akin to how things seemed to glow when the sun escaped the cover of the clouds. With a cheerful greeting, the elder enfolded the three of them into hugs, the kind that Karin privately thought made one feel safe as if the world couldn’t touch her. The feeling was often replicated in their mother’s arms, though it was something more like Karin had finally settled home, some unseen knot in her chest untangling itself.

Their grandfather (because the man had practically adopted them after they were introduced) led them inside letting them settle at the living room table as the old man bustled off muttering about tea and likely snacks, as most grandparents always were keen to mutter about.

Uryū settled across from them with all the sharp restlessness of a prowling caged lion, watching him as Karin gracelessly folded herself upon the mat, she likened it to him both preparing for a fight and preparing to surrender. Yuzu glanced between the two of them for a moment, as if debating whether to wait to hear Uryū or to aid their grandfather in the kitchen. After a moment, in which Karin could practically feel Yuzu’s indecision she tugged the slightly younger twin to sit down beside her. Yuzu managed it with significantly more grace than Karin, though how she managed to do so the eldest Kurosaki could only guess.
From beneath the glass of his spectacles, Uryū glanced at the twins hastily before his gaze fell to the table, studying the rich swirling grain as the silence stretched between the three once more.

They had been expecting the conversation for weeks, Karin had half expected Uryū to challenge them on some Quincy pride, the centuries old hate between the Shinigami and Quincy, which Yuzu had scoffed and giggled at. They had known their cousin since they were young children, their mother insisting on socializing with her brother (however much Ryūken was an introvert). Their father hadn’t been too happy about it from what Karin remembered though she supposed they got along well enough these days, though not without their typical arguments.

Their first few meetings had been like most meetings between children, playful and energetic but also the curious tangle of meeting someone new. After that they had been introduced to Sōken, who had taken a look at the twins and promptly declared them his grandchildren, or at least that was what their mother recalled with a fae laugh that seemed to brighten the air, their father dramatically going into cardiac arrest at the sound of it.

Masaki had always advocated teaching them the ways of the Quincy (and while Isshin had whined, her word was law), and she had mostly done it herself, but she had happily foisted the twins onto Sōken along with Uryū for joint lessons. Sometimes, if Karin thought about it, their childhood had been an eclectic mix of the living world and the world beyond it; reaitsu training mixed in with simple school lessons.

Yuzu touched her hand softly, warmth sparking between the two, likely catching Karin’s nostalgic thoughts. The elder Kurosaki wasn’t normally one for reminiscing, preferring to live in the moment, to let the past guide her but never occupy her. But even she lived in the past sometimes.

Sōken bustled into the room once more a tray balanced on his arm as he smiled at the three, even as his eyes crinkled with concern, the crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes prominent in the room lit by the gentle afternoon sunlight streaming through the blinds.

He set the tray down, and carefully poured the tea with a practice and grace born of age. It was something Yuzu had always envied about the man, though personally, Karin didn’t differentiate between the two. The old man also set a small plate of cookies on the table with a knowing smile, even as the youngest Kurosaki smiled abashedly and reached out to take a cookie.

Their grandfather studied the three, the expectant silence that hung between the teens, before he took his own mug and stated, “I’ll be in the study for a little while, but then I will definitely be coming out to visit.”

He warned warmth lingering in his voice and on his features, the twins shared knowing glances and nodded with mirroring smiles in their grandfather's direction, Uryū glanced up at his grandfather and nodded. Sōken stood up slowly, joints popping loudly with age, and with a last touch of his hand to Uryū’s shoulder, he was moving out of the living room and down the hall.

“So…”

Karin began and trailed off awkwardly as any words she intended to say to start the conversation fled her and she floundered taking a sip of her tea. Yuzu smiled teasingly at her from underneath the lip of her own mug even as Uryū looked up from where he had been studying his tea as if it held the secrets of the universe within its steamy depths. He studied the two of them for a moment, expression shifting minutely between anger, helplessness, understanding, confusion, before settling on a slightly hapless smile he responded, “So you two have the powers of a Shinigami now.”

Yuzu nodded smiling simply, and Karin rolled her eyes at their cousin’s tact, she took a breath
tamping down on her amusement knowing Uryū didn’t need them laughing at him, they needed to focus on understanding, not alienating him further. They loved their cousin, he was family, and they didn’t want to screw up their relationship with him over something so simple as prejudice.

“Yep.”

The youngest Kurosaki replied simply, the words holding some immeasurable weight now that it hung between the three. Uryū drummed his fingers against the table and shifted the glasses on the bridge of his nose, internal conflict flickering through his blue eyes, ones that had always fascinated them when they were younger before he looked up and asked, “Was it your choice that this happened? Did you purposefully seek the Shinigami out?”

He was giving them a chance Karin realised; Uryū was trying to reassure himself that they were still the two girls he had grown up with. Karin turned her head to share a look with Yuzu only to catch her sister with a cookie in her mouth, fondly Karin rolled her eyes and wondered why Yuzu would eat anything sweet in sight, but when it came to her own baking she hardly touched it.

Receiving a nod from her younger sibling, Karin turned and faced Uryū, who was studying the two thoughtfully, mirth dancing faintly in his gaze hidden beneath a careful facade of sternness as it was. Karin took a sip of the still warm tea, savouring the taste before she gathered herself and looked at Uryū.

“We had no intent on receiving Rukia Kuchiki’s powers. The only reason it happened is that two hollows attacked, and we were unprepared for the second. It injured Rukia because she chose to jump in front of us, rather than let us get hurt. To save her and our parents from the hollow we accepted her powers. I-I suppose in hindsight now we could have used our bows but…”

Karin trailed off unsure and Yuzu picked up where her twin had left off, “But you know we prefer to wait for a Shinigami as they can purify the soul. I don't want to destroy a soul Uryū. By the way, Urahara-san should have the converter ready next week. We needed to protect our family, binding the hollow wouldn’t work… we didn’t necessarily expect for her power to awaken our own. But Uryū we’ll always be us, we haven’t changed, not really.”

The younger twin’s words hung heavily on the air, the truth ringing through their reaitsu, even as Karin reached under the table to clasp her sister’s hand sharing support between the two. Uryū sat across from them, expression pensive, a frown marring his features as he stared into his teacup. It was an almost tangible feel between the two, though more certainly Yuzu’s to reach across their table and hug their cousin. Karin shared a soft shake of her head with Yuzu, who pursed her lips but nodded understanding that they needed to wait so she reached forward to take another cookie.

Their cousin had always been a Quincy, his father’s expectations lingering on his shoulders, his mother supportive but tame in comparison to Ryūken’s cold ferocity, and while Uryū harboured no real hate for the Shinigami, it wasn't easy to forget the genocide of one's entire race.

They understood it well, experiencing their own conflict when their Shinigami powers had awakened. They had been raised by a Quincy and a Shinigami and sometimes their views and ideologies clashed. The Shinigami had killed their mother’s entire race, and yet the Quincy did upset the balance. They had struggled, were still struggling to find their own balance between the two opposing sides.

After a moment Uryū glanced up at the two, his eyes weren’t cold like they had been once when he had been beyond furious, like twin walls of pure ice, instead they were warm as he gazed at the two, just staring into their eyes for a lingering searching moment. There was still conflict reflected there, but in the end, he had accepted their answer and had accepted them.
“It’s like uncle Ichigo says, family is everything right?”

Their cousin suggested softly voice a touch unsure. The twins shared a nod at the words their uncle had always said with that peculiar twinkle in his eyes and a cautionary word about how a family wasn’t always blood. A grin danced across Yuzu’s features, one that Karin shared, and before Uryū could defend himself the two were around the table and wrapping their arms around him in a breath stuttering hug. Uryū chuckled faintly at their antics but reluctantly wrapped his arms tightly around the two returning the embrace.

It had been beyond surprising when one day they had been training with Sōken and Ichigo had appeared out of practically nowhere. Their uncle, who they had always thought of as a Shinigami due to his shihakusho, had stood there in the forest mired daylight and had begun to talk to their grandfather as if he had known the man for years (which he had).

Then he, of all things, had materialized a Quincy bow and showed it to Sōken with a puzzled look on his angled features. The three of them had stared in abject silence and shock for all of a minute before Yuzu had run forward to give the man a hug. He had happily caught her and swung the blonde around, while Sōken watched with glowing eyes.

With no reluctance Ichigo had happily slotted himself into their training sessions, appearing every once and a while to supervise or just talk to Sōken. He had provided insight into the technique and provided a few lessons on kido. The man, when with children had a particular glow about him that Karin had only recognized the last time their uncle had visited, barely noticeable, but once noticed it never failed to make the elder Kurosaki smile.

After a minute Uryū pulled back and made a shooing motion with his hand, typical indifference settling onto his features. The twins sidled towards the other side of the table sharing pleased grins even as Yuzu snatched another cookie.

“So, you have a zanpaktou?”

Uryū asked with hesitantly with a shy smile, as the twins settled opposite their cousin, Karin grinned playfully and responded, “So we do.”

He rolled his eyes in amusement at their antics and shifted the glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. Yuzu finished with the cookie, turned to face Uryū eyes glowing and said, “You should have seen our inner world Uryū, there were trees everywhere, and they were huge, and then there was a fire…”

Yuzu continued to chatter easily about their inner world, warmth suffusing the air as Uryū and Karin traded carefully concealed looks of dry amusement at Yuzu’s actions. As an only child, Uryū had never had siblings, though Karin mused that that had changed after he had met the twins (even if he was younger, between the three, Yuzu was the one they protected).

Karin studied their cousin as he settled comfortably, strict carefully maintained nature falling away, softening the lines of his features and spelling his blue eyes soft. There was warmth there written across every line of his face, and Karin knew he appreciated that they were sharing about their inner world. It was a highly private thing among the Shinigami, but between the three it was a sign of trust.

A knock on the entryway to the hallway alerted the trio to the presence of their grandfather, studying them for a moment expression pensive before he spotted the lingering smiles at on their faces and his lips curved up into a smile. The elder had never liked when the three of them fought (which happened about as often as one would suspect) and was obviously happy with the knowledge that his grandchildren had resolved whatever issue had hung above their hands.
The elder shuffled into the room settling at the table with a serene expression, he regarded the three of them carefully for a moment before asking about their day at school. Yuzu answered first, to the amusement of everyone else seated, laughter dancing on the air before the blond continued. Karin glanced at their cousin once, and he smiled at her, the faintest real quirk of his lips. The idle conversation continued to drift between the group; the teens carefully updating their grandfather on their lives, even as Yuzu managed to interject other ceaseless nonsense among it all.

Later after they had slipped away into the forest, like they had when they were children, Sōken watching them from the porch, Karin materialized her bow and shot a falling leaf challenge ringing through the air. Yuzu laughed and followed her lead; Uryū rolled his eyes for a moment, pretending to be the mature one before he joined in with a huff. Then they were running through the forest, laughing and shooting at falling leaves, bright Quincy arrows dancing about the air, and Karin knew that their family would be all right.

X

Ichigo returned from the mission, tired, soaked and in desperate need of a cup of hot tea, the rain season in the mortal realm had seemed to install itself with ferocity and vengeance in Soul Society. Slipping into his personal quarters in the barracks, Ichigo dragged a hand over his face as he wearily shed his haori and glanced in a half-measure of dread at the innocent stack of paperwork piled behind him on his desk.

Starting a war was hard, living it, managing it, and trying to lead a mission was tantamount to difficult, to say the least. He knew that with the increasing hollow attacks on the outer edges of Rungokai (ones that had incurred significantly less casualties due to their militia) that the Gotei 13 was expected to handle the matter in some form, but that didn’t mean that Ichigo wanted to slog through the thick forests for a week to try and limit the small invasion. He personally thought it was the Soutaicho’s revenge for Ichigo even starting a war.

The mission had felt longer than it actually was, but perhaps that was the weight of the oncoming war settling onto his shoulders. Already everything appeared so different, there were political aspects at work among the citizens of Soul Society, and the Central 46 had been all but overturned after far too many refusals to protect, to help, to do anything beyond tradition. And that wasn’t to mention the training that both Hueco Mundo and the Gotei 13 were investing in, training that Ichigo oversaw on both ends (the two forces were almost beginning to blur in his mind on occasion). The battle looked to be something akin to a full-scale war, much closer to the later years of the original Winter War, though far shorter.

Those first few weeks, before the reality of war, had set in, had been all about singular battles, trying to subdue the opposing powerhouses before either could gain a foothold. But then Aizen had decided to invade the living realm and Soul Society; the battle from there had fallen to the foot soldiers, Captains taking a mantle more akin to general. Hordes of hollows, clashing against the Shinigami like a sea of snow and the oncoming night; Ichigo among the thick of it, sometimes leading the charge.

Then there had been the loss, the bloodshed; days in the field under an unfeeling moon, or in the rubble of buildings that had once been homes. It had been the scent of blood lingering in the air, the feel of Zangetsu in his hand’s becoming like second nature as easy and instinctive as breathing, the weary of sleepless nights dragging his conscious down, something as unchangeable as the endless hordes of enemies. The battles had been easy in a sense compared to the Quincy, but they had lingered, marched on for what felt like time unwound.

Sharp knocking pulled Ichigo from his thoughts, from where his head had drifted to rest in his hands
lost in memory, in changed familiar faces, in trailing threads of sorrow. With a sigh, Ichigo heaved himself to his feet, and took a breath gathering himself once more, till he could stand straight and stare at the world around him.

On the other side of the door stood Sosuke, the man raised a brow, likely noting Ichigo’s still damp shihakusho, or perhaps the state of his friend, in any case, the man shook his head and entered without permission. Ichigo shook his head and stepped aside making a sarcastic gesture of welcome even as the man bustled into the small space where a kettle was usually kept, easily preparing the tea.

“Long mission?”

He asked conversationally even as Ichigo slid the door shut hiding the paperwork from view, paperwork he knew he would need to see to personally or Tōshirō (and somewhat Rangiku) would have finished it. The young lieutenant was already close to becoming a captain, and Ichigo felt a touch of pride over the Shinigami’s progress. Brushing a hand once more through damp locks Ichigo settled on the beige settee, pulling the upper half of his damp shihakusho off his shoulders he responded, “Only two weeks, but felt like a year with the rain.”

The scientist made a sympathetic sound (one that he had picked up on from listening to Ichigo enough) and brought a mug of tea over handing it to Ichigo, who tipped the hot liquid back feeling the warmth settle in his stomach and chase away some of the chills.

Sosuke settled across from him, drinking his tea with significantly more patience and watching Ichigo with a sort of haphazard weary. Ichigo looked up through his (once again) too long bangs and raised a brow knowing that while the man could be sociable, he wasn’t on the best of days, so there was, of course, a reason for his visit.

Emotions flickered across his friend’s features, indecision, anticipation, and maybe a touch of worry before Sosuke nodded to himself and motioned his head towards Ichigo’s tea. Receiving the message that the man would only tell him when Ichigo had finished the beverage, he idly sipped at the tea basking in the silence and warmth of the small room, letting himself unwind from the mission.

“Alright, what did you come here to tell me?”

Ichigo asked as he set his mug on the table, curling his legs against his chest to preserve some heat. A smug smile settled onto the man’s lips, the kind he usually got when he had bested someone usually Kisuke, like the cat who got the cream as the saying went; it was the kind of smile that made Ichigo either want to kiss the man or slap him.

“The twins have awakened their Shinigami powers.”

He answered and underneath the smugness there was an apology, lingering concern for Ichigo even as the orange-haired captain drew in a sharp breath before sighing. Ichigo scrubbed a hand over his eyes and focused on his breathing, trying to clamp down on his anger, and Shiro’s somewhat bloodthirsty suggestions. The reaitsu swirling around the room and thickening the air belayed his emotions at the new information.

“And why did this happen?”

Ichigo questioned voice dripping like ice, the mere thought of what had happened made him want to scream, to rage, to lash out, instead he channelled it into the frigidity of his voice. Sosuke blanched before he regained his composure likely knowing it wasn’t his fault or else he wouldn’t have delivered the news himself. The man glanced away for a moment in thought, and then returned his attention to Ichigo and responded with a touch of a smug smile, “Well Kisuke is still in the mortal
realm at the moment?"

The scientist suggested, having easily thrown his friend under the bus, Ichigo took another calming
breath before he tipped his head back and focused on his breathing. He had done everything in his
power to make sure the twins wouldn’t be dragged into the Winter War. Oh, he had made sure they
were prepared, had made sure that Isshin and Masaki would take care of the twins and their
education concerning the spirit realm. He had even visited them and joined the lessons often enough
(and admittedly his nieces/sisters were still adorable, and young Uryū was cute too).

And yet they had still received their Shinigami powers from Rukia. Ichigo knew it was Rukia, he
had heard that she was on a mission to the mortal realm while Kaien recovered but he hadn’t
connected the dots, hadn’t thought much of it because the twins had their reaitsu, and Kisuke was in
the area. But Kami dammit fate continued to tug his family to and fro, and he was powerless to stop
it.

Slumping against the couch Ichigo entertained the brief thought that it was already cemented, they
were all going to fall at the hands of the Quincy King; that was their fate as the very spools of destiny
were set to unwind.

He harshly shoved away such a thought, purging it from his mind with a lick of hate and anger
curling through his gut. Ichigo took a breath and focused on Unohana’s voice in his mind, and not on
driving himself into a panic attack with his own thoughts about the future. Time wasn’t linear, wasn’t
set in stone, it existed like one might imagine space existed in the same abstract concept.

Almost palpably feeling Sosuke’s concern, Ichigo looked up catching the man’s deep cocoa eyes,
hidden behind spectacles as they were gazing at him in worry. Ichigo flashed his friend a small half-
smile before he rose to his feet and tugged the sleeves of his still damp shihakusho onto his arms.

“Ichigo?”

Sosuke questioned, eyes curious as they tracked the orange-haired Captain’s progression as Ichigo
stood up and pulled out his zanpaktou. Turning his attention to his friend Ichigo let Zangetsu settle in
his grasp and stated with a hint of a smirk backed by anger, “I’m going to go verbally flay Kisuke,
and then I am going to return and sleep for a week.”

“Now?”

The scientist asked incredulously, his expression managing to convey a sense of disbelief. Ichigo
rolled his shoulders and shrugged all the grace of a predator following his movement as he replied,
“Better now then later when my anger has time to fester. Besides better to do it now before the man
goes and gets any ideas, or tries to escape.”

His friend didn’t seem to know how to reply to Ichigo’s logic, he took a half-step forward as if he
wanted to reach out and physically stop Ichigo before he shook his head and managed a small nod of
understanding. Ichigo hummed taking another breath before twisting Zangetsu in the air, in the space
between dimensions, opening the doors between the living realm and the spiritual world. He tossed a
last wave over his shoulder, temporarily energized with the new mission at hand and called out, “I
should be back in a bit, feel free to do whatever.”

Goodbye taken care of, Ichigo walked through the Senkaimon and let the anger Shiro felt resonate
within him, the twins had been in danger because of Kisuke, they could have been seriously hurt.
And the man had better have a damn good reason for that.

The Urahara Shōten was quiet in the early evening, a warmth lingering to the tucked out of the way
building that had instilled itself sometime after they had unpacked the tea set proper. Golden light still
streamed from the windows, and Ichigo could sense Kisuke in the building, the man likely engrossed
in whatever lab experiment had entertained him for the night.

Taming his anger for the moment Ichigo walked forward and knocked on the door. After a minute an
unfamiliar Shinigami opened the door, they were likely of the Fourth division if Ichigo got the right
impression (and it did help that most of the healers wore an identifying band around their arm now).

“C-captain Shiba.”

The woman squeaked blue eyes going wide at the Captain on their doorstep; he was likely quite the
sight, what with the rings under his eyes, and his damp shihakusho. Ichigo resisted the urge to pat the
small woman on the head like Shunsui might have done, and instead smiled politely before asking,
“Is Urahara-taicho here?”

The healer regained her composure and nodded glancing back at the warm inside of the shop, eyes
sharp like knives, before she turned and reported, “Yes, he is in the basement.”

“Excellent.”

Ichigo intoned crisply a slightly predatory smile slipping across his features, the healer blinked, shock
splaying across her petite face before she stepped aside, the expression slipping away to be replaced
by a small secretive smile as Ichigo entered the both familiar and unfamiliar shop.

“Can I help you with anything else Shiba-Taicho?”

The young woman asked bowing her head in respect, Ichigo smiled kindly and shook his head
responding, “No I’m fine from here, but thank you for your help. Oh, and if you hear yelling coming
from the basement don’t worry about it.”

She looked up at his statement, startled with hints of mirth flickering behind it all, and a small
mischievous grin dancing across her lips, Ichigo decided he liked the healer. The young woman
bowed and then turned shuffling off towards the kitchen.

Refocusing on the task at hand, to Shiro’s glee, Ichigo slipped into the back room and lifted the hatch
leading to the basement. With a fond shake of his head, Ichigo entered the training area, ignoring the
ghosts of his past that danced across the rocky tanned landscape. Instead, he followed Kisuke’s
reaitusu to where he knew the man had set up a portion of his labs, usually where he tested the more
explosive experiments.

The blond was hunched over a desk; bucket hat sitting dutifully beside him, and in the fluttering light
of the cave-like lab, Kisuke’s hair glowed like iron in the forges. The scientist didn’t so much as
twitch as Ichigo entered the man’s workspace, still blissfully unaware as to his misfortune.

The young Captain remained on the threshold for a moment, feeling explicably tired he leaned
against a support pillar and watched the man for a moment. He slipped into a half meditation an
almost dream-like trance before he startled awake and the thrum of life that was Karakura surrounded
him, and with it the presence of the twins.

“Kisuke.”

Ichigo said the name with all the force and danger of a dagger, the blond startled papers littered with
sketches flying like paper planes every which way as the man turned to face him with all the
ambivalent jitters of shock closely followed by horror slipping across his features.
“Ichigo what brings you here?”

He questioned as he reached behind him to pick up the striped hat and swept it onto his head, hiding the tangled mop of blonde on his head. Ichigo let his eyes harden to crystalline points, and for a moment they flashed acrid gold, as he stared his friend down, letting the silence speak between the two of them.

After a moment Kisuke slumped; his face was tired, lined with stress in a way Ichigo recognized when he looked in the mirror. His heart reached out for the man, his friend, even as he shushed it and asked light as a wire and just as sharp, “Why did the twins awaken their Shinigami powers?”

He looked up harshly at the question, lips quirking between emotions, as those oh so very intelligent eyes flitted from Ichigo to the ground. Eventually, after a moment Kisuke collapsed back in his seat, brushing a hand through the hair under his hat he sighed and responded, “Because it will keep them safe.”

“How?”

Ichigo responded the word like venom, even as he resisted the urge to yell the word, to ask how in the world giving them the powers of a Shinigami would keep them safe. Even if Soul Society was now more accepting, that didn’t mean anything in the face of the power the two wielded. If the Gotei 13 saw them as a threat, then some Captains wouldn’t hesitate to take care of them; only a few, but a few too many. And if fate decided to keep playing the same game then that was very much the course of action the future could take.

“He will seek them out, see how strong they are, regardless. This way they can truly protect themselves. I know you’re trying to limit the Winter War to Soul Society Ichigo, but sometimes war gets out of hand-”

“And now’s you’ve painted a bigger target on them! They are a product of a Quincy and a Shinigami, all sides will want their power Kisuke, awakening their Shinigami powers has only increased the danger.”

The younger Captain interrupted anger bubbling over and seeping into his voice. Kisuke flinched; expression-shuttering close, eyes dark like a storm and just as tempestuous. The silence lingered between the two, tense and thick like Ichigo could sweep Zangetsu’s through its pull.

“They’ll be prepared Ichigo. They were raised right, they’re like you.”

Kisuke stated softly voice falling upon the air like still notes. Ichigo glanced up and paused at the expression captured in his friend’s eyes, shuddering Ichigo wrapped his arms around himself and shook his head before responding, “That’s why we trained them to use their Quincy powers, to use kido.”

“Those don’t compare, not when your enemy has a sword; not when they don’t have their Vollständig. They were going to get involved no matter what Ichigo. If not now, then later when Barragan or Bach or some other maniac takes notice of Karakura town. We can’t keep everything contained to Soul Society Ichigo. This is helping them in the long run.”

He said, voice pleading for understanding, pleading for Ichigo not to turn away, not to break like a damn. Ever the master of words Ichigo thought as he stared at his friend. Both arguments held their points and Ichigo doubted either side was firmly in the right, as the case usually was. Feeling his anger evaporate, or at least shrink in its ferocity (and Ichigo ignored Shiro’s sad whine), Ichigo sighed and felt immeasurably tired.
Kisuke must have seen it on his features as he studied Ichigo with sharp and serious eyes before asking, “You’re taking care of yourself Ichigo? I don’t need to call Shinji again?”

“That was one time, and I wasn’t even that drunk. Besides I’m fine, just got back from a mission.”

Ichigo replied with a huff, crossing his arms over his chest, before slumping and leaning his head back against the pillar. He received a snort for his answer even as he knew Kisuke was likely rolling his eyes at the answer. Footsteps alerted Ichigo to the presence of his friend, tipping his head back Ichigo was greeted with the unimpressed visage of Kisuke as the man reached out and tugged on one of his sleeves.

Honestly, he was so acquainted with the thick damp cloth at that point that Ichigo had stopped feeling the damp clothing, and only the chill. The man rolled his eyes at Ichigo and asked, “Really Ichigo you couldn’t have waited to change into dry clothes. I swear I knew there was a reason you were a Shiba.”

Ichigo blushed at the acquisition tilting his head down to hide his gaze from Kisuke’s knowing one and Ossan’s rumbling baritone drifted through Ichigo’s mind reminding him of when he had been a teenager. Kisuke tutted and the tenseness that had caught its breath between them faded and the man bustled off pulling out a kettle from Kami knows where and fixing two cups.

He handed one to Ichigo with a small tentative smile, Ichigo took the mug and downed the tea feeling it fill his chest once more with warmth. Kisuke glanced at his workstation for a moment, thoughts drifting before he turned to face Ichigo and stated, “I’m almost finished the converter for Quincy bows.”

“How’s it work?”

Ichigo asked settling beside his friend as Kisuke after sharing a grin began explaining the device that would be like a bracelet and would modulate the bow to hopefully enable it to manifest in the same nature as a soul cutter. The young Captain basked in the warmth of the office and ignored the knowledge of how Sosuke would likely yell at him if he was still there when he got back. Instead, he let his reaitsu drift to check on the twins before returning his attention to Kisuke and materializing his bow with a sigh when the man asked.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! Next chapter we get into more of the plot. I hope everyone enjoyed their break, and best of luck to those studying for finals/exams.
Reviews/comments are always appreciated. Till next week!

Castle!!
Horripilation

Chapter Notes

Horripilation

(n.) A bristling of the hair on the skin from cold, fear, etc.

Hello everyone, we are back, sorry for the slightly late update, last week was pretty much a total write off for writing with all the culminating projects I had. But I’m almost free from exams, and will do my best to stay on track. Thank you to everyone who reviewed/commented last chapter, they always make my day. Finally, we are starting the Winter War. Enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Arata Himura wasn’t a coward, but the chills transcending his spine still edged him closer to the decision to flee. The other members of his squad looked equally as frightened; shifting uneasily, eyes darting around frantically, even if the members from the Eleventh presented a brave face, Himura knew otherwise.

There had been a report of another (one of many) invading party of hollows in the outer reaches of Rungokai, and so a joint patrol of the Tenth division and the Eleventh had been sent out. The mission had started out fine; they had encountered a few hollows, rescued a few souls, and overall felt an unsettling foreboding.

Then they had found tracks leading into the forests surrounding the district. Akami, who was the best tracker among them, had led the Shinigami through the thick foliage under the cover of early morning’s darkness. The sense of unease had only increased the deeper they went, and unconsciously Himura rested his hand on the hilt of his zanpaktou, mindful of what their Captain had lectured when it came to spatial awareness, he let his reiatsu slip out in searching tendrils.

Their Captain was a strange man; it was a generally agreed consensus among the members of the Tenth division, but he was admired by them all. If not for his amazing smile (which had quite easily captivated the rest of his division the few times it appeared), then for the dedication he showed towards their division. Constantly among them training the men himself, speaking with them in an easy manner, as if he wasn’t so far above them.

That didn’t detract from the darkness most of the division had come to recognize. Himura still remembered the one time that Shinsou had been speaking of the small rebellions that had brewed in Rungokai in the past after the dissolution of the Central 46. He had called it war. Captain Shiba who
had been nearby had turned, and in that moment, he had been cut like stone, and sharp as a knife, and in a deathly still voice he had stated, “That isn’t war.” It stuck with Arata just as much as the fond moments they often saw between lieutenant Hitsugaya and their Captain.

A presence rippled across Himura’s senses, something tainted and with the familiar acridness of a hollow. Glancing back at the Shinigami behind him, Arata held up a hand and clenched it into a fist letting them know an enemy was nearby. The Tenth division members nodded, hands reaching towards their zanpaktou, the Eleventh division members, though lost followed their example.

They entered a small clearing, where the trees opened up slightly, and the shadows were less dense, the sunlight just beginning to paint the earth in colour. Quietly the squad members moved into a circular pattern, pushing those with higher kido abilities towards the centre, and fitting together so that one would guard, while another Shinigami could attack. The air hung heavy with tension.

It slammed into them suddenly, with all the force and weight of their Captain’s reaitsu when unshielded. It stole the breath from their lungs, and Himura struggled for a moment in a blind panic, fear flowing like a river through his veins before he took a breath and pulled his reaitsu around him tightening his grasp on the hilt of his sword.

A man screamed in the silence, voice piercing and hoarse before it disappeared. Casting a sharp eye around the group, he noticed the nervous shifting, the fear that permeated the air, and the gap where the Shinigami had been.

“Hold your ground!”

He shouted, letting his reaitsu surge into the air to combat the overwhelming presence lingering out of sight. The men stilled, and their fear retreated a little so that they could focus clearly.

At that moment the creatures appeared, six, eight, fifteen, of them lumbered into the clearing. Great hulking ugly brutes, with bright colours smeared like blood over their bodies, and eyes like the pools of alcohol left after a bar fight.

Then it appeared, almost human-like in nature, with long black hair that draped dead and lacklustre, and an eye like living torment; pure sadism, the other wrapped in an eyepatch. The being licked its lips, a tattoo in harsh black ink appearing briefly on the long tongue.

This was the leader Himura could sense it, the power that coalesced around the hollow in torrential waves. He knew in that moment that they would not make it out of the battle alive, that it was no longer a simple hollow patrol. Because there was something as powerful as the Captains in front of him, and he knew somewhere that had always whispered, an instinct he was told, that this wasn’t the end, only the beginning. And then he thought of Captain Shiba’s eyes when he spoke of war and wondered at the chill in his chest.

He turned to Saitama, the fastest in flash-step, he was young and small, hardly a presence to be noticed, or missed. The man looked up, and what he saw there brought horror to his features, but he nodded and that was all Himura needed, he focused on the battle ahead.

The hollows made the first move charging forward and striking into their ranks. Arata slipped around one large beast, using flash-step to slice through the mask, as blood scented the air around them, and the rising sun painted the scenery gruesome, the cries of the dying a miserable orchestra.

He lost himself to the fighting, to protecting and aiding his comrades, dully in the back of his mind he felt Saitama flee, and something in his chest relaxed knowing the Captains would receive the report, would know of what they had died fighting for. The other part of him desperate to keep living fought
his hardest, reaitsu surging through his palms and releasing his Shikai.

Then the leader was upon him, and Himura knew he was nothing, nothing in the face of such power. He fought back, darting forward, and whipping his blade out to the side and in, every muscle screaming at him. But the creature was playing him, sadistic joy written across its humanoid features. In one fatal trip, the being’s sword was lodged in his stomach, he felt the pain, mind-numbing and all-consuming, fading consciousness, and not enough air.

Himura fell to the ground, vision darkening around the edges he reached out and felt the young Shinigami escape out of the forest, relief filling his last thoughts. Then he felt the sword resting at his neck and he knew no more.

X

Rukia stared at the small hand-held device that served as the Shinigami’s communication with Soul Society. There was a pensive look to her features, one that was almost a frown, one that Yuzu had come to recognize over the short time they had come to know the young Shinigami. It was a look, Yuzu had come to associate with Soul Society, or when the twins against all odds managed to fling themselves into some new trouble. It left worry thrumming beneath her fingertips as the cool night air sent shivers down her spine.

They had both felt it hanging over their heads, a wire, trembling and thin waiting to be cut, something inevitable. Karin had gained that sort of stubborn look to her features, and they both knew, as well as anyone else, that nothing could last forever. Everything had to change eventually, but that didn’t temper the emotions and worries running frantically about her mind.

It was late evening; the three settled at the old playground that they had visited countless times as children, Karin leisurely swinging on the unoiled swing ringing out lone wailing notes, and Yuzu watching from the top of one of the plastic towers. Chad had been there too, the four of them performing a quick patrol, dealing with the local hollows before reconvening in the park. It had become something near of a habit when Rukia had regained her reaitsu enough to materialize her zanpaktou and their own Shinigami powers remained.

It had just become another factor of their life, patrolling Karakura together. Sitting in the eaves of the forest and thinking about the future, about Soul Society, reminiscing. Chad and Uryū weren’t always there; their cousin more than happy to put aside extra time for his art projects, and Chad often working. But they convened often enough, and there was a strange sense of kinship in it all, beyond what they already had.

There was a different sense to it all in the late evenings on patrol, some burst of night driven energy and excitement, challenges and chases across the rooftops and skyscrapers of Karakura even as it was combatted by the occasional silence of the moments in between; the plus souls, the soft warm glances, whispers, and wild smiles.

Rukia tucked the phone away, eyes staring past the two of them where she was leaning against another plastic structure. Her gaze was distant like she was staring into the far reaches of space, stars caught in her eyes; Yuzu could almost sense the multitude of emotions lingering there, sorrow and joy, grief and relief. It all swirled together, and the twins quietly waited for their friend to speak, or rather Yuzu waited, knowing that if the Kuchiki didn’t, then Karin would take matters into her own hands.

The young Shinigami opened her mouth to speak, eyes darting to the two of them with something helpless and soft before she closed her mouth and the silence continued to stretch like the threads of cloth pulled thin.
“What did the message say Rukia?”

Karin asked quietly after another minute, voice soft in a way that it rarely was even with the older twin’s patience fleeing quickly. Rukia startled faintly and her lips quirked down, after a minute of contemplation where Yuzu could see the Shinigami piecing together her answer, Rukia looked up.

“I’ve been recalled to Soul Society.”

She stated simply, though the words fell with the heavy silence of certainty. Yuzu frowned, and she knew the expression was mirrored on Karin’s features; it was partially shocking the news, but they had also been expecting it. Normally the Shinigami stationed in Karakura only stayed for three weeks at most (that was excluding Urahara-san who seemed to be on some sort of permanent sabbatical), they were already stretching into the end of the fourth week.

“Recalled?”

Karin asked, and Yuzu thought she could detect a hint of sadness, something desperate there, and maybe it was the clinical wording, not some deep heart-wrenching statement. Yuzu bit her bottom lip, concerned for her friend, this was unlike the reports of the larger than normal hollows, or Urahara’s strange and bizarre messages that involved far too many emoticons. This was different.

“Is it Kaien-san?”

Yuzu asked gently, tentatively, thinking of the former lieutenant Rukia spoke of with soft reverent tones, teasing grins, and shadows under her eyes; the man who was their cousin, Ichigo’s brother, and someone who had near died. Rukia shook her head, gaze still horribly distant, and the blond slumped in slight relief. From what the twins understood, normally a Shinigami of her position would have remained within Soul Society to support her Captain. But the injury had affected everyone badly, and the healer had advised that Rukia get away for a bit, put her mind off of the former lieutenant. And so, the mortal realm it had been.

It reminded her of when they were younger, when people would flock to Yuzu for some reason, always insistent on talking to her and ignoring Karin. The twins had always snuck off away from the crowds because, in the end, they were overwhelming. They valued their friends, their values were centred around family, but they knew just as well, that sometimes time was needed.

It must have shown on their faces, for a kind smile, the kind of twist of one’s lips that suggested they were trying to make the best of it all, settled on Rukia’s features and she inclined her head in a slight nod before continuing, “Normally Urahara-san would be able to tell me, probably in advance. But…”

“Has something happened in Soul Society?”

Yuzu asked with concern, as Rukia trailed off, hand unconsciously straying to where her zanpaktou normally rested at her waist. A wild look, something dangerous and ancient swiftly danced across their friend’s features and then it was gone. She turned to the two; considering, her eyes shining with her age, those deep abyss eyes, in a way that was knowing you were staring into the eyes of someone who was much older. Whatever she had seen in their serious gazes seemed to convince her.

“A full war has broken out between the forces of Hueco Mundo, and Soul Society.”

She started tiredly and with a slump of her shoulders. The younger twin stifled a gasp, even as Karin beside her radiated shock and concern. The news was something completely unexpected, they had always known of the fragile balance between the three races, the centuries-long struggle between the
Shinigami and the hollow. But a full war? That was different.

“A war?”

Karin questioned confusion puzzling across her features. Rukia crossed her arms over her chest and sighed nodding her head, she pursed her lips for a moment then answered, “There have been a rising number of hollows within Rungokai, and recently whole raiding parties. The final step happened sometime yesterday. As to what it was, I have no clue, but… this was partially expected.”

Yuzu blinked at the explanation, a frown placing itself on her features as she studied their friend. In some ways, it was hard to imagine Rukia fighting in a war, to correlate the images of her on patrol, or with her Chappy drawings, with the common idea of war they were taught in history. There was a deeply seeded concern seating itself inside her chest at the thought of their friend in a war, their friend who was hundreds of years older, and yet in so many ways still a teenager.

Yuzu was worried that their friend wouldn’t come back alive. They knew Rukia was competent, talented even among the Shinigami, but that didn’t lessen the knowledge that in war there were casualties.

Karin’s hand found Yuzu’s own, pulling her from spiralling thoughts, and she looked over and hid a smile at the murmured whispers she got from her sister, ones about not allowing them to take their Shinigami into a war zone. The elder being studied the two of them for a moment, pensive before she continued, “It’s okay you two, this is why I decided to become a Shinigami, to protect the weak. It's my duty.”

Rukia settled a hand on Karin’s shoulder, reaitsu leaking reassurance even as she squeezed her shoulder once before she stepped back. Yuzu considered the fact, tried to understand Rukia’s motivations. And in some ways, the twins understood, really it was who they were at the core of it all, it was just that Rukia was protecting a much larger idea of family.

“Can we help in any way?”

Karin asked, fire-like determination lighting her eyes up in the flickering halo of the streetlights. Rukia’s eyes widened, surprise and fondness filtering there even as those eyes were sharp. She shook her head near immediately, warning playing itself across her features as she shifted and replied, “Stay safe, stay here. You’re both too young to get involved in a war.”

“But we have our powers, we could help.”

Karin protested, and Yuzu was torn between the two, eyes darting between the raven-haired Shinigami and her sister as they stared each other down, equal parts fierce and begging. Yuzu and Karin both wanted to help Rukia, help the thousands of souls under the protection of Soul Society because while they might not have the experience the Shinigami had after hundreds of years in the fields, they had power, and the will to fight.

Another part of Yuzu quailed at the thought of serious battle; there was something different about their patrols. Those were simple mindless hollows for the most part. But she knew without a doubt, that war didn’t simply come because a few hollows invaded, there had to be a puppet master at the head of it all. It scared her, simply, and she knew Karin felt the same even beneath the courageous bluff.

Rukia stared the two of them down, eyes sharp as knives and just as cutting, challenging them to hold true to their words. Yuzu’s hands tightened into fists at her side and she watched as after a minute the stern expression faded and their friend sighed, eyes soft and endearing.
“You two need to stay here and keep Karakura safe. You’re not ready for what will happen.”

Rukia stated knowingly, and though it hurt somewhere inside her head, Yuzu knew their friend was right. Karin made to protest, but the blonde reached over and snatched her sister’s wrist casting a dissuading look.

“Are you leaving now?”

Yuzu questioned softly, peering up at their friend who studied them with a sad look, hesitant for a moment before she nodded and responded, “It would be for the best. Ukitake-san is going to need all the help he can get. I’m surprised I wasn’t called earlier.”

They nodded, and Yuzu wanted to protest, wanted to demand their friend to stay, to ignore the summons to war. But she knew, as well as Rukia, that she couldn’t ask that. Karin was quiet for a long moment, features sharp in pensive shadows before she looked up and there was that familiar blaze to her eyes.

“Then we better get to Urahara-san’s.”

She stated voice light and encouraging even as the younger could feel the same masked emotions. Rukia studied the two once more, those deep eyes sad and knowing, before they were gone, and a mask was there. The kind she had learned to whip out in an instant from her older brother, and her sister, she had relayed one night.

Sighing Yuzu slipped down from the playground structure, that seemed to glow a murky yellow in the evening, and Karin popped off the swing, the two easily joining Rukia. She smiled at the two something warm and fond.

They slipped out of the playground, and Yuzu pushed aside the slight niggling feeling that their dad would probably yell at them for breaking curfew (as much as his yelling was more whining and crying). Instead, the three stood, staring at the road that stretched and lead to the outskirts of turn, empty and forlorn in the nighttime, with flickering streetlights it seemed both a warning and premonition.

The Urahara Shōten glowed warmly in the dusty corner; it sat like a sleeping giant, there was always an air about the place that something was not as it seemed. Yuzu had long ago come to love the tiny shop, with its ancient wood structure, the small section of candy Urahara-san kept, and the other eccentric visitors that always hung about the place. Karin was much less of a fan, but she had come to see the merit of having a ‘retired’ Shinigami living nearby.

The door slipped open after a quiet moment, and the healer they had met before after a few too many incidents that even Yuzu was struggling to heal, appeared. Amaya’s warm blue eyes widened in partial shock when she saw the three of them, even as she stepped back, eyes darting towards the basement before back to them.

Yuzu smiled kindly falling into step beside the healer as the two raven heads forged ahead; there was a seriousness to the two that Yuzu recognized when they were in a battle that wasn’t simple tactics.

The basement training area was just as dusty as always Yuzu observed mildly, glancing around at the sprawling mass of stone pillars and endless rusty earth. It still inflicted some awe to see the massive area hidden underground.

Urahara-san appeared after a moment, striped bucket hat tilted over his features in his usual jest, and the familiar fan held gracefully in his hands. There was a seriousness that hung on his shoulders like
the haori they sometimes saw Ichigo wear, and it reminded Yuzu in the same manner of Ichigo on that day in the rain.

He studied the three of them, and his eyes were like bullets as they landed on Rukia. Some unseen message passed between the two Shinigami, the blonde’s eyes narrowing, even as Rukia remained still, spine straight before the man’s shoulders slumped and he nodded.

Then the scientist turned to study the two of them, and his eyes were that eccentric mix between intrigued, fond, and something unnameable. He scrubbed a hand over his features and said, “I’ll be going to Soul Society in three days, though Kuchiki-san is leaving now. Amaya will remain here in Karakura town unless she is needed in Soul Society.”

The group of women nodded, and Rukia after sparing a reassuring look towards the twins stepped forward to speak too Urahara-san privately. Karin turned to face Yuzu and Amaya, even as the youngest shifted on her feet, fighting the chill that swept through the underground area.

“We can handle the patrols if you’d like?”

Karin suggested to the young Shinigami, who looked up startled before smiling and nodding her head in thanks, a mischievous quirk of her lips alerted Yuzu as the healer replied, “And in return news about Soul Society?”

Karin sputtered at the cheeky answer, even as Yuzu and the healer shared a laugh, quiet and tamed by the situation but there nonetheless. After a few more minutes of silence, Rukia and Urahara-san rejoined the group once more, grim expressions painting their features. Yuzu couldn’t blame them, not with thoughts of an oncoming war.

Amaya sidled away to speak with the scientist, as Rukia stepped closer those clear eyes studying the two of them with a supernova of emotions. Karin was still beside Yuzu and tentatively, like when they had been small children she asked, “You’ll come back?”

Her eyes flashed but Rukia nodded and there was determination there, that will to live they had glimpsed that first meeting. Yuzu stepped forward, and before the Shinigami could defend herself, Yuzu wrapped the woman in a tight hug.

“Don’t die please.”

She whispered in the eternity-suspended space between them as Rukia tensed and relaxed wrapping her arms around Yuzu as if she were a lifeline. Rukia nodded into her shoulder and her resolve harmonized in her reaitsu.

Then the Kuchiki stepped back, and Karin dragged their now protesting friend into another hug, this one much more bone crushing in nature. After another minute, where Yuzu could feel the burning sensation behind her eyes that signalled she was close to tears (and how could she not be? Their friend was going to war, and promises weren’t lifeblood), Karin stepped away.

Rukia stood there for a moment a lone silhouette against the golden backdrop, and Yuzu committed the sight to memory, her blue eyes, the way her lips curved into the faintest indication of a smile, the way her hair feathered about her face.

Then Urahara stepped into the picture, and Yuzu wiped at her eyes, silently she prayed for their friend’s safety, for her to come back alive and whole. The scientist’s zanpaktou was drawn with deadly elegance, inserting itself into the space between dimensions and calling into existence the familiar shoji doors; both a tiding of warning and welcoming gates.
Rukia stepped into the hazy light of the doorway, and over her shoulder, she glanced back and caught their eyes, she nodded lips curled into an encouraging smile, then she slipped through the gates.

Yuzu leaned into Karin’s side and took a few deep breaths, finding her sister’s hand she took comfort in the physical sensation. They watched together as the door disappeared and prayed that Rukia would survive.

X

Ichigo slumped forward onto his desk, resting his forehead on the cool surface, with a put-out sigh. Low raspy laughter echoed through the small room, and Ichigo lifted his head to glare balefully at Shiro, where the spirit was sprawled across the couch, limbs splayed every which way. The pale spirit waved, even while Ichigo could feel the concern radiating from the hollow spirit. Ossan in front of Ichigo stared in a slightly reproachful manner, mostly laced with concern.

He almost wished for some of the elder spirit’s sake, if only to take some of the edge off of the headache growing behind his eyes. But he knew Unohana would likely murder him if he started drinking right now, she was already yelling at him for the ‘few’ times he smoked with Kainen.

There was a Captains meeting he needed to be at. The thought entered his mind with honey-like slowness, and Ichigo acknowledged it, before shooing it away preferring to sulk for a few more minutes. He knew what the meeting was about, just as he had known the minute the Shinigami had entered his office, eyes wide and traumatized; he would have to keep an eye on the poor man.

A gentle hand pushed the bangs collecting over his eyes out of the way, and Ichigo peered up at his zanpaktou spirit, Ossan smiled softly, fondly down at him, even as his own eyes radiated the dull pain that had seemed to lodge itself in his chest the moment the war first began, or perhaps it had always been there, a reminder.

“C’mon King ya can survive this.”

Shiro cajoled in his typical encouraging manner, Ichigo only nodded in appeasement, as he shoved away from his desk and stood up, feeling old scars aching. He turned briefly to face the window, to see the vast stretches of Soul Society spelt out before him in white stone, almost glowing faintly.

“It’s not the surviving I’m afraid of.”

The Captain acknowledged quietly before he reached over and picked up Zangetsu, feeling the two spirits dematerialize after sharing concerned looks. He could almost sense their plans to frog march him to Unohana’s office, which would be nothing short of troublesome considering Shiro’s appearance. He was already debating on how to deal with Muramasa.

Pushing aside his procrastinating thoughts, Ichigo exited his office, pausing briefly to glance at the barracks and flash his men (and women) an encouraging smile, that faded slightly as he studied the gathered Shinigami, crossing his arms over his chest he sighed and said, “War has started, if you don’t think you can handle this, if you can’t face hollows, like numbers you’ve never seen before, then go to the Fourth, volunteer, or stay and protect Soul Society. Either way, you are Shinigami and if you can’t fight, you will defend, or aid in some way. We’ll likely be sent out tonight as a raiding party, those who are skilled at flash-step be ready.”

Then he was skipping across the roof of Soul Society, likely much to the Soutaicho’s dismay (he had once received a full hour lecture on it), a silhouette against the evening skies. The First division was as imposing as ever, even with its standard design, it seemed the building would always carry a sense
of the ancient man who led Soul Society. Slipping in quiet as a wraith, Ichigo entered the meeting room following behind Love who carried himself with typical nonchalance, every step to an unseen rhythm.

They received a glare for their tardiness, one that was like living embers, but Ichigo could hardly find the effort to care. He slipped into place beside Shunsui and tried to settle comfortably, his former Captain glanced at the orange-haired Shinigami from underneath the brim of his straw hat, knowing concern decorating his features. Ichigo only tilted his head slightly and quirked his lips in a small reassuring smile, the elder nodded, atypical seriousness stealing over the man’s features.

The Soutaicho waited a minute for the gathered attention of the collective Shinigami, studying them all with his piercing gaze from underneath large brows, long shadows cast on the lines of his face. There was a tenseness to the air, something anticipatory and afraid as if all gathered knew what was to be said but still didn’t want to hear it. Ichigo supposed the truth was somewhere close to that.

“War has begun.”

Yamamoto stated in the hovering silence, shattering it completely so that it lay about the Captains like broken glass. Reaitsu rippled throughout the room, managing to convey a deep sense of the shock and horror at the statement, and Ichigo hid a minute flinch at the magnitude of the emotions filling the room.

The Captain of the Tenth rubbed a hand over his features and glanced briefly at Shunsui who was pensive, face grim and dark like a carved statue, the kind he had seen in the old museums, those of ancient warriors before the coming storm. The Soutaicho rapped his cane against the floor, drawing the attention of the Captains once more, he studied them all again with still seriousness before with a sigh that seemed to relay the man’s old age he continued, “This morning we received a report from a coalition squad of members from the Tenth and Eleventh divisions, that they were attacked by a hollow, and Espada of Captain level. An hour ago, a Garganta opened on the outskirts of Soul Society, and another Espada of Captain class stepped through. No civilians were harmed, but the hollow remained in clear challenge until Chōjirō and I arrived, where a declaration of war was delivered.

We will not stand idly by while the hollows think themselves strong enough to invade Soul Society. We will station four of the squads within Soul Society, the rest will prepare for an offensive assault a week from now. If we are to survive this confrontation, then we need end it as swiftly as possible.”

Silence heaved about the room, upturning any semblance of serenity with heaving breaths and plain shock. Ichigo clenched the pommel of Zangetsu, drawing strength from the presence of his spirits he glanced around the room wondering who would speak out if any. There was a dull grim acceptance that filled the space just as violently as silence, there was no avoiding it.

“Do we have any idea why the hollows have chosen to attack now?”

Ukitake asked softly, concern and weary lining his brow, Shunsui beside Ichigo shifted at his friend’s voice, and Ichigo carefully watched the Soutaicho for his reaction. The news about the encounter an hour ago was both news and not. He had felt Ulquiorra’s presence the moment he had stepped foot into Soul Society, but he had had not an idea as to what the result would be. Whether it was Barragan once more thinking he had power or an act of Ulquiorra’s own free will, the apathetic hollow had proven to have an instinct that stretched far beyond anything Ichigo had ever seen.

That a formal issue of war had been declared was in some ways surprising, but also something he completely expected of someone like Barragan who divined pleasure in that bullshit for some reason. It was almost like Sosuke in all of his dramatic finery, perhaps that was why the hollow had become
They had all on some level known it was coming, perhaps not a war with the hollows of Hueco Mundo, but a war nonetheless. The changes that had revamped Soul Society; reformed the divisions providing extensive training, sheltered Rungokai from attack, shifted the structure of command so that the weight was more evenly distributed. All that wouldn’t have come about without reason, even if Ichigo was a good portion of said reason.

“What are we planning for the invasion? There are massive droves of hollows, that’s not even including the hollow forest. To try and completely conquer them would be a foolish endeavour doomed to fail.”

Sosuke commented crisply, though as usual managing to retain an air of politeness and a genial smile. Ever since the man had been promoted to Captain, some of the fakeness that had paraded around with the man had fallen away, and it made Ichigo grin to see it. See the sometimes startled looks of the Shinigami when the man said something that slipped outside of the genial mask.

As he considered his friend’s warning, he shivered at the thought of the hollow forest; he was glad that a few years ago he had rescued the Shinigami stuck there (and if the man was in his division then it was just because Ichigo had good taste or something) and hadn’t been back since. There was something about the place that bristled the hair on the back of his neck and shook every instinct. It wasn’t fear but caution.

“That is well understood Aizen-taicho. However, our assault plan will focus on the Espada in charge of the hollows; they will be the ones we will need to focus on. Without their guidance, the hollows will resume their typical nature. The squads will be joining us, as there will no doubt be many hollows under the control of the Espada.”

The Soutaicho answered, the deep rumbling voice stretching into the silence. Sosuke demurred and nodded bowing his head, stepping back even as his glasses caught the light in a familiar play. Ichigo tapped his fingers against his thigh as he listened to the hushed murmurs surrounding him. He wondered if the Soutaicho would be able to order the Shinigami from killing the Espada, he doubted so.

Though he wouldn’t mind if Nnoitra ceased to exist, he had grown close to the others, they were just as brilliant and capable as their Shinigami counterparts. In some respects, more so, they were all unique, with quirks, and smiles, and Ichigo found himself thinking them as a family all over again; Tia’s motherly persona hiding underneath the cold exterior, Grimmjow’s relentless excitement and cockiness, Starrk’s quiet contemplativeness.

The disquiet continued to surge about the room as the Captains continued to discuss in quiet hushed whispers what the Soutaicho had essentially spelt out for them. They were the ones who would be fighting the Espada, portents of unknown power and abilities. It reminded Ichigo deeply of the first Winter War, the battles surging forward, the powerhouses’ vs each other, and yet everything was so very different, the attack was on their terms, and there was no mystical god-stone everyone was seeking.

Yamamoto’s reaitsu flared throughout the room, and the temperature increased with his ire as silence once more fell. Ichigo glanced up at the old man standing there with a deep exhaustion in his eyes, barely noticeable to anyone who hadn’t come to know the man; who hadn’t come to know such exhaustion intimately. He almost debated dragging the elder to Unohana, as partial revenge, but also in general concern for the man who had become something of a grandfather.

“The four Divisions remaining in Soul Society will be the Seventh, the Thirteenth, the Twelfth, and
the Fourth. However, we will be requiring the aid of Shinigami from all divisions.”

The Soutaicho announced, and Ichigo ran over the decision in his mind, he had suggested some of the divisions that would be best suited to remain on the home front but had ultimately left the decision to the old man.

The Seventh and the Thirteenth would serve as the primary defenders of Soul Society, and while they weren’t divisions that focused on brute force like the Eleventh, the Thirteenth had an excellent mastery of kido, and the Seventh had developed into a division proficient in hand to hand combat, and Zanjutsu.

Scientists by nature were not to be soldiers on the battlefield, they would better serve as the support they were, providing connections between the home front and the battlefront, as well as updated technology, it also provided Sosuke with an outlet to watch over Soul Society. Though the majority of the Fourth would remain in Soul Society to handle the wounded, it was simple fact that those particularly gifted would be running the field tents.

“The Fourth will spare a squad of healers for the invading force.”

Unohana stated crisply and clearly, her melodious voice almost echoing in the chambers where they were gathered. The Soutaicho nodded his assent to the statement, even as the Captains who remain within Soul Society shifted through a wide range of emotions, though Ichigo thought he could detect relief in Ukitake’s eyes, and satisfaction in Sosuke’s.

Ichigo ran a hand through his hair, feeling the dull thrum of questions, almost nostalgia prickling at the back of his head, memories of different war meetings, and chairs because they stretched into the long hours of the morning sometimes. Some part of him wanted to speak out, to guide the Captains and assure them that everything would turn out alright. Another part of him just wanted to start walking and not look back.

He was impressed by how much Soul Society had changed over the years, even now it was different to the one he had first stumbled into, while tradition was respected, it wasn’t adhered to, and slowly they were working out some of the kinks. Distantly the young Captain wondered if it would be enough.

“We will need to send out a reconnaissance team.”

Yoruichi suggested stepping forward, composure silent and sharp as a knife, hidden was the normally feisty and flirtatious woman, and in her place the Captain of the Second. The Soutaicho nodded and inclined his head forward letting the Shihōin head continue.

“I will take my division… but is there anyone here familiar with Hueco Mundo? It will provide us with a better opportunity if so we will also need a method to enter Hueco Mundo; I trust the Twelfth can manage that.”

The Captain stated, and Ichigo rolled his eyes at Yoruichi’s words, Sosuke nodded his head in agreement eyes flashing to Ichigo as the Captain resolutely stepped into the centre and said, “I have experience with Hueco Mundo, my squad can join you on the reconnaissance mission.”

For a moment it seemed as if Yoruichi wanted to protest the inclusion of his squad, jaded distrust and focus on the mission flashing across her features before it cleared, and she saw Ichigo once more and nodded respectively slipping into line as Ichigo repeated the movement.

“Then it is settled the Second and Tenth divisions will initiate a reconnaissance mission tonight.”
The Soutaicho stated simply, glancing at the gathered Captains with a peculiar patient look. Byakuya stepped forward after a moment and asked, “I understand that most of the battle planning will need to commence after the reconnaissance mission, however it is safe to assume that the Gotei 13 will be handling this battle in a manner different to that of the 1000 Year Blood War?”

“No genocides, man kid you cut to the chase.”

Love commented smoothly, and Byakuya only nodded, cool mask in place as his gaze strayed to Ichigo, and there was something knowing there, and it made Ichigo question why he had ever told his friend anything, even as he was also laughing.

The Captains seemed to draw breath at the question, wondering if it would be a complete execution of all those who stood before the might of the Gotei 13, Sosuke stepped forward amidst the chaos and stated, “Espada among Captain class are capable of cognizant thought. They are far from mindless beasts; they possess emotions, will, and desires just as we do. To consider the situation we must consider this as how we would handle a mutiny. There is a balance between our species, our actions will dictate the future.”

They all fell quiet at Sosuke’s simple clinical statement carrying great meaning behind it all, and Ichigo silently applauded his friend. After a long moment where Ichigo could almost taste the rising tension, bitter like acid, the old man stated, “We will not be mandating a complete extermination. There is a figure or figures behind this war, and once dismantled things will perhaps be simpler.”

Shinji shifted Sakande resting at his hip at the Soutaicho’s words before he stepped forward, posture casual but bridled with hidden tension he asked, “And the Vizard will be allowed into battle?”

As if the name itself was some wind, the Captains who held the powers of a hollow straightened, shoulders stiff. The Soutaicho peered at Shinji from beneath his brows before he nodded in affirmation, and Ichigo saw the barely perceptible slump of his shoulders in relief as he returned to the line.

The silence lingered for a few more moments before the Soutaicho rapped his cane against the floor and finally stated, the reconnaissance mission will commence tonight. From there we will begin planning our offence and defence. Dismissed.”

They all bowed at the final words and began to shuffle out, Ichigo caught Yoruichi winking at him from across the hall, and Ichigo almost wanted to flee, even knowing that woman was harmless, useful for a good cackle every once in a while, as well. Rubbing his fingers over his arms Ichigo took a deep breath and pushed aside the weight of the future for a brief moment, passing a wink in the woman’s direction before gliding out of the hallways.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed the chapter, both Ichigo’s perspective and the twins’ goodbye to Rukia (is anyone else sort of shipping them with Rukia? Just a little bit?). Reviews/comments are always appreciated, and I will hopefully see you all next week. Till next time!
Hello everyone, we are back with chapter 49, yay! So, this chapter sort of ran away from me, the plot took the reins. But I’m pretty happy with how it turned out, and I hope you enjoy. Read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

X

Yoruichi leaned against the wall of the Tenth division, all sinewy careless seduction, her skin radiant in the light of the street lamps, in a way that Ichigo knew caught the attention of all around her, and she knew it as well, ever a feline at heart. Her chosen two squad members hovered behind her like silent wraiths, though Ichigo could see the fourth seat was uncomfortable with the waiting.

Ichigo sighed at the thought of the coming mission and shook his head as he paced over to the Captain of the Second, near Yoruichi’s shadow Ichigo could spot Soi-fon, the strict female studying him with cold eyes. She had never overly liked Ichigo, even in his own timeline, but they had a mutual respect for each other that he had found in both timelines.

“Hey, Ichi-berry.”

The female Captain greeted casually, pushing off the wall with a whirl of her shihakusho, Ichigo chuckled quietly to himself and inclined his head in greeting pushing aside his trepidation and worries. Two of his own squad members filed out into the streets, a much lighter party than those of the Second division.

“Yoruichi,” He greeted, lips curving into a faint fond smile and he continued, “Kūkaku says hi.”

The Shihōin princess’ eyes lit up at those words, a wild grin slipping onto her angled features. The two women had been friends long before Ichigo had even been found in this timeline and it showed in the deep bond they shared (although he did sometimes bemoan the gossip they found).

“Excellent. How’s Kaien?”

Yoruichi asked pleasantly, voice lingering with unspoken emotion, worry and concern hid there, as she crossed her arms over chest. Ichigo’s smile faltered for a brief moment at the mention of his brother, he considered a placated response, one that was like second nature at times, before

Louning
(adj.) Darkened by clouds.
answering honestly deciding the woman deserved better after their many years of friendship, “He’s doing better, it’s been hard adjusting.”

The Captain of the second nodded, eyes understanding where they studied Ichigo in the half-light of the night, gold eyes suddenly too piercing as she asked, “And you Ichigo, how are you?”

He grimaced faintly at the question, the expression slipping away before the others could take notice and instead he let a cocky sure smile slip onto his lips as he responded with a teasing wink, “Fine as always Yoruichi.”

She rolled her eyes at the answer, something there promising retribution for the avoidance, even as she began batting her eyelashes flirtatiously in insinuation before they both laughed in shared amusement, their mirth bouncing off the empty cobblestone. Ichigo took the moment and tucked it away for safekeeping. Their mirth fell away unspoken as the heaviness of the night became apparent once more and together the two Captains surveyed the gathered Shinigami, a collection of their best; those who had shown proficiency with flash-step and had common sense when it came to the idea of stealth.

“How do you want to do this Ichigo?”

Yoruichi asked deferring to his leadership; it was an almost nostalgic feeling, being in command, planning a battle, leading people. Instead, he furrowed his brow and considered their men (but really mostly women), after a minute he turned addressing the gathered Shinigami and said, “First we need to get into Hueco Mundo, all of you need to be aware, Hueco Mundo is a dessert. There is nothing for miles, just sand, there is little to no cover. What we will be looking for is Los Noches. This is a covert mission; we do not want to be detected if a hollow is close to engaging in combat alert me.”

Grim determination and nods of understanding followed his statement, Yoruichi studying him with an equally serious air, one that sharpened her presence to that of a predator. It was an unspoken understanding that because Ichigo was Vizard he was better prepared to deal with hollows on the mission, and would likely be able to hide the Shinigami with his own reaitsu.

“What does Los Noches look like?”

A Shinigami from his own division, Yumi if Ichigo remembered correctly, asked voice soft and sure in the emptiness of the street. Ichigo cocked his head for a moment looking for an apt description of the building and struggling to describe it in a way that didn’t betray his own experience (too much experience) upon the white sand.

“It is like a palace, though there is little to no ceiling, and it’s built of a material that is a pale white. It is impossible to miss, as it is one of the only structures of Hueco Mundo, not to forget its size.”

He finally said, still struggling to describe the ancient sense to the building, how it felt different to the way Aizen had made everything so clinical. So that even sand that finds itself everywhere had no place in such a cold building.

But the way they had left Hueco Mundo was also different, they had fortified the walls, structured the building and floorplan, but they had left the building’s white walls facing the endless night sky. In some silent imitation of the past, the building held onto the ancientness about it and remained ever imposing in a way Ichigo doubted Aizen would have ever understood.

The Shinigami were silent and serious then, focused on the mission, and the two Captains traded a glance before they moved through the streets of the Gotei 13 silent as the parting wind, mere apparitions moving towards the Twelfth division.
They entered the Twelfth division at the beckon of a demure Shinigami, their squad members glancing around with barely concealed curiosity on some, and open awe on others. As the man led them through the building, even Yoruichi paused as they passed one chiming invention, following the man ever deeper into the Twelfth.

Sosuke leaned casually against the far wall as they came to a halt, the epitome of calm and careless, though Ichigo could see sharp eyes tracking their movements and landing on Ichigo with an amused rise of his brow. The Shinigami in front of them stopped stepping to the side in continued silence and Ichigo resisted the urge to tease his friend as Sosuke re-settled the glasses on the bridge of his nose.

“Aizen-taicho.”

Yoruichi greeted voice lingering with hidden satisfaction as she inclined her head in respect, the man repeated the motion stepping in front of them and dismissing the silent Shinigami who had been near intangible, like the first whispers of the wind. The scientist led them the last bit of the way, all quiet and echoing in the clinical hallways, that chilled the less experienced Shinigami. Stopping at a heavy door with a keypad, he leaned forward adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose once more and entered the code.

The doors ground open with the slow crawl of suspension and finished with a final resounding slam. Sosuke smiled genially at the gathered Shinigami as he led them inside, ignoring the multitude of cautious glances as if the division didn’t likely hold inventions far beyond the realm of dangerous. Ichigo only shook his head at his friend’s antics.

It was very similar to the invention Kisuke had whipped up within the mortal realm in Ichigo’s own time though with a great deal more finesse to it. Said structure was a great hulking mess of metal and wires splayed across the floor like a nest of spider webs with reds and green and endless black. It reminded Ichigo of more than a few health and safety violations covered in his high school education, but he shoved those aside and instead focused on the rest of the device.

He suspected it was partially powered by the Hogyoku, though likely Sosuke’s half as the other Kisuke was studying in regards a replacement for Ukitake’s condition. They were still testing the potential of both stones, as Sosuke and Kisuke had developed two separate but similar stones. It reminded Ichigo faintly of the immortal quest for endless life sought in the philosopher’s stone.

Thinking of the blond, as well as his alchemical dabbles, reminded Ichigo that Kisuke would be returning to Soul Society soon. Yoruichi would be happy to see the scientist even with her semi-regular visits to the human world. Though Ichigo was slightly inclined to worry about the mortal realm, considering that his sisters had awakened their powers.

“The Garganta will open in the same location, you will have three hours in Hueco Mundo, at the three hours mark the Garganta will open, if you are not there we will not be opening the Garganta again in that location. It would risk an invasion of greater numbers into Soul Society due to the high reaisu of the portal. You will be there until we can pinpoint a safe time, or until the invading force arrives.”

Sosuke stated crisply, eyes sharp and commanding where he stood beside the machine, drawing all attention to the sharp figure he cut amongst his words, other scientists fluttering about like moths as electricity crackled upon the air. A grim state settled over the four squad members, and Yoruichi shared a look of reluctant understanding with Ichigo, one that was half unbridled determination.

He didn’t step forward to reveal that he could summon a Garganta, that there would be no need to worry.
It wasn’t a commonly known fact about the Vizard, that they could travel at will to Hueco Mundo, and only Shinji and Mashiro could open ones other than Ichigo. He preferred to keep it secret as it revealed that they had the potential to be in Hueco Mundo at any time; that they could have been there at any time; that the increase of hollows could be less than one-sided.

It would breed distrust among their ranks once more, less so among the high-ranking members but there would be suspicious thoughts and wonders if one of them hadn’t grown bitter and decided to betray Soul Society. Another part of Ichigo was scared, scared of solo hit missions; to dart in an out and take out a target.

He wasn’t Onmitsukidō, but because he could open a near undetectable Garganta, and because of Yoruichi’s training he had been given those missions on occasion. And he had hated them. Slipping through enemy lines like a cold killer, or in the Blood War stalking and waiting for the kill like a predator. He knew the fear was irrational, that he wouldn’t be forced to do that. But that didn’t erase it. Because the Vizard would be expected to do more no matter what.

So, he didn’t mention it, even as Sosuke flashed him a reassuring look hidden beneath an artic expression. It would be fine as long as they returned within the three-hour mark, and Ichigo would try his best to make sure it happened, he only hoped his own infamous ability to find trouble wouldn’t make a reappearance.

Studying the Shinigami once more, Sosuke pierced them with those dissecting eyes, conveying the gravity of the situation, what they were entering. After a minute the man turned and nodded to a Shinigami waiting by a circuit board, the man startled but slid forward, pushing a few buttons with careful ease.

The air grew heavy with reaitsu, like the tension before a storm, and with a crackle, the Garganta tore open in the centre of the room, hung between the two hulks of metal. Ichigo stepped forward first, unhesitant, leading the way. He flashed a last sparing look to Sosuke, who stared back in acknowledgement before Ichigo stepped through with an unheard sigh.

Going through a Garganta, other than the ones he created himself, was always slightly unsettling for Ichigo, it always felt as if there was a tugging sensation from behind his navel, but going through the created portal was something else entirely.

Thankfully it did not spit them thirty feet in the air hovering above the sand, but instead in the shadows of a small dune. Ichigo stumbled out of the crackling portal from hell and moved out of the way taking fortifying breaths as Shiro’s raspy chuckles echoed throughout his mindscape. He rolled his eyes at his spirit’s antics and instead focused on the other Shinigami stumbling out of the portal; carefully he guided them away letting them sit in the sand.

Yoruichi was the last to step through, features pale even as her composure remained in place the only sign of her discomfort was the small frown twisting her lips. She spotted Ichigo after a minute and drifted over to him, letting the small team of Shinigami acquaint themselves with the landscape. Ichigo had almost forgotten how stunning Hueco Mundo was at first glance, the endless white sand, the sky like a sea of wispy ink, and the ambient reaitsu.

Stepping out of the cover of the dune with a glance back at their team, Ichigo surveyed their surroundings, intimately familiar with most of Hueco Mundo, even if most of the world was near identical endless sand. If he squinted he could spot the craggy tips of a large collection of trees that peaked from the forest hidden beneath their feet, he could faintly detect hollows in the distance. Glancing at the sky Ichigo grinned at the crescent moon decorating the sky, in some imitation of Shiro who always insisted on grinning at the pale spectre like a loon.
Shaking his head with a mute sigh, he turned to face Yoruichi who was glancing at her feet with a small pout and amusement aglow in her eyes, she looked up at him and there was something almost teasingly pleading as she mouthed about sand in her shoes already. He just grinned in response; there was no way to escape the sand. Ducking back into the cover of the dune, silently he marvelled at how even the Shinigami seemed to sense the silence that wavered about the sand, there was an unspoken quiet that seemed to seep into the soul.

He waited another minute for the Shinigami to acclimatize themselves to the new world before he stepped forward drawing their attention, in a low whisper he stated, “I’m going to be materializing my Vizard mask, which will provide us with some coverage from hollows. We will move together as a unit until we draw closer to Los Noches, once we are within a certain distance we will pause and plan from there. We will likely be splitting into two groups, and I will be giving Yoruichi my mask which should help hide your presences. Remember the point of this recon mission is to observe their defences, if we can without detection infiltrate Los Noches, and assess what type of power we will be facing then that is a bonus.

Remember this is war. Those hollow attacks the past few months? They weren’t random; they were observations however normal they may have seemed. We will be fighting a war on two fronts, and any information we can gain will be beyond valuable. Stay with your squad at all time, and if we are separated, look at the moon and see which way it is facing, that is your guide. We will not leave anyone behind I swear.”

Ichigo finished voice subdued but firm with determination, he could almost feel the persona of a general slipping onto his shoulders once more, an invisible cloak that carried the immense weight of lives in his hands. The squad members nodded; expressions serious like carved stone with the gravity of the mission upon them. It reminded him of when he had led troops and they had been fresh and so afraid, knowing what they were facing but still brave in the face of it.

Shaking away the trailing thoughts, Ichigo ran a hand through his hair and with a flick of his wrist drew Zangetsu. Carefully he let the blade slice through the skin of his forearm, shallow and swelling vibrant crimson, he ignored the cries of the surrounding Shinigami and let the blood fall upon the sand, staining it rust red.

Looking up Ichigo received the full force of their concerned attention, their expressions ranging between aghast and furious worry. He had the feeling someone would be tattling to Kaien, probably Yumi she was glaring accusingly. In desperate explanation, Ichigo smiled reassuringly and said, “Everything looks the same, now this place doesn’t.”

Yoruichi shook her head in fond resignation rolling her eyes even as she stepped forward and cast a small healing kido over the shallow cut. He smiled in thanks before turning his attention to the horizon, ignoring the glances shared behind his back.

They moved swiftly across the sands, slowly at first so that the others could adjust to the unique sensation of travelling over sand (it was nothing short of a nightmare after days of slogging through the light crystals). But soon enough they were flickers of black, mere shadows crossing under the watchful eyes of the moon. Occasionally a hollow would move to intercede, to attack, but Ichigo would flare his reaitsu, Shiro baying for blood to all who dared challenge them. They went unhalted.

After a near half hour of travelling, though with the endless sands it felt like an eternity, Ichigo raised a hand and they slowed to a stop, resting in the shadows of a sea of dunes. He could sense the vibrant hum of Los Noches in the distance, the multiple Espada dwelling in the pale ruins, like the dull buzz of cicadas.

Turning to the gathered Shinigami Ichigo studied their faces, their conviction before carefully he
slipped the mask off his head and handed it to Yoruichi. The Captain of the Second took it
tentatively, fingers sliding over the smooth, porcelain-like texture of the mask. It reminded Ichigo of
the children he would sometimes play with in Rungokai, ever curious hands studying the mask and
its primitive lines.

“Yoruichi, do you want to scout the exterior? Look for structural weakness and primitive defence
measures?”

Ichigo asked pulling the female from her observations, she paused for a moment before nodding,
carefully sliding the mask to rest on her head, stark against her plum-coloured hair. She turned to the
two Shinigami from her division, Soi-fon at perfect attention. Ichigo nodded to himself and turned to
Yumi and Akira, the two squad members he had chosen; they focused on him with clear intent eyes
bright in the vividness of Hueco Mundo’s night.

“We will be infiltrating the interior. There are hollows, Espada of immense power there that you will
not be able to defeat. Our mission is to ascertain the structural layout of the building. Do not engage
in combat whatsoever, stick close to me the whole time. And if I tell you to run, run.”

They nodded eyes wide at the serious side of their Captain that rarely appeared. Nodding Ichigo
turned to Yoruichi who tipped the mask on her head with an excited grin, they shared a small nod
and Ichigo addressed the small recon team once more, “Return here in an hour and a half, that will
give us an hour to return to the portal location.”

With a final nod the two groups split up, Ichigo silently praying for his friend, even knowing of her
immense skill in the realm of stealth and reconnaissance, he still hoped and prayed she wouldn’t
encounter any of the Espada. It was likely she would encounter the sand hollow (of which he could
never remember its name) but that was an important defence, and if she was half as cunning as he
knew she was then she would understand that.

Leading the two Shinigami forward, Ichigo skirted the edge of the unseen borders of Los Noches,
where one could almost sense the reishi dense sands, projecting his reaitsu enough to hide those of
his squad members but not enough to draw attention the whole time. They followed quiet and as if
living shadows, Ichigo glancing back every so often to check on the two, familiar concern for his
squad members humming out of sight. Slowly he led them in a roundabout way towards the
building, stopping once they were within sight of the towering white walls.

He could almost feel their awe, see the wonder splashed across their features as they stared at the
structure, and understanding dawned. No simple hollow would have constructed something such as
this; even the ruins beforehand had alluded to sentience. Nodding to Akira and Yumi he left them to
try and comprehend Los Noches in its entirety, as Ichigo surveyed the building looking for one of the
more discreet entrances that would be noticeable on first glance if one was particularly inclined.

Motioning to the two with a wave of his hand, they crept across the sand to the door set into the wall,
noticeable only due to the faint border surrounding it. Sharing a last look, one that questioned if they
were ready to move forward, if they wanted to turn back, he would not grieve them for it. He
understood how fear could throw bravery away.

Ichigo pushed open the door when he only received twin stares of affirmation. Akira, though less
calm than Yumi, projected some of the fear Ichigo had come to know on the battlefield, but it was
tamed in the face of determination.

The door swung open with a groaning heave that reminded the Captain of the Tenth of a sigh; cool
air drifted from the tiny opening and the entrance was cloaked in shadows. Ichigo slipped inside, the
bright white of the halls stealing all but a few shadows hidden in the alcoves, glancing down the long
corridors for any enemies he sighed. Ichigo bit back a curse at his own ingenuity, because while white was fine for preventing the coveted shadows of an intruder; he was an intruder.

Beckoning the two to follow him into the faint shadows of a corner, Ichigo cast his reaitsu out in searching tendrils. Locating the hollows in the area with ease, Ichigo felt Yumi do the same, followed a moment later by Akira. There were mostly low-level hollows lumbering through the hallways, but a few Arrancar also drifted aimlessly, their reaitsu bright in comparison to the dull sense of the fodder hollows.

“Stick to the ceilings while they exist, few ever look up. Yumi explore the north, Akira explore the south, hide your reaitsu as best as possible. Try to map entrances, exits, weak points, and the highly defended areas, if you can try to get a rough estimate of numbers or what Espada might dwell there. If you can’t that’s okay, we just want a general idea of the building. If you're caught flare your reaitsu and I’ll be there as soon as I can. I want you to meet me at the centre of Los Noches, the area with a higher concentration of Espada, in half an hour. I’ll locate you once you’re nearby. Understand?”

Ichigo finished with a reassuring warm smile and a curious tilt of his head, Yumi nodded features like steel as her reaitsu dimmed close to nothing, Akira shivered visibly for a moment before his resolve strengthened, sea green eyes blazing with determination. Ichigo rested a hand briefly on the young man’s shoulder in reassurance before nodding at the two. His fourth and sixth seat, they had always shown promise in the division training exercises. Akira reminded Ichigo of his own teenage years though a bit more unsure, and Yumi, though a bit of a perfectionist was sweet beneath the quiet exterior.

The two Shinigami flash-stepped away, close to the ceiling and the barest marking of their passing a gentle rustle of air. Ichigo nodded to himself, cloaking his presence in Shiro’s reaitsu he flitted towards the east planning on mapping it and the west before meeting with the two young Shinigami. He was familiar with the layout of Los Noches, and as he darted through the long narrow hallways absently marking and holding onto what he already knew another half of his attention was focused on Akira and Yumi.

X

They met outside the large doors that served as the entrance to what Ichigo would call the council room, though a throne room would more adequately suit its purpose while Barragan was in power. The two large doors were propped open as if torn off their hinges, great gleaming metal that shimmered with night’s folds. His squad members were slightly out of breath, though it was well-hidden, where they stood behind him. Marking a large portion of the sprawling fortress while hiding their presence took a large amount of control, to say the least.

Ichigo studied the two, wondering if it would be better to leave them in the hallway, hidden in the shadows where they could catch their breath. They had covered everything within the allotted time and he was beyond proud, but that didn’t detract from the fact that they had exhausted some of their energy. His word was veritable; if whatever he saw in there was reported from him alone the Soutaicho would believe him.

As if sensing his thoughts, Yumi pinned him with an unimpressed stare managing to convey it through only a raised brow, and a curve of her lips. The Captain of the Tenth wanted to debate for a moment, to push that they stay behind for their own safety, when Akira turned and fixed him with large eyes that seemed to state that they would support their Captain no matter what; even if said Captain was too stubborn to accept it.

Sighing softly to himself in resignation and acceptance, he felt Ossan’s amusement at the scenario as
he slipped into one of the few shadowed rooms of Los Noches with a beckoning hand over his shoulder. The ceiling was a half-cobbled thing that held at the corners and the seams of the walls but was nothing but open sky in the centre. In the middle of the large room a long table stood, the seats filled with the gathered Espada, Barragan at the head of the table in an ornate chair, while others lounged or slouched at the table.

Starrk glanced over at the doorway, eyes narrowing for a minute, before a wolf’s grin slipped onto his lips and he turned away, the only one to notice their uninvited guests that is until Ichigo caught Nelliel’s knowing and excited smile. They slipped close into the shadows settling a fair distance above the ground, reaitsu solid beneath their feet; Ichigo mimed zipping a hand over his lips as the gathered Espada finally settled.

Barragan pushed away from his seat with slow careful movements belaying his physical age, the female hollow attending him disappearing as the old hollow coughed and silence fell with a ripple of corrosive reaitsu. He stared them down, ancient eyes studying the gathered Espada and Ichigo watched in silent study, distantly keeping an eye on Yumi and Akira, noting their well-hidden shock at the variety of Espada before them. Another part of him wondered how Yoruichi was faring, praying that everything was fine on her end.

“Zommari, how have the raids on Soul Society progressed?”

The old hollow addressed; voice like the gravel of sand slipping through one’s fingers. The large monk-like Espada stood in one fluid motion inclining his head in respect he responded, “We have made incursions upon the outer districts, and have slowly moved closer. We have been halted by the patrols of Shinigami sent out, as well as the local militias, but with Szayel’s aid we shall be moving deeper into Soul Society within the coming week.”

The hollow king nodded a pleased expression settling on lined features, Zommari sat down with a hum. The hollow turned next to Harribel and asked, “What do you think of our army”

The female stood, stiff-shouldered and like ice, she responded, “Our forces have come a long way. The fodder is able to recognize basic commands and move as a unit.”

Again, Barragan nodded, pausing for a minute to study the gathered Espada before landing on Ulquiorra, a bland expression sitting on the bat-like Espada’s apathetic features, the hollow king’s gaze flashed next to Yammy, who was obviously bored, before returning to Ulquiorra he asked, “How does reconnaissance in the mortal realm fare?”

The pale monochrome Espada stood and in dull monotone responded, “There are a numerous amount of spiritually sensitive mortals in Karakura town, the location of the jūreichi, but none that pose a threat.”

Ichigo’s heart stopped in his chest at the mention of his hometown, and the vague thought of the twins being discovered by Barragan or anyone for that matter. If their heritage let alone their existence were discovered, all forces would be vying for their favour, or to destroy the potential threat they represented. They simply held too much power. It irritated Ichigo to hell and back sometimes how much their lives hung by a thread suspended in balance. He pushed aside the worried rambling of an older sibling and refocused on the meeting below.

The hollow king continued to question his ‘subjects’ some barely containing their ire at the old man, or amusement such as Nelliel or glaring at the other Espada across the table (especially some of the more aggressive ones, cough cough Grimmjow). Updating their leader on weapon supplies, force numbers, and other reconnaissance into the hollow forest which had been strangely misled.
The three Shinigami remained quiet and in the shadows the whole time, where Ichigo could feel the shock of his two acolytes at the force assembled before them and the plans for the coming war. He knew that most of Soul Society, most of the Gotei 13, hadn’t truly considered the hollows a threat in the coming war. They had been mindless beasts who were cobbled together with little order, the anathema of the pillar of order that was Soul Society. Here they were a functioning enemy, an army with generals, and a base of operation.

Their tentative place within the shadows was lost in one blinding unforeseen moment as Barragan studied the hollows gathered, nodding to himself the man announced, “We will attack Soul Society within a fortnight, prepare your forces!”

Akira gasped next to him reaitsu flaring like the flutter of a moth’s wings, faint and barely noticeable above the din of the more blood lusty hollows’ cheers and raging reaitsu. Ichigo held his breath and hoped, heart hammering impossibly loud in his chest as Akira stared, wide-eyed horror seeping into his young eyes.

A bang on the table silenced the Espada and echoed around the halls as Barragan stared around the room, piercing and hard as iron before landing on the thick shadows of the ceiling with a wicked bone sharp smile he called out, “It seems we have an uninvited guest.”

Surprise rippled through the gathered Espada, even as Ulquiorra stood without prompt well versed in his superimposed position of executioner, leathery wings appearing in the half-light of the council rooms as whispers and hushed murmurs filled the air like the waiting presence of a predator. The third Espada glanced around the room, and Ichigo knew he would find them in less than a minute; Ulquiorra had the fine control of someone who could count grains of sand. And he knew the bat-like Espada who had become something of a friend couldn’t ignore their presences forever, because Barragan’s attention was on the hollow and the existence of intruders, and there were two Shinigami at his side.

He tugged harshly on their shihakushos and pointed his eyes to the opening in the ceiling, desperation and adrenaline sharpening his features and eyes like razor points, begging them to listen to his command. Akira’s eyes were twin pools of regret, and Ichigo softened minutely towards the young man before pushing them forward, Yumi glanced behind her with clear concern. Ichigo pulled his reaitsu towards himself with a brilliant burst of Shiro’s powers and drew the attention of every Espada in the room.

He felt as they slipped out into the night, noticed by Starrk and Tia, who said nothing in the tense silence that waited for the executioner’s blade. With a soundless beat of powerful bat-like wings Ulquiorra was hovering above the table, a terrible still spectre, eyes pinning Ichigo like an insect, hidden in the darkness as he was. Those eyes held some emotion, but it was far and distant, ever the perfect actor.

Ichigo bolted in one quick movement, slipping out into the night above Los Noches where he could spot his squad hurtling towards the horizon. Instinctually he knew he would have only a few minutes to escape. He glanced behind him and spotted Ulquiorra staring up at the ceiling a warning in his eyes one that Ichigo understood well as the Espada swarmed about the room like ants below them, Barragan a cold still figure in the midst of it all.

Reaitsu pumped through his veins as Ichigo followed his two Shinigami, steadily gaining on their lagging figures until he could see the expressions rampant on their faces; terror and desperation making playthings of the night. That was when Ulquiorra appeared like a living apparition of death over Los Noches, wings spread in some imitation of famous renaissance paintings Ichigo had seen before. The Captain of the Tenth knew then that their time was up, there was no way to halt the
Espada only to escape.

Ichigo reached his squad members as the terror of all beings at the third Espada’s presence rippled through Hueco Mundo, brushing violent gales of dancing sand into the air. He drew Yumi and Akira into quick half-hugs, a careful hand brushing through their hair in reassurance, in promise, before he was wordlessly urging them forward, the thrill of the chase, and the horror of being the prey assaulting his senses even as he struggled to maintain a level head. It had been so long since he had seen the battlefield since he had experienced all of its chaos and fear and it was drowning him in wave after wave of familiar nostalgia; the sound of blades clashing beside his ears and on the edge of his sight familiar smiles.

They continued to struggle across the sands, fast but not fast enough, never fast enough when it came to Ulquiorra. They were out in the open, no cover, and too much of a distance to reach before the portal. Ichigo knew if they could reach a sea of sand dunes they would be okay, he could defend and direct his Shinigami to hide.

But out in the open, the bloodlust would draw other hollows who would linger on the fringes, and provide time for backup, and there would be nowhere to hide except underneath the sands, a place he did not want to return to.

The two figures ahead of him were already slightly tired, lagging behind in a way they wouldn’t have been if Ichigo hadn’t sent them to sweep a full wing of Los Noches. Guilt wormed its way into his heart, gnawing at his thoughts even as he harshly shoved it aside, focusing on surviving.

Ulquiorra was gaining on them, he could feel the presence draping over the air, and the powerful beat of his large wings. His squad members knew it too, but they continued to rush forward. It was still too slow; he would swoop down before they could throw up a hasty defence.

Ichigo pivoted a half-step, whipping Zangetsu out in a desperate bid for time and let reaitsu surge along his sealed blade and slashed, renting the air itself in a wordless Getsuga Tensho. He turned instantly gaze not even lingering on whether the attack had been successful, though he already knew Ulquiorra had dodged the arc of energy.

He was behind the two again, and he prayed that Ulquiorra would focus on him alone, he could handle himself. The others were children when it came to war, they hadn’t seen its brutalities, and he didn’t want them to know it, to carry that weight, and Ichigo sure as hell didn’t want to lose anyone yet.

Then it happened and Ichigo’s heart stilled in his chest, silence rushing past him and surrounding his every sense. Yumi tripped, stumbling over the air and her own footwork and she collapsed into the dune bellow, time like the sweep of the pendulum. Ulquiorra hovering above like the executioner’s blade began a steep dive, blade glinting like a needle in the firelit night of Hueco Mundo.

Reaitsu surged through his veins, eyes glowing a faint hue of blue as Ichigo surged forward intending on moving his squad member, a Shinigami under his care out of harm’s way. And if not that, then he would take the blade for her, he could survive it.

Her eyes were wide with terror, tears gathering there as he could almost see her mouthing desperate last words, about a family, about not wanting to embrace death. They were two forces moving at nearly invisible speeds, Ulquiorra spiralling through the skies, and Ichigo across the sands. His zanpaktou spirits were deathly quiet within his mind as Ichigo pushed himself harder Ulquiorra ever closer a phantom of death in apathetic disguise, cast almost as a falling angel.

He was close, close enough to reach out and touch her sleeves, and she looked at him watery amber
eyes pleading, begging him to save her, careful masks tossing to the wind. Ichigo plastered a reassuring smile across his lips and the sand skirted around his form as he pushed her out of the way, reaitsu propping her to her feet as Ichigo turned sinking into the sand Zangetsu catching Ulquiorra’s blade as it drove into his arms with the full force of the Espada’s descent, like the morning star descended.

Ichigo grunted struggling against the blade as Ulquiorra’s large bat wings folded against his back, the normally impassive mask broken for a moment with those normally blank eyes expressive like a painting, emotions visible like brush strokes and hues. Then it was gone two actors cemented in their roles. Ulquiorra swung his blade a rapid flurry of attacks that Ichigo struggled to defend against from his low vantage point, the weight of gravity pushing against his arms and the adrenaline surge leaving breath shaky.

He could feel Yumi nearby and desperately called out, “Go I’ll be okay, meet at the portal!”

The moment of distraction cost Ichigo as a kick slammed into his chest and he was sent flying across the sand, rolling, coming to halt desperately bringing Zangetsu up to parry Ulquiorra’s fierce advance. He could hear Yumi screaming something even as her presence began to move away, in a half-aware state he searched for Akira.

Ichigo’s search was cut short as Ulquiorra charged a cero point blank and with the same empty mask let his reaitsu explode outwards. Zangetsu deflected most of the damage, the blast radius sending the sand around him flying everywhere, almost crystalizing it with its strength, he could feel the heat of the blast tickling his features as Ichigo reached and jammed his left elbow into the side of Ulquiorra’s face. The hollow flinched and Ichigo took the moment to slide out from under the Espada’s blade even as he only gained a breath before Ulquiorra was on him again.

As he deflected the flurry of attacks that weaved about his defence he attempted to push for an offence and searched for the presences of his squad members, cursing out loud as he was forced to halt as an overhead attack forced him into the sand once more. Panting Ichigo growled and pushed back against Ulquiorra, desperately trying to split his attention between the battle and his squad, knowing that he couldn’t not when facing Ulquiorra, and not when flashes of another battle echoed in his head, and the feel of a hole through his chest tickled his senses.

Ichigo coughed as he fell to a knee blade held over his head as Ulquiorra pushed against Zangetsu. His face as impassive as ever where it stared into his eyes, sweat beading his own temple, and his bangs tangling together in front of his eyes in wisps of orange.

Reaitsu pulsed along Zangetsu’s blade as he prepared to release his Shikai, he could sense Ulquiorra gearing to do the same, the air heavy and acrid with their reaitsu lingering like an electric storm, clouds gathering on the horizon. Ulquiorra was a millisecond faster, and with a brilliant coalescence of reaitsu, Ichigo was sent flying, rolling once more over the sands and silently lamenting how long it would take to get rid of the sand as he righted himself fast. But not fast enough as Ulquiorra’s blade beelined towards his abdomen and Ichigo struggled to unbury Zangetsu from its tomb within the sand.

He was too slow, but it wasn’t anything close to mortal wound, Ichigo winced staring defiantly into Ulquiorra’s eyes even as he tugged uselessly at Zangetsu attempting to free the blade. Time seemed to slow to the consistency of molasses dragging at his senses and slowing every moment to liquid softness as he braced himself for the pain. A zanpaktou sliced through the tension catching Ulquiorra’s blade, and the moment was broken as Akira grinned at Ichigo, the expression shaky and the man’s eyes watery.

The two fighters hadn’t even noticed the young Shinigami approach, too enthralled by the other’s
presence, focused on the battle alone. At some point, Ichigo had assumed his squad members were safe and had focused most of his attention on trying to gain the upper hand, or Akira was better at hiding his reiatsu then Ichigo remembered.

“Need a hand Captain?”

Akira asked faintly, strain becoming clearly visible on his features as he pushed back against Ulquiorra’s superior strength. Ichigo freed Zangetsu at that moment and added his blade to the mix pushing Ulquiorra back and releasing a small Getsuga Tensho to give them enough space. The Captain of the Tenth nodded at his sixth seat, and the two returned their attention to Ulquiorra charging forward even as the Espada flew across the sands to meet them.

They were disjointed, having rarely duelled together, though he had made time to occasionally duel with those over the tenth seat, there simply wasn’t the experience between the two necessary. But they tried replacing what they lacked in teamwork with determination, Ichigo maintaining an offensive while Akira defended.

He could sense presences drawing closer, from seemingly all directions and of no identifiable presence; enemies or allies. He pushed aside the distraction and ducked out of range of Ulquiorra’s blade, Shiro hissing in his mind, the tense air growing heavier and it reminded Ichigo bitterly of his own war.

The third Espada was gaining ground, even as they fought desperately, he could sense it, the weariness still lingering with Akira, straining at Ichigo’s own limbs though he could likely continue fighting for the whole day, he was losing his peak which when fighting someone of Ulquiorra’s calibre with a sealed blade was not the best idea.

Ichigo once more started channelling reiatsu along his blade, the reishi spiking in black arcs against the gleaming metal. Once more Ichigo was interrupted as a well-placed kick sent Akira flying backwards, landing with a thud that was near silent, dampened by the waves of sand, and a small cero was sent Ichigo’s way.

Zangetsu flicked upwards, catching Ulquiorra’s blade as the cero crashed into the sands behind him and he resisted the urge to glance back and check on the young man. Instead, he deflected Ulquiorra’s uppercut and crouched sweeping low aiming for the hollow’s spindly legs.

From his slightly higher elevation the third Espada summoned his reiatsu, and with something once more near point-blank range cast another cero, forcing Ichigo into the sand as he deflected the power scorching the white sea surrounding them.

He couldn’t even catch a breath, couldn’t seize the minute moment of concentration needed to release Zangetsu as Ulquiorra pressed his advantage, a flurry of attacks appearing out of nowhere like glass wings, fluttering with graceful fluidity. The hollow had always been fast and Ichigo felt it as he defended, his shoulders ache in protest.

The Captain of the Tenth whirled around as Ulquiorra disappeared, the tell-tale hum of Sonido alerting Ichigo as he caught the blade only to flinch as a clawed hand stretched out to slash across his features. It was the opening the third Espada needed as he fluidly dropped and reversed his blade and drove it forward.

Ichigo braced himself; breath caught in his lungs as he prepared for the pain, knowing he wouldn’t die, Shiro wouldn’t let him. His eyes widened in shock as suddenly Akira was in front of him, and the blade was piercing the young Shinigami’s torso in one clean movement that sent blood staining the sand with his lifeblood.
He cursed out loud, emotions bubbling forward into overdrive as the moment snapped back into focus even as he caught the wounded Shinigami with one arm, the other swinging Zangetsu around to catch Ulquiorra’s blade. The hollow was unflinching in the face of the mortal wound he had dealt, still pressing forward with the mechanical movements of someone not entirely there.

Ichigo sprang back a few paces desperately trying to put distance between the hollow, he shushed his instincts the one telling him to rip apart the enemy, to toss aside everything but the battle. Tearing his haori off, he gently lowered Akira to the ground, telling him hastily in murmured whispers to apply pressure to the wound, and to, “For Kami’s sake hold on you damn stupid idiot.”

He caught Ulquiorra’s next strike with Zangetsu’s dual blades, reaitsu dancing around his figure as he struggled to end the battle as quickly as possible, he could sense Yoruichi faintly now; knowing that she was nearby, but not a precise location. With a growl he released a Getsuga Tensho, reaitsu surging from his blades and pushing Ulquiorra back, he pressed his advantage, swinging furiously overhead, to the side, down, up, catching the rapid flurry of return attacks with his breath heaving in his lungs and his attention half focused on his wounded squad member.

Then Yoruichi was there with Soi-fon, she nodded at him once, golden eyes feral and her reaitsu like a burst of tempestuous thunder itself. He turned nodding once at Ulquiorra who nodded imperceptibly in return, canvas eyes apologetic as their battle was finished.

Akira was collapsed on his haori a stark figure against the endless sands, hand weakly hovering over his wound, even as Yumi beside him pressed her hands to his torso, tears dripping from verdant amber eyes, and bright crimson coating her hands.

Ichigo cursed as he saw the young man’s condition. He was pale, so very pale, blood coating his lips, and the sand around them. Ichigo could already tell he had lost blood, too much, but he wouldn’t let Akira die on his watch. He couldn’t. He was tired of burning squad members, of losing bright souls that deserved to live.

Ichigo crouched beside Yumi, hands hovering over the wound as he attempted to channel healing kido. He swore violently the situation overwhelming his senses as his own concentration left the warm green light fluttering and unsure, his own hands shaking with adrenaline and exertion. He grasped one of Akira’s hands and rested his forehead against the warrior’s, taking a deep calming breath that drew on Ossan’s presence, he whispered, “You stupid idiot, I could’ve taken it. Survive Kami dammit, you hear me.”

He took a fortifying breath and attempted to begin again, with marginally more success, restoring some of Akira’s strength. With a flicker tired green eyes stared into Ichigo’s own and the young man weakly coughed, blood once more wetting his lips as he smiled a crooked smile, “Sorry Captain. Will you tell my wife I love her?”

“Fuck, you’re going to survive this and tell her yourself.”

Ichigo promised with a shaky frown hands hovering over the wound even as he knew that if they didn’t get the Shinigami to Unohana soon he wouldn’t make it, even with Ichigo’s moderate skills. Akira nodded weakly the hand gripping Ichigo’s own tightening with some indefinable will to live. He glanced at Yumi, the woman obviously shaken, her body was wrought with fine tremors as she applied pressure to the wound, and tears cascaded silently down her cheeks. Ichigo grimaced he knew that it hadn’t been three hours. That it wasn’t even close, and unless he made a decision, Akira would die.

It lingered only for a moment, the hesitation and the knowledge of what it would mean if he opened a Garganta. Soul Society would know. Ichigo tossed the hesitation aside as Akira drew a rattling
breath and Ichigo made his decision his two spirits quiet and reassuring as they surround him.

He glanced away to see Ulquiorra in the air, a pale spectre hanging like a shadow of Ichigo’s heart as healing kido continued to simmer through his fingers. The hollow after a minute studying the gathered Shinigami turned and fled, Ichigo knew that he would report only what Barragan needed to hear. Yoruichi turned to look at Ichigo, eyes knowing and understanding as she beckoned the squad members towards the collapsed Shinigami.

Ichigo turned and held tightly to Akira’s hand his voice desperate he whispered, “Stay with me, please. You’re going to see your wife again.”

Then he stepped back reluctantly disentangling his hand and tugging at Shiro’s powers Ichigo pulled at the fabrics separating the world. The Garganta ripped into existence with an ominous crackle, Yumi looking up with obvious shock even as Yoruichi corralled her division members closer to the portal.

Bending down Ichigo made eye contact with Yumi smiling reassuringly as he gently lifted Akira into his arms, blood instantly staining the white lining of his shihakusho though Ichigo hardly noticed. He nodded his head, knowing that he would need to go through last to maintain the portal. Yumi went first followed by three blurs of shadow that Ichigo knew was Yoruichi and her division members, and finally, Ichigo stepped through the portal casting a last glance at Ulquiorra who remained in the skies the distance between them tangible.

Then they were in the Fourth and Ichigo was begging Akira to hold on a little longer as healers swarmed their squad, they were close so close. He could feel the man’s life force fading, like a candle gutted to soon, flickering in high winds; blood staining Ichigo’s hands like the sand of an hourglass.

The sixth seat was placed on a gurney and rushed inside, Ichigo following as he continued to supply healing kido, encouraging Akira to keep his eyes open, and to Kami stay with them. Blood was covering his hands, he didn’t even notice as he gripped Akira’s hand, feeling the death grip the other man had on Ichigo’s hand fading along with his strength.

Ichigo already knew what would happen, but he refused to believe it, refused to lose another Shinigami under his watch even as they slid the gurney into one of the private rooms. Akira coughed loud and weak as if his own lungs desired to escape his failing body, he crushed Ichigo’s hand pulling his attention to glazed green eyes, and he knew it but still, some desperate part of him wanted to scream for it to stop.

“Captain… thank you. Please… tell my wife… I love her.”

Akira said slowly his strength sapped by his final words; Ichigo nodded wordlessly eyes blazing with promise. The tense figure on the gurney nodded once a faint smile falling onto his lips, hand cool in Ichigo’s grasp before Akira slumped, eyes glazed and gone as the bright spark of life fled as all seasons do. Ichigo shut his eyes and took a breath, as he tenderly reached forward and slid open eyes close, before pressing a kiss to the man’s forehead.

He turned away, slid over to the wall unable to meet the gaze of the healers who fluttered around the body who were unable to do anything, and of Unohana in the doorway studying him knowingly. For a moment Ichigo thought to blame them before he pushed it aside knowing it was his own fault, his and the stupid brave boy dead on the medical gurney. Ichigo sunk to his knees and took a deep breath, letting Zangetsu’s comforting presence wash over him, and settle the grief and the hundred other emotions clogging his throat, and burning his eyes.
Okay wow, so this chapter was definitely an emotional rollercoaster eh? I honestly didn’t expect it to turn out this way, it was actually going to be a lot shorter recon mission, but the plot ran away, and this was the result. As for those who are wondering why Ichigo didn’t just throw Ulquiorra off, or instantly release his Shikai. Ichigo was experiencing flashbacks during the battle, was trying to locate and defend his squad members, not to mention starting with a disadvantage. Also, it has been a few centuries since Ichigo actually fought in a real war, he’s out of practice. He’s by no means rusty, he can still kick ass with ease. But all of these factors combined to provide the result. Hope that answered any questions regarding that. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, I love to hear your guys reactions to chapters like this. Till next time!

Magnesium!
Byakuya growled under his breath, from where he was seated at his desk, as the results of the recon mission Ichigo had been assigned to be delivered by a slip of a Shinigami whose eyes darted around the office as if plotting an escape route. Which in the face of Byakuya’s somewhat well-known temper among the Tenth when it came to anything involving Ichigo, was a wise decision. Pushing aside the confusing blurb of emotions that bubbled beneath his carefully crafted Kuchiki mask, the Captain of the Sixth bowed his head in gratitude dismissing the member of the Tenth division.

Part of him was beyond glad that the Tenth had come to know their Captain well-enough that Byakuya had received a report before the imminent Captain’s meeting. Another part was in a half-flurried state of panic, and worry over Ichigo.

To hear that a Shinigami, a member of Ichigo’s squad no less, had died on the mission, had all manner of alarm bells ringing in his head. Not to mention the fact that no one knew where the wayward Captain was. He knew Ichigo, knew him inside and out, like the back of his own hand, the overall view and what mattered most, as opposed to the individual lines that formed a whole. And while he still held all manner of secrets to his chest, Byakuya understood the man’s core, his soul. Losing someone on what was supposed to be a simple recon mission, one under his watch, would devastate him.

Ichigo already knew all the lessons of war, things he had murmured to Byakuya in a half-conscious state, about how sometimes you couldn’t do anything, about how the odds sometimes weren’t in your favour. But that wouldn’t lessen the grief by a heartbeat because knowing the lesson wasn’t any preparation for when it occurred once more.

Running a hand through his hair in a familiar habit he had picked up from Ichigo, displacing his Kenseikan, Byakuya pushed away from his desk, drawing on the soothing presence of Senbonzakura with an even breath as he plotted his next course of action; the main objective being
finding his missing partner.

A Captain’s meeting would likely be called in the next two hours, and he knew without a doubt that when it was called Ichigo would be there, clinical and to the point in the report, even if he was far from stable on the inside. The mission team had returned an hour ago, appearing in the Fourth in a manner that would likely circulate the gossip circles for weeks. Which left Ichigo an hour to disappear, and Byakuya at least an hour to find him, because Byakuya wasn’t leaving Ichigo alone when he knew what his love would be like; anything from reckless to morose.

Deciding to start with the Fourth, Byakuya exited his office, glancing around the division courtyard in the low light of the evening; he spotted a familiar head of outrageous red. Byakuya let his presence flare calling his lieutenant over, who straightened imperceptibly before turning and spotting Byakuya, who waited patiently for the young man to arrive.

“Captain?”

Renji asked quietly demurring in the shadows of the veranda, Byakuya smiled briefly in reassurance before responding, “I’m going to find Shiba-taicho, please look after the division. If I am not back when the Captains meeting is called, please attend in my place and inform them of why I was unable to attend.”

The lieutenant’s eyes widened in understanding and with a flash of experienced humour; it wasn’t the first time Byakuya had run off after Ichigo, before being replaced with a serious expression, the intelligence that was rarely used slotting into place behind his eyes. Nodding his thanks, Byakuya turned away from his lieutenant and exited the division, quickly picking up speed as he flash-stepped his way to the Fourth division.

The normally subdued and quiet division was bustling with tension and energy when Byakuya entered, some hush falling as he entered the long medical bay where the Fourth division members were running about like students before an exam. Unohana swept out from one of the back rooms, hair was done up, for once, in an elegant bun, there were lines around her eyes and at the crease of her mouth that alluded to the rough nature of the day. The coming war was affecting them all.

He inclined his head in greeting as the imposing woman paused before him; she glanced once around her division in observation before turning to face him once more. She nodded with a motion of her head and turned moving back the way she had come. Byakuya took the silent invitation to follow and trailed behind the woman, idly glancing at the few patients on the medical gurneys.

She led him into her office, with its large circular window and the faint smell of aloe that always reminded Byakuya of his grandmother. The Captain of the Fourth slipped into the chair behind her desk with a muted sigh that betrayed her exhaustion and Byakuya took the proffered chair.

“You’re looking for Ichigo?”

She asked though they both already knew the answer, the question more of a statement, he nodded hand unconsciously straying to Senbonzakura’s hilt. Unohana hummed for a moment before she stated, “He was hit hard by the loss… I would expect nothing less of Ichigo and his hero complex. He spoke to the other member of his squad Yumi, to comfort her, and then Yoruichi-san briefly. After that, he left the division. I have little idea where he may have gone; however, I suspect you will have many more ideas than I, Kuchiki-san. It would probably be helpful to speak to Shihōin-taicho, she may be able to give you an idea of how bad he seemed.”

Byakuya processed the information quickly and with a familiar pang of sadness, Ichigo was always one to put his duty first. He had ignored his own pain, guilt, grief and everything else to comfort his
squad member. It was something so incredibly Ichigo that it left a fond yet bitter smile dancing across
his features.

“Thank you, Unohana-san.”

Byakuya responded inclining his head respectfully, as he rose from his seat intending to check on
Ichigo’s squad member for Ichigo and then speak to Yoruichi. Unohana smiled from where she was
glancing at a report, hair curling gracefully at the joint of her neck she replied, “Thank you Kuchiki-
san.”

With a bow, Byakuya swept out of the office and down the hall, following the worn path out
towards the med bay. He paused as he walked, some unknown sense guiding his feet as he turned
following the hallway to a closed door, the dredges of Ichigo’s presence lingering like fine whispers.
It was something Byakuya had only become accustomed to over time, and he doubted few others
noted when Ichigo did leave a trail, but he was thankful for it nonetheless.

Searching with his reaitsu Byakuya was met with only cold emptiness surrounding the room, a
lingering kind of chill that reminded him of the ghost stories told in the mortal realm. With a tug of
courage, Byakuya slid open the door and drew in a muted breath. It was the Fourth division morgue,
though he knew the Twelfth also held one for research purposes, where the bodies were held until
the funeral. Shaking his head Byakuya spotted the body lying on a table, a sheet drawn over the still
form. With a knowing sigh, Byakuya murmured a prayer and turned away sliding the door close
with a click that seemed final in the silence.

Returning to his original path Byakuya entered the med bay, eyes searching for a division member
not caught in the bustle of the frantic traffic. A female healer drifted over after a minute, quietly
asking if he needed any help. The Captain of the Sixth spoke of Ichigo’s squad member, and the
woman nodded a sort of half sadness to her eyes as she directed him to one of the private rooms.

Thanking the healer Byakuya paused outside of the private room, taking another fortifying breath; he
was taking a few of them today, he entered the room. The Shinigami sitting on the bed was simple
with a quiet aura about her that endeared her to Byakuya a slight bit immediately. Her eyes were red,
and it was obvious she had been crying, knees tucked to her chest in an instinctive position of
security and comfort.

The woman glanced up when he entered and bowed her head respectfully, Byakuya smiled kindly,
recalling the woman was Ichigo’s fourth seat with a recollection of the many faces that passed
through the orange-haired Shinigami’s office.

The silence lingered between the two, unsure and hesitant, as Byakuya remained by the doorway.
After a moment glancing around the empty room, Byakuya tentatively asked, “Is anyone here with
you?”

The woman nodded hesitantly after another moment of silence, hands dropping to her lap she
responded meekly, “Shiba-taicho was here, Kuchiki-taicho, he went to visit… A-akira’s wife. My
brother has been with me.”

“Thank you, Yumi-san. Please get some rest, and know that what happened today wasn’t your fault,
nothing is ever the sole fault of one person.”

Byakuya responded slowly a touch awkwardly, smiling kindly at the hint the woman had given; she
was intelligent. He felt for the woman, understanding guilt and grief, even as he turned not wishing
to overstay his welcome and unsure how to help but knowing the woman would likely need to seek
the therapy now widely available in the Fourth. As Byakuya left he heard a murmured thank you.
Standing in the hallway Byakuya debated his next location on the wild-goose chase of trying to find Ichigo, who at times could be damn near impossible to find considering how damn well he knew three different realms. Sighing, he mentally mapped his options out; he could speak with Yoruichi and see how bad Ichigo was, try to find Akira’s wife to see if Ichigo was still there, or try and track him.

Disturbing his Kenseikan once more as Byakuya ran a hand through his hair, he decided to find Yoruichi. Ichigo’s state would give Byakuya a better idea of where he was hiding (because he was hiding, you could feel the lack of his presence), and it would take longer to track down the departed Shinigami’s wife than to dart to the Second division.

Decision made Byakuya departed from the Fourth with a final glance at the bustling division, lanterns casting a warm glow around the place of healing. Byakuya swept swiftly through the near-empty streets of Soul Society, only the occasional patrol appearing. A heavy tension was settled over all of Soul Society, one that was almost tangible, it lingered with the coming war, and sparked Byakuya’s own trepidation. He knew that the war wasn’t a simple matter of win or lose, and it wasn’t black and white. Byakuya had heard Ichigo murmur such things in half whispers as he always did when they sat by the fire with sake. But he also knew that it was nothing in comparison to what would come after.

Pushing aside dark thoughts, Byakuya arrived at the barracks of the Second division, a warm glow emanating from the lamps cloistered around the building. He waited outside, knowing that Yoruichi had likely known of his presence before he had landed a block away and that the woman would prefer discretion among her subordinates, that and she took pleasure in surprising those who didn’t expect it.

After a minute the Shihōin princess slipped out of the barracks with ever-present grace, a shadow with glowing eyes and a luminescent grin. But Byakuya could see an exhaustion behind the movement that betrayed how harshly the mission had affected the normally smooth Captain.

“How was he?”

Byakuya asked cutting to the chase, knowing the woman would appreciate it after the long day. Yoruichi sagged against the wall for a moment before her perfect posture (or what counted for posture when it came to Yoruichi) settled into place. Her eyes glowing in the darkness reflected a deep sadness, one that was accepted by the leader of the Onmitsukidō but there nonetheless.

“It was... he was... bad. But it wasn’t like those times.”

Yoruichi replied struggling to describe her friend’s state. Byakuya nodded in understanding, it was hard to scale things with Ichigo where he flipped between hiding his emotions behind iron walls and wearing his heart on his sleeve. Ichigo hadn’t had a break down like before, he was getting better, but he still had bad days. Crossing his arms over his chest Byakuya leaned against the wall mirroring the Shihōin princess’ pose he asked, “Any idea of where he might be?”

She laughed at the question, the sound echoing hollowly through the streets, and gave him a knowing and exasperated look. Byakuya conceded with a small acknowledging nod of his head and
listened as Yoruichi dutifully replied, “He won’t be in Hueco Mundo or the human world. I doubt he’s with his family. It seemed like he wanted solitude."

Byakuya nodded the places where Ichigo could be hiding narrowed down once more. Stepping forward into the light Byakuya gripped Yoruichi’s arms in thanks, looking into her eyes and smiling gently. She returned the expression, eyes soft like liquid gold she shook her head and murmured, “Go off and find your boyfriend.”

The Captain of the Sixth huffed a laugh at his friend’s response but nodded, letting go of her arms he stepped back and bowed whispering a sincere thank you. Yoruichi laughed and made a shooing motion with her hands before she slipped once more into the barracks eyes glowing in the darkness.

Glancing down the narrow winding paths of Soul Society, which Ichigo had often bemoaned resembled a maze, Byakuya let his senses stretch out searching for Ichigo among Rungokai. He knew that the Captain of the Tenth was probably in one of the Shiba retreats dotted about the districts, of which there were many. Byakuya had an idea of which one in particular.

Nodding to himself, the Captain of the Sixth glanced around once more at the empty streets, the First division glowing in the distance; he doubted they would make it in time for the Captain’s meeting, Senbonzakura agreeing with tamed amusement. Shaking his head in partial mirth at the idea of the Soutaicho and the other Captains’ reactions, Byakuya set into a quick flash-step steadily making his way to the Shiba home he knew Ichigo was likely hiding in.

Byakuya was right, he could sense Ichigo as he landed in the small grove of weeping willows, the cabin of sorts tucked against a rocky cliff face, small and secluded it was more a safehouse of sorts. Ichigo had disappeared before; it was, unfortunately, a routine habit when he was ‘emotionally compromised’ as Ichigo had once put it. Byakuya was half glad Kaien had shown him most of the locations considering how often it occurred; though more often than not Ichigo appeared here.

Senbonzakura’s gentle prodding echoed throughout Byakuya’s mind and with a nod, he pushed aside lingering thoughts and memories and walked forward. Pausing at the door Byakuya listened intently, for what, the Captain wasn’t sure, but he was relieved when the faint near inaudible sound of breathing slipped through the thin rice paper door.

He knocked once and waited, listening as fabric shifted and the gentle pad of footsteps echoed behind the door. It slid open after a suspenseful moment of silence, where Byakuya knew Ichigo was debating even opening the door (which would ultimately have been useless and they both knew it), and Byakuya contained the soft sigh at the sight of Ichigo. His eyes were red as if he’d been crying, though Byakuya doubted he had, there were bags under his eyes, and a gaunt grimness to his features that was normally washed away under the light of day.

“Byakuya.”

Ichigo croaked softly, just his name nothing and everything behind it, looking at him with eyes flashing like a kaleidoscope of emotions. Byakuya reached out and gently rested a hand on his partner’s cheek feeling the cold that seemed to seep from his skin he murmured Ichigo’s name in return.

Like a wraith, the Captain of the Tenth stepped back; shihakusho swishing like a faint wind, in the half-light of the unlit cabin Byakuya could see blood staining the shihakusho like a red wine. For a brief moment, he worried that it was Ichigo’s own before rationality took over (not that Ichigo wouldn’t treat an injury in the face of some other objective), and Byakuya decided to later search for spare clothes, for the confounding foolish man.
Byakuya glanced around the familiar small cabin, with its three rooms and the currently unlit fireplace casting deep shadows. Fixing Ichigo with an unimpressed stare, one that received a slightly apologetic smile, Byakuya swept forward and after a few minutes, a small fire began crackling merrily filling the once dark cabin with warm light. In the shadows cast away by the light, Byakuya could see Ichigo’s eyes clearer; for all that they were shrouded with emotion.

“It wasn’t your fault Ichigo.”

The Kuchiki head said quietly, voice gentle as if approaching one of the small animals that Rukia sometimes found. Ichigo’s head snapped up at the words, eyes wide like a deer caught by a hunter. Byakuya stepped closer to his partner, and with a small frown noticed the fine tremors leaving Ichigo’s hands shaking. Without hesitation he pulled Ichigo into a hug, a hand stroking the orange-haired man’s back in a soothing motion as he tried to imbue Ichigo with some of his own warmth.

“It is my fault… if I had just released my Shikai sooner, hell I could have done so much! I-I,” Ichigo pulled away in a frantic motion voice rising from a soft whisper he began pacing, “Fuck Byakuya, I should have engaged Ulquiorra beforehand, should have opened a Garganta for the two to escape, should have never let them into the throne room, should have went into Bankai, should ha—”

Byakuya interrupted Ichigo’s pacing and quiet rant, drawing him from his spiralling thoughts and into his arms. Cradling his shaking form, he whispered, “What has happened has happened Ichigo. You can’t always save everybody.”

“But that’s why I’m here! What’s the point if I can’t save anyone…?”

Ichigo responded fiercely equal parts determination and sorrow, an apology lingering in his trailing words because they both already knew the truth. Byakuya once more stopped his partner in his pacing, holding Ichigo’s face between his hands he looked into soft brown eyes, eyes that had seen too much, that were like amber holding emotions and memories in some golden light.

“You don’t carry the weight of the world anymore Ichigo, you’re not alone. You’re not God. People die. Sometimes that’s how is.”

Byakuya spoke earnestly trying to reach Ichigo through the dark haze he had sunk himself into, knowing that speaking of what Ichigo had already accomplished wouldn’t work, nor endless platitudes. Ichigo blinked slowly, one hand reaching up to cup Byakuya’s own before Ichigo buried his head against Byakuya chest shoulders heaving silently.

Carefully the Captain of the Sixth slid the two to the ground, the warmth of the fire roaring happily in the fireplace seeping out to embrace the two. Ichigo remained quiet, slumped like a ragdoll against Byakuya’s chest fingers clutching the thick material of his shihakusho.

“I’m tired Byakuya… tired of death and losing people. And I know I’m going to keep losing people, but it doesn’t sting any less; just tired.”

Ichigo whispered voice young in a way Byakuya rarely heard, it reminded him of when Ichigo had revealed everything. The Kuchiki head nodded hugging Ichigo closer to his chest understanding the unspoken sentiments behind the words pried from Ichigo.

Briefly, he entertained the thought of mentioning the Captain’s meeting, the idea of Ichigo grinning in mischief and saying that they could all go screw it, before he shook his head and dismissed the idea, content to let the silence speak, saying only, “I know.”

“Life without planning extensively for the future looks so weird, like a distant hazy dream from a
lifetime ago, “the orange-haired man said softly staring into the fire, Byakuya hummed curiously understanding in a vague sense what Ichigo was speaking of. With a soft shake, he continued, “The time that’s going to come after the Quincy is so abstract…. It’s like an unfinished painting with no clear plan. I’m not sure if it frightens or excites me.”

“We’ll keep on living. I’ll make the tea you like, Rukia will become a lieutenant, Kaien will continue to bother you, your sisters will grow up, and we’ll spend each day living each day.”

Byakuya said sincere and like a promise in the emptiness of the cabin where it was just two souls and the crackle of a fire. Ichigo glanced up then, eyes like burnished bronze in the candlelight he smiled and pressed a chaste kiss to Byakuya’s cheek before letting his gaze fall back to the fire.

“Do you still want to travel?”

The Captain of the Sixth asked amiably, earning a faint bout of laughter that shook the body in his arms before Ichigo looked up at him and grinned eyes flashing his arms stretched out and he said, “Of course, the rest of Japan maybe Mount Fuji, America again, the Empire State building, maybe England…”

X

Ichigo paced through the base camp, presence drawn like an armour around him, broadcasting surety and assurance like the wide trenches dug into the sand. They were spread out behind a small sea of rolling dunes, providing cover in the case of an attack, and they ran like a maze that stretched back for what seemed like endless miles when within its enclosed walls. They weren’t the best trenches in Ichigo’s opinion, in fact, they were hardly functioning in some senses, but he knew about the attrition warfare of the First World War, so he was walking a thin bias. Being built in the sand didn’t help in any case, the crystalline substances seeped everywhere.

The trenches rose to about his neck, enough so that if one was crouching they wouldn’t be seen, and were enforced with wood, or sandbags, though it did little to help the eternal spread of sand. He knew on a basic level that it would be years before he got rid of all the sand. Though what the system of hastily constructed trenches lacked in physical strength and appearance, they made up for in planning. The trenches had three main lines so to speak, the front line closest to Los Noches, which served as their first line of the defence in case of enemy attack, it was where most of the patrols were located, and where the tension hung thick as if a living shroud. The second line which was an in-between sort of line, primarily used for fortifications and communication, and the third line held the semi-temporary barracks, and mess halls, all situated more or under the cover of white and grey tarpaulin.

It wasn’t a small camp necessarily primarily the Tenth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, Fifth, and the Eleventh divisions were there. Mainly those specializing in fighting, they needed Captains with experience and the capability to handle the Espada. That and the aid of a few squads of other division members like the Fourth and the Twelfth had led to quite a collection of Shinigami. It was a bonus that Ichigo knew most of the Captains (he knew most of them in any case) and that they were actually able to work together to form cohesive plans, though Kenpachi was insistent on storming the fortress upfront and wreaking havoc, an idea quickly vetoed. Having Shinji and Kensei there was also nice as it allowed for the presence of three Vizards on the battlefield.

They had formed a cohesive team of sorts; the whole concept of warfare strange and unexplored to many of the Captains on the field, not to mention the lieutenants. Of the Captains in Hueco Mundo, Ichigo would wager that Shinji and Shunsui were the only others to have a good understanding of war. Ichigo was surprisingly okay with that, at least he comforted himself with the fact that it would provide the experience for later.
Ichigo was just more than thankful he hadn’t been put in charge of planning and managing their camps within Hueco Mundo, locating the droves of food needed for the soldiers, actually finding a means to create the barracks; sand was a far worse enemy than hollows in his opinion. Glancing to the side through some of the open sand that stretched between the dunes a reflection of the sky, he could see Los Noches rising in the distance, imposing and ancient against the starkness of Hueco Mundo’s eternal night. He knew the sight unsettled many of the Shinigami, with its caring indifference and the ancient thrum of power that vibrated in the air, least to mention the ever-grinning moon hanging like a spectre upon the sky. But to Ichigo, there was a faint sense of home.

It was beyond strange, being back on the battlefield, once more partaking in war councils, planning their attacks, and walking through the barracks and checking on their Shinigami. It was damn familiar and nostalgic, occasionally he would have to step away from a conversation just to take a breath and ground himself in the present. But it was also so very different from his own timeline, then they had settled far out from Los Noches perched on the sand, in a rapid flurry of invasions and offensive manoeuvres. But still far too damn similar in any case, if the occasional hallucinations waving out of the corner of his eyes, which he didn’t tell Byakuya about, were any indications.

The same threatening mix of nostalgia and war was enough to keep him on his toes even as he acknowledged he was simply at ease in a sense in Hueco Mundo, even with, or especially because of the war. Shiro content with the ambient reaitsu, and the prospect of battle was only an advantage; when the hollow was happy, everyone was happy.

As Ichigo strolled through the second line he kept an idle eye out, monitoring the trench walls, the morale of the soldiers, the general atmosphere that lingered over the camp. They had only been on the battlefield for a week, small scuffles precipitating any real combat, but they all knew it was coming. It lingered like the oncoming clouds of a storm hovering above their collective heads, the downpour waiting around the bend.

It was amusing he supposed, and Ossan agreed with that sage wisdom of his and murmured riddles; his attempts to raise morale, in the way he recalled most fondly from the wars, by walking through the camps. But it beat pouring over the reports as Ichigo knew Byakuya was doing the last time he had seen the man in their barrack. There was a war council scheduled soon, one that would speak of moving forward, and Ichigo was mindlessly making his way towards the large area. But in the meantime, he was content to simply wander, senses refraining from screaming at him.

“Captain Shiba!”

One of the men, Shouta, called out happily as Ichigo passed. The Captain of the Tenth paused on his path and turned with a small smile, three of his division members were huddled over a small fire, few would forget how cool the nights of Hueco Mundo were, passing a flask and grinning with all the good mirth of friendship. Another of the trio beckoned Ichigo over with a wave and he conceded with a roll of his eyes at their actions and a nod.

“And how are you fine gentlemen this evening?”

Ichigo asked amiably as the warmth of the fire washed over him pleasantly; the one on his left, Ryou grinned amiably and offered Ichigo a small metal flask, one that caught and played with the light. It was a tempting offer especially in the light of the coming meeting. He shook his head and smiled in thanks knowing that alcohol probably wasn’t the best idea, even as the Shinigami on his right, Bakugo responded, “We’re pretty well Captain, not knowing when we’re going into battle is a right mess, and the sand’s annoying but all things considered we’re good.”

The Captain of the Tenth smiled warmly at his subordinate’s words, hearing the truth in them and recalling the less than favourable conditions he had heard of before. He knew sometimes it wasn’t
the battle that was the worst, it was the in-between, the wondering when it would happen next, and who would be the next victim. Man’s own worst enemy; his mind. But the soldiers seemed in good heart.

“Any news of home Captain?”

Shouta asked with a knowing wink and a grin that was missing a few teeth, Ichigo shook his head in a mixture of amusement and fond resignation, but remained silent. Ryou took a swig from the flask and leaned closer to the fire as if willing to share a secret he said, “Words going ‘round that those in the Eleventh are unhappy with the lack of action… they don’t see it soon ya might have a mutiny on ya hands Captain.”

Ichigo frowned at the information though it wasn’t completely unexpected, or completely correct. The whole invasion of Hueco Mundo had been driven forward after the recon mission, rushed forward at the outcries of the Shinigami. And they had seen battle. Hollow patrols had attempted to test the strength of the trenches, not to mention Kaien and Tōshirō had made a special trip to deal with the sand hollow.

Ichigo smiled in thanks and responded, “Thank you Ryou, that will be helpful, though I have a feeling the Eleventh will gets its bloodshed soon enough. If you want any advice relating to home, watch out for the Women of the Shinigami’s Association, they’re planning a war featurette.”

Ryou and Bakugo chuckled at the warning, even as Shouta grinned in knowing the terror of the desperate measures the women would go to on occasion. Ichigo laughed with his men, basking in the camaraderie that was easier in war. Rank and division seemed to fall away in the moments in between.

Taking a last glance into the flickering flames, consuming logs in brilliant hues of orange and red, that Ichigo knew Shinji would compare to his hair, Ichigo glanced at the moon hanging in the sky with a knowing sigh. Shiro chuckled in the back of Ichigo’s mind, even as Ossan gently prodded the young Captain forward, there was still a Captain’s meeting, and Shinji would whine if he was late.

Pushing to his feet Ichigo bid the men a goodnight, telling them to keep their eyes open and to enjoy their totally allowed drink. They responded with knowing smiles and deep laughter, Ichigo rolled his eyes before continuing towards the third line where the command area was centred under a mass of tarpaulin and tents.

Shinji waved at Ichigo when he slipped under the heavy tarp flap that served as the door to the command tent, eyes playful and alight beneath a serious exterior, Sakande’s mask was casually perched on his head and Ichigo knew the man was likely revelling in it; the ability to show their hollow side freely, without disdain, and to actually have a use for their powers. Shinji while of the same kin as Kisuke and Sosuke, was also someone who when they had a family, had power wasn’t afraid to let the world know it, not when people would shame him for it.

The blond waved Ichigo over, and after waving to Shunsui, who was at the head of the table bent low over the collection of maps gathered like a great collage, Ichigo made his way over. The Captain of the Eighth, who usually shunted responsibility when available, had, as the most experienced member (excluding himself of course) stepped up as the leader of their little invading force. Ichigo suspected the Soutaicho knew it would happen and hardly begrudged the old man for his plots.

Shunsui was a good commander, far better than some of the Shinigami Ichigo had worked with or even under during his own war. He cared about the lives of the Shinigami under him, and he had a good tactical eye. That wasn’t to mention his considerable technique with the zanpaktou, one couldn’t fight and train under Yamamoto for years and not pick up anything.
The Captain of the Eighth nodded briefly in greeting as Ichigo seated himself, the elder’s face uncharacteristically serious but even still managing to retain ever-present good humour. Kenpachi was sequestered in the corner, looking near bored out of his mind as he idly sharpened his katana with an ever-present screeching that left Ichigo distinctly unimpressed. It didn’t help that Yachiru’s large eyes were studying Ichigo from over the large man’s shoulder with all the intensity of any member of the Shinigami Women’s Association.

Idly he wondered if there would be candid shots from the war, a whole propaganda scheme like they had tried in his own time; it had relatively flopped, but Ichigo would never forgive, nor forget the horrors the media bought with the public’s attention. It was a basic certainty that there would be pictures, but he hoped it wouldn’t meet the fervour of his own time.

Kensei was beside Shunsui pouring over the reports stacked on the desk with an expression that was a cross between bored and interested with a good dose of his usual seriousness. Ichigo wasn’t sure how the man managed such an expression but chalked it up to Kensei being Kensei. The Captain of the Seventh like the Eleventh division was probably itching for a fight and enjoying the short break from his lieutenant.

As Ichigo pulled some of the reports, division numbers, food supplies, and the like scattered on the low table closer he glanced around for a familiar head of raven only to draw up short. He wondered if Renji, one of the few lieutenants actually belonging to the divisions stationed here, (most of the other lieutenants were being borrowed so that the power was divided equally) had been sent to fetch Byakuya from where he was undoubtedly buried underneath the piles of paperwork. He hoped that the Twelfth would have the communications line set up soon, it was desperately needed.

Once the battles started in earnest there would be little to no time for paperwork, it was better to have their secretaries, those division members who had been trained of sorts to deal with the paperwork, sort through it all and only filter the important papers back. In the quieter moments there was time, but in war, there weren’t necessarily quieter moments.

Squishing closer onto a small mat beside Shinji, Ichigo eyed the entrance for a moment before turning to glance at his friend. Shinji was idly reading over a report, chewing on a pen. Ichigo knew it was mostly a front, something for the man to occupy himself with while they waited, and to divert attention away from himself.

“Feeling nostalgic Ichi?”

Shinji asked after a few quiet moments with a shit-eating grin curling across his features, as if the blond didn’t have a clue. Ichigo fixed his close friend an unimpressed stare and responded sharply and sarcastically with a grin, “Not at all.”

The blond chuckled before his eyes slid to the make-shift door, and Ichigo followed his gaze, countenance brightening when he spotted a familiar head of red hair, done up once more in some ridiculous style with a bandana that Ichigo secretly loved. Byakuya entered after the lieutenant, eyes tired but warm where they connected with Ichigo’s own, a small smile dancing across the Kuchiki head’s face.

“You two are such lovebirds.”

Shinji commented with a moue of distaste but mostly just fond humour and a knowing smirk, Ichigo tilted his head towards his friend and raised a brow in insinuation earning an affronted huff followed by a smirk. A familiar presence settled beside Ichigo, calming his nerves faintly and leaving him a touch happier that the man had arrived, and the meeting could begin soon.
They sat in quiet stillness for another minute, content to pour over the reports in amiable silence. Shunsui coughed disturbing the silence and gathering the attention of the Captains effectively. The man grimaced for a moment before a serious expression slipped across his features and he opened his mouth to speak.

“We will be beginning our advance tom-"

The Captain was interrupted as the door to the tent was hastily shoved open and a Shinigami entered with a flurry of panic nipping at his heels. Eyes wide the Shinigami took in the Captains, gasping harshly for breath, the man took a moment before desperately stating, “The hollows are attacking! Some are in the trenches and there’s a great force coming.”

Ichigo growled under his breath about upstart hollows and interrupting meetings, and stood up, even as harsh whispers of surprise surrounded him. Turning to the gathered Shinigami, Ichigo glanced briefly to Shunsui, their eyes connecting and understanding passing like electricity through a wire, the man nodded giving Ichigo permission.

“I’m going to the front lines to mobilise our forces. Shunsui can you handle defence with Kensei? Byakuya, Shinji mobilise your division for the left and right flanks to join the offensive forces. Kenpachi do whatever you’d like as long as it helps.”

The Captain of the Tenth commanded; coveting power and attention with his voice. Shunsui nodded, looking a touch relieved that Ichigo had stepped forward; even knowing it was a rush of the moment thing. Kensei nodded appeased, Kenpachi was grinning like a madman, and Ichigo had long ago come to terms with the fact that the Eleventh division was not one to be controlled in battle. Glancing last to Shinji and Byakuya, Ichigo received twin stares of determined acceptance.

Ichigo flashed the two a quick smile and then he was darting out of the tent, sand whipping around his feet as he made his way to the front line. The wave of hollow reaitsu that lingered around the air was heavy, like the acrid taste of copper that hangs in the air after blood is spilt. Ichigo was surprised he hadn’t noticed the large presence earlier, he berated himself silently for it but pushed it aside to focus on the coming battle. Zangetsu in his hands hummed happily, he could feel Shiro’s bloodlust and Ossan’s pleasure at the thought of the coming battle and it resonated with the part of him that would always be a fighter.

The sounds of fighting reached his ears first, the clash of zanpaktou, the roar of hollows, and above it all the moon grinning at the coming bloodshed. He arrived a moment later, breath still light in his lungs.

Ichigo almost stopped short at the force of invading hollows, like a small sea of porcelain figures gathered upon the sands waiting at the helm of Nnoitra with his sadistic skull-splitting grin. Ichigo cursed under his breath even as he swiftly turned, dodging a hollow attack and letting Zangetsu smoothly sail through the air and slice through a hollow mask. There were a few in the trenches already from what Ichigo could see, likely a raiding party but they were quickly being dealt with.

Ichigo turned his attention to mobilising the Shinigami that would meet the invading forces on the sands. The Shinigami around him were a mix of the Tenth, the Fifth, and the Sixth, with a few others, which made organizing the offence easier. In the distance, he could spot some of Shunsui’s men, and the Eleventh division members drunk on the coming high of battle. Byakuya slid into place beside Ichigo with a wicked grin, long ebony tresses whipped into a low tail, Senbonzakura catching the hollow light of the night.

“Go gather your men; I’ll see you on the battlefield. Zaraki will probably take care of the Espada. Be careful”
Ichigo instructed and received a sharp nod and a grin full of irony and challenge, a hand snaking out to tuck a stray lock behind Ichigo’s ear with a whispered, “Be safe,” and then the man was gone calling the Sixth division to arms. The Captain of the Tenth turned his attention once more to the invading hollows, his spine straightened imperceptibly, and a grim look shadowed his features for a moment before he stepped out of the trenches with a calling flare of his reiatsu.

The Tenth division members, along with some of the Fifth gathered throughout the first trench line, the tension of battle crackling upon the air like liquid lightning through their veins. He pivoted a half-step so that he could address those who would fight the offensive while keeping an eye on the hollows baying for blood.

“The Sixth division will be attacking the left flank, we will take the centre, and the Fifth division will take the right. Try to avoid the humanoid hollow with the scythe, he is an Espada. Move forward as a unit, protect each other if you can, and stay aware of your surroundings. Go slow and be careful; moving on this sand is difficult. Remember you are fighting to defend Soul Society, your families, friends, and your home.”

Ichigo finished his short impromptu speech and turned as the approaching opposing force began to move forward. There was a tense moment of a standstill between the two forces, as Shinji appeared on Ichigo’s right with a jubilant look and a bloodthirsty smirk, and Byakuya on Ichigo’s left, the weight of the coming battle giving pause to all.

Then Nnoitra was yelling commands, frothing at the mouth like a rabid dog and the hollows charged forward. They waited at the front line, the men still in the trenches, the three Captains a backdrop against the night sky, they waited, the drums of war beating upon the sands growing louder as the hollows drew closer.

They waited until the hollows were upon them, and then the Shinigami were moving forward to clash upon the sands, renting the air with cries of pain and the tang of blood. Ichigo slipped into the fray, a vague half mannered idea of where Byakuya was as he slipped through the attack of a hollow, Zangetsu cutting through hollow masks with ease. Up, down, to the left, he slid in between a blow to save a soldier, a Getsuga Tensho here, a cero there.

The endless motions of fighting that rocked like a gentle rhyme throughout Ichigo’s mind as he focused solely on the battle, letting Zangetsu sail true as the hollows fell around them. In the distance far away from the general chaos of battle, he could feel Zaraki and Nnoitra, the two powerhouses like radiant suns upon the sands as the two battled. Then a hollow was clawing at his face and Ichigo let his focus drift whole-heartedly to the battle once more.

Ichigo paused in the middle of the battle when Nnoitra died when he felt the hollow’s reiatsu finally disperse like a great scattering of clouds underneath the warmth of the sun. The remaining hollows felt it too, their motions suddenly disjointed and lost.

It took little time after to force the beasts into a retreat, the creatures fleeing once more to the safety of Los Noches as the Captains halted their men. And then there were the bodies, lying still on the white sands stained red. There were many and it ate at his heart and pounded inside his head, even as he spotted Kenpachi standing almost unnaturally still a triumphant crazed grin on the man’s features; he was hardly surprised the bastard survived.

The Captain of the Tenth flicked Zangetsu, watching disconnected as the blood rent the air like a string of rosary beads, he could feel Shiro’s satiated content, Ossan’s reassuring warm presence like arms encircling his body. Idly his mind went over funeral preparation, how they would handle the bodies, and how many letters to families he would need to write.
Byakuya stopped beside Ichigo, blood sluggishly dripping from a cut on his cheek, and weary clinging to his form like an old lover, but he was alive and Ichigo was beyond grateful. They surveyed the battlegrounds, the Shinigami scattered across the fields, and Ichigo murmured nothing to himself as he continued to stare, Byakuya silent beside him as they mourned quietly.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you are enjoying the way the Winter War is playing out, I’m trying to shift it from Anime one on one boss battles to something more involving of the Shinigami as a whole. Apologies if you were upset by Byakuya and Ichigo’s more blatant relationship in this chapter, but it has been coming for a long time and will remain in the background (for those wondering when they got together, it was sometime after Hisana died). Thank you all for reading, reviews/comments are always super appreciated. Till next time!

Honey!
X

The med bay in their base camp was small and smelled heavily of antiseptic; Ichigo didn’t necessarily hate the place, but his desire to be on the fields with his men, or really anywhere but under the watchful eye of a healer, combatted any love he could have for the place.

Ichigo shifted on the cot and hissed as he pulled at one of the stitches that stretched from nearly his hip to his ribcage. It was quite nasty, or so Shinji had said with a satisfied grin, Ichigo had little comparison considering his definition of nasty was closer to being torn nearly in half. It had been a lucky slip really, he had been fighting Grimmjow, the aggressive excitable cat, and then Zaraki had appeared like a chariot of hellfire, and Grimmjow had been joined by Nelliel and the rest was a blur of chaos Ichigo didn’t want to try and untangle.

He knew that the medic who had treated the wound, Tsuyu if he remembered the frankly frightening woman correctly, had wanted to send him home; probably because she didn’t want to deal with him, and also because of the severity of the wound. But he had dissuaded her, eventually. Stating he needed to be there if another battle occurred, he was a Captain. To assure victory he had promised to stay in the med barracks (he may or may not have crossed his fingers).

The young man had also pulled the old Vizard-fast healing excuse, which Shinji had happily vouched to in a way that had the healer doubting the two of them but consented anyways; likely so she wouldn’t have to deal with the two anymore. Shinji could be an annoyance on a good day, but trap him in a room with little to nothing to do and the man could be a nightmare, he had the absolutely inane habit of beginning to rattle off riddles if one wasn’t careful.

Shaking his head, Ichigo carefully shifted his shihakusho to the side and glanced at the inflamed skin stretching a line along his torso, the stitches crossing neatly in black thread, it would probably scar, another to add to the collection. With a magnanimous sigh, Ichigo let his shihakusho flop back to cover his chest, as he squished his head into the pillow, by his estimate he would have a day till he could be on the battlefield once more, but he could probably escape the med bay in an hour if he tried.
It was a day too long; a day where he wasn’t there to lead the soldiers, to protect everyone. He didn’t doubt the abilities of his comrades, not in the slightest (well Zaraki couldn’t really lead but that was to be expected), they were all holding their own in battle and within the command tent. They had formed a team, working to balance each other’s strengths and weakness while trying to maintain low casualty rates, planning who they would fight, managing the advancing line, and talking with each other.

But that didn’t deter from the guilt that snatched angrily at his thoughts in the silence of the med barracks. Quiet was violent, a lyric he faintly recalled from some song, one that rang true. In the med barracks there wasn’t much to do but sleep, and think, and Ichigo was hardly at the point where he was sleeping most of the day, so his body could heal. Instead, it was his thoughts, flashes of the past and present interchanging before his eyes and stealing away his sight as he sat quietly and ignored phantom figures.

When he was on the battlefield it was easier to ignore it all, to push it aside and focus on the feel of Zangetsu in his hands. Even the small amount of downtime he had; that had dwindled since the start of the war, he spent aiding the troops, talking to his fellow Captains, or going over the reports with Byakuya.

Ichigo knew Unohana would probably have a field day once things quieted, and he was okay with that, mostly accepting it with grace. But that was later, and here Ichigo was in the silence with only the gentle hum of healing and sleeping Shinigami around him.

Idly he forced his mind to think of the war pulling away from thoughts of past injuries and the visits to the Fourth that were inevitably in his future. They had been in Hueco Mundo for three weeks now, it seemed both a century and a few days at the same time. The first week had been nothing but tension, like the cold war of the fifties, but with far less spying or nuclear weapons. Then the second week had exploded into bloody chaos, moving forward inch after solitary inch, fending off attackers, and charging into the fray. It was an attrition war at its finest, because Shinigami and hollows didn’t have tanks and aeroplanes, and chivalry was half-dead.

That second week had mostly been fighting between the Shinigami and the fodder hollows, Nnoitra had been the only Espada seen and he had died. Ichigo wondered if that’s why they hadn’t seen any of the Espada till the third week. It was hard to predict or understand Barragan’s movements; the Captain of the Tenth had stayed away from Los Noches, it was easier to fight that way, not knowing their plans as clear as glass eased his conscience somewhat.

In the most recent week, the Espada had finally escaped their porcelain mansion and onto the fields. It had been a thrill to fight against Tia, Nelliel and Starrk, the three making appearances along with the other Espada as the Captains were pulled onto the fields while the ‘fodder soldiers’ (a name he despised) continued to fight around them. The fighting had raged, sand burning into glass as blood continued to stain the sands in a way that was achingly familiar. They were closer now, Los Noches within easy view, a sharp crease against the horizon.

The bodies were sent back to Soul Society for cremation, and Ichigo wrote countless letters to their families, and they continued to fight, reinforcements occasionally arriving, and Shinigami kept dying. The word whispered on the wind was that a force would be attacking Soul Society soon, that soon the hollows would make their move. It sent a coil of unease snaking its way around Ichigo’s chest, stealing his breath. His family was there, Kaien, Rukia, Ukitake, even the Soutaicho, and ever the protector, of course, Ichigo was worried.

He knew the war was reaching a climax, the fighting before had been without results, the Espada battled the Captains and neither side lost or won; only gaining information and understanding of each
other, and the intimate understanding of war. Soon they would be entering Los Noches, and the
skeleton on his throne would be forced to surrender or their forces would perish. It was a simple
known outcome hanging in the balance as the days and nights continued to pass under the same
grinning guidance.

Ichigo was mildly hopeful about the survival of the Espada, the ones that possessed the intricate
sense of humanity at least. Some of them, the ones he particularly liked at least wanted to stay alive.
The Central 46 wasn’t around to spew biases and harsh sentences ferried through the law anymore,
and the Soutaicho was tolerant at least. He had talked to the other Captains as they shared a few
flasks of stolen sake, they had been surprised by how human, for lack of a better word, the Espada
were. Shunsui had looked so old when he talked of battling Tia and Starrk, and Shinji had already
made his decision, lips firmly sealed shut so that they were almost white with grim determination;
Kensei was the same, and Byakuya understood ever the hidden empath.

He was hoping most of the Captains, when it came time, would spare the Espada. They were dear to
him even if he didn’t know them as well in the current timeline. They had such potential and brilliant
personalities. Their diversity would be a great advantage to the ever-traditional Soul Society; they
would bring new techniques, new cultures, ideas, and new opponents of a friendly kind.

“How ya feeling there Ichi?”

A familiar voice asked casually with its usual drawl, pulling Ichigo from his meandering thoughts.
Shifting upwards on the hospital gurney Ichigo glanced at the low entrance to the med bay and was
greeted with the grinning visage of Shinji, short golden hair like a halo around the Vizard’s head as
the man leaned cockily against one of the support pillars.

Ichigo chuckled faintly at the sight and shook his head refusing to answer immediately, instead
beckoning the older Captain inside. Shinji’s countenance brightened for a moment, so that the man
seemed to glow before the Captain of the Fifth was casually prowling towards Ichigo’s bed.

“So, Mr. stuck-in-the-med-bay, how’re ya feeling?”

Shinji asked once more, sliding languidly into one of the small uncomfortable plastic chairs scattered
around the med barracks. Ichigo tilted his head in thought for a moment before shrugging, and then
hiding a wince at the unfortunate decision, he replied, “Mostly better, stitches should come out soon.
It’s just the quiet.”

“Because heaven forbid ya have to sit in the quiet.”

Shinji snarked back with a raised eyebrow, even as underneath Ichigo could see familiar concern; the
man was as much a mother hen as Kisuke. Ichigo grinned at the insinuation, because Ichigo was a
man who appreciated the silence, and Shinji damn well knew it.

“It’s too silent. But now that you’re here I won’t have to worry, will I?”

Ichigo shot back as he grinned at his friend. Shinji leaned back in fake hurt, hands splayed over his
chest in offence. Ichigo simply gave his friend an unimpressed stare and rolled his eyes at the man’s
dramatics.

“What no overbearing division members pop through?”

Shinji asked after a moment, arms slung over the back of the chair, and in quick motion, Shinji’s feet
were on the bed. Ichigo knew the healer would throw a fit, but he couldn’t find the empathy in
himself to care as Ichigo shook his head and sighed in partial relief and commented, “Nope, I’m just
gad no one’s sent anything back to Soul Society. Kaien would slay all of Hueco Mundo to get here if he heard I was injured.”

Shinji laughed, loud and deep, in a way that lifted the spirits and after a minute Ichigo joined in, ignoring the pain in his sides. Slowly they calmed; the previously oppressive atmosphere of the med bay, lighter.

“I can see that happening,” Shinji commented with a grin pausing for a moment, an abashed expression stole faintly over the blonde’s features and he continued, “Though I may have mentioned you were in the med bay to Sosuke and Kisuke.”

Ichigo’s heart stopped for a moment of terror, as he prayed to whatever deity above that would listen, that they hadn’t shared the news. Kami knew having the healer on his back was trying enough, but Kaien was a helicopter parent at its finest, except everyone was part of his brood. That wasn’t even to discount the others, Rukia would hit him, he winced at the thought of the midgets stinging hits, and Ganju would give him those puppy eyes that always made one feel incredibly guilty.

Pulling back from his thoughts, Ichigo glanced at Shinji who was picking at the frayed hem of his shihakusho. Shaking his head in fond amusement Ichigo commented slyly, “Couldn’t resist the urge to gossip to your boyfriends?”

Shinji glanced up, obviously happy for a moment that Ichigo wasn’t angry before a scowl twisted his features as he registered Ichigo’s words. With a pointed finger, Shinji lectured, “I’ll have you know I don’t gossip.”

The Captain of the Tenth made a vague sound of agreement with an unimpressed look that Shinji once more received with mock offence. After a moment a wicked grin slipped onto the blonde’s features as he studied Ichigo, it was the kind of grin that made his eyes light up with infernal fire, and Ichigo silently bemoaned his peace of mind for whatever was coming, even as Shiro chuckled obviously amused.

“Speaking of boyfriends, has dear-old-sparkly-Kuchiki come to visit?”

The blond asked innocently, Ichigo shook his head again, and tamped down on the urge to swat his friend knowing it would be a waste of energy. Instead, he sat a little straighter and replied simply knowing it would irritate Shinji who had been hoping to get a rise out of Ichigo, “He visited earlier. I asked him to smuggle in some sake, but well he’s not always perfect.”

The Captain of the Fifth doubled over with laughter, blond hair swaying and parting like liquid gold in the faint light of the med barracks. Ichigo shook his head, sometimes it wasn’t even the funniest things that set Shinji off.

After a few moments where the blond attempted to regain his breath, Shinji sat up, cheeks a rosy red, and eyes bright with mirth. He studied Ichigo for a split-second before with a waggle of his brows and a wink he pulled out a flask and tossed it to Ichigo.

He caught the canteen easily, the sound of liquid splashing playfully inside. With an amused grin, Ichigo flicked back the lid and took a sip, the liquid burning pleasantly on the way down. Tossing the flask back to the blond, Ichigo received a cocky smile as Shinji questioned, “Who’s perfect?”

Ichigo tilted his head in obvious thought, one hand reaching to stroke a beard he didn’t and would never have. He continued to think about his answer for another moment before assuredly responding, “Why that would be me wouldn’t it?”
Shinji chuckled and reached over to flick Ichigo on the head with an amused murmur of, “brat,” Ichigo swatted at the hand even as Shinji slipped back and took a swig from the flask. Setting it down the man grinned wicked and wild and asked, “Now who’s going to help you escape the med bay?”

“Well, I’m sure I could rope one of the members of my division into helping me escape.”

Ichigo responded with a knowing grin, Shinji gave Ichigo an unimpressed stare in return and responded, “Aye but they aren’t half as good as I am. You’d probably get caught.”

“Probably, but at least I would be sober.”

Ichigo acknowledged with fake solemnness. Shinji exclaimed in response, “Oye I bring ya sake and this is the thanks I get!”

The Captain of the Tenth rolled his eyes at his friend’s dramatics and reached over to comfortingly pat the man’s arm in a way that wasn’t at all demeaning. Shinji studied Ichigo for a moment before he rolled his eyes and passed Ichigo the flask.

“So about breaking me out?”

Ichigo asked with a curious lilt as he passed back the flask. Shinji stared the orange-haired Captain down unamused before he responded, “You’re just going to escape soon anyways aren’t ya.” Ichigo nodded, the blond sighed, “I don’t know Ichi. What’s in it for me?”

“The satisfaction of pulling one over the head medic,” Ichigo responded and received an unimpressed stare. Shrugging in defeat Ichigo snatched Shinji’s flask out of the man’s hand, waved it threateningly and said, “If not bargaining then how about a hostage situation.”

Shinji stared incredulously for a moment before he shook his head and said, “I’m still not busting ya out Ichi.”

“Oh well worth a try.”

Ichigo said amiably as he handed the flask back, the silver metal catching the light of the tent in sharp slices. Shinji smiled good-naturedly and with a wink said, “But that doesn’t mean I can’t stay to keep you company.”

The Captain of the Tenth just laughed at his friend’s antics, ignoring the stitches in his side, and promising to be on the battlefield soon, he would fight to protect them. In the meantime he would listen to Shinji babble about low calibre Shinigami.

X

The early evening was quiet, the hum and lull of it settling around Rukia like a familiar blanket. She wanted to tug it closer, to enfold the sense of security that seemed to hang gently around her, but she couldn’t not when there were lives depending on her. The calm of the night was underlain by a deep unseatable lingering tension, one that crackled and licked at her heels as she led the patrol down the narrow empty streets of Soul Society.

It occurred to her faintly as shadows shifted with the shuffling wind, that the quiet of the night was not so much light, as a heavy blanket settled over all of them by the lack of presences drifting throughout the streets. Through all of her years living in the outer districts of Rungokai, there had always been someone on the streets, some beggar in the corner, shady dealings under a veranda, people stumbling from the bars. But there was none of that tonight and the silence lingered and
swelled in the empty corners.

The five Shinigami around her could feel it as well; they shifted uneasily, glancing at the buildings that were a dark murky grey in the night, and ripe with shadows. The war was affecting them all. Most of the residents of Soul Society had been advised to temporarily evacuate to the outer districts, which had changed from the poverty-stricken ghettos of her youth, to somewhere people could actually have a decent quality of living. The general thought behind the evacuation was that farther away from the Gotei 13, where all the fighting would occur, would be safer and less likely to attract the attention of the hollows.

Rukia only prayed the hollows wouldn’t be so callous and monstrous under the lead of the Espada as to attack the souls; she knew very easily that it was a prayer unlikely to find fulfilment. Though a part of her was comforted with the information that the patrols of low-level Shinigami and those of the militia were still occurring and patrolling the streets.

As Rukia surveyed the streets, eyes picking out the shadows with all the ease of a predator, she idly wondered how Ukitake-taicho was; it had seemed as if her Captain was balanced on the edge of a wire. With Kyoraku-taicho gone, and the stress of the coming war, Kaien had returned from his impromptu semi-retirement to aid their Captain in dealing with the paperwork, but the weight of war was still taking its toll on the kind man. Although she supposed war was taking its toll on all of them.

Returning from the mortal realm had been a flurry of debriefings, new responsibilities, and an underlying worry that lingered for Byakuya, Ichigo, and all the other Shinigami fighting as part of the invading force. Not to mention the background worry about the twins, and her own worries and doubts. But Kaien the mother hen, blessed soul he was had sat beside Rukia and talked, and then she had talked, and it had been a bit better.

A noise ahead of them startled the patrol so that they all came to a screeching halt, gazes locked on the darkness that was beginning to gather thickly, like syrup dripping from the horizon and coalescing in great draping curtains. The sound was repeated, like the small clack of something heavy against the cobblestone, and it took Rukia a minute to recognize the sound even as a Shinigami to the left moved to draw her zanpaktou.

Rukia raised a hand, halting their movements as the shadows cleared and a hunched figure appeared, a wagon was pushed forward carrying a great load of crops. The man pushing the wagon was old, white wispy hair gathering around his head in wild spurts, he was joined by a younger man, who carried a katana and the weight of a soldier about him, eyes as unforgiving as the supposed sands of Hueco Mundo. It took Rukia a moment to notice the last member of their party, sitting in the wagon was a small girl, barely a toddler, all wide-eyed curiosity as the child played with a small scrap of a doll.

“What are you doing here? It isn’t safe to be wandering these streets at night.”

The raven-haired Shinigami asked kindly, pitching her voice in a manner that she hoped wasn’t intimidating. The old man glanced up with warm eyes, but it was the young man who stepped forward to answer, he bowed his head, sweeping off an old rice hat that had a worn care about it, he stated, “My grandfather is a farmer along the eastern edges of the Fifty-eighth, he heard of the citizens who were unable to leave, and who were in need of food. He has always been a kind man,” the young man trailed off with a fond sort of look before he continued, “I refused to let him go alone, I was part of the militia in my district and decided to accompany him. The child is one that was found abandoned at one of the empty restaurants nearby; it is likely the mother was unable to take care of the babe.”

The young man finished, eyes a contrite mixture of the hardness born of the weary, and a soft
fondness that was directed towards his two companions. Rukia knew about families in Rungokai, they weren’t formed of blood, and she didn’t doubt their story, not when she knew what living in Rungokai looked like. She had heard of the struggles of those who were evacuating, of those who were stuck in relief camps temporarily and unable to get the sufficient food necessary for those with reaitsu. It was a matter she wished could aid more in, but resolved that ending the war as soon as possible would be all they could manage, that and the volunteer work they had been managing in their spare time.

The Shinigami shifted uneasily once more, and Rukia ignored the same urge as the feeling of eyes watching them appeared and increased tenfold sending shivers down her spine. Turning to the two Shinigami on her left after a moment of thought she carefully instructed, “Please lead these three to the relief camps situated to the north, those should be the ones closest to here. Be quick please and be safe.”

The Kuchiki received twin nods, their fear reflected like glass in their eyes but hidden beneath determination and the will to protect their home that had recruited the men in the first place. The small family after a moment of silence moved forward so that they converged with the group, the two Shinigami sharing murmured names under the cover of darkness.

Rukia stiffened suddenly as a Jigokuchō fluttered out of the darkness, and at the same moment, reaitsu exploded into the night in a violent wind that ripped at Rukia’s hair and senses like a violent windstorm, the reaitsu piercing rain. The female Shinigami took a deep breath, tamping on the instinctive urge to flee at the powerful mixture of reaitsu clawing at each other and scraping into the night. Carefully she let the graceful messenger land on her outstretched finger, attempting to project calm to her worried colleagues.

As she read the missive Rukia hid a gasp, perfect Kuchiki mask, one Hisana had always teased her about, staying firmly in place. Kaien’s familiar baritone reported an invading force of hollows, four Espada, an unknown quantity of regular hollows, as well as Arrancar. Three of the Espada were known locations and had been engaged by Captains, but one was still missing, and there were hollows wandering the streets.

Unconsciously Rukia’s hand reached for Sode no Shirayuki’s pommel, taking comfort in the icy wave of calmness that surged from the blade, her spirit murmuring soft warnings. Taking a moment Rukia turned to the small patrol; eyes carefully absorbing the fear decorating the features of the three souls who remained huddled together.

“The hollows have invaded Soul Society. There are four Espada, with three known locations, and an unknown quantity of hollows and Arrancar. Keep your eyes open, and please get—“

Rukia trailed off as a loud crack split the air behind her, slowly she turned to watch the air rent itself in two and a dark figure stepped out of the Garganta, flanked by a few hollows. The Espada, for that, was what it was, Rukia could tell from the power choking the air like a viper curled around its prey, was tall, with skin like charcoal, harsh against the meticulous white of its outfit.

The Espada was quiet, an almost serene air about the hollow, even as underneath something twisted thrashed in its cage. The hollow glanced around in abject silence, observing its surroundings before his gaze landed on Rukia, and her squad, as well as the souls hidden in the back.

“A patrol, I did not expect one.”

The hollow mused quietly to himself, obviously male if the deep voice like the timbre of a drum was any indication. Rukia repressed the sharp shudder tracing her spine as she tried to plot, tried to use the mind she had always been praised for, wondering how they could escape alive. Rukia knew the
harsh truth, she wasn’t even a lieutenant, there was no way she would be able to defeat the Espada, even with the help of the Shinigami on patrol they still wouldn’t make it. But she could try, delay for time until a Captain could arrive or another lieutenant. And maybe if she could protect the souls, and delay the Espada that would be all that would matter.

Because if they ran, if they were cowards then the Espada would be able to go where he pleased. He could attack the innocent citizens of Rungokai, not to mention the small family behind her. And Soul Society would have little to no clue till a report came in. Rukia wasn’t a coward, she was scared, more than she had ever possibly been in her life, but she wouldn’t abandon Soul Society nor the family behind her.

Words echoed in her mind, “You’ll come back?” and “Don’t die please.”

Rukia wouldn’t die, no matter how impossible the odds seemed, no matter how much she wanted to surrender to a higher force, improbably odds. She would live, she had to, she had promised to return, and she wouldn’t break a promise, not on her honour.

Without warning the few hollows gathered behind the Espada began moving forward, great lumbering motions almost unnaturally fast. They were different from the hollows Rukia had encountered before, reaitsu thick and heavy around them, and staring cautiously she could see strange designs sprawling over their masks in acrid yellow. Rukia drew Sode no Shirayuki from her sheath with a whisper of metal on wood and yelled to her squad members, “Get those three out of here at all costs. One of you report to the Soutaicho.”

The Kuchiki let her attention drift away from the patrol, assured they would follow her instructions as she sunk into a low stance, zanpaktou humming steadily in her hands and Ichigo’s voice in her ears. Kaien and Ichigo had been the ones to teach her most of what she knew with Zanjutsu, Byakuya had taught her as well but they had devoted their bonding time to kido. Kaien with his water-type zanpaktou had been ideal for aiding Rukia in figuring out her Shikai. And Ichigo with his experience with Hitsugaya-san and his innumerable talent had been a bonus.

The first hollow charged and Rukia let thoughts of the past, evenings in the Kuchiki compound, slip away as she stepped forward and sliced through the hollow’s mask. Beside her, one of the Shinigami on patrol appeared and sliced through the mask of a hollow with amphibian-like features.

Her assertion has been right, the hollows were strong, like the famous hollows they discussed at the academy, such as Grand Fisher, with heavy reaitsu and either brute strength, or cunning speed, some hidden employed tactic springing out at the last moment. Rukia was glad there were only four of them as she dodged a few flying spikes and slipped under a crushing blow, Sode No Shirayuki slashing upwards to cut through the mask.

Rukia and the other Shinigami continued to fight the hollows, trying to reserve their movements and retain their energy. All the while Rukia was peripherally aware of the Espada waiting on the edge of the battle, ever calm and serene like the surface of a lake waiting for the ripples to disturb its peace, watching and observing.

When the last of the hollows had crumbled into dust Rukia paused and turned to face the Espada, chest heaving, even as grim determination filled her veins with adrenaline. Sode no Shirayuki remained poised lightly by her side as she stared into acid yellow eyes, ones that burned like the scorching sun.

“You are a worthy opponent. I am Zommari Rureaux, the Eighth Espada.”

The Espada stated, and Rukia suppressed any urge to flinch at the revelation, nor to sag in relief that
she wasn’t fighting an Espada higher than the fifth because she knew her chance of survival had increased incrementally. Mustering her composure Rukia pulled on the icy Kuchiki mask and responded dutifully, “Rukia Kuchiki of the Thirteenth division.”

The hollow nodded and drew his blade, Rukia almost wanted to thank the hollow for the lack of dramatic rambling, or last moment wishes and cocky taunting as hollows or really any enemy often participated in, and Ichigo had whined about in many of his correspondences. Though Rukia doubted the battle would cease without any monologuing.

The Shinigami behind her shuffled to the far side of the street, clearly understanding that it wasn’t a fight he could participate in. The man could aid from the sides, but this was a battle where he would get in the way when he had little experience with Rukia or sufficient skill with the zanpaktou.

Rukia partially appreciated it, and partially wanted to rally the Shinigami to fight with her, so she wouldn’t feel so utterly alone against what felt like a giant of an opponent. Sode No Shirayuki whispered softly that Rukia wasn’t alone, calm surging through her, freezing her worries and lending the icy numbness of the frost.

The Espada was fast, that was the first thoughts as Rukia crouched dodging the overhead swing that would have taken her head off had she been a moment too slow. He was fast but not as fast as Byakuya who moved as if hell ran through his heels and electricity through his muscles. Rukia was not as fast as her brother, not even close, but she knew how to work around that.

She listened to the vibrating hum that the reports had stated signified Sonido, and slid to the left dodging the swing, she let Sode no Shirayuki snap up to crash with the other blade with a grinding screech of metal that sent sparks dancing upon the night air. Coolness wrapped around her hands like icy gauntlets and Rukia pushed against the larger force, a frown of determination pulling at her lips.

Rukia flinched as a whisper of instinct snapped at her muscles and she ducked an overhead swing from behind, whipping around to see a twin of the Espada who had fled a few paces. The voice that spoke came from both of their mouths like eerie mirrors, “You will fail because you are Shinigami. The Espada are superior, and Sonido so follows. And I among the Espada have the fastest Sonido. I added in another step and am able to create in a sense clones of myself, a certain magic if you will. I can create up to five clones with Gemelos Sonido.”

And there was the monologue Rukia mourned silently, trying to think over a new strategy even as she stared icily at the Espada, her peripheral attention extended as once more she caught the whistle of wind signalling an attack.

The hollow reversed his blade and began a complex combination of swings, moving his blade like it weighed nothing, slashing overhead, to the left, reversing to stab, before slashing low, and dragging his blade upwards. The twin carefully following the movements and leaving Rukia to rely on her senses and training to stand firm, even as a third clone formed into existence.

Rukia carefully swayed around the liquid like blade, catching it on Sode no Shirayuki and struggling against the Espada’s greater physical strength with concentration lining her brow. She felt the clone moving behind her, even as cocky victory filtered through watered yellow eyes, and with a split second of decision, Rukia dropped into a low crouch the blades crossing overhead.

Pushing Sode No Shirayuki upwards from the low crouch, Rukia pierced the torso of one of the clones, before swirling around steadily onto her feet and casting a Shakkahō that sent the other clone flying backwards slamming into the misty white of Soul Society’s buildings.

“Please halt I will not let you invade Soul Society.”
Rukia stated staring the Espada down with ice circulating through her veins and turning her words into glaciers. The Espada studied her for a moment eyes glaring holes in the darkness before the Eighth Espada stated, “You are arrogant to think you are able to stop me. I shall show you the depth of such arrogance. Suppress Brujería.”

Rukia braced herself watching in surprise as the Espada levitated his blade, the metal folding in on itself, before Zommari’s head tilted and continued to tilt so that his head rested like it was broken upon his neck. Then a white film like substance erupted from the Espada’s blade, hiding the body from view, and reaitsu splashed upon the air with all the force of a tidal wave.

When the strange substance finally cleared, Rukia had to resist gawking at the strange creature that had once been the Espada, eyes surrounded it’s round almost pufferfish like body, the eyes covered near every inch of his body blinking every second in a way that was definitely not creepy. She could feel a monologue about power coming on because it was seemingly commonplace.

Instincts screaming in warning Rukia darted to the side as one of the eyes glowed purple, the kind of purple that was sickening and made one think of disease and taint. He questioned her movements after nothing visible had happened before he began to explain the nature of his resurrection, the way he could steal sovereignty from all that his eyes saw.

As the man continued to monologue, Rukia silently tried to figure a way out of her situation, her left leg was already compromised, the print standing vividly against the black cloth of her shihakusho, and he would soon use that against her. She knew she would be able to use flash-step if she immobilised the leg, the question was the best way to do so without causing herself permanent damage. Studying him silently with a blank face that prompted more explanation Rukia noted the number of eyes and concluded that he could only control so many things as there were eyes, fifty-two eyes which meant little relief; though Rukia had another suspicion.

The Espada finished his monologue making a great show of commanding her left leg to move forward. Grudgingly Rukia resisted, even as her leg moved without her command sliding a step forward. Tamping down on the worry that bubbled like a fire within her chest, Rukia gathered her reiaitsu around her, body temperature lowering steadily and at an accelerated rate, and with a silent breath said, “Dance Sode No Shirayuki,” letting the blade swing vertically and watching the familiar transition to Shikai as the ivory ribbon extended lilting through the air on an unforeseen breeze, and her reaitsu pulsed like a heartbeat in her ears.

Without preamble Rukia let ice encase her right leg, hidden underneath the fabric of her shihakusho, immobilising and acting as a sort of cast for her the limb. The Espada stared confused even as Rukia punctured the ground once with Sode No Shirayuki and called out, “Tsugi no mai, Hakuren,” Following that she punctured the ground four more times sinking into a battle stance and letting her reaitsu surge as an icy gust of wind drove forward to flash-freeze the Espada.

The ice caught the Espada still wide-eyed in the sudden transition to Shikai, and Rukia knew it was only a temporary fix before the ice would crack and the battle would resume. Though some part of her desperately wished that the Espada would stay frozen forever, that the battle was over, even as she knew it was far from likely. Rukia held onto that the attack would at least incapacitate a few of the ever-creepy acid like eyes.

The thin layer of ice cracked after a moment and revealed a disgruntled Espada who studied Rukia with cold eyes and something like fury playing commonplace on his face. Many of the eyes adorning his body remained open a thin layer of ice rendering it temporarily blind.

“I have underestimated you Shinigami; to my own arrogance.”
The Espada stated before turning to the Shinigami still in the corner, five of the eyes on Zommari’s torso glowed, the same sickly lilac, as Rukia turned a half pace wincing as she saw the marks appear on her fellow Shinigami.

The Espada charged at the same moment as the controlled Shinigami moved forward blade snapping to and fro in a sluggish movement, one that Rukia reluctantly matched as she was unwilling to hurt a subordinate. It went against all she stood for.

Dodging the overhead strike from the Espada, Rukia shoved the Shinigami back and turned to face the Espada dodging a flurry of attacks, as she tried to keep her attention split between the Espada and her comrade.

Rukia cried out in surprise and pain as the Shinigami zanpaktou sliced thinly into her side, blood trailing sluggishly from the wound, as her breath left her lips in a parted exhale of frost. She turned sensing the Espada’s movement and blocked the blade, only to wince as an eye’s pupil dilated bright purple filling the arm as Rukia swung her left arm to block her right surrounding her left arms will. Silently once more Rukia froze her arm, wincing at the numbing cold and the extra weight that dragged at two of her limbs, and chilled her body as she turned to the Espada and let a byakurai slip from her fingers piercing the hollow’s shoulder even as she whipped around to defend against the controlled Shinigami.

She could feel herself tiring, energy already drained from fighting the advanced hollows, the weight of her iced limbs, and restricting her motion so as to avoid injuring her fellow Shinigami. It was her downfall as Zommari darted in and Rukia raised her guard a moment too late managing only to deflect the blade so that it pierced the outer edge of her abdomen. Cursing under her breath Rukia frosted over the wound and retaliated using kido, knowing it was a weakness of the Espada after she had seen previous reactions to its uses.

Wordlessly Rukia cast a Shakkahō, followed by a byakurai, pushing the Espada back and temporarily immobilizing him she turned to the Shinigami who was charging forward, blood breaking through the iced-over wound in her abdomen she pulled her reaitsu to her hands and called out, “Bakudō number one Sai.”

Instantly the Shinigami fell as the powerful binding locked his arms behind his back. Rukia barely had a second to turn and block, struggling against the larger Espada’s greater strength with only one arm and the ice crutch serving as half of her stance. The Espada began a flurry of fast-moving blows and Rukia skidded back as one of the eyes dilated quickly ushering her reaitsu forth she called out, “Some no mai, Tsukishiro,” she drew a circle and watched as ice erupted in a pillar stretching towards the night sky like a beacon, the faint light of the nearby lamps distorted and shaky in its icy surface.

She prayed that the Espada was trapped in the ice, or that at the very least it had stopped Zommari and his overblown quest for sovereignty. Carefully adjusting her grip on Sode No Shirayuki, Rukia extended her senses, silently drawing on her remaining reserves of strength, and pushing aside the numb weight of her left arm and right leg.

The tell-tale hum of Sonido buzzed like cicadas in the still lingering quiet of Soul Society, Rukia pivoted and caught the Espada’s blade on her own. They initiated an intense flurry of attacks, cutting up, down to the side, slipping underneath in clumsy movements off balance because of her frozen limbs, she used her frozen arm as a shield whenever Zommari tried to use his Amor, the sovereignty technique, swinging her shoulder to move the arm that hung like led at her side as they duelled.

Her reserves were drawing thin, Rukia was cut in half a dozen places, the blood trailing sluggishly, and she knew the battle was drawing to a close. Her opponent was also near finished, scorches
marring the pristine white of the Espada’s robes, blood leaking like wine in other areas, and yellow-acrid eyes that burned with hatred.

Staring at the hollow from across the street, Rukia knew this would be the final dramatic charge. In that moment her heart fluttered in her chest, and she thought of the upcoming war, the bloodshed, the pain, and for a moment she wanted to let it be, let it end. Then a pair of twins flashed through Rukia’s eyes, Yuzu’s soft smile and Karin’s spunk. Hand tightening on Sode No Shirayuki, Rukia knew she wouldn’t die, not here, not today.

They charged Rukia swaying near on her feet even as Sode No Shirayuki hummed in her hands and the last dredges of reaitsu pulsed through her veins in cool rivers. They clashed once and Rukia felt the Espada’s blade clip her side, even as her zanpaktou sliced cleanly through flesh and bone, blood draping the air in pearlescent drops. Rukia collapsed to a knee, breath heavy in her lungs she choked a laugh and murmured, “Arrogance,” even as she vaguely registered a familiar arriving presence, the fading one of the Espada, and let her conscious sink into blissful darkness with determination still gripping her heart and will.

X

Chapter End Notes

So, was the battle between Rukia and Zommari good? I tried to play on their individual strengths, and still make the battle exciting without all the monologue. Would you guys like to see more one on one battles? Or less? Thank you all for reading, comments/reviews are always appreciated. Till next time!
Chapter Summary

Backpefeifengesicht
(n.) A person who needs to be slapped; lit. “a face that needs a fist in it”

Hello everyone here is chapter 52, I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

X

Ichigo shifted in the rickety plastic chair resting unhappily on the plastic sheets (Kisuke’s idea) serving as the floor of their tent. The young Captain supposed it was a measure against the sand; tough rice mats would likely have served just as well. Ichigo rather thought the plastic made sneaking out when Byakuya was sleeping difficult; it made the most horrible crinkling noise and he had received bleary-eyed glares a few times after slipping in from a night shift.

Running a hand over his features and weaving fingers through his messy hair Ichigo sighed and rolled his shoulders, taking a small respite before refocusing on the causality reports from the last advance. A frown settled firmly on his features as he added two more names to the list of letters to the families he would have to write a letter to, his hand and heart heavy and already mourning the thought of all the Shinigami lost in the war.

For a few more minutes Ichigo continued to work in the empty silence of the tent, sorting papers, signing his signature with a flourish, letting his thoughts drift aimlessly, disturbed only by the rustle and chatter of passing Shinigami. Finally, when the dull monotony of completing paperwork overwhelmed his senses and rendered any further attempts useless, Ichigo pushed away from the small desk and stood to survey the tiny space with a critical eye.

Byakuya had decided, upon first seeing their tent, that he had a love-hate relationship with the bone like structure, Ichigo was still undecided with its low ceiling, white tarp walls, and the stacks upon stacks of paperwork. Most of it only needing only cursory glances or was there because of overflow.

It wasn't like Ichigo and Byakuya inhabited the area other than for sleep, paperwork, and for the occasional moment of peace of mind, like most of the other Captains. Usually, they were in war councils, speaking to the field soldiers, or visiting the med bay. Like Byakuya was doing at the moment, and probably would be for the next few hours.
Renji, the loveable idiot, had decided to engage Grimmjow in battle in the recent attack to protect a few Shinigami who had been targeted by the adrenaline junkie of an Espada. The redheaded lieutenant had returned bloody, but alive, and Byakuya ever the worrier about family, and redheads in particular (he had adopted the practice from Kaien) had departed for the med bay, likely to hold vigilance till the younger Shinigami awoke.

Cracking his neck, Ichigo paused as his senses alerted him to the presence of Shinigami outside the tent, though their reaitsu was suppressed, so the number and identity was Ichigo’s guess for the moment; partially because he was too lazy to try and discern the presences.

Mumbling about meddling fates, and a penchant for trouble following him like a bloodhound, Ichigo pushed aside the tarpaulin sheets that served as their door and came face to face with two Captains. He repressed the sigh building in his chest and regarded the two with a dry look.

Resisting the urge to rest his palm against his forehead, Ichigo studied Shinji, left arm shimmering with barely visible iridescent kido sliding and moulding around his arm, and a bruise blossoming on his cheek, there was a cocky grin dressing his features, but it was fragile and as clear as glass in its mockery. His eyes were dark where they glanced into Ichigo’s own, pleading, asking, and apologizing all in one.

Kensei behind the blond had a distinctly unimpressed, and yet uncomfortable expression as he glanced around the camp with discerning eyes, Shinigami bustling by with hardly a glance at the trifecta of Captains. Shaking his head and once more mumbling about idiotic captains as Ichigo’s mind pieced together a likely plausible story for their appearance the orange-haired Captain stepped aside, propping the flap of his tent open so that the others could follow, ducking under the low entrance and stepping into the warm light of the oil lamp on the desk.

“You two are idiots.”

Ichigo commented with a roll of his eyes as he settled onto one of the cots staring the two down with an expectant expression as he waved the two Captains’ over. Shinji settled on the ground beside the cot, letting Kensei take the seat with little to no plastic and far less squeaking, and squishing the blond an inch closer to Ichigo.

“Oy at least let us defend ourselves before you call us names.”

Shinji demanded unrepentantly as he challenged Ichigo with a grin. The orange-haired Captain studied the two and wondered why this was his life, even as he reluctantly nodded motioning for the two to explain.

“Okay, well we decided that it would be a good idea to do some reconnaissance, see if we could get an idea of what was happening in the hall of the mighty Espada because we know your mission was… cut a bit short. So, we got into Hueco Mundo fine, mind you, didn’t attract any attention till we got to the throne room.” Shinji paused for a moment discomfort flashing across his features as his gaze strayed to his arm a flash of remembrance playing shadows over his eyes, then the blond straightened and continued Kensei a solemn statue at his side.

“Oy at least let us defend ourselves before you call us names.”

Shinji demanded unrepentantly as he challenged Ichigo with a grin. The orange-haired Captain studied the two and wondered why this was his life, even as he reluctantly nodded motioning for the two to explain.

“There was a meeting happening. And the self-proclaimed king was talking to his followers, a few were missing preparing for another blow on Soul Society, and one was “indisposed” or whatever. Anyway, after some brief boring information, I’ll include in the report, these Arrancar were brought in, three of them, looked decently human. They were charged with the betrayal of Los Noches for aiding a Shinigami that had fallen on the battlefield off the fields. Barragan unsheathed his sword and then he released his resurrection, it was all a show for sure, and he was crazy terrifying, a full skeleton regalia and all, and then he touched them with his sword and they just… disintegrated?
Crumpled to dust, the muscles, then bone stripped till there was nothing left… it was terrifying. And then he turned his attention to the rafters, I don’t know how he detected us, maybe knew we were there the whole time, who can say? He sort of flew at us, and we were trying to escape without his blade touching us. His blade nicked me, and I could feel it eating at my skin, consuming my flesh, so I put a stasis kido to try and stop it and here we are.”

Shinji finished with a helpless look and a grimace, Kensei looked a touch abashed at their mess of a night but mostly resigned. Ichigo stared at the two for a few minutes of silence, before he dragged a hand through his hair and stood up, swaying his way over to the desk where he grabbed a flask, one he had successfully kidnapped from Shinji, and took a swig before tossing it to Kensei who followed the action before passing it once more to Shinji.

“Let me see the arm.”

Ichigo commanded as he made his way over, willing the rant he felt bubbling up beneath Shiro’s righteous fury and protectiveness to wait, and instead, he focused on saving Shinji’s arm, after he could focus on chewing the idiots out.

Shinji smiled a fragile tender smile, and stretched his left arm out, shimmering in the warm glow of the oil lamps. Ichigo crouched and inspected the cut. It was small about the size of his pinky, and the flesh around it was already gone, muscle starting to peek out in some grim macabre scene, bone glistening white. Barragan’s reaitsu lingered and swelled about the wound leaving Ichigo to contemplate the problem. Slowly he recalled the lessons Unohana had casually imparted as they walked through the markets of Rungokai, or when conversation wasn’t necessarily an option.

“I think I’ll be able to save your arm, but if not, we’re going to tie it off below the elbow in case we need to save the rest of it. I’m going to try an override or so to speak to burn Barragan’s reaitsu and his powers to stop the process. If it works you’ll have to wrap the wound tightly to prevent infection and see Kotetsu-san for immediate healing.”

Ichigo stated clinically and simply, putting aside his own feeling for the moment to focus on Shinji’s wound. The blond blanched at Ichigo’s words, but it quickly morphed into grim determination, the kind that had always earned Ichigo’s respect, and he nodded his acceptance.

“This may hurt.”

The young Captain warned his friend as he ripped part of his shihakusho and wrapped a strip around the Captain’s elbow to stop the blood flow, and hopefully provide enough time for drastic measures if things went south. Then Ichigo took the flask from Kensei and tipped it back letting the liquid courage burn his throat before he passed the flask to Shinji who nodded eyes dark and earnest and mirrored the action. Swiftly Ichigo unsheathed Zangetsu, the blade humming familiarly in his hands as Ichigo channelled his reaitsu letting the hollow portion of his heritage flow to the surface, through his body, pulling from his vast reserves and letting it spike through his blade, coalescing along the metal in arcs of ebony.

The blond Captain extended his arm wordlessly, the airtight and serious as Kensei passed Shinji a gag, and the oil lamps flickered. Ichigo let Zangetsu hover above the cut taking a breath, centring himself and his will before he carefully let the blade cut through the stasis kido and into the wound. He let reaitsu flow through him like a conduit, bright pulsing energy, wild and chaotic.

He focused on the feel of Barragan’s reaitsu of chasing every wisp of it infecting the wound and burning it to nothing. Ashes to ashes as one would poetically claim when talking about time and certain grandiose hollows. Ichigo ignored Shinji, ignored Kensei, the outside world, focused utterly on the wound until he sat back with an exhale of exhaustion and looked up, Zangetsu resting at his
Part of the problem had been Barragan’s strength, while nothing to compare to Bach, it was nothing
to scoff at and still required minute force to eradicate. Then there were the wisps of it gathering and
filling the wound seeking to spread like maggots. Ichigo had had to chase each filament down, piece
by piece, because if even a lingering thread of it remained, if the flesh, bone, marrow, muscle held
even a thought of decay and time then it would spread.

Sweat beaded Shinji’s brow, his teeth were clenched around the gag, as he studied Ichigo with
something like awe and thanks radiating from his amber eyes. Kensei seemed equally impressed and
a hell of a lot less tense as he undid the binding that wrapped around Shinji’s elbow with a
tenderness most thought the silver-haired man didn’t possess.

Heaving himself to his feet, Ichigo repressed a shudder and lugged himself to the desk once more,
carefully grabbing a roll of bandages before returning. Gently he inspected the wound extended his
senses to search for anything. With an exhale of relief he gently bandaged the wound, still raw with a
hint of white, there would likely be a hell of a scar, and maybe slight muscle damage but the idiot
would survive.

Ichigo leaned back and took a minute to pull at his reaitsu, reshorring his energy and allowing the
exhaustion that hovered like a fog to fall away slightly, the sleepless nights in a too familiar desert
had only aided and abetted his insomnia and exhaustion. The tent was quiet as they all recovered,
and Ichigo prepared his words to the gleeful, yet muted cheering of Shiro, and Ossan’s amusement.

“I retain my right to call the two of you complete idiots. Where in the three realms did you receive
the bright idea to attempt an infiltration mission? You’re not even good at reconnaissance for Kami
sake! I understand you both are Vizard, but that doesn’t mean an Espada can’t sense you. And
honestly Shinji your zanpaktou, while an illusion type, is far from Sosuke’s more material based
creations, and Kensei your zanpaktou is all about hand to hand fighting. Why in the world did you
consider this a good idea? Can you imagine what would have happened if they had captured or
killed you!? They would have used you as blackmail, maybe even for experiments, or if you had
died, imagine the hole it would leave in Soul Society, how it would affect everyone and the morale
of the troops. I hope you both understand the gravity of your actions… but I’m glad you survived.”

The young Captain finished throwing himself to the floor once more, from where he had pulled to
his feet to start pacing as he ranted. When he regarded the two older Captains once more, they were
appropriately mollified, both with shame clearly written on their features. Ichigo satisfied that his
lesson had been imparted, leant back against the cot and took a swig from the flask.

“So, what are you going to do with the information about the previously unknown resurrection of the
leader of the Espada?”

Ichigo asked amiably, releasing the tense air and allowing the two to focus on something other than
their own foolish actions. The two Captains shared a glance communicating without words and
Ichigo continued to sit there studying the two and prompting an answer.

“We need to find a Captain with a contrary zanpaktou or at least is capable of dealing with
Barragan.”

Kensei seriously stated after a minute, staring at Ichigo with all the resolution of a brick wall (which
was a lot apparently), Ichigo nodded and replied, “So who would that be?”

“Well, the Soutaicho for sure, maybe your little lieutenant. Probably you because Kami knows no
one has ever seen your Bankai, you tricky bastard. Isshin if he would be willing.”
Shinji replied after a beat, glaring at Ichigo when he suggested the orange-haired Captain, still spiffed that no one had seen Ichigo’s Bankai. Ichigo ignored the expression because he wasn’t being guiled into releasing his Bankai, and that was a whole other cohort of problems he didn’t want to face at the moment.

Instead, he thought over the list of names and replied, “Toshiro is out, he’s too young and inexperienced for Barragan. Isshin wouldn’t want to put his life in danger like that with his girls, plus he would be rusty. So that leaves me and the Soutaicho. And while I think I could maybe deal with Barragan I don’t have an elemental zanpaktou.”

“Yeah but you do have your Hierro, which can be damn near invincible.”

Shinji shot back and Ichigo remained silent, contemplating the idea of fighting Barragan. While Ichigo was far from afraid of fighting the skeletal king, he was more afraid of the power he would have to extend to win. Barragan’s power; that of time and decay was tricky and oh so very delicate. Ichigo was fine against any type of enemy, but time was an old friend and a bitter dream. To win he would have to employ techniques that would draw attention, more so than before, and with the Quincy war approaching (and a whole other plethora of problems) Ichigo preferred the image of a powerful, but mostly sane Captain of the Gotei 13. Not a Shinigami, Quincy, hollow hybrid on the level of Kami.

“The Soutaicho should handle it.”

Ichigo stated finally with a sigh followed by a swig of the sake. Shinji jerked as if he wanted to protest, proclaim Ichigo’s undying strength, but then he caught Ichigo’s eyes, the shades making home in warm brown eyes, and nodded, having known his friend for enough time to understand that particular sort of darkness.

“Then we need the Soutaicho here, and we should send one of ours back to Soul Society.”

Kensei commented insightfully and received nods from his companions. Ichigo reached over and held Zangetsu’s hilt, the blade almost purring as he waited in thought before announcing, “It would be best if we send Shunsui back to guide the Gotei 13 while the Soutaicho is here,” Ichigo received strange considering glances for the suggestion but no objections were raised, and he continued, “We’ll have a Captain’s meeting tomorrow. In the meantime, a certain blond needs to go visit my second favourite healer.”

Shinji turned pale at the words but nodded with a resigned sigh, Ichigo had little doubt that Kensei would make sure the feline-like Captain would actually make it to the med bay. The three sat in comfortable silence for a moment more, before Ichigo tossed Shinji the flask and guided them to the doorway, beckoning them out into the cold night with a warning eye and a warm smile.

As he closed the tent flap and drifted to the desk with papers scuttled like sand upon a beach Ichigo sighed and wondered when the war would end. He turned as Byakuya entered the tent with amusement and closed off sorrow and waved in greeting, idly contemplating a battle between the Soutaicho and Barragan. The future was far more interesting than Ichigo ever thought could be created.

X

Jushiro sipped calmly at the mug in his hands, inhaling the whispering spirals of steam and the deep scent of a chai blend, the warmth travelling through his chest and alleviating some of the centuries-old ache. Cradling the mug to his chest, Jushiro let his gaze drift to the sky, parallel to the ever-winding streets of Soul Society; it was grey and overcast, clouds hanging pregnant upon the air in
great silver wisps with a lingering tension threading them together. The weather seemed to harken a silence, dampening any noise, so that Soul Society appeared as if abandoned. Though perhaps, the Captain considered in a certain sense it was. Many of the residents of the districts surrounding the Gotei 13 had been evacuated for safety precautions. Leaving something akin to a ghost town.

Silently the Captain of the Thirteenth was beyond glad that they had acted on the plan put forth by Ichigo and Byakuya during one of the many war councils that had filled time as if a pendulum at the mad rush to prepare battle plans, defences, and every little detail in between, before the invading force would leave Soul Society. The plan had been shot down at first; many of the Captains protesting on the basis of the sheer scale the evacuation would take, others on the matter of practicality.

But in the end, Jushiro supposed it had been the correct movement, even with the relief camps, as he could still see the damage the recent attack had wrought. In the east, he could see wisps of smoke, broken shells of building, and rubble playing hopscotch over near every surface. The repairs after the war would likely be a matter not worth thinking about, Ukitake endeavoured with a minute smile.

Thinking of the attack gave Jushiro pause, the sounds of metal clashing against metal rising over his own heartbeat in the silence. Shaking the phantom sensation away the wise Captain sipped at the tea absorbing a measure of calm from it.

They had expected the attack in a sense, word relayed through the grainy communications the Twelfth had finally solved that it was likely with the movement of the hollows. But they had been unable to predict a time, and the lack of knowledge had set everyone on edge, paranoia running rampant and curtailing the rooms like a hoard of dark clouds.

The invading force had been small, they suspected it was merely a test, to see how well defended their home was. Five Espada in total; though one had never revealed itself, remaining in the shadows. Three had been engaged by Captains, and one by a Shinigami of his own division.

The gentile Captain’s thoughts turned briefly to the Kuchiki still under the tender care of the Fourth division, prayers of a desperate fever running through his mind as he thought of the frail-looking form (and suddenly he understood if slightly, Shunsui’s overbearing concern). Beyond all odds the young woman had been able to defeat one of the Espada, Jushiro had no knowledge of its current state, whether it was in the Twelfth morgue, or one of the prison cells developed by the kido corps and the Twelfth. But the Espada had been subdued by Rukia alone; without the aid of any other Shinigami.

It sent a flutter of pride curling around his heart at the thought and elevated his decision further to promote the young Kuchiki. Her experience in the mortal world had done her wonders, and likely by the end of the war, she would be more than ready for the position. It would help fill the gap left by Kaien’s injury. While the Shiba head was still insistent on staying part of the Gotei 13, even if that meant paperwork, and division training, it didn’t compete for the full mobility needed for a lieutenant.

Though Retsu had shared with a secretive smile that Kisuke and Sosuke were working on a rough prosthetic, based on the ones the blond scientist had seen on his semi-permanent sabbatical to the mortal realm. The idea brought a soft smile to Jushiro’s lips, knowing how much it would impact the lieutenant, who much like his younger brother lived to protect.

Rukia hadn’t been the only casualty of the attack, Soi Fon had been injured when she attempted to stop a hollow who according to the young woman’s report been fast and precise with an apathetic nature. The lieutenant had only been injured in protecting Yoruichi with the almost fanatic obsession playing a large part. The wound had been shallow and the lieutenant would likely be freed within the
next twenty-four hours.

Rose and Love had encountered a pair of hollows that functioned as one Espada. The duo’s report had been as detailed as possible and had concluded that the duel had ended in a draw when the Espada retreated; not of their own violation but obviously on the command of others.

There was rumour that an Espada had tried to attack the Fourth but had seen one look of Retsu in all the aura of her past and promptly turned tail. Jushiro doubted the authenticity of the rumour but wasn’t disabused to the notion of Unohana’s rather violent other side.

It was likely that if the rumours held truth, it had been the Espada that had turned in the direction of the Twelfth, where he had met the dynamic duo of the science department. The battle was still mostly shrouded in rumour, though Jushiro knew it had ended with the hollow’s escape, and Kisuke needing a few stitches to the blond’s utmost pleasure.

Ukitake’s side ached at the reminder of his own brief encounter with an Arrancar, and he thanked Kami above that Kaien had been around. He had suffered an attack earlier in the afternoon, and his body had still been weak, trying to recover the energy his body needed. It had been an Arrancar waiting, lusting to rise to power, and had decided to target the known weak link of the Gotei 13.

It sent spirals of shame, guilt, and a touch of distaste spiralling through Jushiro’s thoughts on the matter of it all. He knew logically speaking, that he wasn’t the weak link, Shunsui had reiterated it countless times. But Jushiro was still only subject to doubt and misdemeanning thoughts.

Shifting slightly, Jushiro pushed the thoughts of battle away and ignored the familiar ache filling his chest, burning intensely after his own fight, the wound tracing a cross across his abdomen sewn with neat black stitches. The teapot was moved with a soft sound, loud like a canon in the silence lingering, drawing the younger Captain’s attention as Jushiro glanced into the wise eyes of the man who was like a father to Shunsui and Jushiro. There was a deep sorrow and thought in those ancient ember-like eyes as the Soutaicho turned away to gaze out over the lands under his protection.

War was strange Jushiro supposed, contemplating the way his own thoughts seemed impossibly loud, like thunder and lightning, in the silence without Shunsui to talk and flirt, and smile that damn flirtatious smile. He wasn’t ashamed to admit that he missed the silly Captain of the Eighth.

It wasn’t only the souls of Rungokai that the Gotei 13 was empty of Jushiro conceded with a muted sigh, the Gotei 13 feeling almost dull without the bright personalities invested in another dimension. It made the white-haired Captain wish the war would draw to a close with haste, if only so that tea would not be so forlorn an event, and he could hear Ichigo complain, or Hirako yell across the halls at Hiyori.

Glancing back at his mentor, Jushiro noted the old man’s distant gaze, and in an endeavour to not spend the whole time in contemplative silence (though he was not wholly unopposed to such an idea), he commented thoughtfully, “Dark thoughts.”

The Soutaicho blinked and returned his attention to Jushiro, taking a sip of his tea, the old man conceded with a nod, eyes amused, and responded, “Dark times, dark thoughts.”

“Is the state of the war so dire?”

Jushiro asked honestly, seriousness coating his voice in even tones. The old man blinked as if remembering who he was speaking to or that perhaps he was not alone, and his eyes softened minutely where they gazed at Jushiro, warmth filling them and transferring to his own soul.
The white-haired Captain smiled in kind, the fondness he felt for his old mentor filling his smile with honest warmth. The Soutaicho conceded with a nod of his head and replied, “Not so grave as that. It is merely the future that troubles me. The Quincy are awakening, and I wonder if Soul Society will be ready.”

The words were strangely ominous as if holding unknown weight, or having been spoken before like a keen case of déjà vu. Jushiro thought over the words, acknowledging them with a nod and a furrow of his brow. They had known, those that had been alive at the time of the Blood War that it hadn’t been the end. But he had held onto the fragile hope that the matter would lay sleeping.

Though Jushiro knew that, as with everything in life there would be trials, great momentous trials that were sometimes whispered to young children, and tales that were cautious platitudes. There was the curious sense that this was something like that, and he had a feeling of who the strings of fate danced around.

Idly with the sort of detachment that had become commonplace over his years living with the illness that had plagued him since childhood, Jushiro wondered if this war or the coming one would be the one that saw him draw his last breath. He knew the thought terrified Shunsui, but Jushiro had made peace with it all long ago.

“Come let us think no more of dark thoughts.”

The Soutaicho spoke gruffly, rumbling baritone pulling Jushiro from drifting thoughts. The white-haired Captain nodded in agreement, toasting with his mug before he took a sip. He knew they would likely still speak of the war, there was little else to discuss as it buzzed around them demanding to be talked about, but they would stray from thoughts of death.

“Have you heard from Ichigo?”

Jushiro asked the Soutaicho amiably, smiling fondly at the thought of the redhead. He knew that the old man had spoken to Shunsui, as he was the main leader of the gathered Captains (and didn’t that place a knowing grin on his features), but Jushiro knew it was likely Ichigo had corresponded with the old man.

The friendship between the Soutaicho and Ichigo had been unexpected when they first caught the two chatting in the gardens of the First, drinking tea, and talking about systems of government. But as Jushiro had come to know the young man, he had come to see that the two were very similar for all that they were vastly different. Jushiro hardly felt jealous that the old man had another person to talk to, lacking far too few friends with his great age and position.

The white-haired Captain suspected that when Ichigo stepped down from his position as Captain of the Tenth (which he was planning they all could tell, though few begrudged him for it), that the man would likely transfer to the First and become a lieutenant under Yamamoto.

“Only that the impulsive brat landed himself in the med bay again but is otherwise fine.”

The Soutaicho replied, sharing a chuckle with Jushiro over Ichigo’s rather famous tenure when it came to the healer’s division. Briefly, he worried for the redhead before consoling himself with the knowledge that it was unlikely for anything to happen with the other (overprotective) Captains around.

A knock on the door disturbed the peace and Chōjirō stepped aside to let Kaien enter, crutches tucked under his arms, and a collage of maps crushed in the creases of his elbows. The Soutaicho nodded in greeting, Jushiro mirroring the gesture and the young Shiba head hobbled inside with a
happy but subdued grin. Slowly he made his way over to the low table where he carefully set his crutches down before following suit. The visit while a surprise wasn’t wholly unexpected Jushiro supposed, knowing his lieutenant would stop for nothing when he had a mission, most certainly one of his own makings.

“Good Evening.”

Kaien greeted amiably as he unrolled the maps, letting first a map of Soul Society unroll beneath their eyes, a maze of white walls, and dirt brown pathways, and then one of Hueco Mundo, sand, their trenches, and Los Noches. Pulling out a small silk bag the lieutenant with a grin fitting a child; which Kaien admittedly was, the young man began setting the piece over the two maps, black for Shinigami, and white for the hollows.

“Okay, I think we’re all ready now. Thought I might give a debrief so we’re ready for the next Captain’s meeting. So, as you can see the Hueco Mundo team has advanced thirteen kilometres in the last week, that’s the blue line. And from what Ichigo reluctantly relayed to me they will be beginning an assault on the fortress within the next week,” Kaien paused to shift the Soul Society map on the top of the pile and continued, “Currently on Soul Society’s turf, the areas in red are buildings that have been damaged, and green is where the Espada appeared.”

The two Captains studied the map carefully, looking for patterns in the attack; Kisuke had suggested something along the manner of fixed anchor points when they had discussed a direct invasion of the Gotei 13. Though Jushiro knew it would be unlikely for a full pattern to make itself known, having suffered only the singular attack.

The Soutaicho across from Jushiro hummed and nodded, keen eyes studying the map with the same intensity as Kaien. Chōjirō bustled into the room, disturbing the contemplative silence, the older lieutenant settled beside the Soutaicho with a careful incline of respect. Jushiro smiled warmly at the lieutenant before turning his attention to Kaien who was studying the map with a light Jushiro had quickly come to recognize shining in sea green eyes.

“The next points of contact will likely target the Captains encountered previously, as the Espada will have the greater amount of data, as supposed to you Soutaicho. No Espada attacked the Fourth and there is no knowledge of your zanpaktou or fighting style other than what is common knowledge.”

Kaien said after a few minutes, stating both the obvious and bringing attention to the manner that had slipped beneath their notice. Smiling softly at his lieutenant, Jushiro paused as a thought occurred to him and he asked, “Do you think it is likely they will attack the division, or try to locate us separately?”

The question hung in the air with a perverse darkness spreading through their thoughts as they considered the devastation it could bring forth if the Espada attacked one of their divisions. Countless Shinigami lived in the barracks, to say the least of being caught in the battle, or in the likely rubble from such a battle.

“We simply don’t have a way of knowing at the moment. However, it would likely be beneficial if we relocated some Shinigami to divisions that were not targeted.”

Chōjirō suggested with a polite incline of his head, ever polite tenor filling the room. The suggestion received a positive hum of agreement, and Jushiro pushed aside the oncoming headache at the thought of the paperwork that would likely come from such a movement, instead focusing on the idea of the Shinigami under his protection safe.

“We know that Rose and Love will likely be targeted again. Though the two are always together, so
they should be able to handle whatever Espada engages them. Sosuke reported that the Espada they faced was heavily damaged in their fight if it did show up again, Sosuke already reported that he knew how to deal with it, so the Twelfth shouldn’t be concerned. Not that I would suggest evacuating it in the first place. Rukia dealt with the Espada, it is unlikely that they will send someone to attack her when she is in the Fourth, so we should err on the side of caution in case they decide to send another opponent. Yoruichi says she might be able to handle the Espada but would likely require backup, with Soi-fon in the Fourth, and its power levels.”

Kaient stated summarizing what they all already knew, Ukitake smiled blandly and responded with an amused glint, “And that leaves us.”

“It would perhaps be wise to have young Hitsugaya-san paired with you two for safety measures.”

The Soutaicho stated in suggestion though it came out more like an order. For a minute Jushiro wanted to protest, he was well-enough if he ignored the slight burn that filled his chest, and Kaien also looked as if he wished to protest sharing the same will to fight. But with a soft nod towards his lieutenant, the Shiba head settled. Jushiro knew it was only the Soutaicho’s wish to protect his Shinigami, and that the experience working in a team if the Espada did attack would be a considerable gain for the young lieutenant.

Nodding his consent to the idea, Jushiro sipped at his tea, once more observing the board as Kaien fiddled with the map, a keen light dancing in his eyes. Chōjirō glanced up after a moment and softly suggested, “Perhaps we should lend the Eighth division lieutenant to the Fourth in case of another attack centred either on Unohana-taicho or Kuchiki-san.”

The suggestion received consent, and after a moment Yamamoto summoned a few of the Jigokuchō, the graceful creatures drifting through an open wind off the tails of the wind. The Soutaicho carefully relayed the new movements in a rustling whisper, knowing that while a Captain’s meeting would be the best place to announce the temporary changes, the attack could come at any moment, and a warning of such would provide a sense of security. If Jushiro recalled correctly there was a meeting in the early morning tomorrow.

As the graceful carriers fluttered away with the messages, Jushiro let his attention drift, wondering if they would face the same Arrancar or if one of the Espada would be sent to deal with the Captain and lieutenant of the Thirteenth division.

“It would be wise if we returned to the division now Captain, we can start the evacuation measures.”

Kaient stated in aside, voice warm and compassionate as keen eyes glanced at the thin shafts of sunlight peeking through the seascape of clouds. Ukitake nodded and glanced at the Soutaicho who nodded, actions serving louder than words as Jushiro gracefully rose to his feet, Kaien following the motion albeit a touch slower.

Together they glided towards the large doors guarding the entrance to the Soutaicho’s office when they slammed open, a Shinigami dashing inside with breath heavy in the suddenly tense air and eyes wide. The young Shinigami blurted out, “Espada. The Twelfth is picking up traces of Garganta beginning to form, near the same locations as the time before.”

Kaien beside Jushiro cursed harshly, even as behind the two the Soutaicho’s eyes hardened like tempered steel, and Chōjirō’s hand stayed to the pommel of his zanpaktōu. Settling a hand on the frantic Shinigami’s shoulder Jushiro broadcasted calm as he gently said, “Thank you for alerting us, please return to your division.”

The Shinigami nodded and after a hesitant moment flash-stepped away. Glancing back at the
Soutaicho, Jushiro saw another Jigokuchō perched on the Soutaicho’s finger, likely delivering the imminent warning of battle. Their eyes connected, and understanding passed between the two before Jushiro turned away.

Gaining Kaien’s attention, Jushiro nodded battle drawing his features into grim determination, mirrored on the younger’s features. Together the lieutenant and Captain of the Thirteenth division made their ways through the winding streets of Soul Society, towards their division, where Jushiro knew a battle was waiting. Silently he prayed for the health of his comrades and that the war would end soon.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed some of the introspection into the war. Reviews/comments are always appreciated and thank you guys for the positive reviews/comments on the last chapter. Till next time!

Key!
Sirimiri

Chapter Notes

Sirimiri

(n.) A light rain, a fine drizzle

Hello everyone, we are back for chapter 53, finally starting with some major battles. I hope you all enjoy read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The Thirteenth division was quiet when Jushiro and Kaien arrived, the air hanging limp and tense as around them the sounds of Soul Society waking for battle begin to clatter upon the storm-swollen sky. Ukitake ignored the pain lingering faintly in his chest as they observed the Division, the quiet murmur of sound drifting to meet them, and the flash of a shihakusho, slowly he let his attention stray to his lieutenant catching the faint grimace on the young man’s features as they entered the courtyard. The Shinigami of their division moved in frantic paces, near running at the report of the imminent attack, like ants scattered about the ground in a crazed search, or perhaps retreat.

Ukitake paused studying the rushing and near frantic souls for a moment more before he flared his reaitsu, the gentle presence commanding the attention of those within the courtyard as they stuttered to a stop. Jushiro smiled reassuringly at the Shinigami under his protection as they paused in their scurrying to face their Captain, he noted the fear and panic splaying across their features with a touch of worry.

The presence of hollows began to filter into the air like stale cigarette smoke, and knowing time was of great importance, gently but with hidden steel, the white-haired Captain commanded, “We are evacuating the division because of the imminent attack and the likelihood of an attack here, please relocate to either the Fourth if you have healing experience or the Tenth division.”

It was a testament to his long tenure as the Captain of the Thirteenth; the camaraderie and familiarity he had built with those who surrounded him and his own calming nature, that the Shinigami only nodded moving quickly and quietly, even as proximity alarms began to blare quietly throughout the streets of Soul Society warning of the incoming attack. Drawing a breath of courage, Ukitake pushed aside the weight that settled heavy on his chest, pressing at his lungs and heart like a great beast, dread and fear and an amalgamation of other emotions and prayers as the battle drew closer. Slowly he let his fingers drift to Sōgyo no Kotowari’s handle, the twin spirits reflecting light energy that eased some of the growing tension and let his attention focus razor sharp, omitting thoughts of Hueco
Mundo and Shunsui, centring only on the coming battle and preparations.

“Is there anything I can aid you with Captain?”

Kaien asked softly, voice serious and lingering with the offer of aid. Ukitake turned warm green eyes upon his lieutenant, features determined where the young man leaned on his crutches, fingers straying over Nejibana’s hilt and the ever-present desire to serve Soul Society, to protect in whatever manner possible, painting his features noble in the shadows of the afternoon. He studied Kaien for a moment more, eyes flickering to the Shinigami darting out of the division with the faint whispers of wind marking their passing, before deciding on a course of action with a nod.

“Perhaps it would be best if you would fetch young Hitsugaya-san and inform him of the influx of Shinigami, and if he hasn’t received the Jigokuchō, the idea of fighting together?”

Jushiro suggested softly, not a command, not if it wasn’t absolutely needed; he tried to avoid that between their years of experience together and the trust between them. He knew that Kaien would want to stay at Jushiro’s side but would be swayed by his own morals. Indecision played across the young Shiba head’s features for a moment before he nodded, sea eyes blazing with determination and will. The like which was a trait of the Shiba family Jushiro had seen many times over.

The lieutenant after trading a warm fond smile filled with promised and assurance shared a nod of parting with Jushiro and disappeared in a burst of shunpo, significantly slower than when he had possessed both legs, but still well above the level of most third seats. Running his fingers through his hair, the white-haired Captain turned away from the entrance to his division and instead focused his senses searching for the presence of a Garganta he knew would be materializing, one that was appearing in the training sales located in the back of the division. He sighed minutely and pulled his long white hair into a low tail (having dealt with the horrors of long hair in battle many times over) and with a prayer for courage, the older Captain moved swiftly towards the Espada waiting there.

The Garganta sprung into being with a loud startling crack as Jushiro arrived, the great tear in the fabric of their dimension eye-catching and foreboding as a shadowed figure appeared a silhouette against the yawning darkness. Three other figures echoed behind the Espada that stepped through the Garganta, reaitsu dancing upon the air thick and warning where it surrounded his senses as the invasion began in earnest.

Subtly Ukitake summoned a Jigokuchō and reported the presence of three Arrancar, cautioning that it would likely be best if Nano, Lisa, and Rangiku were to encounter the three, based on what he could sense of their power levels, before they could wreak chaos on Soul Society. The delicate creature fluttered off towards the commander as the Espada stepped fully out of the portal and into the dim half-light of the training sale.

The female Espada, for he assumed it was a she, had a cold calculating aura about her, piercing blue eyes observing the courtyard in all of its forms, a bone white rather revealing uniform reminiscent of many detailed in the reports decorated her figure, and a blade glinted behind her back. There was a bone-biting power about the Espada that lingered on the air, bringing with it a chill, the sense of a predator prowling the waters for its next prey.

The three Arrancar, likely the Espada’s Fracción, entered the courtyard behind the Espada who continued to survey the area. Three women who studied Soul Society with varying expressions; interest, distaste, and apathy but all radiating the sense of a predator released upon helpless prey. The female Espada’s attention finally landed on Jushiro who remained quiet standing in the half shadows of the veranda, reaitsu confined close to his chest and, expression blank but serious. He greeted the warrior’s icy blue eyes with a nod of respect and acknowledgement and received one of his own the air tremoring with the coming battle.
The Espada whispered something to the three Fracción, who scattered a moment later leaving the two alone in the courtyard, the wind blowing, and the clouds watching overhead. The female Espada tilted her head curiously for a moment before stating in a voice that was sharp like a spear and as equally commanding, “I am Tier Harribel the Second Espada, and you are?”

The Second Espada’s voice was muffled slightly by the fabric covering her mouth but did nothing to muffle the severity of her words and their meaning. The white-haired Captain muffled a shocked expression and the stuttering of his heart at her place in the hierarchy, which he knew the Espada held. Of that hierarchy, she was below only one other Espada and the self-proclaimed King, which meant her power would be doubtless expansive. Ukitake nodded in acknowledgement expression gentle and passive, he greeted in kind, “Ukitake Jushiro, Captain of the Thirteenth division.”

The two opponents studied each other for a moment more before Jushiro stepped off of the veranda and into the fading light of the courtyard, his steps impossibly loud in his ears, like drums beating a final march. Sōgyo no Kotowari slipped easily into his grasp as Harribel repeated the motion with her own blade, ever sharp eyes tracking his movements.

They paused for a moment, the air tense and close to snapping before with a breath that was like a shockwave the Second Espada was attacking the Captain of the Thirteenth. Jushiro defended against the flurry of attacks that sailed from one movement to the next, blade sliding smoothly to block an overhead strike, before swinging vertically to block an attack from the side. He gritted his teeth at the force behind the blows and allowed his reaitsu to flourish beneath his fingers as he sprung back a half step and let a wordless Shakkahō fly from his fingers, the kido spell sparking harmlessly against the Espada’s hollowed blade and what reached the skin of her forearm was harmless against her Hierro.

Then she was upon him again, every move a calculated step in their game of chess, as Jushiro dodged a side sweep before he slid inside her defence and flicked his blade up with a clash of sparks as it met her own blade. They remained locked for a moment before they broke apart, and Harribel began a fast-paced combo of attacks, the movements quick and fluid like the rapids of a stream fast and hard. To the left, overhead, whipping around to strike at his calves, reversing to the side and in, once more to the left before switching to the right. Jushiro met each blow, the force jarring his arms slightly as he continued to centre himself in the battle Sōgyo no Kotowari flowing easily from one attack to the next.

They continued to clash for a few moments more, sparks flying as their blades melded the air seamlessly, testing the other’s strength and skill, kido occasionally bursting into the cloudy skies as it broke apart in a flurry of light. The two opponents flew apart once more, light panting filling the air as they studied each other appraising their opponent and the skill they had displayed. Harribel was talented, a master with her blade, a key tactician, and worthy of the position she held within her own hierarchy. Jushiro knew that if he were to battle her alone for an extended period of time, even with his experience it would be a hard battle, his chances made worse especially considering his illness, which pulsed beneath the veins of his chest.

If they weren’t in a war against one and other, Ukitake would be tempted to invite peace with the woman if only for her power and the lack of crazed bloodlust some Espada were rumoured to hold. Her eyes while fierce and chaotic were not feral; they were intelligent, human in a strange sense, her skills and wisdom earning his respect. Jushiro repressed a shudder at such thoughts and the inevitability of life and death in war, instead, he listened to Sōgyo no Kotowari’s happy chatter as the fight continued.

As the two fighters readied once more to move forward, two new presences made themselves known, flaring brightly in the dimming light, halting the two fighters’ charge. Pivoting where he
stood a cautious half-step, a warm smile broke across Jushiro’s features as he caught sight of his lieutenant standing in the light of the courtyard Nejibana at his side, crutches propping the Shiba head on two feet. Beside the young man was the lieutenant of the Tenth division (and soon to be a Captain) Tōshirō Hitsugaya. The youth was studying Harribel with keen cold eyes, Hyōrinmaru unsheathed and glinting with promise at the prodigy’s side.

Harribel frowned at the appearance of the two other Shinigami, it was a tempered calculating frown, one that delayed the Espada’s concerns as Ukitake turned his attention to the Second Espada once more, silently mourning unfair odds even as his own senses mocked fairness in war. With a lithe movement wrapped in tense minute urgency, the Espada’s blade was held in front of her facing the ground, reaitsu gathering like an electrical storm she called out, “Hunt Tiburón.”

Water surged from the blade and surrounded the female Espada in a swirling cyclone of liquid as her reaitsu rose to the air, flashing through the water in spikes of gold lightning before falling away to reveal Harribel’s resurrection.

Ukitake resisted the urge to cover Tōshirō’s eyes at the rather revealing outfit, and as the water finally dispersed fully Jushiro felt slight amusement at the blush decorating his lieutenant’s features. With a muted sigh Jushiro shook the distracting thoughts away once more letting his attention return carefully to the battle. Quietly he turned to face the Espada, feeling the way her reaitsu lingered heavy in the air, like water rising around their feet every moment, a slow inescapable drowning.

Harribel’s blade had shifted from it’s small hollowed out form, to a large pata, shaped almost like a shark tooth, and she held it with easy grace as she studied them coldly. She remained there for a moment reaitsu swirling and shifting, and as the Espada continued to eye her enemies her blade began to shimmer. The three Shinigami stood still for a moment watching the Espada with weary eyes as reaitsu gathered before with a wicked snap like the air itself had torn asunder a glowing bolt of golden reaitsu shot towards the three.

Darting to the side the white-haired Captain spared a glance at the two lieutenants assuring himself of their safety as they stood out of harm’s way, Kaien leaning against the far wall his crutches beside him, zanpaktou held at the ready. Tōshirō had slipped into a battle stance on the opposite side, reaitsu drifting playfully around the young lieutenant. With a breath Jushiro shifted so that he was in Harribel’s focus and centred himself, he let his reaitsu surge, Sōgyo no Kotowari’s laughter rising like a chorus as Jushiro called out, "All Waves, Rise now and Become my Shield, Lightning, strike now and Become my Blade."

With a final burst of reaitsu, the singular zanpaktou split into the familiar forms of his Shikai. The blades comfortable in his hands as the rope stretched between the two holding Sōgyo no Kotowari’s charms as they caught hiding rays of sun and glimmered at the Espada who watched the white-haired Captain with keen eyes. Ukitake let his attention rest on the Espada even as peripherally he felt the two Lieutenants gather their reaitsu.

The very air chilled, and the skies continued to darken, swelling with a great cold about them as Tōshirō began to release his own Shikai. The young man’s voice echoed in the clearing as he called out, “Sit upon the frozen heavens Hyōrinmaru.”

From the lieutenant’s zanpaktou a familiar dragon of ice burst forth scratching its way into the dark skies with a roar that vibrated throughout Soul Society and sent chills upon the air, and down the spines of all present. Silently Ukitake mused that his division would definitely be seeing some remodelling after the conclusion of the battle with the release of such powerful elemental weapons.

Kaien a step behind Jushiro released his zanpaktou with a hum and a twirl of the blade, the usual dramatics muted in the face of a serious battle, reaitsu gathering as the familiar trident-like shape of
his lieutenant’s Shikai came into being. Harribel across from the three Shinigami watched everything with a cautious eye before something close to a smile flitted across her feature baring far too many teeth to be anything but ferocious. Reaitsu gathered about her and the Espada let her blade flick forward, a wave of water pouring from the tip and rushing like a tidal wave towards the three, all-consuming as if hurled like a great beast towards them.

Seeing the lieutenants’ shock at the unexpected attack involving water, Jushiro slipped forward in front of the attack letting Sōgyo no Kotowari’s joyful laughter at the game echo throughout his reaitsu as the water was caught in the left blade, channelled through his zanpaktou as reaitsu surged through his hands. The water charged from the right blade faster than one could visibly see, a wave of water, more akin to a tsunami was its size, as it towered above the division with a roaring scream announcing it’s crashing fall towards the Second Espada.

The female Espada remained standing in the face of the tidal wave of water roaring towards her, expression calm and calculating as with a graceful movement of her wrist the broad blade was directly in front of her and the water charging towards her contacted with a great hiss and was vaporized. Spouts of steam drifted listlessly through the air where it had contacted with her blade as the rest surged around her like Moses parting the red sea, as it collided with the far walls of the barrack.

Attempting to mask his shock, Jushiro shifted in split-second instinct as he blocked the broad blade of the female Espada where it crashed against his own, the larger form pushing heavily against the hasty x he had formed with his twin zanpaktou. Her blade glowed once more with the gold reaitsu that reminded Jushiro of the sun, and he shifted pushing his opponent and himself away from the two lieutenants watching with careful eyes. Ukitake ducked the bright burst of reiatsu and fired a byakurai in return, which Harribel carefully dodged.

Kaien appeared to the left of the Espada, Nejibana swirling as the Espada turned and caught the trident like blade against the broad surface of her own blade. They exchanged a flurry of movement, blades clashing with an echoless sort of clang as Kaien moved in half paces using Nejibana and his weight against his own opponent as temporary support even as water flowed around his foot and beaded his hair like a fine mist.

Desperate to not leave his lieutenant battling alone when he only possessed one leg. Ukitake shifted Sōgyo no Kotowari purposefully in his hands, catching the light and drawing Harribel’s attention as she launched a roundhouse kick to Kaien’s chest sending the lieutenant to fly back crashing into the veranda.

Jushiro repressed a worried shout as Harribel turned and from her blade, a massive jet of water once more shot towards him with blinding intensity. Thrusting his left blade forward, the white-haired Captain hesitated only for a second as Tōshirō called out, “Ukitake-san direct it towards me,” before following the young man’s command and absorbing the attack and redirecting it towards the younger lieutenant.

Hyōrinmaru whipped up as the large wave of water raced towards him and as it collided it shifted with a binding crackle of ice, another dragon joining its brother in the sky. It hovered for a moment tail twining through the air before it swept towards the ground roaring its defiance as it charged Harribel.

The Second Espada’s blade snapped up, eyes two narrowed points of cold iron, and before their eyes the ice dragon evaporated at the point of the blade, mist curtailing the air and thickening the atmosphere. The white-haired lieutenant didn’t hesitate at the disappearance, or rather vaporization of one of his ice dragons charging forward the two locked in combat, blades moving in a flurry as
Tōshirō slid under an overhead strike and thrust Hyōrinmaru through a gap in Harribel’s guard only to spring back as a broad swipe of her blade threatened to slice into his torso.

A large jet of water shot forth from the Espada’s blade, racing towards the too close lieutenant who whipped his blade up and a wall of ice materialized the water crashing harmlessly against it with the sound of falling rain, dispersing to the side as Harribel charged forward. The tell-tale hum of Sonido sung upon the air as she appeared behind the white-haired lieutenant who whipped around and deflected her overhead strike, Hyōrinmaru glinting against the bone-like blade.

Behind Harribel, Kaien shifted out of the rubble leaning against the remnants of a wall, blood trailing down his forehead where it mixed with the water beading his brow. He shared a glance with Jushiro; eyes glowing and fierce, who recognized it from the many times they had trained together. Kaien began to swirl Nejibana generating great waves of water that surrounded his feet and ebbed and flowed with each elegant twirl of his trident as Tōshirō continued to defend against Harribel the two trading swift blows as ice and water crashed against each other forming great spikes and leaving mist to curl openly upon the night air.

With an imperceptible nod, Kaien sent the waves hurtling towards Jushiro, even as he continued to swirl his trident water continually pooling and rising at his feet and soaking his shihakusho. Elegantly the Captain of the Thirteenth absorbed the waves and together they let two tidal waves surge towards the female Espada still locked in combat against the youngest lieutenant.

The waves crashed upon the Espada from both sides, as Harribel remained locked against Tōshirō, the water drenching her and battering against the Espada’s vast strength. Opposite her Tōshirō’s reaitsu rose ice cradling his features and twining upon his blade, and with something close to a grimace of a smile the young lieutenant called out, “Daiguren Hyōrinmaru.”

Even as graceful wings coalesced upon the lieutenant’s back, beautiful and ethereal with the way they shifted in the mists, ice crept rapidly over the Espada where her blade connected with Tōshirō’s own and froze the water already coating her form. Flash freezing her body as the temperature plummeted further with the release of the lieutenant’s Bankai, the water ebbing around Kaen’s feet becoming sluggish at the freezing temperatures before thrashing like the roiling waves of the sea.

Hesitantly Tōshirō stepped back from the frozen Espada, blade still held at the ready as he studied Harribel wondering if the ice would hold a being of her calibre, of her power. It was a wise move as with a large crack that rent the air, the ice coating Harribel shattered like glass, and before one could draw breath three bright bursts of energy shot towards the white-haired lieutenant. Hyōrinmaru’s wings wrapped around the youth as the attack clashed against the ice with a bright flash of light, shattering the wings but leaving the lieutenant relatively unharmed. As the wings began to rebuild themselves with creeping motions, Harribel charged forward blade swinging like lightning upon the sky, like the predator charging for the kill at the scent of blood in the water.

Kaien beside Ukitake swept the water surging around him, splaying across his feet and curling at his sides like a loving companion, and let it fly towards Harribel and in extension Tōshirō with determination forging his eyes into diamonds. The Espada let the water buffet her back pushing her forward as Tōshirō extended his zanpaktou and froze the water in mid-air redirecting it towards Harribel who slashed with her sword sending a jet of water that disrupted the icy daggers.

Hyōrinmaru in the skies above roared and trading a glance with Ukitake as Tōshirō once more locked blades with the female Espada, Jushiro nodded and the dragon spiralled towards the earth. Extending Sōgyo no Kotowari’s blade Jushiro absorbed the dragon with a harsh pant as the drain on his reaitsu at the large task registered and echoed in his lungs, fluidly he shifted the attack through his zanpaktou and let the dragon remerge larger than before, with sharp ice spiralling around its form in a
fine mist as it flew towards Harribel.

The female Espada sensing the danger let three rapid bursts of reaitsu release from her blade surprising Tōshirō who flew backwards to collide with the wall at the force of the attack, rubble crumbling and burying the white-haired youth. The female Espada pivoted as the dragon roared charging her with the wrath and fury of its legendary ancestors. Harribel frowned at the beast, eyes flickering and swelling she let it collide with her zanpaktou mists dancing upon the air, even as Jushiro was already a half step in front of her Sōgyo no Kotowari flitting forward to clash against her large blade.

They clashed weapons flying as Sōgyo no Kotowari shifted fluidly with Jushiro’s movements. As he ducked a broad overhead sweep and let the right blade lash out at the women’s calf, a faint line of crimson appeared as he faintly pierced her Hierro. In response to the cut, she growled something low, near inaudible and slammed her blade overhead, water swirling about her feet, as Tōshirō began to pick himself out of the remnants of the wall.

Glancing at the Espada as she swung her large blade to the side, Jushiro twisted and shifted stance fluidly to the side, Sōgyo no Kotowari locked in an x formation to take the weight of the blow. The deep-sea blue was still ever calculating and calm, even as a wildness was seeping into her eyes, where they peered into his own from across their interlocked blades. Like the madness of a wounded animal backed into a cage, some part of Jushiro apologized for pushing the Second Espada into such a position, another part of him, the one that recalled this was his home cried out in victory, and another part of him wanted the war to end with as little death as possible, however a flitting fancy.

The two fighters pushed apart distance stretched tight between them as Jushiro’s breath came ragged in his lungs, and Harribel panted faintly across from him ever composed as her blade swung forward and a jet of water once more burst forth, the air around it shrieked at its power.

Before the water could collide with Sōgyo no Kotowari, it was whipped away swirling behind Ukitake as Kaien appeared a half-step behind the Captain. Jushiro smiled slightly, the smile filled with pain as his lungs shuddered in warning and the taste of crimson tickled his throat, even as he blocked a vicious strike from Harribel that pushed Sōgyo no Kotowari close to his chest and strained his arms.

Ukitake dropped suddenly to his knees as the blade flew harmlessly overhead, and from his lower position cast a Shakkahō that pushed the female Espada back a few paces giving Jushiro the room to rise slowly to his feet, he ignored the absent thoughts of age and Shunsui’s nagging voice. With the low hum of Sonido, Jushiro caught the edge of her blade only to pause as reaitsu gathered bright and golden around the edge of her blade and Sōgyo no Kotowari’s left blade slid forward an inch to absorb the attack as he redirected it to the ground. The moment of distraction cost the white-haired Captain as he instinctively slid back a few feet from where he had once stood, the blade cutting lightly into his chest but missing anything vital.

A burning pain filled Jushiro’s lungs as he panted Sōgyo no Kotowari held at the ready, blood dripped down his chest and stained his shihakusho. The white-haired Captain’s eyes widened in surprise as he sunk to his knees great wracking coughs heaving his body regardless of the battle as the taste of copper filled his mouth, and Sōgyo no Kotowari fell limp in his grasp, the hush concerns of the twins whispering in his mind as his body continued to tremble, and coughs painted his lips with blood.

In the murky haze of pain, Jushiro pushed aside the torment of his body, drawing on fleeting wisps of reaitsu that danced just out of reach as he glanced through bangs that had slipped free of the hair tie. Kaien was in front of Jushiro, a violent frightful figure, like some wrathful god, water swirled
around the stump where his knee had been forming a pseudo leg as the lieutenant’s trident clashed against Harribel’s broad blade. Water rose around them frothing and spitting in great towering walls that drenched everything so that it rose around Jushiro’s knees, stained crimson with his blood, and phantom spectres of shadow danced in the water.

“Tower and drown all Nejireta Hasu no Megami.”

Kaien’s voice announced in the midst of battle, clear amid the pattering of rain as his reaitsu rose and drenched the air. Water poured from Nejibana’s trident form and swirled around Kaien in thick swathes of green and blues that rippled as if fabric and the water continued to rise surging over Kaien’s head and around the division walls, spilling over into Soul Society’s streets. Ukitake covered his mouth to hold his breath as the water surged over him but found as he coughed once more at the beckon of his lungs that the water simply flowed around his mouth avoiding tiny bubbles of air.

Covering his mouth once more at the feel of blood, Jushiro watched awed as thousands of lotus flowers filled the water, golds, amethysts, aquamarines, carmines dancing together in blinding awe. In front of him, the two continued to battle, flashes of light in the murky water that steadily became darker around them as if the night drew its cloak through the water.

Kaien moved gracefully through the liquid as if he once more held both legs and all the skill of his many years as a Shinigami, Nejibana glowing like the ancient’s tridents of the Greek mythologies. Harribel battled valiantly against the lieutenant, the two clashing points as water swirled away any of Harribel’s offensive attacks and attempted to fill her lungs, lotus petals clinging to her skin and seemingly pulsing in the darkness even as the water ripped itself away at the same time confused and desperate.

Jushiro shuddered as the pain pulsing throughout his lungs diminished slightly and he rose unsteadily to his feet. Water surged lovingly about his arms, and soft red petals tangled about his shihakusho as his hand sought the thin cut that crossed his chest and Sōgyo no Kotowari marvelled at their lieutenant’s Bankai.

As the two continued to fight Jushiro’s eyes searched for the white-haired lieutenant and found him at the opposite end of the courtyard. Lotus flowers caught in his hair as Daiguren Hyōrinmaru glowed with ethereal light and Tōshirō stared with wide-eyed awe.

Jushiro returned his attention carefully to his lieutenant, watching delicately as he noted the attacks, and technique of Kaien’s Bankai. It was a Bankai fit for a man with one leg, it gave him the advantage almost wholly over his opponent, discounting someone with water affinity such as Harribel. And though he wasn’t certain of the lotus petals, Jushiro suspected they weren’t mere decoration. He wondered how long the lieutenant had trained after losing his leg to achieve his Bankai.

As he studied his lieutenant Jushiro noted Kaien’s strength was waning, his movements beginning to slow. The white-haired Captain suspected it was from maintaining his Bankai in battle against an opponent. But he was not alone in his weariness, Harribel was also tiring strength fading as the lotus petals decorating her body continued to glow. Their movements though were just as hard and fast as their blades remained locked before springing away and resuming deadly flashes of a blade like quicksilver.

Suddenly in a flurry of movements near to fast to comprehend Harribel reversed her blade, as Kaien overextended his trident, and slashed a broad strike across the Shiba head’s chest. The lieutenant took the attack with an expression of pain and pivoted driving his zanpaktou through the female Espada’s shoulder. With a soundless growl in the depths of the water, a cero burst from Harribel’s fingers, brilliant yellow and shimmering in the water it thrust Kaien back so that the lieutenant was
floating near Ukitake, far from where the two had moved during the course of their battle.

Tōshirō stepped forward taking the moment as his cue, great pillars of ice slid through the water blinding and fast, yet silent so deadly silent, they surrounded Harribel. A double of the white-haired lieutenant distracted the female Espada for a split moment before the great beams of ice crashed into the female Espada and the dual image shattered.

Slowly the water drained away as Kaien stood, clutching his chest Nejibana swirling gracefully as it absorbed the water, lotus blossoms laying thousands upon thousands on the ground a parade of soft colours plastered upon the earth. The four pillars stood in the echoes of the night broad and taunting as Jushiro turned careful eyes to the wound gracing his lieutenant’s chest.

Jushiro shifted carefully and gently to Kaien’s side, wet clothing slowing his movements as he studied the pillars of ice where they encircled the female Espada, the air tense and silent as they wondered if the battle was finally finished.

The ice pillars, giants in the night air, shuddered for a second before with an ear-splitting noise they cracked and began breaking apart with a continuous horrible screeching noise. Shatters of ice joined the multiple petals on the ground as they revealed Harribel in the epicentre, ice spread like tragic glass around her, glinting off the ice crystals plating her features and the petals still scattered through her hair. There was a grin, something wild and excited though tame and hidden as it was on the female Espada’s face.

She swayed there for a moment, obviously barely holding on to conscious she bowed in acknowledgement of the battle and with a great rippling crack fell backwards into a Garganta disappearing from sight before the three Shinigami could do anything.

Jushiro found that he didn’t much mind the Second Espada’s escape, as shocked laughter rippled from his lips regardless of the dull ache of his chest. She had been beyond a worthy opponent, cunning on her feet, a tactician at every turn, but she had held some semblance of kindness beneath the cold exterior. She had held the opportunity to end any of their lives at many turns, a press of her blade or a step to fast, but she had refrained.

The Captain of the Thirteenth sighed as he surveyed his division, refraining with great effort from thinking of the necessary repairs (or remodelling) as he ran a hand through the wet strands of his hair, eyes carefully seeking out the two lieutenants. Tōshirō was leaning against a pile of rubble that was once a wall, exhaustion decorating his features at the drain of adrenaline of battle, and the still lingering excitement of it all left a small grin on his features. Hyōrinmaru rested sealed at his side as the ice littering the ground began to melt, and a warm breeze rustled through the remnants of the barracks.

Kaien was close to Jushiro, a step away, leaning against the still released form of Nejibana breathing heavily, head tilted back, and eyes closed, water glittering upon his features like beads of mist so that he looked for a second like the fae creatures of old. With a slow breath, the older lieutenant lowered himself to his feet, Nejibana shifting to the elegant form of a zanpaktou in the Shiba head’s hands. Kaien turned to Jushiro with a laugh on his lips and eyes bright beneath the exhaustion and said, “Guess we’ll be doing a lot of repair work Captain.”

Jushiro shook his head but nodded, a cough startling itself out of his chest and he paused waiting for a moment before settling slowly beside his lieutenant. He smiled reassuringly at Kaien even as he gently pressed Sōgyo no Kotowari into their sealed state. He felt drained, the kind of drain one feels deep within their bones, in their soul, but there was the relief and exuberance at living to see another day filling his lungs and lifting him slightly.
Tōshirō shuffled over after a minute, he stood beside the two surveying the remains of the division, the flower petals swirling on the warm breeze, the water stains seeping into the tiled stain and he grinned apologetically but said nothing as he settled beside the three a peaceful silence hovering among them as they simply were.

After a moment, as Kaien shifted his shihakusho to check on the gash bisecting his chest, Jushiro shifted and inspected the wound a light healing kido seeping from his fingers to heal the worst of the damage. As an afterthought, as he resisted the dizzying of the world, he summoned a Jigokuchō requesting medical assistance at the Thirteenth division, and a report to the Soutaicho that the Espada had escaped but with no casualties. Duty to his lieutenant’s health and Soul Society finished Jushiro took a deep breath of the air and rested his hands on his lap half wishing for a cup of tea, and half wishing for Shunsui to be there talking a mile a minute and chortling about the young.

X

Chapter End Notes

Well, there was the battle against Tia, I hope you all enjoyed, I tried to play off of everyone’s strengths and weaknesses as much as possible. Kaien’s Bankai kind of came out of nowhere, and I left a lot of it vague for a reason, so feel free to infer, the name means Twisted Flower Lotus Goddess. Also do you guys like these battles? Do you want to see more of the battle of the current Winter War or less? There will definitely be one full battle in the next chapter, but if you want to see some of the other battles afterwards I’m happy to write them. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Tape!
Chapter Notes

Vad

(n.) Wild, untamed; uncontrolled, unregulated

Hello everyone, we are back with chapter 54. As always thank you guys for the super wonderful support last chapter. This will be one of the last chapters in the new Winter War arc, so I hope you all enjoy the coming battles and read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo stared at Los Noches where it towered before him; white walls almost crystalline in the hues of the moonlight, as the clash of battle roared behind the gathered Captains sharp and horrid. Kenpachi, Renji, and Kensei manned the first line of offense against the hollows, the three serving as their generals as the forces of Soul Society encroached upon Los Noches' territory in a bloody battle that rung with finality and lingered in the air like a fraying rope, or the light at the end of the tunnel.

Grip tightening on Zangetsu’s hilt, Ichigo quietly glanced at the Captains surrounding him, the final invading force. For a finale to the war between Los Noches and Soul Society, the Captains sent to deal with the Espada and the self-proclaimed King of Hueco Mundo, while the division Shinigami battled the hollows as a partial distraction. It sounded far grander than Ichigo felt it actually was, war lacked any true honour and majesty to be sung of, it was war.

Byakuya was the epitome of serenity and grace beside Ichigo; hair pulled into an elegant tail, and Kenseikan gleaming in the moonlight, he looked all the part of the noble Captain. As if sensing his gaze, the Kuchiki heir turned his attention to Ichigo with a raised brow eyes half alight in amusement and seriousness. The orange-haired Captain simply smiled in reassurance, eyes fond where they gazed at the Captain of the Sixth. Said Captain rolled his eyes in like-fondness before returning to face the behemoth of an enemy before them.

Shinji was on Ichigo’s left, the picture of calm and relaxed as he slouched with an imitation of a grin dancing across his features. Underneath Ichigo could see fear and worry clouding amber eyes like a stormy night, sparks of lightning, vibrant gold, flashing throughout the storm, tempered and tamed by experience and will. Silently Ichigo hoped the Captain would be alright if they were to face Barragan again however unlikely the odds of such seemed. Shinji would be perfectly fine otherwise, there was little that could truly affect the nonchalant Captain, and his arm was healed well enough; or at least Isane had reluctantly given the blond the all clear after one too many minutes spent with his
Ahead of the three Captains stood the Soutaicho, presence flaring in the winds that whipped across
the desert in a near sandstorm, reaitsu pulsing bright and warm a near tangible presence. The
Soutaicho had arrived the day before, stepping through a Soul Society made Garganta even as
Shunsui reluctantly took leave of the base camp. The Captain of the Eighth had been unwilling to
leave his soldiers, to leave the frontlines and the battle, he had felt a sense of responsibility for the
invading force. But the drunkard of a Captain knew the old man was needed to deal with a hollow of
Barragan’s capabilities, and that Soul Society couldn’t be left bereft of a leader if the hollows were to
invade in a sense of perceived weakness.

The past few days had been a flurry of orders filtered through Soul Society, passed between the two
forces. Word of victory, and invasions, and the utmost urgency that the Soutaicho departed to Hueco
Mundo to deal with Barragan. Ichigo’s heart had beat like a crescendo in his chest when he had read
the missive detailing the victory (or at least an assumed victory) against Harribel, his lieutenant,
Kaien, and Ukitake had battled against the fierce Espada and held their own, even with Jushiro’s
condition and Kaien’s lack of both legs.

That pride had been half consumed by worry the next moment when he read that Rose and Love
were in the Fourth, though with no critical injuries. Starrk was an opponent not easily defeated and
would be difficult for many of the Captains but Ichigo held no doubt they had fought well.

Pulling his thoughts away from the troubles of Soul Society, Ichigo drew on a breath tinted with the
taste of copper, and the presence of hollows and allowed his concentration to centre on the coming
battles and the future. The two Captains around Ichigo straightened imperceptibly as if sensing the
tense air that settled around them like a mantle, like the breath before the executioner’s blade fell.

With an almost intangible signal, the Soutaicho drew Ryūjin Jakka the blade glinting in the light and
sparking crimson. Wordless he stepped forward and with an elegant slash broke through the
impassive walls of Los Noches, rendering the ancient stonework aside with a crash and the jarring
sound of rubble crashing in the distance. From the now very visible, large hole in the wall, a draft of
cool air wisped out, bringing it with it a violent chill as a shadow appeared in the entrance. Large and
foreboding the presence lingered in the shadows watching but hardly waiting. Ichigo resisted the
urge to groan and instead drew on Zangetsu’s strength, imbuing his body with energy.

Yammy stepped out of the shadows of the new doorway alone and imposing where he towered
against Los Noches, a small blessing Ichigo supposed. The Espada studied the gathered Captains
with obvious distaste and disrespect as if they were nothing more than insignificant ants gathering in
the sand for which the Espada could crush. While Yammy had always been powerful, his
intelligence had never been something to boast of.

“Well, what do we have here, seems like some scum decided to blow a hole in Los Noches.”

The hollow stated with a guffaw, beady eyes sharp and cruel where they studied the small group of
Captains. It was a look Ichigo vindictively wanted to erase, painfully from the arrogant Espada’s
face, but he resigned himself to drawing Zangetsu quietly from the sheath, Byakuya miming the
motion beside him.

At the release of their zanpaktou, glinting in the din of the battlefield still roaring behind them
Yammy tipped his head back and laughed, great bellowing harsh laughter like ice grating against
stone. The hollow subsided after a moment and taunted with a leer, “Pathetic Shinigami, you think
you can win.”

They remained silent and stoic in the face of Yammy’s boisterous and foul amusement. Eventually,
the hollow calmed and stepped further out of the shadows of Los Noches pushing the four back into
the open sands as he seemed to swell, a living giant casting shadows on all before him. Ichigo
wondered if Yammy would attempt to defeat the four without the use of his resurrection if he would
simply fire cero after cero and continue to believe in his own power. Such a path would certainly
lead to failure considering the Captains he was facing, though anything but victory wasn’t an option
for the Shinigami.

He almost wished for Ulquiorra to appear, to at least tell the oaf of the opponents Yammy was facing
and their obvious skill level, but Ichigo took small mercies as Shiro’s cackles resounded through his
mind. Yammy studied them all for a moment more, before with a bellow and the quick draw of his
blade the hollow charged them. A great lumbering charge that reverberated through the sand and cast
the image of a wild bull frothing at the mouth. The four Captains split with the wind, Byakuya and
Ichigo to the left, while the Soutaicho and Shinji darted to the right.

Unsure who to fight the Espada bellowed once more and, following Ichigo’s never-ending luck,
turned and swung at Byakuya and Ichigo. Wordlessly the two slid into a low stance near shoulder to
shoulder, Senbonzakura overlocking Zangetsu to form an x shape as they shouldered the weight of
the large blade together.

They held off Yammy for only a minute before the Espada of rage was bellowing at Shinji who had
drawn a wicked slash down the spine of the Espada who had left his back open to the enemy. The
Soutaicho watched from a short distance, knowing if they needed help he would step in, but
preferring to let his Captains handle the manner.

Ichigo and Byakuya swiftly broke apart, and while the fool was distracted with Shinji, who was
taunting the brute with bright eyes and a cocky smile, Ichigo channeled reaitsu through his fingers
and to his blade letting it spark with the reaitsu as he gathered it all and with a sharp slash sent a small
Getsuga Tensho careening towards the large Espada. It crashed into Yammy, burning out against his
back and the injury there with a brilliant spark. The Espada roared in pain and anger and turned to
face them once more, features twisted in fury and hatred. The Soutaicho watched from a short distance, knowing if they needed help he would step in, but
preferring to let his Captains handle the manner.

“Ichigo called out with a snarl and an explosion of reaitsu that rocked the sand and sent gusts of
wind billowing about the plane. Ichigo muffled a few expletives as the Espada began to grow, form
twisting and swirling grotesquely in a violent storm of reiatsu and sand. Silently Ichigo thanked the
Espada that they were far away from the battlefield and far enough from Los Noches as the Ninth
Espada’s form continued to grow and take shape into something monstrous.

Ichigo could feel Byakuya and Shinji’s tangible shock as the Espada finished transforming, the
gigantic almost centipede-like body whirling around to face the three of them with a leer. Before they
could register, the sudden reaitsu was pressing like waves all around them, as the new creature in
front of them, a bright burst of crimson shot towards the three, a hurtling star of death, broke them of
their shock.

The Captain of the Tenth stepped easily forward in front of his comrades, Zangetsu snapping up as
he dug his feet into the sand, a mildly pointless endeavour, considering the rather lacking grounding
properties of sand. Ichigo let the vast burst of reaitsu dissipate against Zangetsu’s blade with a hiss,
Shiro’s bloodlust humming against the blade, as he slid back a few feet at the force of the cero.

In the background, as the cero finally dissipated, Ichigo felt Byakuya release his Shikai, the familiar
sakura petals danced upon the air around them and surged forward to surround Yammy in a swirling
deadly storm. Ichigo stepped out of the sand gathering around him with a huff and rejoined his comrades, silently he let his reiatsu surge once more towards his blade. With an exhale he released two quick-fire Getsuga Tensho that slammed into Yammy with all the force of a hurricane, caught unaware as he was distracted by the thousands of tiny blades in the process of slicing through his Hierro.

With a ripple of reiatsu and a faint dizzying sensation that spread and disappeared as quickly as the wind, Shinji stepped forward, Sakande spinning fluidly at his side. Byakuya appeared beside Ichigo as they watched confusion warp Yammy’s features as he swung towards them, or what the hollow likely saw as the three standing in front of him, but only ended up charging in the opposite direction, looking some mind-warped being swinging at nothing.

Yammy continued to strike at the sand, the small grains surging into the air in great curtains and tangling with the sakura blades still hanging upon the air. Ichigo watched tensely, wondering how long the illusion would hold as Shinji continued to taunt the hollow, earning a rapid flurry of strikes burying deeper and deeper in the sands as reiatsu roiled like a storm-swept sea.

With an angry roar, one that was purely animalistic the hollow charged a cero, the air going acrid as reiatsu gathered around the large Espada. With a great bellow, the large monstrous Espada turned in a full circle crimson reiatsu burning the sand in a fiery beam that was pure catastrophe and anger surging out around the hollow and destroying all in its path for miles.

The three Captains carefully dodged out of the way of the scorching reiatsu even as Ichigo shot forward low to the ground ducking carefully under the sizzling ray of doom. It caught at the tail end of his shihakusho, burning through at some places only to encounter his own Hierro as Ichigo slid easily through the sand. When he was in a close enough proximity to Yammy he let reiatsu sharpen Zangetsu’s blade to the fine point of a diamond as he whipped into the air with a burst of Shunpo.

The beast of an Espada turned his head to look where Ichigo would have been standing in the inverted world he was trapped in, eyes glaring and gleeful at the opportunity to crush him as the Espada bellowed insult after vile insult. Ichigo wondered if the Espada had even realised he was trapped in an illusion as the rage-filled hollow slashed forward, his many legs moving in grim tangent.

Pulling his reiatsu forward like a cloak around himself, Ichigo chose the area he would attack and charged towards the hollow, falling through the air, wind pulling at his features even as sakura petals danced around Yammy’s head temporarily blinding the creature and distracting it. With a burst of reiatsu Ichigo cut through two of Yammy’s legs with a sound that was bone and flesh and everything else falling apart but not.

The two great legs fell with heavy thumps, the sound echoing upon the desert as if beckoning greater silence. Yammy wobbled precariously, leaning drastically to one side even as the hollow roared and cursed, clumsy and yet deadly, the Espada continued to launch bala in all directions his rage permeating the air like spores.

Shinji stepped forward in front of the great beast, even as Ichigo moved to the other side of Yammy, swinging Sakande gracefully and casually with an ever-present cheshire grin the blond taunted the rampant Espada. Mildly Ichigo wondered if, through the power of rage alone, the less than bright Espada would break through the net of Sakande’s inverted world.

With a roar Yammy charged Shinji, actually charged in the right direction, though Ichigo doubted he could see at all and was merely following the inherent instinct that drove all hollows once more, he had reverted only to basic instinct, nothing of human-like intelligence or cognizant thought remaining though there had always been little of such. Sakura petals blossomed around the creature even as
Ichigo charged an overpowered Getsuga Tensho and with a breath that tugged on his composure and Zangetsu, Ichigo released the energy swelling under his skin.

The two forces crashed into the Espada with a wave of sand blurring their opponent temporarily from sight, as they waited tense and silent. Knowing that the attack wouldn’t be enough to take down the crazed Espada, Ichigo shared a quick look with Byakuya and Shinji, making a short motion with his hand that received quick nods of acknowledgement.

With a mighty roar, that pierced and chilled all those who listened, and a tremble of the earth the dust cleared and Yammy appeared, larger than before, the many legs gone and in it’s place a wide plain served as the Espada’s chest, horns peaking from Yammy’s head and the lack of wounds appeared stark against the sky. Reaitsu crowed and screamed with the Espada even as chopped laughter began to filter the air, chilling a deafening.

Ichigo studied the Espada with cold hard eyes, as the Ninth Espada’s attention swung towards the three, and with great lumbering strides, the Espada thundered forward the land shaking with his movements. The three Captains quickly darted out of the way, Shunpo fast and light over the sand, long familiar with its tread after consecutive days on the field. Silently Byakuya darted forward, Senbonzakura following his motions in sweeping waves, as Shinji wrapped around the other side of the Espada.

Concentrating Ichigo took a breath and focused on his reiatsu, on picturing the kido he would cast within his mind. Peripherally his attention remained on the battle and the distraction the two weaved around the Espada even as his focus dwelled deeper and deeper as the Bakudō began to take shape, glowing and surrounding him in rich reaitsu.

Instincts screaming in warning Ichigo glanced up a second too late as a large tail swung towards him, blindingly slow in a drawn-out moment as Ichigo’s movements felt as if dragged by molasses tugging at every appendage. He ducked the large extremity, the wind billowing and ruffling over and around him like the gales of a tornado with the passing overhead of the tail. Ichigo rose to his feet reaitsu still surrounding him, only to stop stone still as Byakuya’s cry rang through the air and Ichigo took the split second he had to pull his Hierro and blut vein around him.

The large arm impacted Ichigo with all the force of a charging horde of hollows, slamming into his chest and drawing his breath out of him even as the pain and injury from such an attack were rendered near non-existent. The Captain of the Tenth tumbled and rolled over into the sand flying backwards as the grains surged around him. Desperately Ichigo dug Zangetsu into the sand halting the slide of his body slowly as the force of the attack dispersed.

Pulling himself out of the sand with a drawing heaving inhale of stale desert air, Ichigo shook out the sand clinging to him like younger sibling, covering his shihakusho and beaded into his hair. Idly he pulled aside the sleeve of his shihakusho to see a large bruise, reds and purples forming a lovely mosaic, already beginning to form, light and shallow as it was. The clash of blades and a roar drew Ichigo’s attention once more to the battle.

Ichigo glanced at the Espada with a near growl where Yammy was once more occupied with Byakuya, whose reaitsu was raging upon the Espada sharp and cold fury. Cloaking his presence with a tug of reaitsu Ichigo moved forward gathering the Bakudō once more, he let reaitsu flow to his hands, pulling on his vast reserves he studied the Espada and ignored the harsh panting as he tried to retain air in his lungs, instead focusing on the incantation and the desired results, allowing his reaitsu to shape it with his will.

The Bakudō finally charged to its maximum capacity, which with Ichigo was hardly an insignificant amount, the Captain of the Tenth flared his reaitsu, bright and calling, taunting and filled with
vindictive joy. Yammy pivoted roughly, tail sweeping out and nearly missing Shinji. Ichigo stared the hollow down eyes glowing and called out, “Wall of iron, tower formed from hate, forge molten iron and neatly finish in silence! Bakudō number seventy-five Gochu Tekkan.”

With a burst of reaitsu, five pillars slammed into Yammy, nailing him to the ground and preventing movement as the hollow thrashed and struggled against the great weight bearing against him. Ichigo panted as he maintained the kido, continuing to feed reaitsu into the pillars as Byakuya moved forward swift and deadly, features graceful in their lethality as Senbonzakura moved with a swift motion and ended the battle.

With a soft exhale Ichigo released the kido, the large pillars disappearing in bright fluttering feathers of reaitsu as the body slammed into the sands with a shockwave that rippled through their feet and sent sand flying in a great palisade of light. A moment later, after the dust had literally settled, the Soutaicho stepped forward studying the three Captains with warmth, dark coals glowing with pride. Ichigo coughed and mustered a weak smile even as he filtered reaitsu into a minute healing kido and moved his way to Byakuya who was studying Ichigo with a delicate mix of worry, and the urge to bash one’s partner over the head for worrying them.

Ichigo just waved weakly, and Shinji guffawed, the sound loud and free, as he sheathed Sakande, the blade’s pleasure at seeing battle humming faintly on the air around them in a low vibrating sound, almost like a feline purr. The Soutaicho studied the body for a moment, lying on the sands like the end of an American monster movie, larger than life and just as inertly terrifying. Elegantly the old man unsheathed Ryūjin Jakka and with a wide sweep started a fire, crimson flames flickering and devouring over the remains, disposing of the body and crystallizing the glass around them from the sheer intensity of the heat.

As the body of the Ninth Espada was rendered to dust the invading force of Captains paused for a moment to catch their breath sharing quick reassuring glances ascertaining one and other of life as Shinji tossed Ichigo a canteen, full of water rather than sake and drawled, “Well that was one way to start an invasion.”

Ichigo chuckled and shook his head at the blond’s casual summarization and tossed the canteen to Byakuya who caught it with a faintly amused smile. They stood in silence for a moment more, replenishing their reserves of reaitsu and taking the moment to recover from the battle before they collectively moved swiftly across the sands, towards the large hole, and still standing Los Noches, cool air taunting and warning of the coming battles.

Briefly, Ichigo glanced over his shoulder, aware of the war raging on two fields, the sea of ebony, ivory, and among it all crimson like a beacon of death. The Shinigami were fighting with a great fervour, blood staining the stands even as they forced back the hollows, ever closer to the walls and shelter of Los Noches. The fall of one of their most powerful leaders had likely disheartened the creatures of instinct and provided a change in the ceaseless tug of war that had been the flow of battle. Nelliel could likely do little to stop the swift flow of war overcoming the forces of Hueco Mundo.

Byakuya rested a hand briefly on Ichigo’s shoulder pulling his attention from the battle behind them and grounding him in the war in front of them. His eyes were warm and fond once more, asking if he was truly okay, even knowing Ichigo’s stellar reputation for surviving the most particular wounds. Ichigo nodded imperceptibly and tilted his head with a smile before his eyes strayed to Shinji and the Soutaicho striding ahead of them and passing through the hole in the wall, striking figures as they were swallowed by the darkness of the entryway.

Nodding once more at each other the two younger Captains followed their superiors into the
darkness. Los Noches was always the same, though in this timeline it lacked the overbearing blue sky, one could never destroy the lingering sense of something else, something ancient, and the strange hues of shadow refracted through the white walls.

Ichigo slid to the front of the group with ease, having mapped the place for the reconnaissance mission, and his own intimate familiarity with the building. One came to know a place very well when they destroyed or fought in half of it. The others made no signs of protest as Ichigo’s eyes observed their location and the best path to the throne room.

The air was tense and oppressive hanging over them like an imminent summons as they glided like wraiths through the halls, senses open and spread out as they searched for any nearby presences. Shinji sidled behind Ichigo with a faint eerie whistle that both amused Ichigo and made him roll his eyes as he glanced back at the blond with a raised eye knowing the blond likely wanted something.

“Who do ya suspect we’ll meet on our little rendezvous?”

Shinji asked, quiet as if the silence prompted a lack of speaking but still holding the blond’s ever-present amusement. Ichigo shook his head slightly and shrugged mutinously but thought honestly about the question before replying with another half-shrug. It was easier to say who they wouldn’t encounter, primarily the deceased Espada such as Zommari, Nnoitra, and now Yammy, as supposed to those still alive and kicking within the palace. Though Ichigo supposed it was likely Harribel was still too injured to fight so she would likely remain out of sight.

The Captain of the Fifth was unperturbed by Ichigo’s silence, crinkling his brow for a moment he casually responded, “I doubt it would be the Second Espada, your little lieutenant, dear older brother, and Ukitake apparently did a number. I wonder if the bastard who put Love and Rose in the Fourth will appear. Love, and I quote, said, “Man he was just too lazy to finish us off.” I wonder if he’ll be too lazy to fight.”

Ichigo valiantly resisted the urge to laugh, or maybe giggle in a not at all crazed manner hearing the other Vizard talk about Starrk and the Espada’s reluctance to complete any action. He was more than thankful Starrk had respected his wishes and refrained from killing Love and Rose, though Ichigo knew some of Shinji’s complaint likely held a fraction of truth. The act of refraining from killing the Shinigami helped to forge the already burgeoning idea that the Espada, at least some of them, weren’t mindless killing beasts, and were following Barragan through necessity alone.

Squinting briefly at the intersection before them, corridors branching off in an endless maze of white, Ichigo mentally ran the area through his mind, and let his senses drift searching for any Espada he would prefer to avoid lingering in waiting; the labs were one place he would stay very clear of. Though it seemed the only Espada within the boundless walls were, Starrk, Ulquiorra, Harribel, Grimmjow, and perhaps Nelliel, he could sense her nearby, but as usual, her presence seemed to drift everywhere an endless game of tag. That was of course excluding Barragan who was a category all his own.

Decision made, Ichigo led them forward through one of the narrow winding corridors that seemed to threaten to close off around you, and Shinji after a minute of the lingering silence that tangled at one’s heels with ghost whispers piped up, “I mean imagine fighting one of the crazed bastards, just like Kenpachi?”

Ichigo rolled his eyes and murmured about knocking on wood (which always earned him a strange glance), and challenging fate, right as a door set in the wall to the left slid open with a hiss of shadows, and wild feral reiatsu spilt out into the hallway.

The other Captains tensed even as Ichigo glanced over his shoulders and pointedly stared his friend
down, Shinji only shrugged haplessly as one must do in the given situation. Grimmjow appeared from the shadows with a cocky grin, one that never slipped or even cracked minutely at the sight of the four Captains, the cocky bastard. The blue-haired Espada leant against the frame of the doorway all sinew and casual predator, a nasty scar still healing down the side of his temple and the hilt of his blade peeking from the sash of his obi.

Grimmjow’s eyes roved over the four with a vibrant light, as if assessing who would provide the most entertainment to the ever bloodthirsty Espada. The cat-like hollow’s eyes passed over Ichigo with a barely there wink, and the blatantly obvious desire to fight Ichigo, who only shook his head imperceptibly, before passing over the others with mild interest.

Before the Fifth Espada could challenge one of them, Shinji stepped forward with a bloodthirsty smile, Sakande shining through in the wicked glimpse of a Cheshire grin, eyes near ochre with the Vizard’s hollow side. Grimmjow grinned wide and manic at the blond who only smiled in return the tension between the two swelling and building like a storm, radiating out through the hallways.

“Don’t worry I’ve got this, you three go on ahead.”

Shinji called out over his shoulder, confident and sure as he continued to stare the Fifth Espada down. Grimmjow studied the blond for a tense second as if weighing his merit and power, before a wide predatory grin settled across his features, lighting his eyes up like a madman.

The blond glanced once over his shoulder and nodded, eyes connecting with Ichigo, they conveyed a sense of promise depths serious and burning with determination before they disappeared in a blur of Shunpo and Sonido. The lack of their vibrant presences rang like a stark wound, a reminder of empty space once valued. Carefully Ichigo let his senses track the two, following them as they exited the main part of Los Noches and appeared in what was considered one of the training areas, which were really areas without proper floors and tall walls, with a few layers for support.

Nodding to himself Ichigo whispered a prayer for the both of them, even knowing that they would be fine, Grimmjow had a willpower near enough to match Ichigo’s, and Shinji wouldn’t fall easily. The more pressing concern was how much blood they would lose in beating each other into bloody pulps, though at least the two adrenaline junkies would have fun, and that was what the Fourth was for.

“Do you think Hirako will be okay?”

Byakuya asked quietly, glancing at the repeating walls that dripped on and on like an intravenous, slowly filtering into your mind and dulling the senses. Ichigo nodded with a muffled scoff and responded, “He’ll be fine, bloody, but fine. Though we probably will want to avoid Kisuke, and Sosuke afterwards. Kami knows how the poor scientist Espada in their hands is fairing.”

The Captain of the Sixth conceded with a nod and an amused shake of his head, the Soutaicho behind the two remained quiet and serene, assured of their battle and the survival of the Gotei 13’s Captains. Ichigo continued to lead them forward, disrupting the silence of the walls, drawing ever closer to the throne room.

The Captain of the Tenth faltered minutely in his sure path as he sensed Harribel, a minute present drifting like a fine mist, or the aftertaste of rain and lacking one of her Fracción. A part of Ichigo wanted to desert Byakuya and the Soutaicho, knowing they were beyond capable of taking care of themselves, the piece of Ichigo intertwined with the core of who he was, the part that thrived on protecting others wanted to check on Harribel’s state.

Instead, he forced his attention forward, knowing the Espada would be fine, she was forged of a
finer steel than any number of Shinigami and Quincy Ichigo had met in the long years of his life. Ossan rumbled contentedly in agreement of his decision, even as Shiro’s energy thrummed beneath Ichigo’s fingers echoing the desire to feel the adrenaline of battle that always lingered in war.

Ulquiorra’s appearance was far less flashy than Grimmjow but still adhered to the quiet Espada’s secret sense of drama. The apathetic Espada drifted from the shadows from one second to the next, the beat of a heart, tendrils of darkness lingering and tugging at him, and forming great wings of darkness.

The third Espada studied them with blank all-seeing eyes, staring into Ichigo’s own for a moment with clear understanding before drifting to observe Byakuya and the Soutaicho like one observed the world turning. That tightly wound reaitsu, loose like a rope waiting to be used drifted through the room, and Byakuya wordlessly stepped forward Kenseikan glinting as his reaitsu, the breath of spring a storm mighty and powerful, swept out to meet Ulquiorra.

Byakuya pivoted a half step, gaze locked with Ichigo, promise heavy and leaden in his eyes before they shared a nod, understanding passing easily between the two. Then Ulquiorra and the Captain of the Sixth were gone with only a soft sigh to mark their venture. Ever the dramatics the two were likely fighting above Los Noches, where they could all be seen, and hopefully avoid causing greater increments of damage to the vast palace.

Ichigo could only find amusement at their antics as he glanced at the Soutaicho who glided forward to stand beside Ichigo, eyes honest and sturdy where they gazed into Ichigo’s own. The orange-haired Captain nodded once, murmured about one on one battles and inevitability before leading them forward; the throne room taunting and bright like a blitz on their senses.

Their walk was quiet, and Ichigo mentally prepared himself, for the fight against Starrk, but also for the dull realisation that at the end of the long night in Hueco Mundo the war, so-called the Balance War would come to a close. An infinite finish, and yet never ending in the minute circles of Shinigami and hollow. It was an almost strange sense to imagine a war drawing to an end without extended loss of life or damage. And the prospect of an unsteady peace between the two forces was like a beacon of promise, assuring Ichigo that he was succeeding however slightly.

For the third time as they walked silently through the halls of Los Noches, an Espada appeared, pulling the two Captains to quick attention. Starrk was alone where he stood in front of two ornate doors, that towered above their heads with carvings like renaissance marble embossing the large frame. The first Espada studied the two of them with a lazy half-smile, hand resting idly on his katana, even as Ichigo could sense Lilynette lingering nearby, likely on Starrk’s orders.

“You see I’m supposed to stop the both of you from entering, but I don’t really think that’s possible hmm?”

Starrk rumbled, that deep voice ruff with disuse stated nonchalantly with an obvious glance at the Soutaicho who remained impassive at the sight of the Espada before them. The First Espada’s reaitsu drifted throughout the small antechamber, wild and feral, sharp and biting, with an undercurrent of loneliness, the lone wolf, or coyote Ichigo supposed as he pivoted a half-step to glance into the Soutaicho’s eyes.

The Captain of the Tenth nodded once, an acknowledgement and promise all wrapped up swiftly into the movement. The Soutaicho nodded slowly in response and Ichigo stepped closer for a sparse moment eyes warm and fond he whispered, “Be careful of Barragan, he is cunning and guileless in his old age.”

Yamamoto nodded eyes flickering to life with an old flame, powerful in its ancient mannerisms,
leaving Ichigo to grin at the hint of a smile escaping the confines of the old man’s beard. The three paused suddenly as a large sound ripped throughout the air, accompanied by a violent burst of reiatsu that scattered across their senses like an echo through a canon. Ichigo sighed and muttered about prideful cats and posturing before he turned to Starrk with an easy inviting grin. The Espada grinned once, sharp and feral then he nodded and stepped aside from the magnificent doors leaving an open pathway to Barragan for the Soutaicho.

“Take care old man.”

Starrk called over his shoulders, as he turned away with a swirl of his white cloak, Ichigo rolled his eyes at the hollow’s lack of tact and blatant dislike of Barragan, even as with a nod he vanished and Ichigo followed. The two opponents disappeared in sharp bursts of Sonido and shunpo, leaving the Soutaicho alone to face Barragan.

They appeared in one of the many training areas, sand soft beneath the soles of Ichigo’s sandals, and the skies of Hueco Mundo bearing witness to the coming battle. Lilynette lounging on a few pillows tucked in the shade of the entrance waved to Ichigo once, before returning her attention to whatever was in her hands, from the distance it looked like an assortment of bones.

With a huff of amusement, Ichigo returned his attention to Starrk and tamped down on Shiro’s gleeful bloodlust at the prospect of a fight knowing that the hollow would be happy enough with the battle, even as Ichigo mentally readjusted the seal over his reiatsu. If he was to battle Starrk away from the prying eyes of the rest of the world, then he would fight the Espada properly, Starrk deserved all the measure of Ichigo’s considerable skill (all his reiatsu was a bit too much).

“It’s been a while Ichigo.”

The Espada commented lightly, drawing his katana with a short simple motion, Ichigo nodded with an exasperated expression and replied, “Yes like we weren’t fighting on the sands of Hueco Mundo a week and a half ago.”

That wasn’t what the coyote-Espada meant and they both knew it, fighting on the battlefield was like a stage duel, every move carefully choreographed. Ichigo’s wry statement earned a chuckle, though with Starrk the sound was more akin to harsh barking laughter. The peaceful aura between the two slowly drained, as they studied one another, their stances, their blades, their will glowing in the half-light of Hueco Mundo, to be filled with a tenseness seeped not in life or death but the challenge.

There was nothing, figuratively, riding on the outcome of their battle. They had both duelled each other before, and no matter who won Soul Society would likely hold the greater victory over Los Noches, and Ichigo would walk out of Los Noches, Starrk, however, was the one who’s future lingered on the decision of the Soutaicho regarding the Espada.

With a hiss of metal against sheath, Ichigo drew Zangetsu, the weight of the blade familiar in his hands where it glinted as if shining from within. Reiatsu swirled around him and his pulse lit with adrenaline, the ache in his chest subdued for the moment. A slightly predatory grin slipped onto Ichigo’s sharp features and Starrk barred his teeth as his own blade howled into the night.

With a sparse breath, and the whispers of the wind over sand like an ancient language the two sprung forward blades clashing with the jarring snap of metal against metal, sparks lighting the air with the clash. With a hum of Sonido, Starrk disappeared, an after image lingering in his place, even as Ichigo whirled around Zangetsu snapping to attention. Starrk’s blade whipped overhead to crash against Zangetsu, the strength of the coyote-like Espada bearing into his arms.

Ichigo huffed and his lips pulled back in an imitation of a snarl as he shouldered against the blade
pushing against his arms, the two forces of immense strength weighted against each other. With a whisper of reaitsu lingering like the storm in the air, gathering along his sealed blade Ichigo released a wordless Getsuga Tensho. The bright arc of blazing ebony slammed against Starrk’s blade forcing him away as he slid back in the sand, katana diverting the large ripples of power to either side of the Espada, scorching the sand into a crystal mosaic.

The Captain of the Tenth charged forward as the last of the Getsuga Tensho dispersed, Zangetsu clashing against Starrk’s blade as the Espada grinned at Ichigo eyes alight and alive in a way the normally sedate Espada’s eyes never reflected. Ichigo’s pulse raced with the same excitement, and every sense felt as if magnified in the face of battle.

Starrk grunted at the weight of Zangetsu, the situation reversed for a moment, before the Espada ducked dropping to a crouch he slid back a half step before popping up once more. Ichigo followed the Espada swiftly, Zangetsu catching against Starrk’s blade as they shoved against one another for a moment. With a wink and a wolfish grin Starrk dropped his blade from where it was locked against Ichigo’s zanpaktou and swiftly brought it up again, swinging out to the side and in towards Ichigo’s neck, the air singing with the movement.

Zangetsu snapped up to the side as Ichigo slid into a low stance, their blades clashing with a jarring wail. The two opponents stared one another down for a tense moment before Ichigo dropped Zangetsu and in the next moment let the blade fly upwards to clash with Starrk’s katana.

They exchanged a rapid flurry of blows, metal flowing from one movement to the next as Ichigo dodged a swift overhead strike and responded with a slash to the unprotected Espada’s side. Starrk ripped around catching the tip of Zangetsu on his blade as they slid against each other, edging closer to Starrk’s torso before the Espada slipped away with a burst of Sonido and launched a wordless cero.

The bright blue energy cut through the night like a comet as Ichigo caught the force of it on his blade, holding it only for a moment before he ducked and whipped around to face Starrk who appeared with a familiar hum, katana slicing in a clear jab. Ichigo stepped in close to the Espada’s defence catching the blade and sliding forward. Starrk growled at the tactic and halted Zangetsu with his hand, Hierro preventing any deep cut even as Ichigo’s zanpaktou released a thin line of crimson.

At the sign of first blood, the battle seemed to rise in intensity as they continued to trade blow after blow. Ichigo sliced forward only to take a step back as Starrk’s katana cut a clear path towards his chest. The young Captain dodged and whipped around Zangetsu singing as it cut through the air. Up, left, to the right, sliding through the sand, dodge, move forward, it became a near endless mantra inside Ichigo’s mind as they continued to fight, centering himself only in the battle, the feel of Zangetsu in his hands, the bite of his muscle, and the feel of opponent. Their katanas cut through the air with increasing skill as the two opponents moved in a lethal dance where it felt as if each move was preordained and yet unknown.

The Captain of the Tenth let out a hiss as Starrk scored a gash on his bicep, the sting of the cult mild even as Ichigo retaliated kicking out at the Espada and releasing a small Getsuga Tensho. Starrk dodged the two attacks, the Getsuga Tensho clashing with the far wall as the Espada straightened katana alert at his side. Standing half a pace from Ichigo the two stared each other down, their breaths loud and mingling in the night air as tired grins surrendered their features and reaitsu whipped about them.

Lilynette wordlessly stood from her place in the shadows, studying the two with an expression Ichigo couldn’t name but was some like mix of fondness and annoyance, she glided to Starrk and traded a silent look with the First Espada. Ichigo tugged on Zangetsu, felt the reiatsu that was as
much Ichigo as it was his spirits gather and pulse, Shiro’s bloodlust and glee, Ossan’s pleasure at seeing battle as they prepared.

The two opponents nodded once at each other in wordless agreement, and their reaitsu skyrocketed in bright spirals of the sky and the night as Ichigo released his Shikai, and Starrk his resurrection. Zangetsu’s dual blades slipped comfortably into Ichigo’s hands, reaitsu pulsing and vibrating along his arms, as across from him Starrk rolled his shoulders, fur ruffling in the breeze as the Espada cocked his guns, loud and tremulous in the silence.

Starrk grinned once, feral and challenging as the guns in his hands rose and were pointed firmly at Ichigo. Then gunshots rang through the air, loud and bright, as the vast array of bullets of reaitsu charged towards Ichigo. Dodging under the first bullet, Ichigo charged forward, deflecting each bullet off of Zangetsu’s smaller blade and the outside of Shiro’s blade as he moved closer to the Espada. Starrk increased the rain of fire so that it fell like a hailstorm around Ichigo as he paused in his charge letting Zangetsu weave and whirl around him stopping the sea of cero in their path.

Starrk charged forward as Ichigo defended against the rain of fire, continuing with his hail of bullets as he moved in circles around Ichigo trying to attack his unprotected back. Ichigo watched the afterimages of the coyote-Espada carefully as he whipped around and Zangetsu sung in his hands, before with a grin Zangetsu locked into an x formation and he released a Getsuga Jūjishō. The large crescents of reaitsu slammed into the Espada who let out a rough growl as his guns crossed over his chest to deflect some of the force of the attack as Starrk slid back in the sand at the force of Ichigo’s reaitsu.

The Captain of the Tenth gave the first Espada no time to recover from the attack as he charged forward. From the curtain of sand, Starrk stepped forward and caught both of Zangetsu on the beams of reaitsu that jutted from his guns, The two opponents strained against one another before Ichigo released the trench knife portion of Zangetsu and swept the blade to the side on a path towards Starrk’s neck.

The Espada growled and leaned back, even as one of the beams of light disappeared and at point-blank range, Starrk sent out a hail of reaitsu. Zangetsu’s longer blade rose to catch the hail of bullets even as Ichigo stepped forward against the immense force, Hierro catching some of the stray bullets even as others left thin gashes.

A Getsuga Jūjishō ripped through the sea of reaitsu and slammed into Starrk who caught the assault with a snarl, eyes flashing gold, the hollow ducked and charged the hum of Sonido drifting listlessly in the air as the Espada circled around Ichigo before homing in on his right.

Ichigo caught the Espada’s blades against his own, only to hesitate momentarily as the howling of wolves echoed into the night, and the spiritual creatures appeared around them. Starrk took advantage of the momentary pause and pushed forward, even as the wolves surrounding Ichigo leapt forward.

Launching a rapid burst of Getsuga Jūjishō around himself, Ichigo deflected Starrk’s rapid swift movements, Zangetsu shifting in his hands, as he reversed the trench knife and stabbed a wolf, careful to avoid the ones with Lilynette’s conscious. Reaitsu exploded surging upwards into the air, billowing around Ichigo, even as Starrk thrust forward once more.

They engaged in another quick flurry of blows, blades sliding against one another as the two opponents whirled around each other, Shiro’s blade snapping forward even as Ossan’s blade swept up to defend against Starrk’s thrust forward. Starrk batted aside the strike, shifting fluidly to the side before whirling with a grave and deadly grace to slash both blades towards Ichigo. The orange-haired Shinigami ducked and pivoted thrusting from his lower position with the trench knife even as
the longer blade whipped around. Starrk twisted in mid-air catching the longer blade with one of his own as he dodged the trench knife and his eyes flashed.

Ichigo let out a hiss of pain as a wolf latched onto his extended arm and began glowing, across from the orange-haired Shinigami, Starrk smirked breath leaving his lungs in great heaving gasps. Ichigo had only a second to tighten his Hierro before the glowing almost transparent wolf exploded, obliterating the sands around him and sweeping over Ichigo.

The Captain of the Tenth stumbled out of the explosion, shihakusho a bit seared, and his skin a bit worse for wear. Ichigo pushed the minor injuries aside as he funneled his reaitsu around him, letting it spark upon the air he sent an overpowered Getsuga Jūjishō towards Starrk who flinched eyes a touch wide with shock even as the hollow braced for the attack and the wolves surrounding Ichigo all charged at once, Ichigo grinned in a vaguely bring it on motion.

He sliced and whirled, slicing through the wolves as they exploded left and right around him, Zangetsu singing in his blood and humming in his mind, as if they were one movement. The Captain turned instinctively and caught Starrk’s blade where it slammed into Ichigo’s own, an excited laugh bursting from Ichigo’s eyes as the final stretch of the battle drew on in a literal storm of blades.

They moved across the sand back and forth, near two pinpricks of light, blades whipping overhead, to the side, as they spun, dodged and forced their blades against one another. In a quick movement Ichigo slid under Starrk’s open defence and while Shiro’s large blade held Starrk’s two blades at an impasse, Ossan’s trench knife snapped forward to rest lightly against Starrk’s neck.

The coyote-Espada chuckled, the noise ruff with exertion as their panting filtered into the air, and their eyes glowed. With a nod, Starrk surrendered and Ichigo lowered Zangetsu’s blades and stepped back, with a slow drawn out motion he sealed his zanpaktou and analysed his wounds. There were more than a few scrapes, a collection of bites, and a spattering of bruises but Ichigo was certain he would survive.

Starrk across from Ichigo took a deep breath and glanced at their surroundings. After a minute Ichigo followed the Espada’s example and observed the glass curved into mosaics around them, the deep holes and mountains where the sand had been displaced.

Ichigo let out a soft chuckle at the sight and after a moment sunk to his knees settling into a cross-legged position. Starrk observed Ichigo with a roll of his eyes before he padded over, still all lethal grace and plopped beside Ichigo with a huff and a small bark of laughter.

Lilynette re-emerged into existence a moment later, with a crack like a Garganta. The second half of the First Espada studied the two of them with accusing eyes, amusement hidden beneath it all, but sat on the sand as well. Their breaths mingled the night air as Ichigo let his senses drift to check on his fellow Shinigami and their opponents.

“Anyone dead?”

Starrk asked casually and nonchalantly already knowing what Ichigo was doing. The orange-haired Shinigami shook his head and responded, “Only Barragan.”

The two shared a look followed by a grin and let the silence linger as Shiro’s happiness vibrated through Ichigo’s system in warm waves, and the ache of his muscles and the quiet of Hueco Mundo surrounded them.
Thank you all for reading I hope you all enjoyed the battle between Ichigo and Starrk, it wasn’t as intense as the battle last chapter, but it was definitely something. I may still write the battles between Byakuya and Ulquiorra, Shinji and Grimmjow, Barragan and the Soutaicho on the side (not part of the main story) if you guys are interested? Thank you all for reading, reviews/comments are always appreciated. Till next time!
Kairos

Chapter Notes

Kairos

(n.) The perfect, delicate, crucial moment; the fleeting rightness of time and place that creates the opportune atmosphere for actions, words, or movements.

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 55 and over 400k it feels surreal thinking about it. Thank you, guys, for all your support throughout the years. Anyway, this will be the last chapter of the Winter War Arc (cheering). Next, we'll be moving onto the filler arcs and the movies. Is there anything you guys really want to see in the next arc (which will be comprised of the filler arcs and movies)? Moving on, read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

X

Ichigo entered the throne room silently and like a wraith, as the Soutaicho sheathed Ryūjin Jakka with an elegant movement, and the hiss of metal meeting scabbard. Fires crackled about the room, lingering but dwindling ever steadily as the scent of ash settled like a winter morning over the occupants. The Captain of the Tenth observed the throne room in careful detail, noting the devastation with a keen eye, the scorch marks lining the walls, the pieces of stone that had been rendered to dust, the ash that collected and billowed about the air like particles of sand, and across from the Soutaicho the charred unrecognizable corpse of the King of Hueco Mundo.

The Soutaicho turned at Ichigo's presence, slowly as if stepping out of the mindset battle, out of the focus on only one's opponent, to observe Ichigo. The myriad of wounds decorating the younger Captain's skin like a warning, or a marking, and after a moment his gaze swept past Ichigo to the First Espada and Lilynette lingering in the hallway. The Soutaicho himself bore a few observable wounds most notably the lack of the old man's left arm; fate had a strange sense of humour Ichigo knew. Starrk, behind the orange-haired Shinigami, observed the destruction of the throne room, where he leaned against the wall, with wide eyes, something close to awe hidden there even as the Espada raised his arms in the universal gesture of peace and surrender.

The Soutaicho narrowed his eyes at the Espada, the fire of a warrior still blazing Merrily in those ancient depths before he looked to Ichigo assessing the young Captain. The orange-haired Shinigami understood the question in those eyes, asking if the Espada was trustworthy, asking in part if Ichigo had made the right decision in allowing the Espada to live. Ichigo nodded once, clear and sharp allowing his determination to burn in his own eyes, flickering and growing even as it overcame the exhaustion that seeped into his system, digging cold claws into his thoughts and limbs.

The old man nodded once in response, the trust between the two leaders of Soul Society ringing true and reflecting their many years of companionship. The Soutaicho turned his attention away from the First Espada lingering in the doorway and instead to the still smouldering corpse. Something briefly
sorrowful passed over Yammamoto's features before it was gone in the next moment and the silence was only pierced by the crackle of the fires burning out.

The tense and somewhat awkward air that lingered was swept away in one moment, only to return with even greater force when Harribel appeared as if a shadow from one corner of the room. She glided forward still holding every measure of lethality and grace, even if it was apparent she was still injured from her battle against Tōshirō, Kaien, and Ukitake, in the manner of her walk and the tired mantle that clung to her shoulders. Two of her Fracción followed behind her, quiet and diminished as if recognizing the serious aura of the moment that hung in the balance. The future was weighted by everyone's next move.

The Second Espada halted when she reached the centre of the room, keen sea eyes glancing first to Ichigo, and then Starrk who had stepped half out of the shadows at the appearance of his comrade, Lilynette beside the coyote-Espada studied the throne room with obvious interest. After a silent moment of inaudible conversation between the two remaining Espada, Harribel glanced down at the corpse near her feet with obvious distaste, even as it began to crumble to ashes, the last dregs of Barragan's corrosive reaitsu dissipating with the body.

Finally, the female Espada glanced into the eyes of the Soutaicho, firm and silent, open in a way that purposefully betrayed the intentions of the hollow and allowed the Soutaicho to glimpse whatever he needed to see to ascertain the future of Los Noches. The two studied each other in the silence, a lingering sort of dragging silence that weighed on all occupants of the room, as they continued to stare assessing each other in a wordless game of chess. Ichigo shifted slightly in the tense silence as his muscles reminded him of his injuries, and gently he started a healing kido, mind racing to map out all the plausible situations in front of them, and if possible how to prevent the direr of outcomes.

The Soutaicho had the chance to recognize the Espada as future allies, or at least a faction of their own power capable of ruling Hueco Mundo and controlling the many Espada, one that would aid in the inevitable return of the Quincy. Ichigo had planted the seeds in all the minds of the Captains, the humanity, and intelligence of many of the Espada, which had only been aided by their own encounters, the lack of death on the battlefield, and the opponents they faced. Ichigo had also spoken, suggested lightly, to the Soutaicho of such peace, but he knew he had no power to command the man who had ruled the Gotei 13 for centuries of tradition, nor could one man sway the traditions and decision of another.

Still, Ichigo half prayed that the old man would not let the past influence this decision, as if the Soutaicho choose to execute or condemn the remaining Espada it would set a precedent for the future of Soul Society, an example for the continued bloodthirsty Gotei 13. And if that decision was made then Ichigo would not simply stand by and let many of the Espada, some who he considered friends, and many who had great potential, be executed a for a simple phobia of those different from the Shinigami and the incessant need to follow those with greater power that ran throughout both societies.

Ichigo had been on the bad side of Soul Society before, a traitor to those he fought for, and he wouldn't throw away his own ideals to protect himself, not when he was capable of tearing out the corrupt roots by his own hand. A part of Ichigo knew that the Soutaicho knew the facets of Ichigo's personality very well, most of the Gotei 13 had come to recognize that above all Ichigo protected his own, and it was unlikely, therefore, that Soutaicho would fall to such drastic actions.

Though it left the Captain of the Tenth wondering if the old man could truly accept the changes to Soul Society it would bring; the idea of Espada entering the Court of Pure Souls and conversing with the enemy that had existed for centuries.
As his ribs twanged in reminder of their more than bruised state, Ichigo let his attention drift to the problems closer at hand. He could sense, as he extended his reaitsu, that Byakuya and Ulquiorra had finished battling, though the result of such a battle Ichigo could not detect beyond the scope that they were both still alive and likely injured. Shinji and Grimmjow were close to finishing their battle, reaitsu erratic and fading in a violent fury, Ichigo knew with little doubt that they would both likely be heavily injured.

The attention of the med barracks would likely be needed in due consequence, the poor healers would likely survive high rates of exhaustion-induced fainting and that wasn't to discount the battle that had occurred outside of Hueco Mundo. A battle which was now quiet where his senses searched, quiet but for the wail of the wounded, and the parting of the dead. As if thinking of the battle had drawn a summons, from the left of the room an Espada entered, disturbing the intense staring match that had continued to draw on as if planning to extend for a century.

Nelliel entered with blood matting her teal hair, and a few cuts peeking out of the white of her uniform, presence loud and blaring like a fallen star. The Fourth Espada observed the damage to the throne room with careful calculating eyes, roving over the gathered Shinigami and Espada before landing on Ichigo with a small smile breaking through the cold ice of her exterior before it disappeared once more as her gaze landed on Harribel and the Soutaicho.

"The forces of Hueco Mundo have surrendered on the battlefield."

The Fourth Espada announced simply, attention straying to meet Harribel as the defacto leader of the Espada, while Starrk was powerful he was no leader and would never want to be one, the Second Espada commanded respect and her mantle was that of respect and honour for all that she was a hollow. Harribel nodded once, expression twisting minutely in displeasure or sadness at the predictable turn of the war before her gaze slid to the Soutaicho and she stated, "The forces of Los Noches surrender and wish for negotiation."

The statement lingered and shifted around the room like the final strike of a battle, as the last of Barragan crumbled to dust, echoing the failing of the past and the promise of rebirth if given chance. The two once more observed each other in silence, and in the dreadful quiet Nelliel glided across the room to stand near Ichigo. Her familiar gaze studied Ichigo and in extension Starrk, a hand reaching out to trace faintly over a cut lining Ichigo's cheek, she nodded once smile soft and sure before she drifted to speak with Lilynette; the two having struck a kinship as the few females within the vast palace.

"Soul Society consents to a negotiation."

The Soutaicho responded quietly, ancient voice resounding throughout the room, like the ancient war drums calling its soldiers home. Ichigo straightened to attention where he stood, as beside him the Espada mirrored the motion. Harribel looked once more to the old man, eyes swimming with the depths of the seas and all its ancient otherworldly sense and nodded her acceptance. The Soutaicho repeated the motion once respectful and proud before he turned to Ichigo and made a small gesture with his hand beckoning the young Captain forward.

"Before we can begin negotiations, all members of both parties that have engaged in battle should be seen to."

The old man commanded, voice ringing with authority as Ichigo crossed the cracked ornate tiling of the throne room. Nelliel at the mention of battle stepped forward and received a nod of permission from Harribel.

The younger Espada stated, "The battle on the sands of Los Noches has concluded and both sides
have retreated to take care of injuries and casualties. The forces of Soul Society are camped outside of the wall of Los Noches, and our legions are currently gathered inside the lower barracks."

The two leaders of the opposing factions nodded, absorbing the information with graceful yet mournful countenances at the thought of the casualties, and the idea of a continued war. The new leader of Hueco Mundo glanced once to the Soutaicho as if to ascertain permission to give orders to her subordinates, the old man beside Ichigo nodded once slowly as if the movement was pulled from him though Ichigo could see the old man was somewhat amused by it all.

"Direct our forces that we have surrendered and are negotiating terms of agreement."

Harribel commanded and received a sharp nod from the Fourth Espada who waved briefly once to Ichigo before she disappeared in a hum of Sonido. In the lingering silence of the command for surrender, Yamamoto turned to face Ichigo, staring into the younger Shinigami's eyes, searching for something unnameable before he commanded, "Ichigo please go and recover Hirako-taicho and Kuchiki-taicho. If," He paused momentarily to glance at Harribel who bowed her head and responded, "Tier Harribel." The Soutaicho nodded at the name and continued, "If Harribel-san is agreeable an Espada may accompany you to recover her allies."

Inherent pleasure sparked in cold eyes at the Soutaicho's command, and the open start to negotiations he provided by placing the two on equal footing. Ichigo bowed slightly and nodded turning to Starrk who rolled his eyes but mimicked the action trading a glance with the shark-like queen of Hueco Mundo who smiled sharp and thin but nodded.

"Ichigo if you have the chance please inform our outside forces of our current status."

The Soutaicho commanded softly, eyes smouldering and sure, placing as always, his trust with the Captain of the Tenth. Ichigo nodded and added the task to his mental checklist and rolled his shoulders, attempting to drag out the last of his energy. The finish of a battle, of a war, was just as tasking as the actual fight if not more so for all the administration, Ichigo knew it heavily from experience.

Ichigo glanced once more at the decrypt throne room of Los Noches and in the centre Tier Harribel silent and strong like a stone statue bearing the weight of the future, and across from the female Espada, the Soutaicho standing ancient and wise a guardian of the past and a sword for the future. Then Ichigo turned and nodded to Starrk and the two exited the throne room through the large ornate doors torn off their hinges, leaving the old man surrounded by the remnants of Hueco Mundo's most powerful.

Starrk turned to Ichigo once they were out of the watchful gaze of the throne room and gestured for the orange-haired Shinigami to lead the way. Ichigo rolled his eyes and murmured about lazy Espada even as his senses searched for the closest pair of fighters, his muscles protesting the thought of yet more Shunpo.

Locking on to Shinji's presence in the east quarter of the vast palace, sated yet tinged with the familiar sense of pain; Ichigo shared a quick glance with Starrk who was murmuring to Lilynette in patient warm tones. The coyote-Espada glanced upwards and nodded, Ichigo took the gesture as acceptance and with a shake of his head and a pull of his reiatsu Ichigo disappeared in a quick burst of Shunpo, moving through near-endless white halls.

As they traversed the ground swiftly, mere afterimages and blurs of colour, through the halls of Los Noches, Ichigo wondered how this would change everything. It was easy to draw out an elaborate plan and try to account for every whim and will of fate, but to actually see things in action was a far different sport. There had simply been no absolute guarantee that Soul Society would accept the
Espada for having near human consciousness and intelligence, that the Central 46 wouldn't once more dig their old gnarled claws where they didn't belong, or that some great casualty wouldn't appear.

There still wasn't a whole chance that Soul Society would accept the hollows, at least not for the general souls of the afterlife. But many of the Captains seemed open to the idea, something Ichigo had half hoped for, half orchestrated.

Then there were questions about how everything would change. The Vizard had been slowly accepted in Soul Society after years, even with complaints, nothing had changed, and the powerful Captains and Lieutenants had remained. But to invite Espada; full hollows into Soul Society was unlikely. The young Captain wondered if it would be something like distant associates, acknowledging each other's existence and worth, policing their own forces and relying on one and other only in dire times.

The idea of Soul Society and Hueco Mundo working together to form a semi-cohesive unit was a strange idea, but the bonds forged in fighting weren't easily broken, even those against one's opponent (Ichigo was a connoisseur of that philosophy). And Ichigo knew with no shred of doubt that many of the more bloodthirsty Captains and Espada would enjoy the chance to battle new opponents even in a friendly setting, training in new ways, and preparing, even if they didn't know it, for the Blood War.

It was still all so uncertain, and something about not knowing the future for once was a strange amalgamation of worry and elation mixing in Ichigo's chest. The idea that the future had been changed for the better was fully cemented in the outcome of their negotiations.

Ichigo pulled away from his thoughts as they arrived at one of the larger training areas in the east wing, Starrk startling to a halt behind Ichigo with a muted huff. Shaking out the kinks in his muscles, Ichigo studied the wild ambient reaitsu saturating the place as he walked through the entryway, passing a sort of barrier Szayel had developed to prevent great portents of reaitsu leaking into the rest of the building.

The training area was an utter wreck, marble-like rubble littering the ground in large piles like tiny mountains, with scorch marks, and large gashes adorning them every so often. The area was much like Ichigo and Starrk's own battlefield, though with far greater amounts of damage. Surveying the room once more Ichigo's gaze landed on two figures sprawled on the ground a fair distance away from each other.

Grimmjow's electric blue hair peaked out from the sand on the far right of the large room, where the skies of Hueco Mundo had watched the two combatants. To the left, Ichigo spotted a familiar head of blond and the glint of Sakande resting in the sand. Trading an equally bemused and exasperated glance with Starrk the two split off towards their respective comrades, Lilynette lingering by the doorway with a slightly bemused but more or less annoyed expression.

Shinji was lying on his back, breath leaving his lungs slow and drawn out as if the blond was savouring each breath as proof of living. There were cuts dancing throughout his shihakusho, blood leaking sluggishly from the many wounds, and a cut over Shinji's left brow and across his eyelid forced the blond's left eye closed as he blearily blinked up at Ichigo with mute surprise and exhaustion plain across his features.

"Hey Ichi."

The Captain of the Fifth greeted with a racking cough, even as through the one opened eye Ichigo could see a deep-seated content, the battle had obviously been something close to a draw, though
Ichigo found it likely that Shinji had won. When Ichigo had battled Grimmjow those first few times (excluding the first brutal beat down) they had been near equally matched, in skill and power, but Shinji had years of experience and while his Shikai was certainly something he wouldn't employ to the full extent in his battle, Shinji could still whip out a cero as easy as any Espada.

Rolling his eyes at the croaked greeting and the state of his friend, Ichigo's eyes roved around the sands till they landed on Sakande lying innocently in the sand, blood still coating the elegant blade. Observing his friend in careful measuring silence, Ichigo dropped to his knees and careful shouldered Shinji onto his back, the blond groaned and whined the whole time but after a minute Ichigo rose to his feet, Sakande once more sealed and in Shinji's sheath, and the blond hugging Ichigo's back like a koala.

Ichigo carefully adjusted the weight of his friend on his back and let healing kido surge through his fingers where they gripped Shinji as he moved towards the entrance. After another moment, Starrk appeared from behind a mountain of sand, the panther-Espada slung across his back, knocked out cold, which was a small mercy.

"We should bring them back to the main throne room and then search for the others."

The Captain of the Tenth suggested softly, as his gaze observed the training area once more. Starrk nodded expression calm yet possessing a measure of gravity, he looked to Lilynette murmuring something in a low voice even before he straightened and nodded once more. With a burst of Sonido and Shunpo, the three disappeared from the training room, moving once more through the mirroring halls of Los Noches.

When they arrived at the throne room, Harribel and the Soutaicho were sitting across from each other on the few remaining chairs in the room, silently speaking in whispers. They paused when Ichigo and Starrk arrived, observing the injured Captain and Espada respectively with slightly concerned eyes. Ichigo gingerly set Shinji down in a corner of the room to the blond’s mild protest, as Starrk mimed the action setting Grimmjow a careful distance away. Lilynette studied the two knocked out opponents with a frown before she plopped down between the two.

Ichigo raised a questioning brow at the First Espada who shrugged nonchalantly in answer. The Shinigami assumed she was watching over the two in case they decided to wake up, or that their injuries became critical.

Glancing briefly to the Soutaicho Ichigo nodded in respect and acknowledgement before he let his reaitsu reach out returning to Byakuya and Ulquiorra. Starrk shifted on his feet beside Ichigo and wordlessly the two departed from the throne room in a blur of shunpo.

The ever-watching moon of Hueco Mundo hovered over Ichigo's shoulder as he landed in the sands on the outskirts of Los Noches. The desert around them was a pock-marked mess of crystallized glass and deep trenches almost biting into the marrow of the land. As Ichigo observed the scenery, Starrk whistled in surprise behind the Captain and murmured, "It's always the quiet ones."

Ichigo chuckled at the comment even as his heart palpitated with familiar worry as he spotted the gleam of Kenseikan in the moonlight, Kenseikan he knew better than his own haori. Sharing a brief nod with Starrk, Ichigo skimmed swiftly over the sands and alighted beside Byakuya collapsed in the sand staring at the sky idly with a somewhat serene expression.

The Kuchiki head blinked slowly at the younger Captain's presence before his gaze centred on Ichigo and a smile broke the cold indifference of the Kuchiki mask. Rolling his eyes in fondness Ichigo rested a warm palm on his partner's cheek and observed the myriad of cuts decorating his partner. At first glance nothing seemed critical, all the wounds regulated to cuts sluggishly bleeding,
but as Ichigo inspected Byakuya’s torso he noticed a large gash.

"Who’s the reckless idiot now?"

Ichigo questioned as he shifted aside Byakuya’s shihakusho and began a rough healing kido to stop the bleeding, it was of course completely logical that Shinji and Grimmjow would suffer only the critical injury of major blood loss, and Byakuya would have a scar that near mirrored the one Ichigo had received in one of his own battles against the Fourth Espada (and luckily not the battle where he rose from the dead).

Byakuya laughed weakly before it broke into a hacking cough painting his lips with blood, Ichigo painted his partner with a pointed stare even as he contemplated the safest way to return the injured Captain to the throne room. As if sensing Ichigo’s train of thought, very likely with how similar a wavelength they resided on, Byakuya rolled his eyes and shifted so that his arms circled around Ichigo’s neck.

"Spoiled noble."

The older Captain teased lightly as he carefully lifted Byakuya into his arms, the Kuchiki scoffed at the insult and replied weak but fond, "Insufferable Shiba."

Ichigo scoffed at the insult with a warm smile even as the Captain of the Sixth attempted to maintain a stoic façade, failing as to be expected. Ichigo chuckled silently and earned a small mutinous glare from his partner, as if blaming Ichigo for his situation, Ichigo just winked and turned to face Los Noches, the monstrous stone beast shining in the moonlight.

Muttering to himself as Ichigo’s arms berated him for the extended work Ichigo returned to Starrk who was waiting by one of the entrances to Los Noches, a familiar apathetic Espada slung across his back.

Starrk raised a brow at the sight of Ichigo carrying the Captain of the sixth in his arms, and the older Captain half expected the coyote to whistle again. But the sloth-like Espada just shrugged and turned away after sharing a nod and a wink with Ichigo.

Once more the two arrived in the throne room, and Ichigo spared a brief glance with the Soutaicho as he gently set Byakuya down beside Shinji, using the Kuchiki’s haori as a sheet. Semi-content with the state of the two Captains Ichigo straightened and announced clearly, "I'm going to report the news of surrender to our forces and fetch a healer."

Receiving nods of agreement Ichigo pivoted on his heel, flashed Starrk a smile, eyes holding some desperate promise to watch their lives, and disappeared in a burst of Shunpo. Silently Ichigo wanted the long day to draw to a close, but he knew the negotiations would likely continue long into the night, and that wasn't to discount the continuation of negotiations that would occur in Soul Society afterwards among all members of each party. He could already feel the coming headache, not to mention the paperwork it would all bring no matter what decision was reached.

Landing in the middle of the newer camp, perched on the outskirts of Los Noches' towering walls, Ichigo ignored the hush whispers of the Shinigami surrounding him, eyes sweeping over the myriad of wounded soldiers being attended to by the Fourth division members, his senses searched for Kensei and Renji, the actual leaders with some semblance of sanity, as opposed to the ever insane Kenpachi.

Ichigo cut through the camp an imposing figure, with haste ushering his steps, and exhaustion lining his brow and hooding his eyes. Distantly he acknowledged he was likely a grim figure, but the
thought was swept aside as Ichigo spotted the command tent. Through the open flaps of the tent, Ichigo spotted Renji leaning over a map, Kensei beside the redhead, the two sharing equally serious looks. Striding into the tent without pause Ichigo nodded briefly to the Shinigami stationed on the outside even as he flared his presence drawing the attention of the two-pseudo generals.

"Ichigo!"

They greeted in unison, worry and a mixture of other emotions caught in the syllables of his name. The Captain of the Tenth nodded briefly in greeting something warm in his gaze before it was gone in the face of duty and he replied, "The forces of Hueco Mundo have surrendered. For now, focus on healing the wounded, and preparing for a return to Soul Society. Currently, the Soutaicho is negotiating with Tier Harribel, the new ruler of Hueco Mundo."

The two remained in stunned silence for a moment, before grim determination steeled their features and they nodded. Renji made an aborted movement to leave the tent but before he could move Ichigo placed a hand on his shoulder, halting the motion and said in a somewhat kinder tone, "I'm going back to Los Noches and will be returning with a healer. When you feel you can spare one of you, feel free to check in, we will be in in the throne room. The negotiations could very well take all night."

"Best of luck then Ichigo."

Renji replied to the news with a wry twist of his lips and a serious glint to his eyes as he patted Ichigo on the shoulder and swept out of the tent, all the bearing of a Captain hanging off of his shoulders. Kensei nodded once at Ichigo, conveying his understanding without words, and dismissing the orange-haired Captain to continue on his mission.

Ichigo bowed and darted out of the camp reaitsu sweeping out to search for a semi-familiar presence; he knew Isane would likely still be busy with the majority of vastly critical wounds the Shinigami on the field had suffered. But Ichigo was certain he and another healer could manage to stabilize the Captains and Espada in a decent fashion.

The Captain moved swiftly around the camp, following a trail of reaitsu, even as he left after images like a ghost of his passing. Ichigo only slowed when he found the Shinigami he was looking for, hunched over one of the Shinigami of the Seventh division. The Fourth division member was wrapping a wound and applying a light healing kido, all the while lecturing the Shinigami in front of him to stop being a baby.

"Hanatarō."

Ichigo greeted softly, still surprising the always jumpy Shinigami as the healer spun around with wide eyes, only to settle when he saw Ichigo. The healer studied the Captain with an admonishing look at the many wounds visible all over Ichigo’s body even as the Captain ignored the demanding gaze and asked, "Hanatarō can you come with me? Hirako-taicho and Kuchiki-taicho need healing."

The demure Shinigami glanced back at the division Shinigami, watching the scene play out with wide eyes before he turned once more to face Ichigo, raising a brow in insinuation at Ichigo’s own state even as he rose and nodded.

"Hanatarō,"

Ichigo grinned small and a bit brittle, but a grin nonetheless, Hanatarō under the careful guidance of Unohana had grown a spine and developed as a healer, learning to use what power he held to his full capability, and his role on the battlefield had only strengthened that skill. He would never be as
powerful or precise as Unohana or Isane, but he was skilled.

Hanatarō sighed and with a pointed glance at his former patient locked onto Ichigo's arm, already well-familiar with the orange-haired Captain. Shaking his head Ichigo gently tugged Hanatarō with him into the shunpo as the land blurred around him, merging into the white of Los Noches, and a near second later the throne room.

The young healer swayed on his feet for a moment, sending a small timid glare at Ichigo for the fast and somewhat dizzying travel before his attention fell to the patients and the healer was off on a mission. Sparing the Soutaicho and Harribel a brief glance, still locked in conversation, Ichigo drifted towards Grimmjow, breath still light and airy, barely enough force to move a feather and settled beside the hyperactive Espada.

Ichigo lost himself in the healing kido, healing only the major wounds to the best of his ability, even as Hanatarō tossed him a roll of gauze and mechanically Ichigo wrapped the panther-Espada's wounds almost in a near trance before repeating the process with Ulquiorra.

After an extended period of silence filled only by the hum of Zangetsu and his own mind, Ichigo tipped back onto the balls of his feet, and cracked his neck, observing his handiwork with a critical eye before he nodded assured his patients would survive the night. Slowly Ichigo rose to his feet, attention drifting to Byakuya assessing his state as he glided towards the Soutaicho.

The old man glanced up as Ichigo settled gingerly on the floor beside him, something warm in the Soutaicho's gaze full of pride and maybe fondness as the Soutaicho leaned over and stated quietly, "We have agreed to a cessation of hostilities, and will be convening upon future meetings to work out the details but have defined that the Espada will stay out of the mortal realm. They will be allowed access to Soul Society with given permission from a Captain, so also does that apply to a Captain visiting Los Noches. Harribel-san will hold the position of ruler and will continue to guide the forces of Hueco Mundo."

The Soutaicho finished with a rumble, voice quiet and gentle in the lingering silence of the throne room. Ichigo nodded, expression brightening at the news as he glanced briefly, from under the mess of his fringe, up at Harribel who smiled, something less predator and more genuine; obviously happy with the negotiations so far, and the equal playing field.

Leaning against the chair Ichigo listened to the Soutaicho and Harribel continue to talk, discussing members of either faction allowed in either dimension at any one time. Peacefully Ichigo let his senses drift to his comrades, assessing his partner's health before he turned his attention inwards and began a healing kido of his own, his hope for the future something nourished and growing as the world moved on around him.

X

The vast hall that served as the room for the Captains meetings lingered and pulsed with an invisible tension, draped over each occupant of the room, as an endless sea of eyes watched everyone's movement. One whisper of a sword against sheath, one hint of agitation in the reaitsu swelling an filling the room like the essence of space, would snap that precious tension and give way to something all the more furious.

Wordlessly Ichigo shifted attempting to displace the tension that clung to his shoulders as his gaze surveyed the room. Opposite Ichigo was a line of Espada, those who were not injured or dead, standing silent and alert in the territory of their greatest enemy. Starrk across from Ichigo was a silent statue, posture betraying the fear and worry that crept like a predator between both forces. Gathered on Ichigo's side was the Shinigami, watching their opponents with the same concerned worry and
There were only nine Shinigami facing the seven Espada, a few of the Captains still in the caring presence of the Fourth as both sides recovered from the war. But it was perhaps for the best that both sides weren’t at full power.

Ichigo hid a minute shudder at the thought of the Fourth, he had managed to avoid it for the most part, but he would have to visit Byakuya soon, the poor Kuchiki Captain still trapped as he recovered from his battle with Ulquiorra. It was only through impressive luck and wit that he had evaded Unohana’s hawk-eyed search so far.

At the end of the impressive line of ascendant forces of catastrophic power, the Soutaicho and Harribel stood, opposite one another in a complete silence. A sheet of paper settled between the two on a simple wooden table that Chōjirō had brought in at the start of the meeting.

The paper held an air about it, for all that it held little power as of yet, the ink printed onto the long sheet of rice paper glinting in the oil lamp’s light. The treaty was that similar to a peace treaty, listing the following terms of agreement between the forces of Hueco Mundo and Soul Society. It declared a state of peace between the upper echelon of Hueco Mundo and the Gotei 13 while acknowledging that hollows would continue to exist and follow instinct regardless of who led them and that the Shinigami would still patrol the human world and Rungokai to dispatch such creatures.

It also set rules and regulations (paperwork) for when an Espada was permitted to visit Soul Society; in times of great war as an aid, at the request of a Captain, and in case of a severe emergency, and how it applied to the Shinigami in the same manner.

The general idea behind the treaty was the strengthening of both sides and the idea of strengthening the bond of kinship between the Shinigami and the Espada. Soul Society did not crave war, as much as Hueco Mundo did not crave the extermination of their upper echelon, which was plausible under such a threat. The treaty provided a means of peace between the two forces, and though most did not acknowledge or know it, it had the capability of being the basis upon which the two forces would be united when the Quincy appeared once more threatening the lives of all living, or not living in the stranger sense.

For now, the two forces would attempt to recover from the war, rebuild their infrastructure (where it existed), train in preparation, heal, and recover. All the while Soul Society would descend once more into a flurry of commotion with the vacuum the war had left, seen as an opening to many. Ichigo resisted the urge to run a hand over his face as he attempted to sort his memories into a cohesive timeline of attempt after attempt to fell the Shinigami.

In some ways, he was equal parts dreading and hopeful about the coming attacks. For some, it would open their eyes to the imperfection of Soul Society, and their own desperate need to improve. In other ways it was a pure nuisance; the endless horde of different opponents attempting to break into Soul Society, all with a thousand different problems and revenge problems.

Ichigo shook aside thoughts of the near future and the heavy weight that settled behind his chest at the thought of how close it all was, time flying on swift winds that took his feet from beneath him and refocused on the Soutaicho.

The two had spent the past half an hour in muted silence, conversing over the terms of agreement, making absolutely sure everything was as fair as possible with as few loopholes as possible. The first draft of the treaty had been drawn up after the last battle when Renji had appeared sometime in the early morning with paper and exhaustion dragging his heels, he hadn’t been the only tired soul in the room. This was if Ichigo recalled correctly the fifth draft, after more than a few meetings in the wreck
The half an hour spent in discussion had lingered with a weighted intense silence and Ichigo couldn’t wait for the long meeting to be over. There were many things he would be rather wasting his time with, such as aiding in the repair efforts, managing his division, and subtly preparing Tōshirō.

Soundlessly, as if at a frequency all in the room could hear, the Captains and Espada straightened as the wizened form of the Soutaicho, still ever the pillars of the Gotei 13, leaned over and signed the sheet. After a moment Harribel repeated the action, there was no great ripple of the treaty being signed, nor Kami descending from above to cement it in the fabric of the universe, but regardless a collective exhale of relief shuddered through the souls present as the peace became official.

Ichigo took a breath even as a small honest smile slipped onto his features, something like hope bursting free at the face of it all, Starrk across from Ichigo grinned, a wolfish happy grin. Beside Ichigo, Ukitake smiled warmly, and Ichigo knew there would be celebrations for hours, even as the sun heralded the start of a change, a tangible change as supposed to the endless tails of change, people living others dying, that had moulded the future.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed the chapters and interactions between the characters and the end of the Winter War arc. Reviews/comments are always appreciated till next time!
Ichigo shifted slightly where he leaned back against Zangetsu’s broad chest, serenity listing on the breeze that ruffled his locks and wrapped around the sideways buildings of his inner world; glimmering in the lightly overcast sunlight as clouds passed lazily overhead. Shiro sprawled over Ichigo’s legs in a mess of curled limbs was purring; a rumbling sound that filled the air in a faint humming lull, as Zangetsu stroked slow fingers through Ichigo’s hair.

The three parts of the same soul basked in the relative peace of Ichigo’s soul, taking the time to simply be in each other’s presence after the hectic last few weeks and the endless turmoil of war that always seeped beneath the surface of Ichigo’s carefully constructed mask. Slowly, almost idly, Ichigo’s gaze slid over his inner world, the water lapping at the heels of the buildings like the gentle ever extending ripples of a lake, and the greenery that blossomed and overcame the many cracks in the exterior of the mammoth skyscrapers. It was pleasant to see the world that had so heavily been rain swept for a near endless amount of years, close to something peaceful, though still lingering with the last dregs of the war. Ichigo knew his two spirits enjoyed the change of weather as well.

“What are you planning for the countless invasions that will soon dawn upon Soul Society?” the spirit asked softly, gently as if to cushion a blow, hesitant to interrupt the tranquillity, but following their sense of duty. Ichigo cringed faintly wanting to continue basking in the silence and

“The Quincy portion of the young Shinigami’s powers rumbled, deep voice resounding through the cascade of buildings and falling around them as the syllables of his name lilted on the air. Humming in reply Ichigo tipped his head back to glance into the yellow visor of his older Zanpakutō spirit, and to the crystal blue eyes sparkling behind the glasses. The old man was gazing at him with an immense fondness and pride, even as a furrow of thought made itself known creasing the brows behind the yellow visor.

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warmth but sighed knowingly even as Shiro lifted his head, acrid gold eyes glowing the hollow spirit chortled and asked with a touch of mocking and sardonic humour, “Do ya even remember who came first?”

“The Bounts.”

Ichigo responded with a huff, easily recalling the first invasion, as it was much like the pebble that trickled a landslide. Shifting his legs minutely and displacing the spirit curled over them; who fixed Ichigo with a heat-less venomous glare before resettling, Ichigo gave the spirit a reproachful look before settling once more. Zangetsu tugged lightly on Ichigo’s hair, half admonishing even with the amused smile dancing over the older being’s lips, as he succeeded in bringing Ichigo’s attention once more to the older spirit’s question.

The young Captain sighed and ran a hand over his face before responding, “Urahara will probably let us know when the Bounts start acting up, as with probably everything else in the mortal world, remind me to brief him, so we’ll just have to wait for that to occur. But once it does we can make sure they can’t touch Ishida, the twins, Masaki, or Ryūken, and hopefully save the female who aided Ishida. Then there’s the Captain… Amagai right?” Ichigo paused and tilted his head to check with Zangetsu who held a bemused expression at Ichigo’s inability to remember names, even as he nodded, leaving him to continue, “and there’s the princess and the whole ninja executioners tied in with that, but with the Shiba Clan still esteemed and all that we can probably shelter her there well we deal with the Captain with father issues. Though I suppose he won’t be a Captain in this timeline ne? And we don’t really need any lieutenants of the like so?”

The orange-haired Shinigami trailed off unsure, a shrug of his shoulders betraying his lack of idea on the matter, Shiro shifted to glance at the two but said nothing, even as Zangetsu behind Ichigo hummed and replied, “It is likely he will try to proposition for some position of high diplomacy or honour, perhaps a false pretense such as an emissary of the Spirit King. Or perhaps he will seek to disrupt the fragile peace between the two worlds that the end of the war has brought.”

“Through the Espada?”

Ichigo questioned wearily, half considering the suggestion with an expression of consternation, even as Zangetsu conceded with a nod. Shiro huffed and fixed Zangetsu and Ichigo with a disbelieving stare as if questioning their sanity, he commented, “He’s not strong enough to control any of them, not the survivors, che which is as it should be. I doubt he would be able to manipulate them, Harribel is smarter than that. The only thing he could get his Zanpakutō on would be the Gillians or maybe a few Fracción from Barragan, and that would be business as usual.”

The words lingered in the air for a moment and received a general air of agreement, the logic well-founded even as the orange-haired Shinigami idly placed a visit to Hueco Mundo on his near endless list of things to do, before Ichigo half amused half genuinely curious asked, “Do you really think he would try to be an emissary of Kami?”

Zangetsu only flashed a smile, scarily reminiscent of the predatory teeth filled grin of the Quincy king, before it was gone the next second and Ichigo’s heart resumed its regular rhythm within his chest. The somewhat quiet air lingered for a moment as Ichigo continued to recall the past with some fondness before a thick sadness soured it and a frown marred Ichigo’s features. Emotions battled across his eyes in flashes as he sat in the suddenly heavy silence words bitter on his lips he stated, “After that was Muramasa.”

A general thrum of sadness and a myriad of other emotions, ranging from anger to hope, surged through Ichigo’s inner world in a bright flux of reaitsu, causing the clouds overhead to darken and rumble ominously even as they continued to drift about calm and docile.
Shiro growled a deep sound that betrayed the hollow’s irritation with the deranged Zanpakutō spirit, even as Zangetsu’s arm tightened around Ichigo’s chest in a protective hold. Ichigo’s lips curved slightly into a barely-there smile at the protectiveness of his spirits, as his reaitsu reached out to wrap around the two who had guided his sword ever since he had awakened his Zanpakutō.

“We should kill him immediately then we don’t have to deal with his mind-warping.”

The hollow-like spirit suggested, double tone raspy and filled with rage as it warbled about them, Zangetsu behind Ichigo was quiet, though the Shinigami could sense the older spirit’s silent agreement with Shiro’s idea. A part of Ichigo felt the same, the part(s) of him that had suffered when the Zanpakutō used his power to control Zangetsu, and they had been forced to fight, wielder against Zanpakutō. Another part of Ichigo was reminded of the betrayal of the spirit’s wielder, the sad death, Muramasa who in the end had only been loyal to a fault, and incredibly lonely. It reminded Ichigo in a small way of himself, the aftermath of the Final Getsuga Tensho and the loyalty he had felt for the Gotei 13.

Sensing their wielder’s indecision, Ossan lightly advised, though with fairly well-concealed bitterness, “You can try and save the Zanpakutō spirit Ichigo.”

“I know. It’s just, what if he controls you guys?”

Ichigo responded heatedly concern wrapping its way around his heart as he bolted up in a moment of restlessness, before falling back against Zangetsu’s chest with a quiet exhale. Shiro scoffed at the statement, but Ichigo could see a fear in the spirit’s eyes, one that lingered with all of them as the skies grew overcast and the air crackled with ozone.

“Then he will control us, and you will break his control. But we are not so weak as we once were, we are united in a different bond than perhaps Muramasa can comprehend.”

Ossan said, voice lingering with warm emotions and the familiar promise and riddles that saturated all of the Quincy spirit’s words. Shiro, head resting atop Ichigo’s knee chuckled eyes alight with taunt and glee and added, “Getting sappy old man, but I agree ain’t nothing going to tear us apart that we can’t fix.”

The statement brought a small smile to Ichigo’s features, as reaitsu swelled between the three and for a moment the sense of rain vanished, the bond between them pulsing and vibrant. The rain returned in full force pattering above their heads a half minute later and cascading lightly against the glass as a light prelude to what could come with the force of a tsunami, as Ichigo’s thoughts dipped once more.

Both spirits turned concerned eyes to Ichigo, even already knowing their wielder’s mind and the dark trail they had fallen to. Ichigo shifted aside a shudder and responded timid and hesitant, “What if He breaks our Bankai again?”

It was a tremulous question, drawing forth images of battle, and the resounding emptiness that had shattered and swelled at the start of the Blood War, echoing events only three months prior. The spirits shared a glance over Ichigo’s head, communicating wordlessly, before their reaitsu rose encircling Ichigo in promise Shiro growled, “Nothing is going to tear us apart king, not some Quincy bastard, not some megalomaniac, not even Kami.”

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“Indeed Ichigo, your vast reserves of power will prevent such an event from occurring, and we will be reforged if fate proves to have once more a cruel sense of humour.” Zangetsu reaffirmed as Ichigo shuddered but nodded, drawing on the comfort of his spirits as he controlled his breathing and banished the clouds hovering menacingly around them. The sky was still grey, and the sunlight was faint but Ichigo settled once more into a calm state with the aid of his spirits.
After what felt like an eternity spent in silence and as Ichigo pulled himself back together, Zangetsu wordlessly passed Ichigo a sake cup, the clear liquid glinting in the light reflecting off the skyscrapers. The Shinigami nodded his thanks and shot the bitter liquid down enjoying the burn and the resilience of life it flourished as it warmed his insides. After a minute Ichigo passed the refilled cup to Shiro, who pouted at the liquid but shot it down anyways with a bitter curl of his lips. Of all the things, Shiro had never developed a taste for alcohol, some of it was perhaps instinct, but the rest was the pure incomparable strangeness of Ichigo’s soul; not that Ichigo had ever been a fan of alcohol until Shunsui badgered it into him.

“What will you do about Gunjō, the man who kidnapped the twins and brought them to hell?”

Zangetsu asked, drawing Ichigo’s attention towards a new purpose, a new direction and back onto the previously unfinished conversation. The young Shinigami scrubbed a hand over his features once more, something dark flashing deeply in his features and cracking about the air before it passed, and he considered it for a moment before replying, “I don’t think he will attack the twins, they’ve shown no sign of having hollow powers. He likely won’t even attempt to break out. The only reason he tried in the original timeline is because of the battle against Ulquiorra where I died. Without that, there is no one possessing hollow powers strong enough that has been seen.”

“What bout the girl you had the hots for, Senna? And those freaky Rungokai twins?”

Shiro suggested with a half growl and a moue of concern hidden beneath it all. Ichigo furrowed his brow at the comment mind drawing back to what the blond had relayed of his battle against Grimmjow, which had been told with a rakish cheshire grin and blazing eyes.

“I don’t think he rose from the dead, but I’ll keep an eye out on the blond. If Gunjō does decide to target Shinji as his jailbreaker I’ll just stop him and inform Shinji, maybe alert the Hell guards about their escapee.”

Zangetsu nodded against the back of Ichigo’s head and Shiro rumbled in agreement; the hollow-spirit more than happy to dish vengeance to the spirit who had tricked their wielder and injured their family.

“What bout the girl you had the hots for, Senna? And those freaky Rungokai twins?”

Shiro drawled questioningly where he stared up at Ichigo with bright wide eyes, like a cat peering out from the inky night. Ichigo suppressed a groan at the thought of all the invaders and challengers still yet undiscussed and silently prayed for a lull in between it all, even as he wondered how he had lived through the first Winter War.

Zangetsu chuckled, the sound reverberating through Ichigo’s chest and filling him with warmth as the older spirit replied to the unconscious thought, “Through pure will and determination Ichigo.”

The hollow spirit giggled at the statement and the redundancy of it all, knowing it had been, above all else, an amalgamation of things; Ichigo’s blood-line, his learning curve, and as Zangetsu had stated his willpower.

Taking a moment to cement his thoughts, Ichigo thought back to the two questions he had been distracted from, half irritated Ichigo sat up and reached over to swath the bleached copy over the head for the comment. Shiro hissed at Ichigo with narrowed eyes before he pouted, knowing it was a well-deserved hit for the comment about crushes and settled down once more as Ichigo did the same.

“If Senna appears, I’ll talk to Kisuke, and tell him what Senna is. If we can deal with Ganryū preemptively then there will be no need to alert the Shinigami of her presence. The kids from
Rungokai… we’ll just have to make sure that an eye is kept on them, it will be less likely for anything to happen with the shift in Rungokai but it still possible, and if it does still happen we can leave a recorder reminding ourselves of Rukia in case of an emergency.”

Ichigo spoke softly, slowly putting together the rough foundations of a plan as they always attempted to do now, even if it was more than likely many of the plans would fall apart with a single whistle of the wind. Zangetsu nodded and kindly did not mention the incident with Tōshirō that would also soon draw close. Soul Society had changed, and it would be likely that Ichigo would be able to convince the Soutaicho and the Captains to avoid prosecuting the youth, especially as he was only (temporarily) a lieutenant.

“The Fullbringers.”

The name was stated with a venomous hiss as Ichigo tensed in Zangetsu’s grip at the name Shiro had spat out. Restlessly Ichigo’s hand drifted to the pommel of Zangetsu’s sealed form as he took a calming breath and announced, “He won’t make his move for a bit; it’s likely he knows the twins have Shinigami powers, or he will if he meets Chad. But we’ll arrange an ‘accident’ for Tsukishima as soon as possible, the rest will be easier to manage, especially if we alert Soul Society to it, then the twins won’t need to be involved.”

Ichigo’s voice was decisive, the cold steel of a general reinforcing every word as Ichigo’s cold eyes surveyed the distance in thought. Shiro hummed at the idea, content with the plan and taking out Tsukishima, one who had caused great pain to their wielder.

“What if the twins do become involved, for an unspecified reason, perhaps to train with Chad and train their hollow spirit, which will not have manifested like yours Ichigo as they never experienced the shadowed shaft. Soul Society may take notice of their powerful souls.”

Zangetsu spoke gently baritone lingering with the protective warmth that extended faintly to Ichigo’s family, always the voice of reason between the three. Ichigo wanted to shake away the words, the idea of the twins even experiencing a fraction of what Ichigo had experienced while fighting with Zangetsu (and while the memories were almost equally weighted by the good, no teen needed to grow old so fast), but forced himself to look at the whole picture.

“If that does happen we need to have Kisuke alert us as soon as possible, Isshin or Masaki could probably talk to the twins and Chad. Maybe offer hollow training ourselves? But if Soul Society did find out about them, we try to keep it as hush as possible, the Soutaicho won’t likely search into their background, because he already knows it, the only thing we would need to maintain is that we persist in keeping as little contact with the mortal world as possible. If the twins are trained, then there is no need to interact with them till they have entered the afterlife.” Ichigo stated decidedly, even as a weariness filled his eyes at the thought of all the planning and complex enemies they would face, and the entanglement of his family. Zangetsu hummed reitsu wrapping around the young Shinigami and pulling aside such thoughts as the plan was easily agreed upon as a rough base, Shiro rumbling softly in agreement.

The quiet once more filled the air as Zangetsu continued to idly run a hand through Ichigo’s bright orange locks, and Shiro purred like a content cat sprawled over Ichigo’s legs. The young Captain leaned back and closed his eyes at the faint thrumming peace of the moment, absorbing the ambient warmth and sense of safety for a single second of eternity.

Cracking an eye open as a thought occurred, Ichigo peered up at Ossan who was studying the buildings towering around them, and the greenery decorating it, with a far away eye, one that remembered. The refined spirit glanced down into Ichigo’s eyes feeling the presence of his wielder’s attention as the Captain asked, “Did you feel it in Hueco Mundo?”
The older spirit blinked in mute surprise before a serious expression stole over his normally stoic features and Zangetsu nodded eyes crinkling and dark, even as Shiro growled like a cat with its hair bristled.

“It was almost familiar but…”

Ichigo trailed off unsure on how to continue, Zangetsu hummed in reassurance, reaitsu surging around Ichigo and brushing aside the unspoken fears and worry with a soft presence. Shiro’s ochre eyes, like looking into the sun with their intensity, connected with Ichigo’s own and the spirit said, “Don’t worry King we’ll handle whatever comes our way. No hesitations or you’ll die.”

Ichigo tipped his head back and laughed freely at the hollow-spirit parroting the words Zangetsu had first spoken that first meeting and continued to speak whenever a motivational speech was required. It had almost become something of a mantra, one that resounded and wrapped around the core of Ichigo’s personality,

The three settled once more into a companionable silence, and Ichigo let his eyes drift shut, basking in the sensations of his inner world. The caress of the breeze as it sung where it wrapped around the inverted buildings, the rustle of nature perfuming the air with the scent of rain and life, and the presence of his Zanpakutō wrapped around him, reaitsu flowing between the three in an endless cycle.

“Oy King, sleeping beauty is waking up.”

Shiro’s raspy voice interrupted Ichigo’s semi-meditation and pulled the Captain from the quiet with a few blinks to awaken his senses. Ichigo glanced once back at Zangetsu, the two sharing a nod before Ichigo glanced to his hollow-spirit and grinned disappearing from his inner world in vaporous trails of wispy black.

Ichigo blinked rapidly as the almost fluorescent light of the Fourth pierced his eyelids and illuminated his surroundings, a familiar cot, similar wood panelling to all the walls of the Fourth, and an open window letting in cool air. Shifting in the uncomfortable plastic seat, Ichigo uncrossed his legs and tucked Zangetsu back into its sheath, and finally allowed his eyes to trail to Byakuya.

The Kuchiki noble was still clinging to the last dredges of sleep, eyes closed and expression soft, all the cold ice of the Kuchiki exterior and hard-worn stresses melted away in the face of sleep. It wasn’t always peaceful sleep, for either of them, but being in the presence of each other seemed to help soften the blows of the night, hence Ichigo’s continuous presence in the Fourth.

The ebony of Byakuya’s hair seemed stark in the overbearing white of the division and against the pale cream sheets, almost strange with the lack of the Kenseikan holding the long strands in place. The Captain shifted on the cot, and the medical gown shifted with the movement revealing the bandages still wrapping his torso to Ichigo’s careful study. The older Captain’s wound was almost completely healed, more a thin line of inflamed skin, rather than the critical wound it had once been. It was likely Unohana would free the Captain of the Sixth today, which Ichigo was more than excited about.

The Fourth, while a place of healing was never Ichigo’s desired place of residence; but as any good partner should Ichigo had spent more than a few hours at Byakuya’s bed. Rukia had also come a few times, limping through the doorway with her still bad left leg, and the almost permanently white tipped fingertips, she had worn that careful concealing expression that did little to hide the depths of her emotions as she stared at her brother before collapsing beside Ichigo.

Byakuya’s reaitsu reached out around the room as silver eyes revealed themselves with a flicker, and
lazily slid over to study Ichigo as the Captain woke from his slumber. Eyes still hazed with sleep glowed with an inherent warmth where they locked onto Ichigo’s own.

“Afternoon Captain Kuchiki.”

Ichigo greeted with a warm grin that morphed into a smirk at the eye roll he received for the greeting even as Byakuya responded with an indulgent smile, “Good afternoon Captain Shiba.”

The two held eye contact for a moment more before splitting off into soft laughter that filled the room with warmth. After regaining his breath Byakuya shifted on the cot, sliding carefully up into a seated position, the Captain barely managed to hide the wince the movement provided.

“How are you feeling Byakuya?”

Ichigo asked, honest concern lining his voice as he carefully continued to study his partner, noting the light purple under his eyes, and the thin veneer of sickness that still clung to him. Byakuya closed his eyes in thought for a moment before he responded, “Less like I’ve been sliced in half, but still a fair bit tired.”

“I think we’re all a little exhausted.”

Ichigo replied honestly sharing a small smile with his partner even as he responded with a wink, “Though you managed to skip out on most of the repair work, lucky bastard.”

Byakuya chuckled at the comment and grinned teasingly before settling once more against the bed he questioned, “Was Rukia here earlier?”

“Yeah, she was sobbing by your bedside again.”

The younger Captain responded gaily with a knowing wink, Byakuya rolled his eyes at the answer but some of the tension pressing into the Kuchiki head dispersed at the news his younger sister was alright. The Captain of the Sixth, in between the mad flurry of time fighting and preparing for the final assault, had harboured a worry for one’s sibling that would make Kaien proud.

“She fought really well huh?”

Ichigo commented with a proud grin, recalling fondly the numerous days they had spent in the training sale with Kaien tossing the midget around. Byakuya cracked a smile across from the orange-haired Shinigami and replied, “Indeed it is likely she will be promoted to lieutenant soon.”

The Captain of the Tenth nodded, mind absentely drifting to his own lieutenant before re-centering on Byakuya who was staring at Ichigo with an amused expression. Ichigo huffed and reached over to lightly swat his partner over the head, even as Byakuya dodged the attempt and the two shared a quiet laugh.

The pair settled comfortably with each other in the silence, listening to the quiet hum of background noise that made up the Fourth, the soft white noise of technology, the gentle shuffle of paper, and the warm reatsu that was like rays of sun after a rainstorm that saturated the air.

After a minute, with the gentle nudge of Shiro, Ichigo scrubbed a hand over his features and idly ran his other hand over Byakuya’s own drawing the attention of the Kuchiki. Byakuya studied Ichigo with ever-piercing eyes, ones that had always seemed to divine everything from Ichigo before he could even say it, glimpsing a fraction of what Ichigo was going to say.

“The peace is not going to last.”
Ichigo stated solemnly, glancing away for a moment, desiring to say that the war had finished, that the peace would linger for at least a century before the Quincy made themselves known. But he couldn’t, Byakuya deserved to know when he had shared everything else with Ichigo and had supported his partner through all else, accepting his more time bending reality with no protest.

Byakuya frowned at the statement, the way it lingered stale on the air between them before the Kuchiki furrowed a brow in curiosity and asked, “When? The war only officially ended a week ago.”

Ichigo mirrored Byakuya’s frown at the response, agreeing with the unhidden demand that they should deserve a break from the invasion attempt. Reluctantly Ichigo sighed and directed his attention away from his own petulant whining to Zangetsu’s approval and focused on the question that was still hanging upon the air.

“It could be anytime now. The ending of the war has left a vacuum for challengers to attempt to usurp the Gotei 13.”

The orange-haired Captain responded with a note of exhaustion bleeding through his voice even as Ichigo grasped Zangetsu’s hilt with careful fingers. Byakuya winced at the words as if they were swords driven through his chest, even as he studied Ichigo closely.

“And you dealt with all of these invasions in your own timeline?”

The Captain of the Sixth asked cautiously, voice lined with weariness and support. Ichigo nodded lips slipping into a frown as he replied, “Yes, but during the Winter War.”

Byakuya didn’t succeed in hiding a grimace at the words, likely trying to imagine fighting a full-blown war, with other factions opposing you at any given moment. Byakuya’s hand settled over Ichigo’s in a silent gesture of support even as he asked, “How many?”

“About seven different invading forces, or incidents,” Ichigo replied with a sigh and a shrug, as if to display the helplessness of the situation, before he drifted into silence for quiet retrospective moment, gaze studying Byakuya he spoke slowly, “However, one of the situations will probably affect you more so.”

Ichigo received an elegantly arched brow at the elusive wording, one that demanded Ichigo drop the subtly and state whatever needed to be stated. Better a band-aid ripped off, then a slow dragging sensation.

“It’s about Kuchiki Koga, and his Zanpakutō Muramasa.”

Byakuya stiffened, aura suddenly cold at the mention of the disgrace to the Kuchiki clan, even if the reaction was tempered by Byakuya’s more liberal thinking compared to the other nobles. Steel grey eyes slowly dragged over Ichigo, pulling at every inch of his will, as if searching for the truth in his words, even already knowing their verity.

With a surrendered exhale Byakuya’s head dipped as he quietly asked, “How? Koga was locked away by the Soutaicho.”

“His Zanpakutō escaped capture and fled to Hueco Mundo where he devoured the hollows seeking to sustain himself and his power. In my timeline he hatched a plot to use the spirits of our zanpaktou, which he could control, to halt us as he found the location of Koga’s prison and released the Kuchiki… Muramasa was misguided, loyal to a fault and when Koga was free, he stabbed the spirit. It ended with you fighting Koga, and I dealt with Muramasa.”
Ichigo told his partner slowly, gaze distant as he stared past Byakuya and at the far wall, echoes of
the battle sounding through the air, and the acrid taint of Muramasa’s corrupted spirit almost present
upon his senses before Ichigo shook away the faint traces and refocused on Byakuya as Zangetsu
washed away the lingering sensations.

Byakuya was staring at his hands bunched into fists on the pale cream blankets, stark in contrast to
the monochrome colour. With a searching grip, Byakuya’s hand closed around Senbonzakura
drawing strength from the blade, even as silver eyes bore into Ichigo from beneath a tangle of
feathered bangs.

“There’s something you’re not saying. You can tell me Ichigo, I’m here for you. We support each
other."

The Captain of the Sixth stated a mix of chiding and accusing with concern and reassurance hiding
away beneath it all. Ichigo brushed a hand over his arms at the accusation, mind remembering the
feel of fighting Byakuya once a lifetime ago before he looked into his partner’s eyes and responded,
“To deal with Koga, you pretended to convert to Muramasa’s side. But you were actually holding up
the honour of your clan, or trying to, by dealing with the blemish of the Kuchiki clan personally.”

Byakuya’s eyes widened as he took in the knowledge before a pointed glance was sent Ichigo’s way
and the older Captain responded, “I am far less strict when it comes to duty Ichigo, as you say I don’t
have a pole up my ass.”

The comment brought forth a huff of laughter as Ichigo slumped minutely in the plastic chair
regarding Byakuya with unhidden fondness. The Captain of the Sixth studied Ichigo for a moment
before he spoke quietly, voice heavy with conviction as if pulling the whole of the universe behind
his words and locking it into place, “Whatever happens, future, past, present we’ll get through it
together.”

Ichigo kind of almost sobbed at the words, but instead valiantly smiled a watery smile and nodded,
eyes burning with a sea of emotions that reflected and frothed in Byakuya’s own eyes.

“Guess we shouldn’t tell Kaien our wedding vows huh?"

The younger Captain suggested with a mischievous curl of his lips and light sparkling merrily in his
eyes. Byakuya stared in blank surprise for a moment before he tipped his head back and laughed; the
sound clear and bright ringing through the small room as Ichigo joined his partner.

After a minute the laughter died down and the two were left sitting in a warm silence, words
unspoken floating calmly on the air, unaddressed and unhurried. A knock on the door broke the
peaceful reverie as it slid open to reveal the amused features of the Captain of the Fourth.

Unohana studied the two younger Captains with bemused eyes, ever sharp and catching, as she
glided into the room, all elegant grace. The female Captain bowed her head in greeting to the two,
and as they repeated the gesture she announced, “Kuchiki-taicho I’m going to run a diagnostic scan,
and if everything is in good condition you will be free to check out. However, I am cautioning
extended rest and no over-strenuous activities.”

The Captain finished with one of the perfect smiles that radiated something menacing and warning
even as a pointed gaze was directed between the two younger Captains. Byakuya nodded serenely,
expression placid, even as underneath Ichigo could spot the terror any even remotely sane person felt
upon words of caution from the female Captain and the thought of disobeying them.

Ignoring the faint blush decorating his cheeks, Ichigo idly watched as Unohana performed the scan.
Hands hovering above Byakuya’s torso sheathed in an earthy green glow that seemed to radiate and draw from the air around them.

After a moment Unohana drew her hands away, a generally satisfied air about her as she stated, “You are almost completely healed Kuchiki-taicho, please be cautious and don’t strain yourself too heavily or you may pull the still healing muscles of your stomach and cause the wound to open internally.”

Byakuya winced slightly at the grim delivery but nodded his acquiescence carefully, Unohana smiled, the pleased sort of smile one saw on the face of a predator who had captured its prey, but a smile nonetheless. With barely a breath in between the Captain of the Fourth turned to face Ichigo and asked, in a thinly veiled demand, “Ichigo can you come speak with me in the hallway?”

Ichigo wanted to flee at the suggestion, duck out the windows at that moment and run, escape from too intelligent, too piercing eyes, instead, Ichigo slumped in his seat for a moment before nodding weakly. Running was an effort in futility he wasn’t prepared to engage in. The young Captain had known the intervention, if that was what it could be considered, was coming; he had only delayed it by hiding away from Unohana.

Casting a reassuring look at Byakuya who was watching a strange blend of amusement and worry, Ichigo slipped from the chair and followed Unohana into the hallway, the rustle of Shinigami distant in the closed space. The Captain studied Ichigo openly, none of the serene too peaceful expression masking her features, just a simple expression as she studied Ichigo.

“You need to talk about the war.”

She stated simply in the tense silence that stretched like beaded ropes between the two of them, no asking why Ichigo hadn’t appeared to speak to her, or any other thousands of questions. Simple, blunt and to the point, Ichigo appreciated it even as he wanted to shy away from any thought of it whatsoever and bask in the idea of peace that resounded throughout his soul.

“Just because you feel better now, doesn’t mean you should stop therapy till it starts again Ichigo.”

Unohana advised as the silence continued to stretch, motherly concern and affection filling her tone as she continued to study Ichigo. The orange-haired Shinigami nodded and replied, “I know, it’s just… easy to enjoy the fragile peace while it lasts.”

Ichigo didn’t point out the double-edged sword of his words, only watching Unohana’s brow crinkle; the ancient Captain’s mind wrapped around his words carefully even as she let the silence drift encouraging Ichigo to speak once more.

“It’s just, there’s going to be more invasions soon, and I don’t want to have to talk about the war now when I know it will be needed more when those start.”

Ichigo said grappling with his words as he clenched a fist over Zangetsu’s hilt. Unohana took the admission with her usual flawless serenity nodding even as swift eyes quickened at the idea of a fight, well hidden as it was.

“How long?”

Unohana asked carefully, eyes boring into Ichigo as if to help guide him to his own solution. Ichigo shrugged and responded, “It could happen anytime now, the power vacuum is there, all that’s left is to rise up and take it.”

“Then you can come to therapy until someone invades.”
Unohana suggested with positive mirth listing into her voice as she smiled at Ichigo eyes twinkling. The younger Captain rolled his eyes but nodded in agreement with an exhale of defeat. The female Captain nodded, obviously pleased, and Ichigo conceded that the therapy wasn’t actually the equivalent to torture, it was good for him, had helped Ichigo to become a better person. Sometimes he still just wanted to avoid talking about all the things that made up his fractured and mending soul.

The two Captains turned simultaneously as the soft flutter of wings, like a brush of the breeze against one’s ear, filled the air and two Jigokuchō drifted into the corridor, elegant forms like glowing gemstones as one alighted on Ichigo’s outstretched finger.

“All Captains and lieutenants please report to Sokyoku hill, the Soutaicho has gone missing.”

Chōjirō’s calm timbre announced in a strict manner, that belayed some of the lieutenant’s hidden worry as Ichigo absorbed the message with wide eyes, the inkling of a suspicious burrowing its way into his skull and tapping at his nerves in a staccato rhythm.

Byakuya stepped into the hallway as Unohana glanced up from the Jigokuchō, shihakusho and haori settled firmly over his shoulders; though the Kenseikan were still absent (they took an insane amount of time to thread through Byakuya’s hair). Unohana stared down the Captain of the Sixth for a moment, healer’s eyes roving over his stance and eyes before she nodded once warning still absorbed into every line of her features.

Sharing a consecutive nod of agreement between the three Captains, they left the small corridor in a flurry of shunpo moving across the vast reaches of the Gotei 13 and Soul Society towards the Sokyoku towering above the rest of the world as the early evening painted the hill in hues of burnt russet and gold.

The three Captains landed with a rush of dust about their feet, as Ichigo slipped closer to Byakuya supporting his slightly swaying form invisibly as the Captains and lieutenants already gathered turned to face the newcomers. Tōshirō slid over to stand a half-step behind Ichigo after a moment, features in their usual cold and serious expression even as band-aid peaked out of the collar of the lieutenant’s collar.

Chōjirō stood in front of the small group of gathered lieutenants and Captains; grave expressions decorating his features, and worry creasing his brow. Ichigo shifted uncomfortably as Byakuya beside Ichigo shot him a concerned look.

Before the lieutenant could announce anything, or organize a search party, a figure appeared a fair distance away behind the lieutenant. Long trailing white cloak with fur, unsettling ochre eyes, and who could forget the terrifying, stuff of nightmares, long claw-like nails.

Muramasa studied them all with cold apathetic eyes as if only seeing the pawns in a far grander game. Beside Ichigo, Byakuya stiffened as his gaze landed on the zanpaktou sheathed at the spirits side. And under Ichigo’s breath, as his suspicions were confirmed, and Zangetsu bristled, the Captain of the Tenth could only release a quiet, “Fuck.”

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading I hope you enjoyed the interlude between the start of the next
arc and the last one, it was kind of a summary of some of what you guys can expect to see. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Globe!!
Parastin

Chapter Notes

Parastin

(V.) To protect; keep safe

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 57. I’m pretty happy with this chapter, it was fun to write. Also I was casually checking out the TvTropes page for Bleach, and someone recommended this fic, so thank you for very much Fiction Lover. It kind of feels like I finally made it as a fanfic author. Anyways I hope you all enjoy the new chapter!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Muramasa, situated against the hues of evening decorating the skies in deep everlasting blues and a curtain of stars, studied the gathered Shinigami with something close to an apathetic expression though beneath it all was a hint of disdain and furthermore a loathing seething fury. Ichigo was almost hyper-aware of the Captains and lieutenants nearby, Rukia, Shinji, Unohana, but thankfully not the Soutaicho or the two leaders of the Twelfth division, as the spirit's piercing gaze passed over the gathered shinigami.

Carefully and with well-found concern, Ichigo observed Chōjirō passed out by Kensei’s feet, the silver-haired Shinigami was keeping a careful eye on the lieutenant even as he studied the spirit in front of them with obvious wary. Muramasa’s cool gaze swept over the Shinigami, and after another moment of lingering silence with an elegant flick of his wrist, the zanpaktou spirit drew the katana sheathed at his side and stated, “I am Muramasa and the Shinigami, who presume to deliver the act of justice shall receive their just payment for their treatment of justice’s scales. The slavery of the zanpaktou shall stand no longer; I, a freed spirit will provide salvation.”

At those words, an acting declaration of war, Komamura, a lieutenant in the current timeline due to the Vizard remaining in Soul Society, stepped forward drawing the attention of Muramasa as the large guardian released his zanpaktou with a great flurry of reaitsu and noble words that sent the dust coating the hill into a sandstorm around them. The broad gigantic form, like a shadowy flame-lit warrior of hell’s beckoning, came to life, appearing with a great heave of reaitsu.

Across from the gathered Shinigami Muramasa smiled, katana glinting in promise as the thick reaitsu saturated with an accident hollow. Feeling spread in a creeping barrage along the grounds and out among the whole of Soul Society near intangible, a rallying call, or rather command of superimposed
Ichigo reflexively cringed already understanding what would happen as the reaitsu reached the Shinigami. The gathered lieutenants and Captains would soon be shocked beyond belief, both at the appearance of their own zanpaktou, and that of others as chaos once more spread through the streets of Soul Society.

Summoning a Jigokuchō as the large zanpaktou spirit towering beside Sokyoku hill took an unsteady step, Ichigo commanded the graceful creature to deliver two messages, one to Yoruichi informing her of the new situation and a suggested course of action, and another to the Twelfth, informing Aizen, and Kisuke, who still hadn’t returned to Karakura town as he aided in the war recovery efforts, of the need to track the zanpaktou spirits, and to keep an eye on the mortal world. As an afterthought he informed the messenger to tell Aizen to stay away from Muramasa, Kyoka Suigetsu didn’t need to be released unto Soul Society, before the creature fluttered away.

Damage control somewhat completed of the best management possible, Ichigo watched with wide eyes, having never seen the early events of the Zanpaktou Revolution the first time around, as Komamura’s Bankai turned and swung its cleaving blade against its wielder. Shock rippled through the gathered Shinigami, as the wielder and zanpaktou spirit clashed against one another with a blow heavy enough to rock the ground and ring like a ceremonial gong throughout Soul Society.

As the others drew their zanpaktou in a crash, like waves upon the shore, of steel against sheath and uncertainty danced upon the air. Byakuya turned to Ichigo, Senbonzakura hanging unsheathed in his hands as on Ichigo’s left Unohana watched with understanding and concerned eyes. The Captain of the Sixth studied Ichigo with cool comprehending eyes, something of horror flashing and flickering like a dying candle in silver eyes as his partner nodded once, promise and everything unsaid there as well, before turning to face Muramasa.

Zangetsu slipped comfortably into Ichigo’s hand, his spirits a quiet but steady presence in the back of his mind, as Shinji a short distance away, hanging back as the others began to prepare for battle turned sharp piercing eyes in Ichigo’s direction. The youngest of the Vizard wished he could assure his long-time friend that the enemy was nothing of great concern to any of the gathered Captains and lieutenants; that the enemy would be trounced within a day and nothing more would trouble the minds and souls of the Shinigami.

But to the Vizard, whose zanpaktou reflected the hollow nature of their spirits, the materialization of those spirits, fighting those who represented both your darkness and your power; it would not be close to simple. It would be complicated for any of the Shinigami; to fight against one’s own soul was something close to bathing in stained glass. The knowledge was softened minutely by the recent peace treaty between Hueco Mundo and Soul Society, and the previous reception of the Vizard. Espada were soon to become semi-common on the endlessly winding streets of the afterlife, and this was in part preparation, and a test of the tolerance that had developed over the years.

Shinji nodded once in understanding, some of Sakande flashing golden in his eyes as he turned to face Muramasa, the first of the lieutenants and Captains beginning to step forward as reaitsu filled the air like a great herd of elephants. Shock once more rippled through the crowd as those who attempted to draw on their Shikai at the obvious threat the enemy posed were unable to command their zanpaktou. The blades remained still in their hands as spirits shimmered into existence near their wielders, turning to face Muramasa as if a devoted crowd before a preacher. They received wordless instructions, before fleeing to spread chaos among the streets, leaving their wielders stunned and confused.

As the shock and panic of the moment rose in ever-growing tandem, Ichigo with a breath of concentration pulled himself together and turned to face Muramasa who had watched everything with careful calculating eyes, and something else lingering deep beneath it all. The reaitsu of the
spirit, acrid with the taste of hollow and bitter with loneliness filled the air as Zangetsu was flicked expertly in Ichigo’s hands and he stepped forward drawing the attention of all gathered he questioned, “Why are you doing this?”

The spirit hesitated a moment at the question, emotions flickering across the pale weary features, before the spirit’s eyes narrowed and he responded as if a priest preaching gospel said a thousand times before yet still held together with faith, “The zanpaktou deserve to be free from the slavery of the Shinigami. I have come to set the zanpaktou spirits free.”

It was said with clear and honest conviction, as if the spirit truly believed the words and the ideology behind them, even as it all served as a thin veneer of cover for the spirit’s true objective. Ichigo had to wonder if Muramasa did indeed believe in the slavery of the zanpaktou, considering his own relationship with Kōga, though he doubted it with the absolute worship. Shaking aside the trail of thought he couldn’t contemplate the Captain of the Tenth refocused on Muramasa and responded, “The zanpaktou are not slaves to the Shinigami, it is a partnership, codependency at its finest. And that is not the only reason you are here.”

Muramasa took a wary step back at Ichigo’s words, expression flickering to something close to shock before it was twisted by a thick anger and the katana in the spirit’s hand flicked and caught the starlight in a split second of warning before the spirit was charging forward.

Ichigo let Zangetsu easily swing forward to catch the brunt of Muramasa’s blade against his own, the two straining against one another with a flash of sparks and the grinding of metal against metal as Muramasa peered at Ichigo with enrged lost eyes. The orange-haired Shinigami immersed himself in Zangetsu’s presence as Muramasa sprung away, the feel of his reaitsu leeching, trying to lock onto Zangetsu like oil against Ichigo’s skin as he caught the blade once more against Zangetsu’s. The gathered Shinigami watched in shock as the force of the clash swirled throughout the air. Slashing in a wide arc followed by a Shakkahō that provided him with a pretence of a breath, the young Captain spared a moment of thought to command the Shinigami standing like gaping civilians before Muramasa was on him once more a flurry of blades striking into the night in rapid succession.

The Captain of the Tenth met each strike smoothly, sliding under an overhead strike before whipping around, letting Zangetsu swing towards Muramasa’s unprotected side. The zanpaktou spirit turned fluidly and caught the blade, reaitsu rising in a thick lilac mist around his feet as the spirit reached towards Zangetsu with increasing intensity.

Growling at the attempt Ichigo thrust his zanpaktou in front of him, knowing it would be a risky move, but one that would likely be inevitable if the spirit succeeded in taking control of his zanpaktou. Their Shikai was something powerful, but Ichigo would be able to tame its true power for the masses with the aid of Zangetsu, and hopefully demonstrate the true feel of the bond between wielder and zanpaktou to Muramasa.

Some part of him was still concerned that the Quincy, ever watching and lingering in the shadows would take advantage of the glimpse of his true Shikai. But the fears were banished with ease by Zangetsu and the knowledge that Ichigo still held more than a few aces up the sleeves of his shihakusho.

Reaitsu gathered and flickering around Ichigo in huge ebony arcs, writhing as if alive as it gathered around his blades and pulled at his form, wreathing Ichigo in a mantle of living death and Earth-shaking power. Vaguely in the back of his mind, Ichigo heard a wolf whistle from Shinji, which brought a bloodthirsty grin to Ichigo’s lips as he called out, “Tear the skies asunder Zangetsu!”

It was always fun to destroy Sokyoku hill Ichigo thought a touch sadistically as the ground beneath his feet evaporated, rocks rising in the air as his reaitsu filled the atmosphere like thick ozone, and a
roiling tunnel of black reaitsu sprung up around him before dissipating and leaving the dual forms of Zangetsu in his hands.

The shock was tangible in the air as all souls and spirits gathered stared at the dual blades in his hands, and the Captain of the Tenth sensed an opportune moment to guide the Captains and lieutenants in the short space of breath his dramatic reveal had left. Ichigo flared his reaitsu drawing the attention of everyone, he stood still, eyes piercing spine straight, and commanded, “Lieutenants, Captains seek out your zanpaktou and apprehend or defeat them before they can cause chaos among the streets of the Gotei 13 and heed any news of the Soutaicho or command from a Jigokuchō.”

The words lingered tense on the air for a moment, as the various vestiges of authority internally debated following Ichigo’s orders, someone who had proven countless times to have a sound mind in the heat of battle and an excellence for strategy, to follow and hopefully regain their zanpaktou, or to try and defeat the instigator of the new-found instability in Soul Society, and halt the calamity at its source. After another second where Muramasa studied Ichigo with cool calculating eyes, the Captains departed from Sokyoku hill in a flash of shunpo and a cascade of dust; Ichigo had forgotten how much dust Sokyoku hill held.

Byakuya studied Ichigo for a moment, Senbonzakura drifting a few steps away studying his wielder, and Ichigo with a dispassionate air from behind the mask that held large cracks running through the ornate design, as cherry blossom blades began to decorate the air in increasingly frenzied murals. After a moment his partner stepped closer and whispered, “Quite a way to reveal your dual blade. Do try and be careful Ichigo, also please try not to get hurt as much as you usually manage.”

Ichigo grinned, tinged with the seriousness of the moment and nodded responding earnestly, “Of course, that goes for you as well Byakuya, don’t worry about Rukia I’ll check on her and let’s hope my luck hasn’t rubbed off on you.”

The Captain of the Sixth blanched at the ending phrase and rolled his eyes even as he turned from Ichigo to face Senbonzakura, the lack of Kenseikan dividing the Kuchiki head’s hair stark in the starlight. Then with a hum of shunpo like the buzz of cicada in the night the two were gone, the last wisps of Byakuya’s presence clinging to Ichigo’s senses as he turned to face the spirit silhouetted against the darkening night.

Muramasa waited no longer to resume their battle and charged forward expression twisted into confusion and an apathetic irritation as his reaitsu continued to try and wrap around Zangetsu, unable to grasp a hold on the ever-shifting form of Ichigo’s soul. Zangetsu’s dual blades swept up to form an X as they caught Muramasa’s zanpaktou, easily shouldering the weight as Ichigo’s reaitsu pulsed and glowed, imbued and strengthened by the tangible bond between Ichigo and Zangetsu, two glowing lines of obsidian reaitsu tracing his arms and warding off Muramasa’s malignant attempts.

The spirit’s eyes went impossibly wide where he continued to struggle against Zangetsu, feeling the harmony that resonated between Ichigo and Zangetsu, the spirit’s brow furrowed in confusion even as panic and denial began to overtake and twist the spirit’s features once more. In a flurry of motion, Muramasa slashed overhead and followed with a swing to the side as Ichigo caught the overhead strike and twisted out of the way of the strike to the side. Muramasa spun and let his katana move in ever increasing measures, two beams of starlight were their speed and force. Sensing the spirit’s desperate attempts, reiatsu picking and prodding at Zangetsu, attempting to defeat one who stood a stark antithesis of everything Muramasa preached and sought, Ichigo let his reaitsu surge and released a wordless Getsuga Jūjishō.

The attack surged from Ichigo’s interlocked blades point blank with all the fury of a howling tempest, as Muramasa struggled against the vast wave of ebony reiatsu that scored deep crevices into
the earth of Sokyoku hill and sent the spirit skidding far away as the attack dispersed.

“What… What is this?”

Muramasa questioned miserably where he weakly stumbled to his feet, swaying for a moment before regaining his balance. The spirit studied Ichigo with wide disbelieving eyes studded with despair and some form of betrayal however unacknowledged. Ichigo stepped forward, Zangetsu materializing on either side of Ichigo without the young Shinigami’s asking, the two spirits were stark and grim figures against the night, radiating in the light of the moon above as Muramasa took in their appearances with hungry eyes and a note of loss.

“We serve to protect Ichigo; we are not encumbered by such service, nor aggrieved by it. Just as we protect Ichigo, so too does his living serve us.”

Zangetsu-Ossan stated calmly and logically, deep baritone sensibly filling the air, as Muramasa’s light brown, almost Carmine, eyes swung forward to fall on the older spirit, before swaying to Shiro who nodded with bared-teeth eyes promising blood-lust and chaos as the hollow-spirit commented with a raspy chuckle and his dual tone voice, “King here ain’t controlling us, if he couldn’t fight we’d kick his ass head over heels.”

Muramasa stared at the two spirits and Ichigo stepped forward drawing the spirits attention. The young Captain’s voice felt heavy in his chest as he carefully thought over his words, memories surging beneath his gaze, of the final battle against the spirit, of Kōga and the betrayal, empathy traitorously whispering about his thoughts. Ichigo wished the attack had not happened so soon after the war, that there had been more time to prepare, to plan, to attempt to save Muramasa, but at the moment he had only his words, and the charisma others praised in him.

“Muramasa your wielder, Kuchiki Kōga, did not treat you with the respect and reverence all Shinigami should treat their zanpaktou with. By the time he was sealed away he had gone mad, no semblance even of the great Shinigami you knew. Please give up this conquest, you need not take control of the spirits of the Shinigami, they serve their wielders willing, many hold deep bonds with them. What happened to Kōga and you should never have happened, but please if you continue with this path it will not turn out like you hope. That madness still remains, and he will not see you, will not welcome you. If you surrender now, we will spare you; you will be able to walk free among Soul Society. I once knew the loss of my zanpaktou, it is a soul-deep tearing pain that I would not wish on anyone, but please Muramasa this path can only lead to one end.”

Ichigo promised voice passionate where he stared endlessly into the eyes of Muramasa, never breaking eye-contact, or giving the spirit the chance to look away. The spirit stared with wide eyes, the cracks in his thoughts and beliefs almost tangible and real in the windows of his eyes as the silence continued to linger tense and heavy among the souls gathered on Sokyoku Hill. The spirit seemed to be questioning everything, promise opening up before them in the flourish of the being’s sanity as if taking refuge in Ichigo’s like experience and for a stuttering moment Ichigo prayed it would all resolve itself there.

After a second though Muramasa’s reaitsu rose and twisted like an acid eating at itself and all it touched as it surged towards them, a great broken rage curled over the spirit’s features and he yelled with a voice insane and distorted by the hollows he had consumed, “You lie! My master will not betray me he will welcome me into his arms. You lie; it is all lies, lies, endless lies!”

The spirit’s reaitsu continued to surge enclosing both Ichigo and Zangetsu in thick purple smoke on all sides in an endless box as Ichigo felt it tugging, pulling, and snapping at reaitsu as they valiantly resisted the increasing effect of the spirit’s power as it wrapped around them. Shiro on Ichigo’s left growled as they felt the reaitsu wrap around them like a snake choking the life out of its victim even
as Muramasa swayed, every aspect of his being a twisted emergence of broken desolation and pure fury.

With a crackle and a final gargantuan wave of power Muramasa studied Ichigo with a smile so far from anything it was supposed to be but macabre, and eyes dancing with the madness of one whose quest had finally conquered them. With a sound like paper ripping itself apart the spirit fell back into a Garganta and the night skies sewed themselves shut once more with a snap and the mists dispersed leaving the night air lingering unstable and disquiet.

Intuition tickled the hair on the back of Ichigo’s neck as he whipped around catching the short blade of Zangetsu-Ossan, on the blades in his hands. Ossan’s features were carefully blank; expression twisted slightly from its normal stoicism to something more resembling displeasure, as his great strength and cool reaitsu, like the ever-patient glaciers, slammed against him.

Ichigo cursed as he ducked instincts screaming, as a blade sung overhead to collide with the Quincy spirit’s in a flash of sparks above Ichigo’s head. Shiro with wild eyes, far gone from the bare sense of sanity they usually held stared at Ichigo as if something to defeat. Cursing his luck and pleading for it to end quickly in the back of his mind, Ichigo sprung back with a burst of shunpo and brought the two blades of his soul in his hands up in a quick movement as two mirror blades crashed against the x formation with varying forms of strength as Ichigo slid into a deeper stance and mentally attempted to prepare himself.

“Look at King, still so weak. Wouldn’t survive without us, can’t do anything cause of all the grief. Oh, woe is me.”

Shiro rasped cruelly eyes alight with something far gone and sadistically pleased. Ichigo ignored the words knowing them to be false, or at least that was what he repeated to himself, along with the lyrics to some pop song Yuzu had always loved. Scowling Ichigo charged his reaitsu, letting it build inside him, welling like an untameable tempest, as he pulled on the threads of their bond clogged with Muramasa’s reaitsu and released a wordless Getsuga Jūjishō. He followed with another flurry or rapid attacks, accompanied occasionally by a cero, as his zanpaktou spirits dodged out of the way of the first but weren’t quick enough to avoid the battery of attacks that followed; ebony reaitsu decorating the night sky in towering walls.

Ichigo was forced to step into a rapid movement of shunpo as two separate Getsuga Tenshos slammed towards Ichigo from beneath the cover of the dust listing upon the air like snowfall. Power rippled upon the air, as the blue of Ossan’s more Quincy aligned powers lit up the night, contrasting Shiro’s own dark crimson.

Ichigo let the two attacks collide in a supernova of reaitsu even as he charged forward in between the two ignoring the catch of reaitsu burning his shihakusho and searing his skin. The young Captain caught Ossan’s overhead strike, twisting around to avoid the blow aiming for his neck from Shiro, he twisted out of the way of Ossan’s overhead strike that sung through the air and crouched in between the two opponents. Reversing the smaller blade in his hands Ichigo drove the trench knife towards Shiro’s chest, even as with his other hand still holding the longer blade against Ossan’s renewed overhead strike Ichigo channelled his reaitsu and pointed a Byakurai at his spirit.

Shiro dodged the attack and whirled away cero charging over the horned mask forming over the hollow-spirit’s features even as Ichigo rolled to his knees and Ossan used a muted version of Hirenkyaku to step away from the byakurai and commented harshly, words almost echoing those spoken long ago, “You are weak Ichigo, we have fought with you all this time and you have still not been able to defeat the darkness of your past. You continue to hesitate, throwing aside all our teachings. You will fail because of your weakness; the Quincy king will rise again, and Soul Society
Ichigo ignored the painful thud of his heart in his chest beating a screeching staccato, his eyes burning, and breathe leaving his chest in soft pants. He attempted to ignore the hurtful words, words designed to hurt, as he kept a mantra running through his mind, that it wasn’t real, that it wasn’t true. Even so, memories broke free of the first time Muramasa had invaded and Zangetsu-Ossan had become a ghostly cold figure and the clash of fighting his own soul, the feel of seeing Juha Bach and recognizing his zanpaktou in the magnificent yet maleficent King, or Shiro and their endless games of tug-a-war before they had found an agreement of the soul; the endless seething bitterness and fear. It all wound itself beneath Ichigo’s skin working through his veins as Ichigo narrowed his focus only to the battle, drawing on the old persona of war, the one of a soldier who needed to cut all strings of emotion to still fight in the moment, even as at the same time he broadcasted the love, the bond that threaded his soul together and made every inch of him.

“You’re wrong Zangetsu, both of you. I am strong, strong enough to stop Sosuke from becoming the megalomaniac everyone thought he was destined to be. I stopped the Winter War from being the catastrophe it could have been and created a treaty that will ensure peace between the two realms. I saved Masaki, and Sōken, and Kane. I am not weak, and I will not fail. He will not bring ruin to Soul Society as long as I hold a wisp of power in my hands and you will stand beside me.”

Ichigo shot back eyes blazing as his fist clenched white-knuckled about the sheaths of Zangetsu and his reaitsu flared. Both of Ichigo’s spirits faltered a half-step at his words, spoken deadly clear and filled with a conviction and lack of hesitation that rang throughout the air with all the weight of a final blow. The peace lasted only a moment before their expressions carefully shuttered blank and Ossan charged; blue reaitsu pulsing around his blade, as the hum of Sonido filled the air.

In the half second as Ichigo pulled both blades up the orange-haired Shinigami knew the fight would end soon, it had to. He had sown the seeds to stop Muramasa’s influence, and the reaitsu holding it was likely being broken apart as they fought, unable to stop a soul of Ichigo’s rather unique heritage for long.

Ichigo ducked as Shiro swung overhead, pivoting on his heels he popped up and smashed the hilt of the smaller blade into Shiro’s chin and lashed out with a kick before swerving around to face the smaller blade swerving towards his neck. Ichigo caught it with a grind of steel and a huff of exertion as he let a cero spill from his outstretched hand. The red beam slammed into Ossan’s chest sending the taller spirit careening away even as Ichigo turned quickly to catch Shiro’s larger blade.

The two exchanged a rapid flurry of blows, a dance so well-known that they moved easily back and forth as Ichigo slipped kido into the mixture and was forced to duck as Ossan returned, reaitsu bright and roiling where it clashed with Ichigo’s own. Carefully the Captain of the Tenth ducked under Shiro’s blade and swerved to dodge Ossan’s swipe, and followed by slashing against Shiro’s chest, with the shorter blade, as the longer blade was sent sailing towards Ossan connected only by a tinkling chain that wrapped around Ichigo’s hand and echoed into the night.

Carefully Ichigo ducked and swerved between his two opponents, always half aware that he was fighting his own spirits as moves he knew as well as his own heartbeat were thrown at him, followed by attacks he had learned years before. It was a dance of the same soul and it showed in the constant back and forth motion between the three of them as Muramasa’s control over his spirits continued to fade.

Skirting back at the force of two Getsuga Tenshos as they slammed into Ichigo’s chest the young Captain stood panting as he studied his two spirits across from him staring at Ichigo with a hint of their usual emotions settled but still buried in their eyes. Ichigo knew the battle needed to end now so
that he could manage the other spirits rushing about Soul Society, aid Byakuya who was still not fully healed, and track down Muramasa before he fell too far from sanity; not to mention end it for the sake of his own sanity.

Channelling his reaitsu along his arms, Ichigo drew on all the memories he shared with his zanpaktou, his conviction, the promises laced into his soul, the battles they had won and lost together he channeled it all into the two blades an extension of himself and before they could move released the attack with a cry of, “Getsuga Jūjishō!”

The attack slammed into the two spirits raging with hints of crimson and deep blue in the dark curtain of a moonless night that engulfed Sokyoku hill. Beyond weary, Ichigo waited, senses stretching and straining to feel his zanpaktou even as he sunk wearily to his knees, blades still gripped tight in his hands as his senses remained on constant alert.

As the dust and reaitsu cleared it revealed Shiro and Ossan still standing against the skies, pillars of Ichigo’s strength and will. However, Ichigo could feel them return to him, their reaitsu surging forward to meet Ichigo’s in apology and reassurance as Shiro stalked forward Zangetsu gliding slowly behind the hollow-like spirit.

Ichigo smiled an exhausted but happy smile as he carefully sealed Zangetsu in his hands and let his reaitsu seep beneath his skin once more as Shiro crouched before him at the same moment. The Shinigami and hollow portion of his powers studied Ichigo with careful ochre eyes before gently grabbing Ichigo’s face, movements almost unnaturally tender as gleaming gold eyes stared into Ichigo’s own and the spirit rested his forehead against Ichigo’s own for a quiet moment sharing their breaths and whispering a litany of apologies.

After a moment Shiro pulled back and Ossan resting a hand on Ichigo’s cheek blue eyes studying the younger’s own he stated, “Our apologies Ichigo we should have been able to resist Muramasa, and apologies also for what was said during our battle.”

“It’s fine Zangetsu I know you both didn’t mean it, and maybe if we had had more time, things with Muramasa would have gone better. But what’s happened has happened. For now, we need to focus on Soul Society and Muramasa.”

Ichigo responded a note of exhaustion creeping into his voice subdued by authority even as he shouldered his way to his feet and rolled his shoulders, ignoring the faint wounds covering his body. Ichigo pulled on his vast reserves of reiatsu drawing them together in preparation even he as mumbled about Unohana and the Fourth. Shiro stared at Ichigo for a moment, studying their wielder before the hollow spirit commented, “We’re not leaving you alone tonight.”

“But…”

Ichigo made to protest before pausing, he wanted to argue about what the Shinigami would think of his spirits, one a replica of Ichigo but bleach white, and the other a young version of the Quincy King (though few would know it), but he already knew it was a worthless argument. The Shinigami of Soul Society would be seeing far stranger things, and a hollow zanpaktou would not be uncommon.

Beyond that was the unspoken request, plea, and demand hidden beneath it all; his spirits felt like they needed to protect Ichigo, to make up in some ways for the battle. Ichigo couldn’t aggrieve them for it so he stared first into Shiro’s eyes seeing the open honesty, before letting his gaze swing to Ossan who nodded the same conviction glowing behind yellow visors.

“Come on then we have a lot of work to do tonight.”
Ichigo said with a sigh and a shake of his head as he turned to face Soul Society, surveying the sprawling white streets and the reiatsu that spilt heavily upon the air as battles raged. The young Captain ignored the damage to Sokyoku hill and with a breath of courage launched into a quick shunpo.

Senses extending and spreading beneath his feet as Ichigo moved through a rapid shunpo over the tiled roofs of Soul Society with careful grace, having long ago perfected the art of speeding over the terracotta tiles, Ichigo carefully observing the various battles that filled the air with a rainbow of reiatsu and the sounds of various weapons clashing. Faltering slightly as a familiar icy presence cascaded upon the air like an avalanche before falling deathly silent, Ichigo paused and glanced at his feet a brow furrowing his brow as he recalled his promise to Byakuya and the knowledge that Rukia would not likely have returned to the mortal realm to retreat from Sode No Shirayuki. It was unlikely she had even had the chance to return under Unohana’s careful watch.

It was likely then that Rukia had remained in Soul Society and continued to fight her zanpaktou spirit without the short intervention Ichigo had provided. The Captain of the Tenth had little worry about one of his favourite midget lieutenants, they had spent more than a few lazy afternoons training the Kuchiki heir, and she had improved exponentially. But of course, like the older brother he was, there was a little concern.

Regardless Ichigo dropped to the ground and kept a careful ear out for any nearby fighting as he quickly made his way to the Thirteenth division entrance, where the air shivered like a tree experiencing the deep winter and misted his breath. Zangetsu-Shiro peered around the entrance, all owl or cat-like, eyes cautious and wary even as the spirit had something close to a bloodthirsty grin dancing across his features. He probably wanted to fight Sode No Shirayuki if the female spirit was still conscious. Ichigo had half a mind to fetch a leash for the hollow-spirit if only to stop Shiro from rampaging about and seeking out whichever fight suited his fancy.

“Oy King I heard that. Remember we ain’t leaving ya.”

Shiro chided ochre eyes staring firmly into Ichigo’s own with all the conviction and promise of a thousand lifetimes. Ichigo conceded with a gentle nod and the tips of a smile, with a breath and a thumbs up from Shiro, Ichigo shifted the zanpaktou sheathed at his hip and entered the Thirteenth division gardens. Ice covered near every surface in a glittering blanket, slowly melting in the otherwise temperate air of Soul Society and leaving great puddles of water to decorate the ground like sparkling doorways to another dimension.

In the centre of the garden Rukia was unconscious, a small figure of ebony like a raven amongst the snow, Sode No Shirayuki laid opposite her a fallen angel. Both were still almost unnaturally so as if sculptures of ice carved into reality. As he moved closer Ichigo’s slight fears were displaced as he saw the gentle rise and fall of Rukia’s chest, signifying life.

Zangetsu-Ossan nodded wordlessly at Ichigo, already of an understanding of the need to check on the other zanpaktou spirit, the old man glided across the grounds with ever-present elegance and Shiro kept watch. Crouching next to the smaller Shinigami Ichigo’s hand reached out for the young woman’s pulse and found it fluttery but there and skin cool to the touch, carefully he observed her body looking for noticeable wounds.

There was a myriad of cuts littering Rukia’s skin, blood only barely beginning to well up, but otherwise, it seemed the last attack Rukia had unleashed had near drained her of all her reiatsu and left the young lieutenant exhausted. Shifting into a more comfortable position Ichigo carefully lifted the young woman into his arms, watching her expression to observe if the movement jostled any
unseen wounds.

Sharing a glance with Ossan, followed by Shiro who brought up the rear guard the three quickly exited the Thirteenth division and in a blur of shunpo made their way to the Fourth division.

The Fourth was a cacophony of noise and reiatsu even from outside, and Ichigo desperately wanted to flee, knock and leave Rukia on the doorstep as he recalled the many med bays and the dying Shinigami who had reached for his hands and wailed at the air in front of them. Shaking aside such thoughts, Ichigo took a breath of courage, received a raised brow from Shiro, and a hum of assurance from Zangetsu, and pushed the doors open.

The outside of the division was a mere façade to the utter madhouse the Fourth had fantastically devolved into, a reflection of the usual pandemonium of any invasion. Charging through the crowds with single-minded determination, ignoring the various swerves of surprise, Ichigo spotted a familiar head of brown hair and called out, “Hanatarō!”

With a whirl the demure brown-haired healer turned to face Ichigo, a frazzled expression splashed across his features, as his zanpaktou spirit hovered beside him in a blur of light reiatsu. The healer ducked and whirled through the crowds with a skill that most healers of the Fourth division learned within the first year on pain of greater injury, and met Ichigo halfway, with another healer following quietly beside him, a lost look on the poor snatched Shinigami’s features.

“Ichigo is everything okay?”

The young healer asked with clear worry, observing both Ichigo, the unconscious Shinigami in his arms, and his zanpaktou, with an unperturbed look of concern, possessing a confidence Ichigo was inherently proud of. It reminded him a little of the battle-hardened healer the war had produced in his own timeline. Nodding with a wry smile and ignoring the very obvious staring and shocked expressions at the two spirits behind him from all the surrounding Shinigami, Ichigo replied, “Sort of, it’s as much a madhouse out there as in here. But that’s beside the point, lieutenant Kuchiki was injured during the fight with her zanpaktou spirit, I think reiatsu depletion and minor wounds. She broke the enchantment the spirit holds over her zanpaktou, but it would probably be best to be cautious at the moment.”

Hanatarō absorbed the information with a serious nod, easily pulling another taller Shinigami of the Fourth division out of the rushing highway of people with nonchalance and grace. The small healer firmly directed the two to carefully take Sode No Shirayuki and Rukia into their arms and into a private room for healing, before he returned his attention to Ichigo.

“What about you Ichigo? You look a bit exhausted and injured if you don’t mind me saying.”

The healer spoke with concern the friendly camaraderie the two had built during the campaign in Hueco Mundo stretching between the two in a warm air. Ichigo flashed a wry grin once more, attempting but likely failing at trying to convince Hanatarō he was fine he responded, “There’s still work to do, but I’ll be fine I have my zanpaktou with me, no need to worry Hanatarō.”

The fourth seat raised a brow, a dubious expression lining his features but nodded anyway with the weary sigh of a healer who knew his patient but wasn’t willing to expend the energy on their stubbornness. Shiro chuckled, double tone rasp drawing attention even as Ichigo rolled his eyes at his bleached twin and flashed a thankful smile and a parting wave in Hanatarō’s direction before flash-stepping out of the Fourth and onto the tiled roofs of Serieteti once more.

Reiatsu searching and spreading like a blanket over Soul Society, Ichigo carefully observed Shūhei and Kira fighting Kazeshini and likely Kira’s zanpaktou Wabisuke. The two lieutenants would be
fine the Captain of the Tenth inherently knew from experience, they had always shown promise, and Ichigo had found simple camaraderie with the two and their steady work ethic upon the fields of his past. Turning his attention elsewhere, Ichigo briefly passed over Renji, whose reaitsu exploded every which way, and the roar of his Bankai was almost tangible upon the air as the bone snake rustled over the tiles. Ichigo did not even contemplate attempting to aid the red-head unless he was far too close to death to realize Ichigo had appeared.

It was almost nostalgic, recalling Ichigo’s own similar worldview when he had been a teenager, the need to prove oneself, the endless adrenaline seeking of battle, and the challenge of it all. A low chuckle shook Ichigo from his thoughts, as where they paused on one of the roofs Shiro slipped casually against Ichigo and commented, “Becoming an old man King, all this reminiscing.”

“Yeah, yeah Shiro”

Ichigo responded dismissively with an amused grin directed at the hollow spirit, Shiro ever the epitome of maturity rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out at Ichigo. The Captain of the Tenth would have responded in like manner until Zangetsu-Ossan raised a brow, eyes disapproving behind the golden vizors even as they lit with poorly concealed amusement and fondness at their antics.

“Focus Ichigo, can you sense Hirako-san? It would probably help to ask his assistance at the moment.”

The Quincy portion of Ichigo’s powers suggested, drawing seriousness to the moment as they refocused on the invasion at hand. Ichigo nodded as his senses landed on the blond Captain, and the hollow reaitsu saturating the air around the Captain of the Fifth. With a nod to his spirits, Ichigo picked his feet up once more and stepped off the roof, reaitsu solidifying beneath his feet as he made his way to the Fifth division.

The Fifth, while always far from any semblance of sanity, or peace when Hiyori was visiting, was surprisingly quiet for the chaos surrounding Soul Society. Ichigo supposed it was because Hinamori was off with Rangiku, and of a saner mind, and that most of the division Shinigami had probably dealt with their spirits surprisingly quickly when Shinji released his Shikai; neither spirit nor Shinigami would survive long in the inverted world in a fight.

When Ichigo entered the division, it was to the general bustle of Shinigami, some rushing about in and out of the division, others staring at materialized zanpaktou spirits, in particular, Zangetsu, with a dazed sort of expression. Some stared at their Captain with wide almost awed eyes and maybe a bit frightened, and Ichigo wondered what the blond had done to deserve the fearful hero worship. Shinji was in the centre of it all leaning cosily against a pillar with nonchalance as Sakande purred by his feet, taking the form of a large elegant sphinx cat with a spine of bone and glowing eyes, though Ichigo suspected that was not the only form the spirit could take.

“Oy Ichi!”

Shinji greeted with a touch of exuberance and a lazy wave, Sakande raised her head, piercing gold eyes settling on Ichigo, she nodded once conveying a thousand meaning all in the simple gesture before she settled once more over her wielder’s legs. Ichigo waved in greeting and stalked over to the blond, his two spirits gliding ethereally behind him, the blond glanced up at Ichigo, before his gaze swerved to the two spirits and he greeted each with a respectful nod.

“Zangetsu decide to accompany you?”

The blond questioned with curiosity decorating his features, having met the spirits before. It left the orange-haired Shinigami wondering how the other Captains and lieutenants who had never seen the
spirits would react. Ichigo’s smile was teasing and sharp as he replied, “Something like that. Was Muramasa able to gain control over your or the other Vizards’ spirits?”

Shinji nodded his head with a brilliant cheshire grin and responded, “Nah not so much, took a few minutes max for most of us, only one who struggled a bit was Hiyori and that’s cause they’re both so volatile. Reckon it’s cause we’re so connected, and the hollow part ran interference. Most of em decided to stay materialized anyway for fun.”

Ichigo nodded carefully absorbing the information, it was likely if Muramasa made a great effort to control the Vizard spirits he would be able to manage a greater degree of control. But the passing breeze of his reaitsu he had launched at the Captains and lieutenants gathered on Sokyoku hill wouldn’t have been close to strong enough to counteract the strong-willed Vizard and their zanpaktou. It was also likely if they had stayed for an extended period of time their control would have suffered to a greater extent, but they hadn’t and Ichigo was more than thankful there wasn’t a bunch of fight happy, hollow wielding zanpaktou running around.

“So, any reason ya came to visit, or are ya just mother Henning as usual Ichi-berri?”

Shinji questioned with a sly wink as the rumbling sound of Sakande purring filled the air with the spirit’s amusement. Shiro scoffed knowingly even as Ichigo levelled his friend with a glare and a disapproving glance before he could respond Ossan stepped forward to rest by Ichigo’s shoulder and quietly reminded, “Do not forget Byakuya Ichigo.”

The Captain of the Tenth nodded his head and gathered himself with a breath before he returned his attention to the blond, who was watching the three of them with amused serious eyes. Shrugging aside any comment about his spirits and their own protectiveness Ichigo responded, “As much as you all love to believe I am a mother hen, that is not what I am here for. I need you to prepare to go and speak with Kisuke, ask him to monitor activity in the living world. Additionally, I will need you to alert Harribel-san that a large congregation of hollows, including menos, will likely appear there if we are unable to subdue Muramasa before then. An emergency Captains meeting will likely be called soon and you will probably lead an expedition to Los Noches.”

In an instant, the switch between carefree and serious Captain was flipped and Shinji absorbed the information with all the bearing of the ancient Captain he actually was, carefully picking out unsaid words, and the information that needed to be passed on with tactical ease. After a minute the blond nodded his assent and flashed Ichigo a promising smile before saying in send-off, “I’ll inform everyone. Now go find your wayward boyfriend.”

Ichigo scowled at his friend, even as he rolled his eyes in good-natured amusement at the teasing and bowed once to Sakande who purred happily at the action. With a last parting wave, the young Captain turned away from the blond, reaitsu searching and bright as he left the Fifth in a flash of shunpo.

Ichigo’s senses tracked the Captain of the Sixth division to the outer reaches of one of the more abandoned Kuchiki compounds centred in the Fifth district of Rungokai. The Captain grumbled under his breath about accessibility and ease even as he mentally pulled his reaitsu reserves to his heels, ignored the dull throb of his various wounds, and with a nod to his zanpaktou spirits picked up speed darting through the land as if a passing shadow and the tide of war.

The sounds of battle reached Ichigo’s ears before anything else, followed second by the overwhelming tide of reaitsu that saturated the air, and the thousands of blades standing guard upon the night in shelves of solemn serenity, waiting ever patiently to be wielded.

Ichigo touched down in the clearing, just outside of the major area of battle, and carefully observed
the state of Byakuya and Senbonzakura. The Captain of the Sixth was breathing heavily, tiny flickers of cuts decorating his skin bleeding bright crimson, accompanied every so often by larger gashes tearing apart his shihakusho, Senbonzakura was in a similar state, though it was not easy to tell beneath the armour the spirit wore.

What was far different from Ichigo’s own timeline was that the ornate mask that the spirit had worn near religiously over his features was resting almost carelessly on top of his head. The symbolism was not lost to Ichigo and it brought a small happy smile to his lips before he banished it and stepped forward drawing the attention of the two opponents.

“Ichigo, I was waiting for you.”

Byakuya greeted with a grin, exhaustion seeping through the carefully crafted mask of determination and will, showing Ichigo everything he needed to see as he replied, “Sorry I was a bit delayed had to deliver Rukia somewhere safe.”

Minutely Byakuya’s shoulders deflated at the knowledge that his adopted sister was safe, some of the great tension lifted at Ichigo’s own presence, and the presence of the two spirits hovering behind him. Zangetsu and Shiro delivered both Byakuya and Senbonzakura intense appraising soul deep looks as if parents studying their child’s prospective partner, before Shiro’s reaitsu playful rustled Ichigo’s hair with a vaguely appeased sense to it all.

Senbonzakura faltered for a moment, katana hesitant as blue eyes passionate and alight beneath the mask strayed to Ichigo. Those eyes still blazing with a living will to fight settled and shifted towards something softer as the spirit bowed in greeting before his gaze strayed past Ichigo to his two spirits and a silent conversation waltzed above them. As the silence continued to linger in the clearing like the stillness of a pond Ichigo leant unconsciously towards Byakuya and asked, “Have you broken Muramasa’s control over Senbonzakura?”

Byakuya winced faintly at the question, shifting his stance to better accommodate his wounds he replied, “Yes and no. He still believes that we should join his side to end the blight that Kuchiki Kōga brought forth to the clan. Some of that is in part the last of Muramasa’s control, and the rest is the lingering sense of duty you still haven’t beaten out of me.”

Ichigo nodded easily following his partner’s words with a furrowed brow as he began a light healing kido, sealing many of the smaller wounds and preventing greater blood loss. Byakuya smiled gratefully at the gesture even as Senbonzakura shifted, the invisible conversation finished, katana whispering dangerously so and breaking the tender moment to leave the harsh reality of battle.

The Captain of the Tenth studied Byakuya, the still slightly haggard and exhausted look that held to every inch of him and screamed of his recent injury, if Byakuya had been in perfect health Ichigo would have hesitated to interfere in the battle between zanpaktou and wielder, knowing his partner could handle it. He knew now that Byakuya would likely still be able to defeat Senbonzakura even in his current condition, but that didn’t mean he had to and risk further injury to his partner.

Ichigo stepped between wielder and zanpaktou, Zangetsu silently and with all the presence of ghosts flanking either side of Ichigo as he glanced into the eyes of the soul cutter of his partner. Senbonzakura gazed back silent and challenging as if daring Ichigo to halt the spirit’s attempts to honour their clan and fight his wielder.

“I promise you Senbonzakura, and you Byakuya, that I will deal with Muramasa and prevent him from freeing Kuchiki Kōga without the use of treachery. Senbonzakura your wielder is injured and still needs rest if he were to attempt to undertake such a mission it could cost him his life and leave Rukia, the heir to the clan at the mercy of the elders. It is the best course of action to deal with
Muramasa without such cunning and underhanded plans.”

The words were spoken slowly and clearly, Ichigo’s belief and conviction resounding throughout each word and echoing in the clearing as the trees around them whistled and rustled around them like a skilled flute, detailing long forgotten myths. The orange-haired Shinigami could almost feel Byakuya’s warmth at the words from where the Captain stood behind him, even as Ichigo carefully watched Senbonzakura in front of him, praying for the sake of his own exhaustion that the spirit would listen. Each word had been carefully chosen to try and convince the spirit, but if Muramasa’s control still held like seeping roots then no words would truly sway the spirit.

With a careful tilt of his head, the spirit studied Ichigo, before in a movement near too fast to comprehend the spirit lunged forward two elegant blades in hand spinning forward to clash against Zangetsu’s interlocked blades and Ichigo’s own sealed zanpaktou. In the suddenly close distance between the spirit and Ichigo, the Captain could feel the zanpaktou spirit’s searching gaze as if searing what their interlocked blades told him into his soul.

After a tense moment, that lingered and swelled, pulling back and forth like the ever-flowing tides, the spirit stepped back and nodded conceding defeat and acceptance with the simple motion. The spirit carefully glanced into Ichigo’s eyes, and in a voice deep like a wind through the canyons and soft like the rains of spring said, “I concede to your plans Ichigo Shiba; however, I insist on accompanying you when you seek to deal with Muramasa.”

Ichigo thought over the demand quietly, how the spirit could react to Ichigo’s words, or any actions the spirit might take before he accepted with a nod. The zanpaktou spirit mirrored the action before he disappeared in a flutter of cherry blossoms, likely to return at a later time, but dematerializing to save Byakuya’s reaitsu stores.

Turning to his partner, Ichigo caught and an armful of excitable yet exhausted Shinigami Captain as Byakuya tucked into Ichigo into a tight hug Kaien would be proud of before pulling away and smiling at Ichigo he mouthed, “Thank you.”

“All in a day’s work Byakuya, now come on let’s get you to the Fourth, and then I have to find Sosuke before Yoruichi sends out the Jigokuchō.”

Ichigo responded with a tired grin as he helped sling Byakuya’s arm over his shoulder and the Kuchiki simply nodded at Ichigo’s words undeterred by the many things he likely didn’t understand at the moment. Ossan stepped in front of Ichigo before the two could leave; eyes proud and warm where they were hidden beneath the vizors, the spirit stared at Ichigo in abject silence before pulling away with a fond smile.

With a nod to Shiro who grinned and mumbled about seeing Unohana, Ichigo, carefully supporting Byakuya, left the clearing, the glowing presence of Soul Society close on the horizon as the dawn began to touch the skies with its early rays of light, and his spirits followed behind him.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed the start of the Zanpaktou Rebellion arc, I’m trying to include some of the main aspects but also throw in some twists, so I hope you all enjoyed it. Thank you all for reading, reviews/comments are always appreciated.
Till next time!
Athazagoraphobia

Chapter Notes

Athazagoraphobia

(n.) The fear of being forgotten, being forgotten or ignored or being replaced.

Hello everyone, sorry for the slightly late chapter but we are here with chapter 58, one of the last chapters of the Zanpaktou Rebellion arc, which will be wrapping up next chapter. Read on and enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo swept into the room with all the cold bearing of noble seriousness lining his features even as the still visible signs of battle decorated his body. Immediately after entering the ornate halls, Ichigo wanted to back out at the chaos that seemed to saturate every corner and tile of the room. It wasn’t such chaos as swords flying and reaitsu exploding like a classical overture, but it was the sort of chaos that paraded about with incessant chatter, yelling, and seeping tension. And that was to ignore the very real stone-cold moment before chaos erupted once more as Ichigo swept into the Captains’ meeting, Zangetsu flanking either side of him.

Some of their reactions were beyond amusing to Ichigo, as Ukitake stopped where he was talking to Shunsui to stare wordlessly at Ichigo, and Renji stared in shocked surprise mouth opening and closing like a flabbergasted fish, leaving Ichigo to contemplate Rukia’s reaction with something close to a cackle resounding throughout his mind. Renji and Rukia had never failed in their over the top reactions, especially when coupled together. Though it was unfair to say such, because Ichigo was often full of absolutely crazy surprises, they quite literally ran through his veins.

Other spectators of Ichigo’s arrival were taking amusement in it all, such as Shinji who watched everyone else’s reactions with a sadistic grin and mirth flashing like lightning in his eyes. Some studied Ichigo with new found perception, Unohana was gazing at Ichigo as if having finally received the final piece to an intricate unsolvable puzzle, and there was also Tōshirō’s appraising look, mirrored by Hyōrinmaru guarding the young lieutenant’s back with a frosty glare at anyone who was a half-step too close. If anything, Zangetsu stepped closer at the attention to their wielder as Ichigo glided forward, pulling their collective eyes with him like a wedding train.

The quiet that had descended for a precious fraction of a second at Ichigo’s appearance, reappeared with the descending force of a tsunami as one Captain or lieutenant after another clamoured about the two spirits standing behind Ichigo as he glided beside Kisuke who had the decency to be quiet while
fiddling with three different devices at once; Benihime a silent pale spectre of red greeted Ichigo with a familiar wide smile before returning her attention to her wielder, lightly tapping him on the shoulder or whispering in his ears.

Ichigo knew for a fact that gossip would run like hellfire once the invasion had settled down even slightly and the Shinigami could convene in the pubs once more and talk about the various spirits that had appeared least of all Zangetsu and the reveal of Ichigo’s dual blade. It left a slight humour of amusement bubbling beneath his skin as he thought of some of the plausible absurd rumours, such as Ichigo having killed a secret twin, and that was why one of his zanpaktou mirrored his own image. Honestly, the Shinigami were endlessly creative when it came to anything close to gossip.

Running a tired palm over his features to pull his attention to the matter at hand, Ichigo drew in a deep breath and instinctively glanced at the line of Captains opposite him, searching for a familiar presence unaware only to stop himself with another muted sigh. Byakuya was in the tender hands of the Fourth to recover, in peace, from the exhaustion and injuries he had suffered. Ichigo also had a gurney marked for himself in the Fourth but had only rested the minimum time it had taken to wrap or heal the worst of his wounds before the emergency Captains meeting had been called by Yoruichi, who was standing near the head of the room, where the Soutaicho usually stood in all his imposing glory. The Captain of the Second watched the gathered captains and lieutenants squabble and chatter with an expression that was half amusement, half irritation that the seriousness of the matter at hand had not washed over the masses.

Likely sensing Ichigo’s keen gaze with her stellar perception, Yoruichi’s golden eyes slid over to Ichigo brightening a bit upon seeing the young Captain. With a flirtatious grin the head of the Shihōin clan waved to Zangetsu behind the orange-haired Shinigami, Ossan nodded respectfully in greeting undeterred by the woman’s wiles while Shiro decided to continue his streak of maturity and grinned at the Captain. Yoruichi shook her head in amusement and flashed a wink at Ichigo something asking of him in her gaze as the chaos continued to rise among them.

Ichigo was half-tempted to yell at Shunsui to assume command because it was an inevitable factor that the drunkard would one day be the Captain commander, and he would be damn great at it no matter what his self-doubts whispered. Ichigo had lived it, and even in peace, the man had an eye for the people behind the organization. But he was conversing in soft whispers with Jushiro in the corner and Ichigo could hardly bring himself to march over and interrupt the two at the moment, however, if the noise level rose another decibel Ichigo wasn’t sure what drastic measures would appeal to the young Captain.

Kisuke beside Ichigo, after a persistent tug on the brim of his hat from Benihime, finally tore his eyes away from the devices in his hands, the deep bags under his eyes masking his appearance in the visage of a raccoon as the scientist blinked blearily at Ichigo for a moment before his gaze darted behind Ichigo. The blond blinked once more, as if whether to test if the spirits were actually hovering behind Ichigo before the insomniac shrugged and returned to his device, only after flashing Ichigo a nudging look, a wagging finger, and commenting, “You should get some rest Ichigo.”

“Allright, mother.”

Ichigo responded with a raised brow and a touch of fondness for the scientist’s concern for him. Kisuke scoffed at Ichigo’s reply peeking up at the orange-haired Shinigami from beneath the sea of blond bangs and dramatically rolled his eyes at Ichigo even as he flashed a tired but ever enigmatic smile before returning his attention to the device now flashing in a myriad of red dots.

Feeling the exhaustion settle firmly on his shoulders once more, Ichigo pulled himself together with thoughts that they would soon be able to rest, and Muramasa would be taken care of; one way or
Ichigo rolled his eyes at the wordless command but knew if no one stepped up the chaos would continue to spread among the meeting room and nothing would be decided, and the invasion would continue in all of its greater chaos. Yoruichi could probably step forward and command the captains and lieutenants, just the same as Shinji, who was watching everything with a lazy smile half bitten in annoyance, or Chōjirō who was standing dutifully in the shadows.

But of course, that would be too easy Ichigo supposed as he slipped out of his place in the messy cluster of powerful Shinigami filling the room. A half feeling of dread filled his chest as he recalled the numerous times he had taken command of the Gotei 13, had given orders, or directed the flow of battle through words alone. The young Captain walked quietly and confidently to the front of the room, commanding attention without speaking or raising his reaitsu through his body language alone, mentally he ran over what they needed to cover as he pulled on all of the tactics the war had instilled into the very marrow of his bones.

Silently Ichigo paused at the head of the room waiting in supplication for the Shinigami to notice the Captain of the Tenth standing in the Soutaicho’s position. Idly Ichigo studied them all for a moment as some recognized the change in the atmosphere Ichigo’s move had brought and fell silent, others continued on unaware. With a roll of his shoulders and a hand gripping the hilt of Zangetsu, Ichigo flared his reaitsu capturing the remaining attention that had wandered and left a sea of eyes focused on Ichigo.

It was both a disconcerting feeling and yet eerily familiar, reminding Ichigo of the many times he had led a war council in the past, his past which seemed both yesterday and a century ago to his mind. Shoving aside the nostalgia Ichigo gazed into the eyes of the Shinigami before him, ascertaining their determination, will, and whether they were ready to begin. Satisfied Ichigo spoke, “Captains, lieutenants please calm yourselves and be quiet. You all are able to conduct yourselves in an orderly manner; we do not need more trouble with the rebellion of the zanpaktou spirits already upon us. Shihōin-taicho has found the location of the Soutaicho, and we need to dispatch a small force to rescue the Soutaicho. At the same time, we need to send an envoy to Hueco Mundo to inform our allied nation. Please, devote your attention to Shihōin-taicho and recovering Soul Society and our zanpaktou.”

Ichigo finished calmly before stepping back and allowing Yoruichi to sashay forward, Soi-fon a spider in the shadows following dutifully behind. Yoruichi all commanding seduction as golden eyes passed over the gathered Shinigami with great intensity before the Captain of the Second division began to speak.

The orange-haired Captain tuned most of the report out, having already received the information in the first timeline, and having received a general clue this time it was not hard to rejog his own memories of the events. It always seemed that when something from his past, so alike in similarity it could be a mirror of a parallel world occurred Ichigo would experience a great deal of nostalgia and vertigo, the memories surging up from beneath whatever other thoughts occupied his mind to poke and prod at his sanity.

Yoruichi finished detailing the location of the Soutaicho, and the true nature of Muramasa, of which he may or may not have guided her to certain archives (one didn’t spend endless nights in the library without searching for a few things). Silently the Captain stepped back lending the reins of command once more to her orange-haired compatriot.
Ichigo stepped into the light with slow careful movements, Shiro a pale spectre on Ichigo’s right, and on his left Ossan stood a guardian grounding the orange-haired captain to the moment. Ichigo studied the gathered captains and lieutenants for a moment before he straightened his spine and his eyes became blazing swords of will as he commanded, “A small force shall go to the caves where the Soutaicho is being held, Ukitake-taicho, Kyroraku-taicho, Shihōin-taicho, and I will go. Yes, Kenpachi you may accompany us. Another force will be sent to Hueco Mundo, Hirako-taicho you will lead the mission as you are able to open a Garganta, Ōtoribashi-taicho, and lieutenant Hitsugaya please accompany Hirako-taicho for diplomatic reasons. Urahara-taicho please continue to monitor the living realm for high areas of hollow activity, especially in the jūreichi. The rest of you please subdue or attempt to break the enchantment on your zanpaktou spirits. Additionally, when possible, please aid other Shinigami, and if word of the spirit Muramasa appears please report through a Jigokuchō and alert the other captains and lieutenants. Refrain from attempting to subdue the spirit alone, if possible wait for reinforcements or commands.”

The Captain of the Tenth finished expression stone cold serious as the captains and lieutenants stared up at him with mirroring expressions, the air serious and heavy where it wrapped around Ichigo’s shoulders like a great mantle, like the weight of the lives that depended on him, infinite in their perceived weight. Slowly Ichigo let his attention drift to the Shinigami who had been assigned separate tasks from the others.

Shinji was pouting up at Ichigo for the slight against his diplomatic skills, but his eyes were sharp as piano wire where they flashed in the half shadows. Rose seemed unperturbed by the task, conversing silently with Love in an easy manner, and only nodding once to Ichigo before returning his attention to his partner. Toshiro as always was disgruntled by Ichigo’s order, and the task he had been set, but there was some of the same steel in the lieutenant’s eyes a desire to prove himself capable of expectations; he was almost ready to be a Captain and they both knew it, it lingered unspoken and unfettered.

Shunsui and Jushiro, standing beside each other with a complete lack of regard towards decorum, as usual, stared at Ichigo with equally serious expressions, something behind the ancient set of eyes that communicated wordlessly a desire to retake their zanpaktou. Kenpachi grinned something bloodthirsty and hungry as Yachiru waved from his shoulder, hiding in plain sight as always. Kisuke glanced up once at Ichigo and nodded conveying everything with the simple movement, even as Ichigo could feel the piercing stare of another scientist drilling holes in his skull.

Ichigo stared out at the gathered captains and lieutenants for a final moment of lingering silence as the atmosphere of the meeting room heaved as if storm-battered seas before settling underneath a thin veil of calm, determination written upon the air as if the icy bluffs of the shore. With a nod dismissing the captains, Ichigo said, “The meeting has concluded, Captains and lieutenants please be aware and alert at all times, just because the war with the Espada is over does not mean we can rest yet.”

The air swelled with reaitsu as the captains and lieutenants bowed, some leaving quickly in a flash of shunpo, disappearing to track their zanpaktou spirits, or seeking Kisuke first for aid in that measure. The squad deployed to Hueco Mundo gathered in one corner of the room forming a general battle plan and likely cautioning Shinji against seeking out Grimmjow for a quick battle.

Yoruichi slipped up beside Ichigo, shoving Shiro out of the way with a bump of her hip and a wink at the hollow-spirit. Shiro just rolled his eyes at the sly woman and drifted to stand by Ossan the two conversing silently, likely about the coming battle.

“Good job there Ichi, you were quite the commander!”

The Captain of the Second praised as she leaned against Ichigo, bright carmine eyes peering into
Ichigo’s own like a cat’s with all the intensity of a feline. Ichigo blushed slightly at the praise and the woman grinned, if possible even wider, and continued, “Of course it’s to be expected with your past experience.”

The word past was over enunciated and accompanied by a wink, Ichigo sighed and shook his head in amusement at his friend’s usual eccentricities. The air around the Shihōin head slipped suddenly like a noose for a moment as those piercing eyes sharpened and in a tone like a blade being unsheathed, she said, “Honestly Ichigo you possess a charisma that is both boundless and frightening in that extent. Every enemy, even Sosuke has been swayed or saved in one way or another. You really should stay as a Captain, even if Tōshirō needs a chance.”

Ichigo glanced at his feet at the words, feeling them echo inside his head as he recalled the many times they had been spoken in a different form. His charisma and ability to change the allegiances of those around him and convince them to follow him into war. Ichigo had at one time never recognized it, had still been young and fuelled with a pure sort of determination to see change. But as time passed Ichigo had learned that charisma, when used correctly, could unstick the fine strands of the past.

“Ah, I’m not suited to be a Captain in peace times Yoruichi.”

Ichigo responded casually, rubbing the back of his head in half embarrassment. Part of Ichigo knew that he likely wouldn’t be able to permanently escape a position as a Captain, but Tōshirō needed the experience and he was ready. In any case, the war with the Quincy, while far different from the original timeline would also likely see a great loss of life, and the orange-haired Shinigami once more leading Soul Society in some manner.

Yoruichi blinked owlishly at Ichigo before with a roll of her eyes she shrugged and bumped her shoulder against Ichigo’s fondly. Pulling back the Captain of the Second halted gaze drifting over Ichigo’s shoulder with all the intensity of a hurricane, before a smile something predatory and warning, almost protective flashed across her features whip-fast and disappeared.

“I’ll go and form a battle plan with Ukitake-taicho and Kyoraku-taicho okay Ichi? Kami knows Kenpachi will do what he likes.”

Yoruichi stated, no less a question as the woman patted his shoulder reassuringly and turned in a graceful whirl of black fabric like the extension of a moth’s wings. Raising his brow in puzzled confusion, Ichigo’s reaitsu identified the presence standing behind him as he slowly turned around.

Sosuke stood there looking for all the world calm and collected, his frames, the ones that didn’t make him look like a dork, were resting on top of his hair, which was also not an edgy slicked back style, as the Captain studied Ichigo with keen eyes avoiding eye contact at the same time, as if searing the image of Ichigo into his mind to analyse later. The man nodded once in greeting to Ossan and Shiro, the later of who was studying Sosuke with that half-sceptical look the hollow-spirit always possessed when it came to the megalomaniac turned sane.

“Sosuke is everything okay?”

Ichigo asked with concern, stepping a slight step closer to provide a measure of privacy in the hall still bustling with activity and reaitsu snaking about the ground like a fall wind full of rustling leaves. The older Captain furrowed a brow at Ichigo’s question, something almost like indignation slipping into the calm façade as Sosuke pursed his lips and nodded. Ichigo waited patiently for the genius to elaborate for a tense moment before Sosuke spoke, “Why do you want me to stay away from Muramasa so desperately?”
The orange-haired Captain scrubbed a hand over his features at the question even as Shiro scoffed and interjected, “Why do ya think genius? Ya have a zanpaktou that could literally manipulate all the Shinigami in Soul Society, ‘cept Ichigo and probably Gin.”

Sosuke stared at Shiro for a moment, as if contemplating some desperate revenge against the hollow for the sarcasm and overall typical Shiro-ness before his gaze swung smoothly to Ichigo and he conceded the point with a nod and an exhale of disappointment.

“Do you really think he could control Kyoka Suigetsu?”

The scientist asked, part curious or worried, part typical boastful arrogance Ichigo still hadn’t managed to beat out of Sosuke. The Captain of the Tenth glanced quickly to Zangetsu-Ossan whose reaitzu wrapped around Ichigo in reassurance giving him a strength he didn’t know he needed as he admitted to his friend, “He was able to control Zangetsu, and you know how complicated my soul is.”

“Complicated is an understatement Ichigo.”

Sosuke replied instinctively even as his eyes widened with understanding and the powerful Captain scrubbed a hand over his brow, hand drifting almost without regard to the hilt of his own zanpaktou.

“It’s also because of Them, isn’t it? You don’t want to reveal our trump cards beforehand right Ichigo?”

The Captain of the Twelfth questioned suddenly glancing up at Ichigo with those eyes like living madness harnessed into a kaleidoscope. Ichigo nodded, gaze darting swiftly to the long shadows that suddenly seemed menacing in the filter of white noise that filled the room. Sosuke murmured something softly before he straightened, and his eyes drove their way into Ichigo’s soul through his own as the man asked, “What are you planning to do about the zanpaktou spirit? Something must have occurred differently in the past or you would not be so hesitant to dispatch in a swift manner the enemy.”

Some days Ichigo wanted to curse Sosuke’s genius as the words struck home with all the feeling of Zangetsu plunging through his heart. Ichigo pivoted a half pace away from the scientist to study the room at large, the strong pillars almost representative of the Gotei 13’s strength, the captains like doves in gathered droves upon the floor, and the sense of Soul Society beyond it all. Turning once more to face his friend as Shiro wordlessly stepped closer almost physically supporting Ichigo’s weight the orange-haired Captain replied quietly, “Muramasa in my timeline, sought only to free his wielder Kuchiki Kōga. I doubt he even believed in the freedom of the zanpaktou spirits but was merely using them. Muramasa’s wielder was insane and had been locked away as Yoruichi hinted at. He succeeded in freeing Kōga, due in part to my aid, and that of Byakuya wishing to honour his clan. But the Shinigami was insane and betrayed Muramasa in an instant… we fought the spirit and I,” Ichigo glanced away for a moment lost in thought before he continued, “He was so lonely and bitter at such loneliness consumed by it all until I defeated him.”

Ichigo let the silence linger at the statement, glancing over only once to catch Sosuke’s shuttered yet curious expression, before he turned away again and commented, “I’m going to try and save him if I can, even if it’s just letting the spirit live in one of the outskirts of Rungokai. And if I can’t then I will deliver him from the existence which plagues him now so that hopefully he will find peace.”

The silence lingered intense and unsure between the two captains before Sosuke stepped up beside Ichigo and in a quiet voice enduring some tender quality the scientist spoke, “I believe you will do what’s best Ichigo.”
It was as much support as one was bound to expect from Sosuke Aizen, so Ichigo conceded his gratitude with a nod and responded, “Thank you Sosuke.”

The man glanced up once, brown eyes like the bark of an ancient tree having weathered the world, or like soil rich and everlasting connecting with Ichigo’s own conveying a thousand messages, words meant to be unspoken. Sosuke nodded and turned sweeping towards Shinji who was still being mauled by an overenthusiastic Mashiro while Kensei dutifully watched at the scientist’s side.

“Come Ichigo, we need to speak with Yoruichi and the others as soon as possible.”

Ossan cautioned gently, pulling Ichigo’s attention from idle drifting he nodded and stepped towards the small group still gathered in the corner. Jushiro was the first to notice Ichigo’s approaching presence, happiness bursting across his features like spring at the sight of one of his favourite lieutenants (asking the man to pick a favourite was near impossible though they all knew Kaien probably held the spot). Yoruichi and Shunsui in perfectly unsynchronized movement turned to face Ichigo as he arrived, Zangetsu following Ichigo in silent guard. Kenpachi idly studying his blade bared his teeth in a grin at Ichigo before falling back to whatever entertaining story Yachiru was whispering.

“Ichi you finally made it, I was wondering if you would ever escape Sosuke.”

Yoruichi joked as she gaily slung an arm around his shoulder in one moment and was leaning against a pillar in the next with a wink. Ichigo just shrugged in a vague what can you do manner, before he returned his attention to the two captains watching their interaction with fond amused eyes.

“Taicho, Ukitake-san this is Zangetsu,” Ichigo stated gesturing to the two spirits before he pointed at Ossan and continued, “This Is Zangetsu-Ossan, and my bleached double here is Zangetsu-Shiro.”

“Ma ma Ichigo haven’t we told you to drop the suffixes already?” Shunsui complained good-naturedly earning a small apology from Ichigo before the man continued attention focused on the two spirits who studied the captains with whispering eyes, “It is a pleasure to meet the zanpaktou of Ichigo.”

“Indeed, it was quite the surprise to see Ichigo’s true Shikai, not to mention Zangetsu in the figurative flesh.”

Jushiro added with those so very cunning eyes few ever understand, accusing and acknowledging, dissecting every detail, even as Yoruichi cackled and commented, “Of course you just had to do it in a bang didn’t ya Ichigo?”

Said orange-haired Captain blushed at the comment, and really he hadn’t been going for the whole dramatic flare, really, even as Zangetsu-Ossan stepped forward and bowed to the gathered captains, deep rumbling baritone filling the air as he spoke, “It is an honour to meet the captains who mean a great deal to Ichigo, in person.”

Shunsui traded a meaning-filled look with Jushiro at the words Zangetsu had spoken, something flashing like a confirmation in their gazes even as they bowed in return and Shunsui replied, “Likewise.”

“Allright enough with the formal introductions, yes Ich’s zanpaktou is wicked cool and we all want to question him but let’s focus on the mission at hand.”

Yoruichi interjected with all the usual boundless energy she possessed, cleaving the sombre respectful air in two in one fell sweep as all the gathered captains straightened imperceptibly;
suddenly the epitome of battle-ready. Yoruichi nodded pleased and turned to Ichigo to update him on the plans already in development she began, “I will lead us to the cave where the Soutaicho is being held. Once there we will enter and make our way there. It is highly likely we will encounter rogue zanpaktou spirits, and likely even Ukitake and Kyōraku’s. So, we will adapt, as the situation requires. Good?”

Ichigo nodded something far away but resembling a smile nonetheless settling onto his features at the plan, reminiscent of his own timeline. Basic layout roughly decided, Ichigo surveyed the halls one last time, looking for any Shinigami in need of aid, letting his reiatsu search out the many Shinigami currently engaged in battle throughout Soul Society, even as his thoughts once more strayed to Muramasa.

He wanted to save the spirit, wanted to do so without ever invoking Kuchiki Kōga to the real world. The young Captain had vague ideas, half-formed plans, and a desperate wish for more time. But a part of him had made peace with the knowledge that it was likely in the end Muramasa would only be released through death.

Shaking himself from his thoughts with the aid of Zangetsu, Ichigo shared a final look with the captains gathered about him before Yoruichi stepped forward and disappeared in a wicked blur of shunpo. The two older captains followed behind the Captain of the Second, accompanied by the tinkle of bells, and after a last second glance, Ichigo also followed stepping forward towards whatever the future held.

X

The caves were cold, the kind of chill that seeps beneath one’s skin and bathes your spine in chills, the sensation of eyes watching Ichigo’s every step was amplified by his perceived loneliness. Which was abated slightly by the presence of Zangetsu-Ossan ahead of Ichigo, a tall silhouette radiating calm, and Zangetsu-Shiro behind Ichigo watching everything with those eerie ochre eyes. The other Shinigami captains had all vanished as they passed through the caves to deal with the various zanpaktou that were waylaying the captains, Ichigo was more than thankful Kenpachi did not know Yachiru’s true nature as to fight a zanpaktou of that magnitude would be something too frightening.

It was strange Ichigo thought, in a recurring manner, how some things always seemed drawn to a certain string of fate, Ichigo was certain that it wasn’t likely Muramasa had set up some great scheme for Ichigo to break the Soutaicho out of his self-imposed prison. He wasn’t known as the brash, headstrong, impulsive teenager anymore. But still, the other captains had engaged the other zanpaktou spirits pushing for Ichigo to go on ahead. Jushiro had murmured something encouraging and entirely reasonable about the bond between Ichigo and his zanpaktou as being likely the strongest in Soul Society. At the thought a warm thrum of reassurance washed over Ichigo, tingling with the feel of Ossan’s reaitsu.

In any manner Ichigo was both dreading and anticipating the end of the confrontation waiting ahead of him, he had a vague collection of ideas that had been simmering at the back of his mind, buzzing like a storm of cicadas, clashing ideals and beliefs, all centring on how to deal with Muramasa. His soul was so very divided on whether to attempt to save the spirit or to end the misery before it began. If the spirit was saved Ichigo would be able to guarantee the life of the spirit, at least something close to a peaceful life, but Muramasa would always live with the torment of losing his master, of the knowledge of his betrayal. It would be a half-life one that Ichigo didn’t want to force on any living thing, just as it had been forced on himself by desperate measures.

Killing the spirit though was far too reminiscent of Ichigo’s own time and echoed bitterly throughout his thoughts. He knew it would set the spirit at rest, but Ichigo wanted to give Muramasa a chance to
see what the world was like without Kuchiki Kōga and live in the short relative peace before the Quincy war.

Running a hand through his hair in indecision, Ichigo tightened his resolve imperceptibly, hand tightening on the hilt of Zangetsu sealed at his side as his spirits’ reaitsu hummed warmly around Ichigo. The young Captain halted slightly in his steps as a new presence made itself known, fluttering with an invisible breeze and the faint scent of cherry blossoms.

Ichigo glanced at Senbonzakura calmly; noting the spirit’s somewhat healed visage, and the likelihood that Byakuya would be more than fine in a few days. The elegant spirit studied Ichigo from behind the mask with carefully hidden eyes, radiating in their piercing intensity before the spirit nodded once sharply in greeting and gestured for Ichigo to continue. Shaking his head and murmuring about nobles Ichigo continued forward.

A light at the end of the cave system silently made itself known, glowing and shimmering like a far-off mirage of distant plains, and with it came the sense of Muramasa’s reaitsu, stretched unbearably thin and tainted with hollow reaitsu. Beyond that was the presence of the Soutaicho, subdued but there all the same a constant thrumming heat that seemed to run through the earth beneath Ichigo’s feet as he continued forward unhurried, conviction placing every step in front of him.

The mouth of the cave system opened unto a large open area, stalactites and stalagmites peaking out everywhere as reminiscent water gathered and glimmered in the light of the barrier the Soutaicho calmly sat inside of. The old man was the first to notice Ichigo’s presence, he raised one brow, old ancient eyes locking onto Ichigo’s own and conveying a note of worry and concern for the young Captain. Ichigo flashed the old man a smile of reassurance even as he turned to face Muramasa, the spirit, who had been studying the rock wall with something far away, turned to face Ichigo with a whirl of the elegant cloak settled over his shoulders.

Silence lingered endlessly between the two opponents, running restlessly over Ichigo’s shoulders as the spirit’s eyes strayed past Ichigo to the two spirits standing there, living guardians and pillars of Ichigo’s power. Beyond Zangetsu was Senbonzakura, lingering in the shadows, content to watch rather than interfere, understanding of honour. Something sorrowful passed through the eyes mad in the yellowed grief where he studied the spirits as Muramasa’s hand strayed to the katana strapped to his waist and Ichigo remained still.

“Have you come to save the Soutaicho, Shiba Ichigo Captain of the Tenth division?”

Muramasa asked in a calm almost idle manner, voice like the drag of fabric over stone. Piercing eyes peered into Ichigo’s own and the orange-haired Shinigami smiled in response something lighting in his eyes in predatory warning.

“No, I am here to stop you Muramasa.”

Ichigo stated simply, reaitsu rising around his form bathing it in a slight aura, as Muramasa narrowed his eyes at Ichigo. The young Shinigami wondered if the spirit would even attempt to fight Ichigo rather than flee. The abandoned spirit was not dull and knew tactics well enough to know that Ichigo was stronger than the spirit. Muramasa’s eyes darted briefly; almost a passing second, over to the Soutaicho before they returned to Ichigo some of that madness at their interaction that had been tamed returning in full force as if incited by the challenge.

With an elegant flourish, the spirit drew his katana, the metal glinting in the sparse light of the cave as if possessed. Pivoting in a half manner to face his zanpaktou Ichigo stared at the two spirits eyes blazing he asked, “Please support me through your blade Zangetsu!”
“Aye King.”

Shiro responded and Ossan nodded in kind adding, “Of course Ichigo.”

The two spirits dematerialized in a soft scattering of reaitsu and returned to Ichigo’s blade. Muramasa watched everything with sceptical eyes, studying Ichigo as if he was a puzzle with pieces that never fit together in any manner plausible. With a hiss, Ichigo released Zangetsu from its scabbard the blade a comforting weight in Ichigo’s hands as for a tense breath the two opponents studied each other.

They clashed with the shriek of metal against metal, sparks flying, and reaitsu flaring as they struggled against one another before Muramasa stepped away blade swinging in a fluid almost hypnotic manner before the spirit was sliding across the ground in rapid shunpo to clash with Ichigo. The orange-haired Shinigami ducked the overhead strike and slid into a lower stance as Zangetsu flashed in a wide arc towards Muramasa’s side. The spirit caught Zangetsu on the edge of his katana, the two blades wavering between inching closer towards Muramasa’s side and into the open air for a second before Ichigo stepped back and let Zangetsu set into a flurry of attacks.

Ichigo swung overhead and immediately dropped Zangetsu, bringing the hilt of the blade towards the spirit’s jaw in a brutal strike as reaitsu pulsed about Zangetsu and lingered heavy upon the air. Muramasa caught the overhead strike with ease and dodged the jab to the chin and easily spun avoiding Ichigo’s thrust forward as he skidded along Zangetsu sliding closer to Ichigo’s chest with his own blade. Reaitsu flowing through his veins in a heady rush, Zangetsu roaring in his hands Ichigo released a Getsuga Tensho. Muramasa’s eyes widened at the attack even as his reaitsu circled around him like a cyclone trying to combat the force of the attack and redirect it towards the Soutaicho’s barrier. It was ultimately unsuccessful the large crescent of reaitsu colliding with the spirit’s blade before Ichigo was in Muramasa’s personal space once more.

Something like despair flashed in the spirit’s eyes at the lost chance even as renewed vigour flowed through the spirit’s attacks. The force of the collision sending dust to swirl in the air as reaitsu crashed against one another like the waves unstoppable against the cliffs unmovable. In the periphery of his senses, Ichigo sensed an approaching presence and the weakening of the cave surrounding them at the force of their attacks and reaitsu. With a breath, Ichigo once more drew on Zangetsu’s powers and as they locked blades he released a Getsuga Tensho, some of the reaitsu backlashing against Ichigo’s Hierro, even as it sent the surprised spirit colliding with the far wall in a crash of rubble.

At that moment Yoruichi entered, striding with careless grace, looking as if nothing had touched but the wind in its adoration of her. The intelligent Captain observed the room with critical eyes, gaze landing on first Ichigo, Senbonzakura hovering dutifully in the corner, and then the Soutaicho, before finally falling on Muramasa who was slowly shifting out of the rubble reaitsu swirling and amassing in turbulent heaves of crimson and lilac.

“Need a hand Ichi?”

The woman asked with a cocky smile and a wink general concern filling her words. Ichigo shook his head with a half smile, the rest of his attention focused on the battle still playing in the shadows even as he instructed, “Try to break the barrier holding the Soutaicho if you can Yoruichi but wait till we’re gone. We don’t want Muramasa getting a hold of Ryūjin Jakka.”

Yoruichi nodded in understanding, eyes wicked and alight as Ichigo turned away and Muramasa rose from the rubble gracefully brushing the dust from his clothing even as eyes spitting vitriol and madness slammed Ichigo into place. Zangetsu flicked restlessly in Ichigo’s hands as he asked gaily, “Why don’t we take this battle somewhere a little less cramped.”
Muramasa’s eyes narrowed at the suggestion, golden eyes, like the pillaged gold of ancient temples, landed on the Soutaicho and Yoruichi lingering in the shadows watching the battle with critical eyes. The spirit turned once more to face Ichigo and asked, “You really think you can lure me away from my goals, plain as they may be to you?”

“No. But I’m going to show you how wrong you are.”

Ichigo responded in challenge eyes blazing, hollow reiatsu surging to colour his eyes in a sheen of gold like a halo of the sun’s light upon the morning. Muramasa twitched eyes wide and angered as reiatsu swelled, the instinct of a hollow colouring it crimson.

The spirit disappeared in a blur of shunpo, an obvious answer as much as the plain path he had left. Ichigo glanced once to the Soutaicho and Yoruichi, watching Ichigo with concerned eyes as if questioning the young Captain’s plans. Ichigo flashed them a reassuring smile, promise in the blinding grin before he was gone following the abandoned spirit in a whisper of ebony fabric like the beat of a bird’s wings before a flight.

The Sokyoku hill bathed in the early light of the afternoon loomed above all of Soul Society, the white city glimmering almost radiant for all of its evidence of war from where Ichigo observed it in its place behind Muramasa. The spirit echoed the first time Ichigo had seen him, in the current timeline, as his katana glinted and reiatsu swelled about the hill in endless swirls. Ichigo was almost beyond glad they weren’t in a forest, or near a lake, the change of scenery settled something restless in his chest. Senbonzakura a far distance away watched with careful eyes, presence diminished and hardly of notice to the battle-focused Captain

With a flick of Zangetsu, the air between the two changed, once more adapting to the sense of battle as it settled over the two. Muramasa charged forward blade swinging to the side as Ichigo caught it on Zangetsu and ducked the following overhead swing, before popping up and whirling around to strike at the spirit’s back. Muramasa caught Zangetsu and slid forward, fury decorating his eyes he spoke, “You are a fool Captain, my wielder will welcome me. My sacrifices will have been worth it!”

The spirit disengaged as Zangetsu edged closer to the spirit’s sternum, eyes challenging as Ichigo raised Zangetsu to his chest reminiscent of a guardian statue he called out as Zangetsu arced to the side and the young Captain raced forward, “You are wrong. Please, Muramasa give up this ceaseless fight. To lose part of your soul is devastating but you can recover, you could live in peace.”

The spirit shook his head, bitterness like acid in those eyes as Muramasa clenched a white-knuckled fist around his katana as if a medium for his prayers the spirit snarled and shot forward reiatsu whipping around him and billowing his cloak outwards. Ichigo scowled at his own inability to reach the spirit even as Zangetsu snapped up to clash with the katana in a battle of wills, Ichigo’s bond with his zanpaktou resonating between the two opponents as much as Muramasa’s devastation.

Muramasa fought with a fervent energy, every move more desperate than the last as if the battle was proof of the spirit’s devotion, the final great trial before he would be united with his master. Ichigo struggled against the attacks only for the madness that flowed behind the moves, making them near impossible to predict as Zangetsu flowed a living presence around Ichigo guiding his every step as they always had.

As the battle continued, the orange-haired Captain noted the spirit tiring, blood-tinted almost black leaking from multiple visible lacerations, just the same as the wounds decorating Ichigo stung, and sweat beaded his brow. Those factors acted little as deterrents as they continued to clash blades sweeping through the air with a resonating hum and tangling together like two predatory snakes. Over and over again, back and forth as Ichigo pushed the advantage and Muramasa countered with
attacks that were pulled at the last second and twisted into something powerful.

The moment the Soutaicho was freed from his self-imposed barrier, it echoed throughout Soul Society, as if a summer wind from the south swept upon them. At the same time, a wordless command seemed to reach out for the zanpaktou spirits still under Muramasa’s control as the final act of their battle came into play.

Ichigo ducked under an overhead swing and slid forward close to Muramasa’s guard as they slid against one another with a crash of sparks. Whirling around Ichigo sidestepped an overextended thrust that clipped Ichigo’s side even as he reversed Zangetsu and with the plan grasping the edge of his fingertips with reaitsu drove Zangetsu through the spirit’s being. In a surge of brilliant reaitsu, that flowed and obscured their shapes as if bathing them in the lands of another world Muramasa was pulled into Ichigo’s inner world.

Rain fell slowly as if drawn by molasses, in a tranquil manner around them, as the sideways building remained still monoliths. Muramasa pinned to a building, shattered glass cushioning his form, studied Ichigo’s inner world with wide, awed eyes as if seeing or understanding something Ichigo could not.

Finally, after what felt like a passing of eternities the spirit looked at the katana impaled through his chest with an odd sort of apathy before his eyes drifted towards Ichigo’s own, such swirling depths of emotions untamed in his inner world free of the many masks however tiny he held for the sake of his friends. Wide eyes greeted Ichigo’s own even as he drove Zangetsu further through the being and whispered with heartsick determination, “If you will not believe me then I will show you Muramasa.”

With those words Ichigo recalled the memories, the first zanpaktou rebellion, the chaos, Muramasa and his cold indifference, fighting Zangetsu, Kuchiki Kōga freed, and Muramasa’s final moments. Swirling inside his chest, and mind like a fever, the young Captain inhaled and with a soft exhale channelled it all through Zangetsu, letting the memories flow to the spirit but not forcing them, allowing Muramasa to make his own choice as to whether to glimpse the strange truth of the Captain out of his time.

Ichigo watched the zanpaktou spirit in silence as he experienced Ichigo’s memories; the thoughts and feelings associated with each, noting the moments when devastation crowned the noble being’s features, far distant eyes flashing with turmoil. A warm palm settled suddenly on Ichigo’s shoulder and he leant slightly into the warm chest of Zangetsu-Ossan who he knew was standing there supporting Ichigo, as Shiro crouched at the edge of the skyscraper chucking rocks at the water churning bellow, reflecting Ichigo’s worries and fears.

Muramasa surfaced from the memories with tears streaming down his face, glistening in the rain that soaked them as the spirit stared at Ichigo as if he wanted to deny everything as if to shout and scream that it wasn’t true, even if everything else had already surrendered and accepted the truth. When one was a spirit of the souls of many, one learned to differentiate the truth among lies.

It was also likely the spirit could sense the truth of Ichigo’s soul, the reaitsu that clashed against one another and settled into a strange balance. Even if Ichigo had found a way to absorb the spirit into his own inner world, it was not an environment for any not forged of Ichigo’s soul. It was also far too true that Ichigo would never suit an illusion type zanpaktou even one like Muramasa.

A gentle hand reached up to settle on Ichigo’s cheek as if to feel that the young Shinigami was real, the spirit stared once more into Ichigo’s eyes, seeing far more now that the eyes a warm cocoa were not so blinded by the sunlight. It gladdened some part of Ichigo that he had been successful in curing if only temporarily the insanity and allowing the spirit to pull from the waves of drowning despair and loneliness for a breath.
“I apologize Ichigo.”

The spirit said slowly, a thousand words lingering there, an apology for his disbelief of Ichigo’s words, for his actions, for what had occurred in the original timeline. Before Ichigo could respond that the spirit held no need to apologize the spirit continued, “And I’m sorry you had to live through such a future so terrible that you are here now. Fate is not kind to rest the weight of the world on the shoulders of one so young.”

The words shocked Ichigo as his eyes widened and his breath was stolen from his lungs. He stared in surprise at Muramasa even as the spirit smiled kindly, the expression washed warm and welcoming by the emotions that buoyed from the spirit’s reaitsu even as it was undercut with a current of pain and desolation.

Before Ichigo could respond a tug from the outside world pulled throughout his soul, and Muramasa’s reaitsu wavered flickering like that of a flame facing the rain. Slowly the two were pulled from Ichigo’s inner world, the sunlight of the afternoon shining around Ichigo, as he slowly lowered the spirit cradled in his arms to the ground, Zangetsu still impaled in the spirit’s chest. The reaitsu around Muramasa was light once more as Ichigo flooded the spirit with reaitsu washing away the taint; even knowing any attempt to heal was futile and worthless. There was no longer any will to survive and live in peace, and Zangetsu had sensed it from the first moment the blade had impaled the spirit’s chest.

“Promise me you will deal with my wielder. Make sure he can never hurt anyone again. Please promise me Ichigo.”

Muramasa spoke in a soft whisper as if sensing his fading life force, Ichigo nodded reaitsu echoing his reaitsu in great waves, sorrow at the outcome of the battle but also acceptance like the acceptance he had found in the spirit. Some part of Ichigo wanted to rage and cry that the world was unfair to end such as this twice, whereas the other part of Ichigo, the one that had come to hold fate’s favour knew that some things were unchangeable on a grand scale, things destined to occur. But Ichigo had changed things he thought lightly, Zangetsu humming a warm presence throughout his soul as Ichigo responded, “I promise,” the young Captain spoke and he leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on the spirit’s forehead imparting a piece of his reaitsu to the spirit he finished, “Find peace in the cycle of rebirth and may we meet again Muramasa.”

“Thank you Ichigo, may the future be kind to you,” The spirit spoke slowly before in a careful movement he pulled an ornate hairpin, gold and violet flowers carved into being decorating the pin, from inside his cloak and pressed it firmly into Ichigo’s hand and instructed, “Hold onto it carefully, may it guide you and those of the Kuchiki clan.”

The orange-haired youth was absently aware of the zanpaktou spirits on Sokyoku, silent shadows as Ichigo nodded his promise reaitsu surging around him as he ferried Muramasa’s soul to the afterlife in a great coalescence of reaitsu spiraling away the form of the spirit and leaving only Zangetsu standing entrenched in Sokyoku hill a testament to the daylight and the end of the noble spirit.

Zangetsu-Ossan materialized with a rustle of reaitsu and rested a gentle hand on Ichigo’s shoulder, even as Zangetsu-Shiro settled beside Ichigo with a bitter chuckle half-comforting in its familiarity. The orange-haired Shinigami quietly tucked the pin into the sleeve of his shihakusho, mourning the ending for all the peace it lingered with as his senses following the last trace of Muramasa’s reaitsu. The various captains and lieutenants began to arrive on Sokyoku hill with a heave of reaitsu that resounded throughout Soul Society, and the zanpaktou spirits watched on with careful eyes as the last wisp of reaitsu disappeared in sun’s guiding rays.
Thank you all for reading. I hope you enjoyed the way the arc ended, I know some people wanted Muramasa to live, but I hope I provided a satisfactory reason as to why it wasn’t necessarily possible. The next chapter will be the end of the Zanpaktou Rebellion Arc, and then we will be moving onto another arc. Thank you for reading, reviews/comments are always appreciated!

Down!
Lalochezia

Chapter Notes

Lalochezia

(n.) The emotional relief gained from using abusive of profane language.

Hello everyone, here is chapter 59! This chapter will be the wrap up of the Zanpaktou Rebellion arc in the first scene and start the beginning of the new arc in the second. I hope you all enjoy, read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The restaurant flourished in warm hues of gold and bronze, warmth seeping in an almost tangible aura as waiters bustled about carrying steaming dishes laden with delicacies of all natures, while the scent of incense perfumed the air. The gentle chatter of the gathered captains and lieutenants filtered like white noise in the background as reaitsu mingled and floated upon the air in soft harmony. Ichigo glanced out over the restaurant with a calm settled about his shoulders, noting the many familiar faces as the restaurant was empty of other patrons, hosting solely the Gotei 13 upper echelon, as was reasonable when one considered the often less than sane dynamics a gathering of such Shinigami would bring. And that would be to discount the many spirits also gathered about the restaurant, many seated beside their wielders, some towered above the heads of their wielders, and others fluttered about in a blur of light.

Zangetsu-Ossan on Ichigo’s right was nursing a cup of sake, studying the room in the same manner of his wielder with amused eyes and a resonating fondness that Ichigo felt in the deepest part of his soul. Seeing the Shinigami at peace with each other, sharing camaraderie with their spirits and general good-heartedness was a sight that soothed the half of Ichigo still exhausted by the past week. Shiro squished on Ichigo’s left was staring mutinously at the plate in front of him, likely petulant that Ichigo had forbid the spirit from starting any battles with the numerous powerful beings gathered. That or the fact they were socializing in such a group environment.

Kaien laughed boisterously as he gently slammed his glass of sake on the table, catching the orange-haired Shinigami’s attention where he was settled diagonally from Ichigo with Nejibana settled directly on her wielder’s left. Beside Kaien, Nejibana was a soothing presence flowing and ebbing like the tides brought forth by the moon, a veil of shimmering liquid like beaded gold and draped turquoise covering long almost reed like hair and a dainty face hid most of the spirit from sight, along with the kimono wrapped in shifting folds the spirit was like water personified. As if sensing the attention of his thoughts she glanced up at Ichigo and nodded in greeting; the water spirit content to
remain quiet and observant. Her wielder on the other hand was animatedly talking to Ukitake who listened with a half-amused smile as the spirits of Sōgyo no Kotowari ran about the restaurant ducking under the heels of whichever Shinigami was unfortunate enough to be in their path as they constantly circled back to Jūshirō with some new thing for the elder to inspect.

Shunsui settled half beside Ossan, half slumped over the table ignoring Katen Kyōkotsu’s disapproving stare from the elder spirit at her wielder’s actions, no matter what they were. The younger spirit continued to talk in quiet whispers with Nano, who was relatively similar to the Nano of Ichigo’s time but a lot softer around certain people, of which Ichigo was proudly one of said people. The two, zanpaktou and wielder though unknowing of it, were ignorant of Lisa watching them converse in their own little bubble with fond amusement.

Ichigo jolted from his quiet observance as a hand waved in front of his eyes accompanied a moment later by a bright Cheshire grin, and a curtain of blond as Shinji leaned half across the table to get Ichigo’s attention. The orange haired Shinigami raised a half-amused brow at his friend for pulling his attention away from harmless musings as he first let a half glare fall across his features follow by an expectant expression exemplified through a raised brow.

Something close to a wicked, promising grin flashed over the Captain of the Fifth’s features and Ichigo wondered what he had done to incur the Vizard’s attention. In a voice, one that was all blatant curiosity with a bit of devilish mischievousness, the blond was at heart a lover of causing chaos, and a wink the blond asked, “So Ichigo when did ya get a dual wield zanpaktou?”

If it wouldn’t be inappropriate in a restaurant Ichigo would gladly reach across the table and strangle his friend, as the eyes of many of the captains and lieutenants gathered around them centred on Ichigo as if someone had declared some completely improbably thing, the question which seemed impossibly loud almost echoed about them. Shiro looked half close to acting on Ichigo’s desires, even as raspy chuckles filled the air and the bleached spirit coughed out, “Ya screwed there King. Told ya secrets don’t stay secrets.”

Ichigo fixed his zanpaktou spirit with a baleful look; he didn’t need his spirit to tell him that after all they had been through. Shiro only shrugged and returned his attention to the cup of sake Ossan had wisely decided to give the hollow spirit.

Kaien, still in the middle of his exuberant description of his battle against Nejibana using only one leg and a lot of tactics, paused to turn to Ichigo, like a wolf setting its eyes on a tasty morsel at the question that still lingered on the air. A general look of curiosity surrounded Ichigo as the Shinigami recalled the few times Ichigo had released his Shikai to the eyes of the public, and it had indeed possessed only one blade.

It had perhaps been a hasty decision to release his true Shikai on Sokyoku hill, one that paid homage to his own adolescent years, considering Ichigo had been going for the element of surprise in the past. But things had changed since he had been in the academy; it wasn’t his power or his capability with Zangetsu that had provided the quick second confidence to go through with it all. It had been the family and friends Ichigo knew supported him, the return of his mental health to a state where constant paranoia and insomnia wasn’t normal. His chest was warm at the thought even as outwardly Ichigo maintained a bemused expression.

“Indeed, Ichi it would be interesting to know. Considering when I saw you in the academy tournament you had only a single blade zanpaktou.”

Shunsui commented wryly with all the cunning of an old fox from where he had finally parted his head from the table, curly hair a mess about his face even as the devil resided mirthfully in his eyes. Katen Kyōkotsu whacked her wielder upside the head at the comment even as she studied Ichigo.
with intrigued eyes and Shunsui rubbed his injured skull. Jūshirō the picture of innocence beside Kaen smiled all benign and kind, tempered underneath by a backbone of the same kin of Shinji and asked, “I seem to recall Shunsui mentioning his young lieutenant asking about wielding a dual blade a few times.”

The Captain of the Eighth nodded sagely in agreement with the words, and Ichigo decided that desperately banging his head against the table was not good for his health, so though tempted he refrained. Kaen, studying Ichigo with a sceptical look suggested with all the man of deep reasoning and logic, “Could it be that that was Ichigo’s Bankai?”

Shiro laughed at the suggestion as if the twin blades could ever amount to the true power of Zangetsu, even Ossan shook his head in the negative. Unseeing of the two spirits’ actions Shinji jumped in, “Nah Ichí’s not the type to go all out unless he has to; he wouldn’t skip Shikai for one enemy.”

The comment received a hum of agreement and Ichigo wondered silently when his friends had come to know him so well, when they had come to know his habits, it set his heart about in his chest as if he was once more a teenager. In thought and nostalgia, Ichigo’s eyes drifted briefly away from the table to search for a familiar presence before returning to expectant gazes.

“You’re all horrible.”

Ichigo responded with a shake of his head even as Ossan studied his wielder with well-founded amusement. Shinji chuckled and continued to wear his shit eating grin, likely having a clue as to how long Ichigo had known the true element of Zangetsu but still deciding that every other Shinigami in the room needed to know that Ichigo was, as always, far from normal. At the still expectant glance from Shunsui and Jūshirō, generally curious as the sole dual zanpaktou wielders (other than Shūhei, but he had scythes), Ichigo scrubbed a hand over his brow and contemplated speaking plainly.

“Oh! I bet it was when Ichigo defeated that huge Menos Grande and all that reaitsu was flying about like a huge storm.”

Kaen interjected excitedly, the rouge dusting his cheeks only adding to his exuberance as Nejibana laughed, a clear tinkling sound like water over river rocks at her wielder’s actions. Ichigo shook his head at the guess and once more received a round of raised brows, as one of the spirits’ finally decided to add their input Katen Kyōkotsu silently commented, “It is strange that one’s zanpaktou would change Shikai. That has never occurred in our long history.”

Ichigo decided to flash the older female spirit a pleading look, logic was not necessary for the conversation, nor the wisdom of spirits who had seen and experienced far more than most could comprehend. Thankfully only Shunsui and Jūshirō noted the words with their usual sharpness, gazes flickering between Ichigo and his spirits in thought. If simply anyone were to figure out the nature of Ichigo’s powers, it could be something catastrophic.

“Surely you haven’t gained it recently Ichigo.”

Unohana suggested kindly, all intrigued yet conceding healer, where she slipped into one of the open seats at the wide table with poise and elegance. Almost instantly certain captains or lieutenants who had escaped the female healer’s tender mercy recently tensed at the Captain of the Fourth’s presence. Ichigo just smiled at the woman, ignoring the knowing gaze that demanded a talk at a later date, and respectfully greeted the spirit hovering like a shadow in soft folds of green behind Unohana with a nod.

“You’re correct Unohana.”
Ichigo responded with a half grin, refraining from continuing as unprompted Shiro butted in all pride and boasting, “Ichigo wouldn’t be nearly strong enough to wield us if he got our true form recently.”

“At least your wielder actually uses their Shikai once in a while and isn’t incredibly lazy; hardly able to lift his own blade.”

The older form of Katen Kyōkotsu commented with a dismissive huff and a disapproving stare levelled at Shunsui where he was studying the room with a good-natured yet hiding smile from underneath his worn straw hat. The elder Captain twitched and flailed at the accusation demanding how his zanpaktou could speak to him such a manner with good-natured ribbing as Lisa nonchalantly agreed with the female zanpaktou spirit in a deadpan.

“Ichi-nii, Ichi-nii! Tell us.”

Sōgyo no Kotowari demanded where they popped up beside Ichigo from under the table, one of the twins clambering over his lap to tug at the bright orange strands feathered about his neck, the other having a staring contest with Shiro. Jūshirō laughed at the actions of his spirits and made a vague go forth gesture to Ichigo as the other Shinigami watched on in amusement; most knew Ichigo was an absolute sucker for kids.

Rolling his eyes Ichigo carefully dismantled the twin’s tight grip in his hair and pulled out a thin silver enamelled pin he had nicked from Kūkaku earlier in the day and presented it to the young boy. Sōgyo no Kotowari cheered and scattered across the bench to display the treasure even as Ichigo shared a brief glance with Ossan, conversation playing unspoken.

The spirit nodded imperceptibly, encouraging Ichigo to speak the truth as the elder spirit passed Ichigo the sake cup. Taking a shot for courage Ichigo faced the collective Shinigami and rubbing the back of his head in half abashment the young Captain responded, “I’ve sort of had the dual blades the whole time?”

The answer received a few wide eyes, some suspicious glares, a murmur of, “Only you Ichigo,” and even outright shock combined with disbelief. Shiro cackled at their expressions and commented gaily, “King ain’t a weakling; he just had to keep a pretence else certain people would keep an eye on him.”

Shunsui’s eyes sharpened like razors at the clues Shiro had carelessly left hanging in the air, regardless of Ichigo’s desires, though really the spirit wouldn’t act outside the jurisdiction of Ichigo’s soul unless absolutely necessary. The young Captain still wanted to bang his head on the table at the looks he was receiving though.

“It all makes sense now. But still, how could my baby brother lie to me!”

Kaien commented with wide-eyed awe and crocodile tears even as Nejibana nodded in kind, a comforting hand resting on her wielder’s shoulder, and in a voice like rainfall added, “It was always strange the nature of your reaitsu Ichigo.”

“It definitely explains why you always reached for another blade when we sparred.”

Shunsui added in a logical manner, eyes studying Ichigo as if he had suddenly been presented a grand opportunity. Katen Kyōkotsu also studied Ichigo with interest as if the prospect of another dual wielder was unfamiliar to them and yet strangely intriguing. Though in a sense all of the spirits had sensed something was different about Ichigo, many had paused to stare at him for a silent moment before moving on; always more aware than their wielders of the world beyond the physical.
“It does explain part of the reason Ichigo is so powerful.”

Unohana commented gracefully, as if not suggesting that there was more to the dual form of zanpaktou than one could see on the surface, which she had mostly assuredly guessed from their many conversations. Shinji continued to grin at the chaos his question had brought, eyes bright as Sakande walked gracefully across the table in the form of a feline, she inclined her head regally to Ichigo in greeting before stopping to curl around her wielder’s arm, purring rumbling throughout the air at the action.

Before any more questions could be asked relating to the nature or appearance of Ichigo’s zanpaktou, Byakuya appeared like a godsend from above. With a wink at Ichigo, the noble squished in beside the Captain of the Tenth, as Shiro easily slid over to curl near Shinji with bright teasing ochre eyes and Senbonzakura joined the table to sit stiffly beside Ossan.

“Did I miss anything?”

The young noble asked with a bemused expression, voice innocent as if he was completely lost as he noted the many still shocked Shinigami or the strange curious aura amongst the captains and lieutenants. Shinji chortled at the question even as Ichigo rolled his eyes and responded, “Just this lot questioning how long Zangetsu has been a dual bladed zanpaktou.”

Byakuya made a vague noise of acknowledgement at the statement as Ichigo passed the head of the Kuchiki clan a sake cup and a bottle of the clear liquid. Byakuya nodded his head in thanks and shot the liquid down with elegant grace as a few Shinigami shared conspiratorial stares, words passing almost unseen.

“The real question would be what Ichigo’s Bankai looks like.” Kaien stated factually, drawing the attention of the gathered Shinigami once more before the soon to be dead lieutenant continued, “I mean we know you have one because you’re a Captain. But the only person who’s seen it is the Soutaicho.”

A general consensus of an agreement reached the statement and Ichigo again ignored the urge to bang his head on the table, followed by a round of banging his head against the wall. He had come out to have a good time, and he was feeling a bit attacked. Honestly, his Bankai, while powerful was not something to be lightly released in Soul Society for any reason but a catastrophic threat to the three worlds. And yes, the Soutaicho had seen it, but only briefly.

“Ichigo’s Bankai is of a delicate nature for Soul Society. However, what perhaps would be more interesting is the aspect of his Vizard power very few have explored.”

Zangetsu-Ossan said almost casually guiding the Shinigami to a less sensitive topic, elegant baritone rumbling throughout the small space the gathered Shinigami had carved out for themselves. Ichigo cast a vaguely betrayed look at his zanpaktou spirit, even as a tide of curious glances landed on both Ichigo and Shinji, the resident Vizard.

“I believe Zangetsu is talking about your Resurrección no?”

Shinji asked with another wide grin, gleefully directing the attention to the young Captain, Ichigo repressed a groan at the words and ignored Shiro’s motion of slicing his neck and pointing to Shinji. The orange haired Captain nodded once, more than enough for the Shinigami as they began to gossip to one another, murmuring about the possibilities and what it could even be, even as Byakuya bumped a shoulder against Ichigo’s in reassurance.

“You have a Resurrección then Ichigo-kun?”
Jūshirō asked with a raised brow, as the twins turned to face Ichigo with wide curious energetic eyes as if about to demand Ichigo show them right away in the middle of the restaurant. Part of him was tempted to do so, just to shock everyone into silence and stop the interrogation, another part of him vindictively reminded Ichigo that that would be a bad idea. Instead, Ichigo conceded with a nod, momentarily flinching as he recalled just how he had first accessed the technique.

Shunsui well familiar with Ichigo’s mannerisms after serving with the Captain for many years; studied Ichigo with concern at the wicked fast show of weakness, even as Byakuya beside his partner equally observant squeezed Ichigo’s hand. Kaien leaned across the table to peer at Ichigo, searching as if to ascertain every truth from his eyes alone and asked, “What else haven’t you told us Ichigo? Is your hair even really orange?”

Ichigo scrubbed a hand over his features at the questioning and with a roll of his eyes and a voice thick with sarcasm or annoyance responded, “Yes my hair is really orange Kaien. We’ve been over this a thousand times.”

As if testing the theory Sōgyo no Kotowari each tugged on a lock of hair and inspected it. Their actions, however, were halted as the temperature dropped a few degrees, breath misting the air in puffs of silver as Tōshirō appeared, Hyōrinmaru following protectively behind the lieutenant. Within an instant, Sōgyo no Kotowari was bouncing away to inspect the dragon-like spirit, tugging at his robes and asking about wings and fire.

“Is everything okay Tōshirō?”

Ichigo questioned in concern for his lieutenant, knowing the midget would probably prefer to be anywhere but around Shinigami who would attempt to cuddle or coddle him. The white-haired Shinigami nodded his head and drifted closer to speak, in a quiet voice he responded, “Yes I finally escaped from Matsumoto-san. Urahara-taicho wanted me to remind you that he is departing for the mortal world tomorrow. And I wanted to remind you that you need to set up an appointment with Unohana-taicho and prepare for the next Captain’s meeting.”

“Thank you Tōshirō.”

Ichigo responded with a soft smile for the dedicated youth, even when he wanted to gripe about his lieutenant reminding Ichigo of his appointment the next day, and the upcoming captains meeting, not to mention the unspoken paperwork. Being a Captain was often a thankless position filled with long days and nights.

“Now shoo, go enjoy the dinner, I think Rukia was looking for you earlier.”

Ichigo supplied with an encouraging grin, the white-haired lieutenant delivered his Captain an unimpressed glance but conceded with a nod, the edge of a smile peeking through the scowl. The lieutenant bowed once before turning drifting to where Rukia was animatedly detailing her battle against Sode No Shirayuki to Renji, with pictures. Ichigo was glad Tōshirō had been able to connect with the Shinigami closer in his age range due to the change in station. He was still dutiful and serious, but Rukia, in much the same reflection, had managed to crack some of the ice, and Hinamori had done the rest.

Returning his attention to the table Ichigo gleefully noted that the conversation had moved away from Ichigo’s rather unique zanpaktou. Shinji and Kaien were arguing about whose zanpaktou would be the most difficult to fight, the frequent argument being an inverted world where left is right, vs a full freaking ocean. Shunsui, Jūshirō, and Unohana were idly discussing the many repairs still in progress throughout Soul Society, and the state of Rungokai as many of the lower divisions Shinigami aided the citizens into adjusting in the aftermath of the war.
Turning to face Byakuya, Ichigo studied his partner’s features, noting the exhaustion that still lined his face, though far less than in the last week. After Muramasa had been killed, Soul Society had taken a collective breath of relief, one that at the same time seemed to be held as if waiting for the other shoe to drop. And Ichigo knew it would, but he now had no clue as to who could attack next, it left a furrow in his brow as he contemplated once more how the timeline continued to change in minute and serious ways.

Byakuya likely sensing Ichigo’s attention, or wandering gaze, turned to face the orange-haired Captain, and Ichigo mustered a warm smile as he asked, “Are you okay?”

The Captain of the Sixth nodded, Senbonzakura shifting to face the two captains he nodded once in greeting to Ichigo before returning to careful observance for threats. Ichigo shook his head at the spirit’s normal stoicism even as Byakuya responded, “Yes I’m fine, no need to worry Ichigo.”

Ichigo smiled at the answer, pausing in the middle of formulating his response as he noticed a flash of green accompanied by a whisper of reaitsu in the distance as Kisuke shifted in obvious movement where he was chatting with Sosuke and Gin. Bright Athena grey eyes flashed as the former Captain (but still sort of a Captain) nodded his head in suggestion to the doorway. Ichigo responded with a careful nod before he glanced at Byakuya who only grinned in slight amusement at the silent play of politics and asked, “Would you like to get a bit of fresh air?”

The Captain of the Sixth grinned in acquiescence; eyes lighting like a summer field of grain with mirth. Byakuya carefully rose to his feet, and Ichigo followed after another moment, trading a reassuring gaze with Shunsui who only grinned with a suggestive note and winked before returning to the conversation as Zangetsu and Senbonzakura followed behind their wielders.

The afternoon was chilly but pleasant, bathed in the soft hues of fall in the fading sunlight dying street corners golden, fabrics rich russet orange and gentle blues dressed the skies. With a mischievous wink, Ichigo pulled out a small box tucked into the folds of his shihakusho. Byakuya raised a brow but said nothing as Ichigo lit the cancer-stick and stuck in his mouth with a whimsical sort of look to his eyes.

“You know I’ve heard those are supposed to kill you.”

Byakuya stated nonchalantly as he reclined against one of the walls of the restaurant, Ichigo shrugged haplessly in response, knowing and yet at the same time honouring his father. Shiro chuckled at the comment even as Ichigo responded, “It makes me look cool.”

The young Captain of the Sixth raised a brow and made a why-me face as if questioning his decision to embark on a mission to try and understand Ichigo’s sanity even as the door slid open beside them. Kisuke stepped into the sunlight with a sway and mildly adjusted the hat resting proudly atop his head as he turned his attention to the two captains. Benihime behind her wilder drifted to stand beside Zangetsu, crimson eyes studying the scene with varying shades of interest.

“Ah Ichikun and Byakuya, did Tōshirō inform you that I’m returning to the mortal world tomorrow?”

Kisuke greeted with a flair of dramatics and a grin. Ichigo nodded at the question and in greeting even as Byakuya rolled his eyes at the scientist and his antics. Kisuke stepped into the sunlight with a sway and mildly adjusted the hat resting proudly atop his head as he turned his attention to the two captains. Benihime behind her wilder drifted to stand beside Zangetsu, crimson eyes studying the scene with varying shades of interest.

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Kisuke greeted with a flair of dramatics and a grin. Ichigo nodded at the question and in greeting even as Byakuya rolled his eyes at the scientist and his antics. Running a hand over Zangetsu’s hilt Ichigo let his attention drift to slightly more serious manners, thoughts drifting towards the future he carefully spoke, “Kisuke I need you to keep an eye out on activity in the mortal world. There might appear creatures that you are somewhat familiar with; they eat souls. Or there might also be weird souls that aren’t souls. If they do appear please alert me as soon as possible and do try and keep the twins away.”
“Expecting more invasions Ichigo?”

Kisuke questioned even as he nodded solemnly to the request, pulling out a device and tapping rapidly as grey eyes peered intently at Ichigo. The orange-haired Shinigami scrubbed a hand over his features at the question, as Shiro cackled, and responded, “Unfortunately yes. I think there’s still about seven incidents of varying situations.”

Both Byakuya and Kisuke blinked in silent shock at the answer, the Kuchiki noble took a silent step closer to Ichigo to provide support as Ichigo casually dragged at the cigarette letting the smoke billow and wallow about the air. Kisuke fiddled with his hands for a moment, studying Ichigo with half fondness to his eyes he asked, “What do you believe will happen next?”

“At this point who knows, I can only warn you of the potential threats now.”

Ichigo admitted with a weary sigh, as Ossan’s presence reached out to wrap around Ichigo in a comforting manner. Kisuke nodded seriousness engraved upon his features as the weight of the future bore down upon them all in ever-increasing intensity. The Quincy were drawing closer, leaving Ichigo reeling at the thought of how much time he had spent in the past, how it had so completely become his life, and the strange thought of what would happen afterwards, after the great mission to protect and save the balance was finished.

Muramasa was in some ways a symbol of it all beginning to end, as much as the Winter War. But Ichigo wanted that peace, clung to it like a lifeline as much as the rapids of war eddied around him. Part of Ichigo was unsatisfied with the end of the zanpaktou spirit, one who had deserved better, yet was also comforted by the truth and finality of death.

Ichigo startled out of his thoughts glanced down in surprise as his breath was knocked out of him, a young child with curly hair and bright almost lilac blue eyes glanced up at Ichigo from where he had collided with his legs before the child mumbled an apology still staring up at Ichigo with wide-eyed awe for a moment. Ichigo smiled at the child and watched as the brat grinned back and with a parting wave turned to run joining his friends as they raced through the streets. A contemplative frown settled over Ichigo as he watched the child disappear into the distance before he realigned his attention with the two captains before him, dismissing baseless theories.

“Shall we rejoin the others?”

The young Captain suggested with fake grandeur, Byakuya snorted at the imitation even as Kisuke laughed short and crisp and replied, “Perhaps, but first you can tell us what your Bankai is actually like.”

“Not happening, I’m saving it for the right person.”

Ichigo responded with a teasing lilt, winking at Byakuya even as Shiro chuckled and Ossan hummed in agreement. Kisuke pouted and sighed reluctantly but accepted the answer and with a flourish of his hat and a wink stepped inside the restaurant. Ichigo took a last drag on his cigarette before letting the butt fall to the ground he stamped it out and studied the streets of Rungokai and the feel of Soul Society surrounding him.

Byakuya beside Ichigo studied the same sight, the two absorbing the moment in silence before Byakuya commented, “Come, we best return before Kaien and Rukia decide to spread rumours. Again.”

Ichigo laughed and nodded, the two captains turning from the sun paved street entered the restaurant where the raucous din of the Shinigami greeted them, zanpaktou spirits following elegantly behind.
They would soon depart from their constant materialization, but as Ichigo flashed Zangetsu a grin over his shoulder, the Captain knew he didn’t mind. The future was sweeping forward, and one had to always be prepared.

Rukia was sitting at Tōshirō’s desk when Ichigo entered, dutifully filling out paperwork and humming some happy song or the like, probably something she picked up in her brief intermission in the mortal world. Scrubbing a hand over his brow, Ichigo nonchalantly ignored the midget lieutenant, the sight not wholly uncommon.

The lieutenant had arrived one day, a stack of paperwork under one arm, and the other holding the door open; Toshiro had been out training the division Shinigami at Ichigo’s request. The young Kuchiki had stared into Ichigo’s eyes with all the set and determination of a bull, and he had stared back expectantly waiting for an explanation of some kind. He would even accept that the lieutenant had decided Ichigo was too lazy and she was to remedy that, or that she had arrived to drag him to a meeting he had forgotten about.

“Kyororaku-taicho is visiting Ukitake-taicho.”

Rukia had stated with a deadpan, and Ichigo had nodded near instantly accepting the unspoken reason with a gentle smile, he was well experienced with the two elder captains’ multiple visits. Since then Rukia had appeared at random, sometimes when Tōshirō was in the office, but more often not.

Pacing to his desk Ichigo nodded in greeting to the young Shinigami and with a dismal glance at the paperwork, far less than it could have been at least, thanks to the many secretaries of sorts they had hired, sat down. Rukia glanced up from her paperwork and nodded in greeting, a small warm smile dancing across her features before she carefully took note of Ichigo’s appearance and in a voice weary with resignation asked, “What happened to you Ichigo?”

The orange-haired Captain glanced down at his shihakusho in careful observation, noting the many tears in the simple fabric, and the few cuts he still hadn’t managed to bandage with an apathetic eye, mindful of how certain overbearingly caring Shinigami would see it. Running a hand through his hair in a vaguely abashed movement Ichigo replied, “Kenpachi may have decided to have a friendly spar with me. But at least I got away before any real property damage could occur.”

“Honestly Taicho you could at least bandage your wounds properly and try to avoid him.”

Rukia scolded with a roll of her eyes and a frown, the indignant nagging achingly familiar and successful in bringing a hidden grin to his features. Ichigo shrugged in response and returned his attention to the paperwork at hand ignoring Shiro’s cackles at Rukia’s words in the back of his mind. Silence settled comfortably over the airy office, large windows reflecting light upon the warm wood casting everything in soft hues of summer.

The peace and quiet was suddenly brutally and utterly disturbed by a shrill incessant beeping. Ichigo jolted out of the reverie he had settled into while signing paperwork and fumbled about his shihakusho as the beeping continued.

With an exclamation of relief, Ichigo pulled out a small device, very similar to a cell phone, except able to handle trans dimensional calls. Rukia watched Ichigo with wide wary eyes as he flicked the lid back and pressed the accept message button. In an instant the small blue screen flickered, filtering between white static and a mishmash of techno colours for a moment before settling on a clear image of Kisuke, or rather Kisuke’s eyes. With a chuckle at Ichigo’s surprised exclamation, the scientist
pulled the device away and studied Ichigo with gleaming eyes both serious and overexcited like a boy presenting a new toy to his friends.

“Ah Ichi-chan, just the Shinigami I was looking for.”

Kisuke’s greeting was with one of those irritatingly blank, yet so conniving smiles. Ichigo rolled his eyes at his friend’s antics but murmured a soft hello in greeting as manners dictated before he raised a brow, obvious curiosity filtering through his veins as Rukia slid to stand beside him, ever nosy she peered at the device with wide eyes.

“Is there something I can help you with Kisuke?”

Ichigo asked with an expectant tone as he carefully watched the scientist’s features for any sign of trouble, some cautious worry clawing at his thoughts in supplication, wonderings of the mortal world. Kisuke pouted at the question and demanded, “Can I not call my favourite orange-haired Shinigami out of the blue?”

“No.”

Said orange-haired Shinigami replied in a deadpan delivery, earning a deeper pout from the blond who fixed Ichigo with betrayed eyes. After a minute Ichigo rolled his eyes at the antics of his friend and let his lips curve into a small rueful smile. Kisuke brightened at the motion before his features darkened once more like a light fluttering and he asked, “Are you doing anything important right now Ichigo?”

“Unless you consider paperwork important, no.”

Ichigo responded with a half grin, gaze quickly darting to Rukia, who had flashed Ichigo a glare at the disrespect he had shown the paperwork but was still absorbed in the conversation. Kisuke placed a hand on his chest in one grand flourish he had probably picked up from Aizen’s influence and responded, “Paperwork not important? What blasphemy! It is the threads that form the grand tapestry of life.”

The young Captain snorted at the flagrant lie, before devolving into full-blown laughter at his friend’s dramatics, as Kisuke followed Ichigo’s example and broke into laughter, the sound filling the office with a soothing sort of warmth. Breaking off into soft wheeling laughter Kisuke calmed himself with deep breaths drawing his striped at over his eyes for a moment to recompose himself before once more a serious expression flew across his features. Ichigo mimicked the serious aura, eyebrows furrowing as he waited for the scientist to speak.

“Recently there’s been a lot of reaitsu activity, souls disappearing, and the like in the mortal world. I think this might be the… Bounts you were speaking of.”

Kisuke stated seriously; ever tactical and dissecting with his words. Ichigo scowled as he absorbed the information, desiring to bang his head against the desk in front of him, which would probably concern or irritate Rukia. Instead in a moderately done-with-your-shit-fate tired kind of voice, he asked, “Already? It’s only been about three weeks since Muramasa.”

The blond Captain shrugged at Ichigo’s complaint in a helpless manner, even as a vaguely sympathetic look passed over his features, before being shuttled away by some passing train of thought. A tap on Ichigo’s shoulder pulled his attention away from the device in front of him and he turned to face Rukia who was studying the screen with a serious expression. Quietly she asked, “Is there trouble in the mortal world? In Karakura town?”
Ichigo debated answering falsely for a half moment, allowing Rukia to stay in Soul Society while he dealt with the problem before he bitterly recalled the feel of Rukia hitting him and decided against it. She would likely find out in the end anyway and that would be far worse, it was better to save what brain cells he still possessed. So Ichigo nodded and reassured, “It’s something a few captains will likely be able to take care of easily… well depending. Nope, they’ll be able to handle it.”

The orange haired Captain finished his dubious reassurance with a confident smile and returned his attention to Kisuke who was looking up at Ichigo with far too amused eyes. Running a hand through his hair, Ichigo mentally went through the map of things he needed to finish on his never-ending list, though this one consisting of the upcoming week was considerably shorter than other lists Ichigo had been forced to make.

There was a captains’ meeting to go over the recent renovations to Soul Society, a meeting with Unohana, and of course his normal duties as Captain. But with Tōshirō in the barracks, Ichigo would likely be able to leave everything in the midget’s capable hands.

“Should I come over?” Ichigo questioned with a raised brow to his scientist friend, knowing the answer but wishing to leave it in his friend’s calculated judgement. Kisuke pursed his lips for a moment of thought, pulling a fan out from one of his extensive, never-ending sleeves the scientist flapped the graceful thing in front of his features for a minute before responding, “Is it wise for you to be coming over?”

The orange-haired Shinigami elected to ignore the question and its somewhat redundant yet valid point, and instead grinned at Kisuke something anticipatory filled with predatory corners. Before Ichigo could respond that he would be there as soon as possible, a tug on his shihakusho pulled Ichigo’s attention away from the call to Rukia, still standing at Ichigo’s desk arms folded over her chest and lilac eyes stormy at being ignored.

They softened minutely once the lieutenant of the Thirteenth division had regained Ichigo’s attention, something like hope glimmering in her eyes she questioned, “Is the trouble in Karakura town taicho.” Ichigo again thought briefly of denying the question in a half wish to protect the lieutenant, before once more he recalled Rukia’s famous violent temper and instead nodded in the positive. A conflicted look made war across Rukia’s noble features for a moment, clashing in great hues of hope and trepidation before the lieutenant questioned, both hesitant and courageous, “Would I be able to come with you taicho?”

“To see the Kurosaki children?”

The Captain of the Tenth questioned bluntly, already knowing the answer but needing to see the lieutenant’s reaction. Rukia blushed faintly but nodded, one hand shifting to the hilt of Sode No Shirayuki settled at her hip in promise eyes blazing with a thousand emotions that swelled and finessed itself to a knife-point. Ichigo nodded in acquiescence of Rukia’s request earning a thankful but grim in understanding smile.

Returning his attention to the device, and Kisuke fidgeting with some metal contraption Ichigo announced, “Kisuke we, consisting of myself and lieutenant Kuchiki, are going to head over in a few, expect us whenever.”

“Hopefully the dangai doesn’t screw anything up. Again.”

Kisuke commented cheerfully almost absently in reply as he absorbed the new member of their party with curling lips. Shaking his head with a roll of his eyes Ichigo commented, “We’ll see you soon
Kisuke.”

“Indeed, don’t take too long Ichi-kun.”

The blond scientist replied with a flourish as the screen fazed into harsh static before falling silently. Dragging a hand over his face in exhaustion of the endless rush of life, Ichigo took a deep breath before he flared his reaitsu attempting to call the attention of his lieutenant. Mission somewhat successful judging by the reaitsu approaching, Ichigo turned to Rukia and sternly instructed, “Please go and inform your brother of our impromptu trip, promise him we’ll be back relatively soon, and meet me back here in ten. Go.”

Rukia gaped for a moment, looking dangerously close to deciding to hit Ichigo at the order before she nodded determination dancing prettily across her features as she disappeared in a hum of shunpo. A near second later the shoji doors to Ichigo’s office slid open with a rattle and Tōshirō entered, gaze close to both murder and stoicism in a remarkable mixture as the midget stared Ichigo down, likely questioning why he continued to serve under the orange-haired Captain.

“Taicho is there something I can assist you with?”

Tōshirō questioned frostily, leaving to Ichigo to chuckle faintly and somewhat ominously before he replied, “I’m going on a trip to the mortal world, probably short-term about a week. I need you to manage the division. And don’t worry about it Tōshirō you’ll do fine.”

Ichigo reassured at the vaguely terrified expression that appeared at the statement about the Captain of the Tenth’s sudden leave of absence. As much as the white-haired lieutenant complained, they did actually get along fairly well, they had an understanding of duty and responsibility, and in any case in the midget’s eyes it was an upgrade from Isshin. Tōshirō sighed, a tired sigh, the one he usually used when Rangiku was in the room and asked, “Is it actually an important mission?”

“Why Tōshirō I’m offended you think I would go on lackadaisical missions for no reason.” The Captain responded with a grin before his expressions darkened to seriousness and he continued, “There’s trouble in the mortal world that I need to deal with, and I need you to manage the division while I’m gone.”

In an instant at the cool tenseness of the room, Ichigo’s words had brought Tōshirō nodded a protective statue of grim determination, shifting his eyes around the office in silent contemplation of all the tasks he would need to handle. Knowing the kid would be more than fine, and that it was likely good practice for the lieutenant in any case, Ichigo scrubbed a hand over his brow in a final manner and thought over who he needed to contact before he left for the mortal world.

Glancing up at the white-haired lieutenant through his bangs Ichigo nodded to himself and asked, “Tōshirō if I could ask you a favour?” The lieutenant regarded Ichigo with wary eyes before seeing the determination and thought behind the request he conceded with a sharp nod and Ichigo continued, “I need you to tell the Soutaicho that the Bounts are in the mortal world and that I’m handling the situation. I also need you to speak to Hirako-taicho, Lieutenant Yadōmaru, probably Rangiku, and if Gin is available you can talk to him. Tell them to be alert for a mission to the mortal world. It’s likely we’ll need backup.”

“I understand Taicho, is there anything else you need me to do while watching over the division?”

Tōshirō nodded and asked, seriousness carved into his features like an ice sculpture. Ichigo shook his head as he moved aside from the desk and shook his limbs out for a moment before pacing forward to stand beside the lieutenant he instructed, “Just keep doing as you are doing Tōshirō, maybe try and relax a little. Everything will work out fine.”
Smiling Ichigo reached over and ruffled the white-haired Shinigami’s hair ignoring the annoyed swat accompanied by a small very well-hidden grin at the action. Winking at his lieutenant the Captain of the Tenth exited the office and made his way to the courtyard.

Rukia was standing in the entryway, sunlight playing with her hair and making it gleam like raven feathers as wary cautious eyes searched out Ichigo before landing on him with a spark of excitement hidden behind the façade of stoicism. Waving in greeting Ichigo approached the young lieutenant and when he was within hearing distance asked, “Are you ready Rukia?”

The Kuchiki noble nodded; eyes flashing suddenly sharp in challenge as if daring Ichigo to deny her the opportunity to return to the mortal world. Ichigo just shook his head in amusement, ruffled her hair, a habit he refused to drop, earning once more an annoyed swat, and stepped to the center of the courtyard.

Unsheathing Zangetsu with an elegant hiss, Ichigo thrust the blade between the fabrics of the world, reaitsu flowing about his form in a gentle untameable breeze. With a near unnoticeable click, the shoji doors appeared sliding open in a graceful manner and a halo of light, Ichigo turned and beckoned Rukia forward as the Jigokuchō appeared to guide them.

Stepping through the doorway Ichigo ignored the near unfelt chills that always accompanied a journey through the dimensions as if questioning their existence. Hearing the careful and precise steps of Rukia behind him Ichigo began to move through the dangai precipice as the Jigokuchō floated ethereally in front of them.

The shoji doors opened onto a familiar yard, carded in the last rays of the sun beginning to fade in the approach of the evening. Stepping into the yard as Rukia followed behind him, the Captain let his reaitsu sweep out in broad crawling strokes, searching for the Bount, and inevitably finding the mansion where they had dwelled the last time. Their presences were akin to that of a vampire something sucking on the local reaitsu, leeching from the world around them, but they were there nonetheless.

Kisuke appeared in his usual bustle of antics and flourish of fabric as the retired Captain stood on the deck, fan flapping in whimsy as he studied the two of them with piercing Athena grey eyes. Ichigo shook his head in amusement at the familiar dramatics and beckoned Rukia forward with a lax wave over his shoulder and marched towards the lesser known entrance to the Urahara Shōten.

“Perfect timing Ichi-kun.”

The scientist said in greeting as he stepped aside and let the two Shinigami enter the Shōten, the scent of incense and candy lingering on the air in a heady cloak accompanied by a thick layer of dust; without Tessai spending near all of his time there, it was left to the division Shinigami on rotation to manage Kisuke’s less than cleanly habits. The former Captain followed amiably behind the two as Ichigo led them to the sitting room, idly observing a few of the flickering lights, and the furniture the man hadn’t changed since they had first bought it near fifty years ago.

“Ichigo.”

Rukia began only to fall silent as Ichigo held up a fist and cautioned, “I know you have ulterior motives in coming to the mortal world; mainly in meeting up with your friends. But since you’re here you’ll likely become involved regardless, and I could always use an extra hand. So, you need to know what’s going on.”

The young lieutenant furrowed a brow at the statement, obviously catching on that there was more at stake than unusual reaitsu, regardless the determination Ichigo had always respected in the raven-
haired youth made an appearance as Rukia conceded with a formal bow. Kisuke chuckled at the interaction as Ichigo settled at the low table and rolled his eyes at the man, Rukia sitting with carefully trained elegance.

A second after they settled at the low table the shoji door slid open and a plain Shinigami, likely from the Seventh division if the hairstyle was any indication entered the room, a tray holding both a teapot, cups, and other accoutrements balanced on one arm. Kisuke grinned, somewhat evil, at the appearance of his underling and beckoned the Shinigami forward, the man followed the wordless instructions and set the tray on the table, eyes darting around and observing the Shinigami seated like a deer in the den of a predator, before bowing once to Kisuke and darting out of the room.

Following proper etiquette and manners, though likely also taking pleasure in the wary glances Rukia was casting the scientist, Kisuke served the tea, a chai or something of the like. The silence sat between the three occupants as Ichigo calmly waited for one of the Shinigami to speak first, taking pleasure in the silence and the lull before what he knew instinctively would be once more a harrowing week. Some part of Ichigo was still desperately considering a vacation to some southern country with Byakuya if only to get away from the mess of Soul Society and let the Gotei 13 handle their own problems.

Kisuke was the first to crack in the drawn-out silence, ever immature and lacking patience when it came to anything involving demonstrating or showing an invention. With a tip on the brim of his striped hat, Kisuke placed one of his devices on the table; one that was shiny silver with a halo blue screen that flickered and glowed, besides the device he placed three mod soul pills.

“The Bounts have recently become active in Karakura town.”

The scientist stated in an overly serious tone, shadows cast onto his features by the brim of his hat. Ichigo nodded in understanding and repressed the urge to roll his eyes at the show Kisuke was putting on in part because he could, but mostly to explain to the lieutenant.

“What are Bounts?”

Rukia asked with a raised brow, a serious expression like a drawn knife carved onto her features, displacing the normally kind demeanour. Kisuke suddenly flipped from his overly serious demeanour to eccentric candy shop owner and explained with a bit of a cheery tone, “The Bounts are a tribe of artificially created beings that manage to live indefinitely so long as they consume Souls. They were originally an experiment by Soul Society to create artificial souls, mod souls as you know them. But there was an accident and they were born in human bodies.”

Kisuke explained carefully, pausing and allowing Rukia to comprehend the explanation. As much as Kisuke loved to talk heads above everyone else, when it came to real teaching he could honestly provide an education of certain subjects in a more than sufficient manner, that is if you excluded combat training as Ichigo would attest to in spite.

“And now they want revenge on Soul Society, surprise, surprise.”

Ichigo commented with a drawl thick with irony as Rukia startled to pin Ichigo with a surprised look and Kisuke nodded along something truly exhausted, not the type from staying up for three days straight, pulled at grey eyes. A moment of silence lingered at the severity of the statement; as tea was sipped at and Ichigo listened to Shiro compose a rendition of some pop song.

“Which is part of the crux of the matter young Kuchiki-san. They need a Quincy to do that.”

Kisuke finally added a few seconds later as he sipped at his tea, making a face at it briefly, likely not
enough sugar for the man, before continuing to drink the scorching liquid as if it was alcohol. Rukia furrowed a brow in thought at the guideline they had left her, as she recalled the numerous friends the twins had likely made before she stated, “But there are no Quincy... other than Ishida... who is the twins’ cousin.”

A look of dawning realisation splashed across Rukia’s features as she verbally connected the dots. The twins, Masaki, and the Ishida family were all at risk of the Bounts targeting them on their revenge quest; much to Ichigo’s concern and ire. Kisuke nodded something serious stealing over his features he commented, “Not that I suspect most of them couldn’t handle themselves, least to say Isshin is there as well. But some extra help and a bit of warning are always good. And thus, for that purpose are these mod souls here.”

Kisuke finished far too chipper for the fading sunlight streaming in through a window cut high into the walls, as he pointed at three glossy pills sitting innocently on the table. Ichigo ran a hand through his hair in response even as Rukia leaned closer to study the pills as if one might contain Chappy, unfortunately still an obsession of the raven-haired Shinigami in this timeline. It was likely something universal.

“These mod souls are able to detect the presence of the Bount. And we will place them in these vessels.”

The scientist stated before plopping three very familiar stuffed animals on the table. Ichigo tamped down on the urge to reach over and prod one of the soft plushies and instead watched as Rukia was instantly enamoured with their small and admittedly adorable forms.

“The other Shinigami will probably arrive a few days from now, once the Bounts make their first move,” Ichigo stated before turning to Rukia gathering her attention the orange-haired Shinigami continued, “In the meantime we should go inform the Kurosaki and Ishida family of the potential danger. It is likely one of the mod souls will be able to keep an eye on them as well.”

Rukia nodded in agreement, light sparking in her eyes and giving them a brilliant hue that made Ichigo’s chest ache in a pang of fondness and nostalgia, half recalling the Rukia he had known with a bitter smile before he shook it away. Kisuke looked up from where he was carefully placing the mod souls into the still stuffed characters and beamed at Ichigo for the suggestion, even as the concern lingering told Ichigo the scientist had caught Ichigo’s expression.

Nodding enthusiastically the scientist gently pushed Nova into Ichigo’s hands, uncaring that the Captain instantly passed the plushie to Rukia, he said, “That’s a great idea Ichigo. Take Nova, the mod soul you’re holding with you, he’ll be able to detect the Bounts if they decide to attack someone with striking orange hair walking almost completely alone in the evening. Feel free to return to the Shōten afterwards.”

Kisuke offered with a genuine glint to his eye before he quirked a brow in thought, a pensive expression dying his features like a Greek statue. The man began to talk to himself as Ichigo and Rukia pushed themselves to their feet. Urahara lead them to the back of the shop where he proffered two gigai on them without out prompting which Ichigo was more than thankful for, interrupting the scientist in the middle of one of his chattering fits filled with random ideas was not easy.

Then the scientist was pushing the two to the doorway, not necessarily rude just preoccupied, hands fiddling with the device that had rested on the table. He murmured faintly about being able to track the Bounts through it, and how they should stay cautious before the shoji doors slammed shut behind them with a cheerful wave and call of good luck.

Ichigo and Rukia shared a bemused glance at the antics of the former Captain before cracking into
light laughter as the sunset settled around them in freshly woven colours. Turning his attention to the familiar streets of Karakura town surrounding them, Ichigo embraced the nostalgia of it all for a moment before he said, “Come on let’s go slay some vampires.”

Rukia traded Ichigo a fairly quizzical look bordering on physical abuse, likely only vaguely understanding the reference even as she socked Ichigo on the shoulder for propriety’s sake. Ichigo scoffed at the midget’s antics as he fell into line behind Rukia and let the sunset and Karakura fall over him, thoughts vaguely straying to the Bounts, and to seeing his family again.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed the end to the Muramasa arc, I think the clue I left is fairly obvious but if anyone wants to guess feel free to. Next, we will be starting the Bount arc, which will be a lot shorter than in the canon filler arc.

Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Novel!
Collude

Chapter Notes

Collude

(v.) To conspire or plot

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 60, this chapter we are really starting the Bount arc. By the way, if you guys ever want to send prompts/asks I'm on Tumblr at Arowen12freelancer. I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

X

Masaki opened the door, warmth streaming almost beckoning from the doorway in hues of gold where the woman stood radiant in it. Ichigo was standing beside Rukia, who had Nova sitting happily on her shoulder, under the cover of the evening ducked his head for a moment, unable to bear the sight of his mother, happy, alive, content, smiling in greeting with crinkled eyes and the same smile he himself rarely bore. Rukia looked upon the woman with the same kind of adoration of anyone who’d been in Masaki’s circle of influence for more than a week; as the mother recognized the two Shinigami with bright eyes and stepped aside with a light greeting, “Good evening Kuchiki-san, Ichigo.”

Ichigo nodded in kind, mustering a smile that was all the warmth twisting itself into knots inside his chest, even as Rukia murmured a proper greeting, Kuchiki sensibilities influencing her words. As they glided through the doorway the raven-haired lieutenant landed Ichigo with a suspicious glance that Ichigo could simply feel like a sixth sense, poking and prodding relentlessly in its curiosity. Idly Ichigo wondered what the Kuchiki brat was trying to puzzle out as the door closed firmly behind them with a click and the light of the Kurosaki household washed over him; familiar tawny walls, bathed in warm colours, scents of spices and fragrant candles, all like a sea of sensations eclipsing his thoughts for a moment before there was a rustle of noise and the twins appeared in the hallway followed by Isshin.

The Captain of the Fifth paused in his lax observation of the room at the sight of his sisters; quietly with an inhale he observed their smiles, the light in their eyes, and how they had grown since last he had seen the two. Masaki casted Ichigo a knowing look but said nothing as the young Captain pulled himself together with a small smile that smoothed the lines of his thoughts.

Elation and surprise darted across the twins’ features at the sight of not only their uncle but also their close friend, Ichigo could almost detect the moment of indecision where they attempted to decide who to tackle first before they were darting forward with cries of Rukia’s name. Ichigo didn’t mind in the slightest. The sight of the three colliding in a large pile of arms and laughter brought a wistful expression to Ichigo’s features, one thick with the nostalgia of his own past and the friendships he
had formed that would never be.

Isshin slipped past the twins’ and Rukia’s subsequent dogpile to stand beside his wife, who greeted him with a kiss and eyes glowing with mirth. The lady of the house watched the scene with a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound of her laughter, and an easy grin was splashed across Isshin’s features at the scene and the warmth that permeated the atmosphere at the reunion.

Rukia had wanted to return to the mortal world likely as soon as was possible; she had told Ichigo with a half-smile that she had promised to live, it had been that desire that had allowed her to succeed against the Arrancar she had faced. But with first the war, the cleanup of the war that was interrupted by Muramasa, and the subsequent cleanup and paperwork of everything since, Ichigo knew the lieutenant hadn’t had the time for a true visit. Maybe she had stolen by once to see that the twins were alive, but then it was far too likely, duty and responsibilities would have called her back within the hour.

Part of Ichigo had also wanted to visit the mortal world if he could spare a moment to catch a breath, to make sure none of the Espada or other Arrancar had turned their eyes to the mortal world. The Captain of the Tenth had been in the same workaholic state of Rukia, perhaps even more so, which had prevented any attempts at the endeavour. But it seemed there was nothing to worry about which settled the lead weight hovering over his chest.

Sensing the attention of the other adults in the room like cicadas humming on the edge of one’s hearing, Ichigo glanced over to find Isshin’s eyes staring into the orange-haired Shinigami’s. Ever piercing silver molten like a fire from the hearth, possessing all the rarely seen seriousness the former Shiba Captain possessed, demanding and questioning softly at the same time. Masaki standing beside her husband held the same sort of steel, though hers was more that of the cold unyielding tundra, regal and proud.

“Is everything okay Ichigo? We heard about the war with Hueco Mundo, and that Soul Society was victorious, but not much else so far.”

Isshin spoke quietly, conscious of the twins and Rukia still conversing in fervent muted whispers in the other corner of the entry hall, the very air about the three exuberant and bright as they reconciled. Ichigo pursed his lips at the question, thoughts drifting once more to the past few weeks before he banished them and nodded; eyes serious he responded, “Soul Society is recovering from the war, there were no serious casualties among the upper echelon but some of our forces were lost in the battle. What may surprise you is the treaty between the Espada and Soul Society, a sort of cessation of hostilities. The problem is the after part.”

The doctor’s shoulders visibly untensed as he breathed a sigh of relief at the hidden meaning of the words Ichigo had spoken, none of the Shiba clan or anyone of great concern to the Shiba family had perished in the war. Half a second later the man was once more the picture of a Shinigami Captain as he studied Ichigo with those fire-entrenched eyes and a raised brow gesticulating both to Ichigo’s unfinished statement and the allusion to peace between Hueco Mundo and the Shinigami, which would sound strange to anyone who hadn’t witnessed the war.

“Ichigo elaborated with exhaustion and dry resignation saturating his tone as Masaki and Isshin traded concerned glances at the information before lauding Ichigo with equally concerned eyes as if trying to pick apart his mental and physical health from a glance. He could almost feel Masaki’s intense gaze, studying the youth as if to ascertain both physical and mental wellness, and if they were subpar
then the Captain knew the woman would kindly remedy it.

Ichigo was fine, to be factual, he had finally submitted to booking more appointments with Unohana, who would have chased him down otherwise. Plus, the few weeks in between the next crisis had been a break of sorts, amid more negotiations and diplomatic visits to Hueco Mundo, Captain’s meetings, and the general mania of the Gotei 13.

“How are you Ichigo?”

Masaki asked gently all mothering concern eyes soft in kindness as she took a half step closer and rested a reassuring palm on Ichigo’s arm. The orange-haired Captain resisted the urge to crumple like paper in the face of water, maybe sweep his mother into a hug, instead Ichigo tilted his head to the side letting a genuine smile grace his features he responded, “I’m surviving as well as can be.”

The young Quincy looked like she wanted to argue about surviving as supposed to living and that she also likely wanted to steer him to the kitchen and feed him with copious amounts of food; which Ichigo would never oppose to considering the woman’s almost Kami like skills in the kitchen. Isshin at the same time was studying Ichigo with sharp eyes, like carved flint, concern for his clan, his family in Soul Society, and for Ichigo making a home there.

“Should we be worried Ichigo?”

The retired Captain asked, hand innocuously straying for an invisible blade, one that the man would likely still have difficulty manifesting. Ichigo nodded, reatsu thick with reassurance as his eyes swept around the room before landing on Nova watching the three girls talk with a vaguely content expression on the plushie’s features before he returned his attention to the adults.

“I’ll explain everything in depth when the twins are done reuniting with Rukia. But don’t worry; your family will be safe no matter what.”

Ichigo promised sincerity lining his voice as the adults opposite him sharpened like steel into seriousness at the mention of a threat and responded to the placation with accepting nods. At the verbal mention of the twins, three sets of eyes landed on the adults still ensconced by the doorway and before Ichigo could even have a moment to prepare for attack the twins were launching themselves at him with a cry of, “Ichi-nii!”

Ichigo caught the two with a grunt, they had grown so large from the tiny babes he had first held in his arms awestruck and swung them around to their obvious delight if the giggles and chirping laughter were any indications. Rukia stood still like a stone struck silent in the background, bafflement and shock written like a summer’s day on the Kuchiki’s face, though she didn’t gape, that would be impolite. Setting the twins on the ground Ichigo took a step back to observe them with a critical eye, dramatically stroking his chin in fake contemplation.

They had grown so old to Ichigo’s eyes, it seemed like both yesterday, in his own timeline and the new one, that Ichigo had been aiding Yuzu in the kitchen or Karin with soccer. With Masaki in the corner Yuzu’s resemblance to her mother was striking, and Karin was much the same with Isshin though she lacked the often-foolish manner the man acted in.

“So how are my favourite pair of twins?”

Ichigo asked with a grin, silently vindictively enjoying Rukia’s continued shock at their interaction. He supposed that the twins must not have told their friend that their older brother was the Captain of the Tenth division in Soul Society. Yuzu grinned at Ichigo, a smile equal parts mischief and honest warmth even as Karin rolled her eyes and responded with snark, “We’re the only pair of twins you
know Ichi-nii.”

Shiro chuckled at the response, some lingering irony resonating through his mind even as Ichigo conceded his defeat with the typical sign of surrender and a wave of his hands. Glancing once to Masaki and Isshin for confirmation with a raised brow and a pointed look Ichigo received a wink and asked, “So what’s this I hear about some daring teenagers awakening their Shinigami powers?”

Isshin behind Ichigo choked, whether on the fact Ichigo knew, or had missed the silent ques Ichigo would likely never know, and Masaki laughed high and tinkling with a knowing smile placed upon her glowing features. Both Ichigo ignored to watch the pride beam across Karin’s features forging them in great fires and Yuzu’s features became tinted with wary exuberance as they nodded.

“I suspect in no time you’ll have your Shikai. And then we can duel.”

Ichigo stated matter-of-factly with a knowing wink when Yuzu and Karin traded secretive glances that really hid nothing tainted with a hint of fear at the mention of a duel with Ichigo, the movement hid nothing from the orange-haired Shinigami who knew that with the teens’ different past, being raised with the truth of the spiritual world, trained in their Quincy powers, it was far more than likely they had their Shikai. Ichigo grinned once when both were looking at him once more, a promising shark-toothed grin that said there would indeed be a spar when there was time.

“Wait, Ichigo, you know the twins?”

Rukia demanded cautiously where she had broken free of her stupor, studying Ichigo with those piercing demanding lilac eyes, as if offended she had never realised. Ichigo nodded with an abashed smile and resisted the urge to rub the back of his head, instead his hand drifted to where Zangetsu would rest if not in a gigai.

“Well Isshin is my uncle, and when he went missing I wasn’t so lackadaisical in my searching as some would believe, or the reports would dictate.”

Ichigo explained straying away from anything involving an explanation relating to his knowledge of possible future outlets. Rukia narrowed her eyes once more at Ichigo and stepped forward, in the next second in between the warning bells blaring in Ichigo’s skull, she kicked his shin with a vindictive and challenging glare. The Captain of the Tenth muffled any plausible curses Masaki would disapprove of, which was basically everything Ichigo knew, and instead cradled his injured shin with a hiss.

“What did you do that for midget?”

The orange-haired Shinigami squawked indignantly with a scowl furrowing his brows, Rukia harrumphed and crossed her arms over her chest in response, imitating perfectly a highborn noble with their nose in the air she responded, ‘That’s for not telling me idiot.”

The twins burst into laughter at the squabbling between the two Shinigami even as Masaki and Isshin joined in with fondness to their gazes. Ichigo sighed in resignation and shook his head with a half-bemused smile decorating his features, even as he glanced to Masaki and covertly nodded his head once. The woman, ever aware of the situation in the same manner if not more so than her husband, nodded in understanding and with a smile like the sun unsheathed ushered everyone into the living room with a precise manner that belayed her easy handling of a situation.

Rukia paused for a moment in protest, the Kuchiki part of her likely siting that they deal with business and all its formalities in the entryway or in a formal setting before reuniting with the twins. Ichigo shook his head and ushered the lieutenant forward with a light push, which earned him a glare
even as Rukia was bodily dragged between the twins onto the couch.

Masaki returned from the kitchen a moment later, a pitcher of cold tea and glasses balanced elegantly on her arm as she placed it on the table before swatting Isshin so that he would move from where he was occupying the other entire couch so that the woman could sit. Ichigo reached forward and poured glasses for everyone before settling in one of the chairs with a decent view of the whole room, the attention of the occupants almost unspoken fixated on Ichigo.

“Recently the war against Hueco Mundo ended, yes Yuzu and Karin you can speak to Rukia about it later. But that isn’t why we’re both here today. The end of the war created a sort of power vacuum; certain factions see the end of the war as a weakening of Soul Society’s strength and power and an opportunity for revenge. Already we have dealt with one such faction and it appears another one is beginning to amass its power. We wouldn’t concern you all if you weren’t spiritually aware and potentially in danger. The Bount are artificially created souls that consume souls to extend their lives, basically a vampire. They were created by Soul Society, but in an accident escaped, and now they want revenge, of course. However, they have no way of entering Soul Society except through the aid of a Quincy.”

Ichigo finished in the sinking silence and took a sip of the tea, listening to Ossan’s calming reassurance hum like white noise at the back of his mind as Isshin and Masaki traded concerned looks, backed by the unbreakable steel of parents determined to protect their children. Yuzu and Karin were also speaking without words over Rukia’s head, the determined fire of a protector, and a bit of a hero complex sparking in both sets of eyes.

Some part of Ichigo wanted to sigh and shake his head at the two, even with the different way they had been raised they were still going to try and aid them. Perhaps it was a Shiba or Kurosaki thing, though far more likely it was the teachings of Masaki and Isshin. It made Ichigo both proud and equally worried at the same time because he knew the twins would be on the streets trying to help in whatever way they could against the Bounts.

The silence continued thick and heavy among the family as they comprehended that the three (excluding Ichigo) Quincy sitting in the room were in potential danger. Though Ichigo suspected it was hardly likely they would target Masaki; she could manifest a bow, but her power would never be what it had been. Ichigo had in essence done as Yhwach did to his followers, given her a piece of his own Quincy powers, and while she was alive it was certainly different from before. The twins, on the other hand, were a far more likely target, both because of their power and age.

“What about Uryu and his family? Won’t they be in danger as well Ichi-nii?”

Yuzu questioned in concern, concentration furrowing her brow and curving her lips in a manner that Ichigo would privately admit was adorable. The other occupants of the room twitched at the question as if pulled from their own bubble of ever downward spiralling thoughts as Rukia, along with the twins fixed Ichigo with a half-panicked glance.

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“Relax I’m going to talk to them afterwards. Which reminds me,” Ichigo paused and beckoned Nova forward from where he was perching behind the chair and continued, “This is Nova, he’s a mod soul that can detect the presence of the Bount. He’s going to stay with you guys to help keep you safe. No arguments.”

Ichigo finished sternly channelling all of the dire Captain he thought the family could handle as Nova jumped onto the table before padding over to study the twins with quiet eyes. Karin looked like she wanted to protest their sudden bodyguard, even as Yuzu bit her lip indecisively.

“It’s for your safety. And Nova is really quiet and nice.”
Rukia reassured softly with audible warmth and sincerity as the plushie blushed at the kind words. Isshin and Masaki shared a glance darting from the stuffed animal to Ichigo before Isshin asked, “What do you plan to do Ichigo?”

The orange-haired Shinigami furrowed his brow at the question and after a moment replied, “Hopefully we can subdue them before they manage to invade Soul Society or cause any bodily harm to any Quincy. Maybe if possible try to talk them out of it; Soul Society isn’t so inclined to point-and-kill anymore. We know where their base is it’s all a matter of finding out their plans and reacting accordingly.”

Isshin nodded at the response, serious demeanour slipping away slightly to be replaced with a goofy smile as Masaki tangled her hand in her husband’s with an expression that balanced on the edge of a knife. Karin studying Ichigo and Rukia with piercing contemplative eyes questioned, “How long do you think you’ll be here Ichi-nii?”

The Captain of the Tenth shrugged his shoulders helplessly, knowing that a prediction would likely be proven fatally wrong by one thing or another and responded, “It’s hard to tell, but hopefully only a week, otherwise Byakuya will be mad at me again. Not to mention my lieutenant.”

Ichigo’s wry commentary received a quick burst of laughter that helped to dispel the tense atmosphere, replacing it once more with warm camaraderie as Rukia shook her head at the Captain’s words and Karin rolled her eyes. Idly glancing out the window as instincts chattered incessantly beneath his skin Ichigo ran a hand through his hair and let his eyes wander to Masaki and Isshin. The couple was watching Yuzu, Karin, and Rukia talk with love saturating their gazes in a way that made Ichigo’s heart ache even as it brought a small tender smile to his own lips. Steering his attention back to the topic at hand Ichigo stood and said, “Rukia can fill you all in on the rest. I’m going to go and speak to the Ishida family. I will be at the Shōten if anyone needs me, though I doubt Rukia will be returning there tonight.”

Ichigo finished with a knowing wink as the three teenagers flushed and the adults laughed even as Ichigo received a serious nod of confirmation from Isshin; will and promise flashing like an unsheathed blade before it was once more submerged under familiar light hues. Masaki glanced over at the three adolescents squished into the couch cushions, the teens once in a while amidst the talking catching Masaki’s eyes with a pleading look.

“I see what you mean Ichigo. Are you sure you don’t want to stay for dinner?”

Masaki asked kindly and with warm sincerity, after the first night they had met, the scarily perceptive woman had all but forcefully adopted Ichigo into the family, not that he complained much. It was like he radiated some sort of distressed bird signal, at least so it seemed with all the worrying and nagging adults in his life.

“I’m fine thank you, Masaki. But I promise to stay for dinner one night, so I can hear of Karin’s soccer games and Yuzu’s cooking attempts.”

Ichigo promised with a grin as the blond women nodded with an accepting smiled and responded, “I’ll hold you to that Ichigo. Honestly, thank you for coming to warn us.”

The orange haired Shinigami nodded at the thanks before turning his attention to the mess of limbs swallowing the couch, with an amused chuckle Ichigo called out, “Girls I’m leaving now, eat all your dinner, stay hydrated, and don’t cause trouble for you mom. Rukia I’ll meet you tomorrow at the Shōten.”
In response, Ichigo received muffled yelling that sounded vaguely like it could have been a goodbye or an acquiescence. Regardless Ichigo shook his head and reached out to clasp Isshin’s hand in a silent show of support and promise before turning once more towards the doors.

Masaki rose to her feet and with a gracious smile to her husband guided Ichigo to the front hall, even though he would be able to walk the halls in his sleep if he truly needed to. When they arrived at the entryway, bathed in the warm glow of the electric lighting above and the muted yellow paint like the first touches of spring Masaki folded Ichigo into a tight all-embracing hug. She ignored the way he stiffened in her grasp, how his breath stuttered for a second, and Ichigo likewise said nothing on how she noticed nothing.

“Stay safe Ichigo,”

The woman cautioned with a knowing eye as she stepped back enough to plant a quick kiss on his cheek accompanied by a cheeky wink. Ichigo rolled his eyes at the woman and nodded, not necessarily a promise because Kami knows Ichigo and safe in the same sentence didn’t ever end well, but an effort to try would be made in any case. With a final nod, Ichigo opened the door and stepped out into the cool night air.

He waved once over his shoulder to the sound of the closing door before he began to walk forward, the familiar streets of Karakura town rising up to surround Ichigo on all sides. In the early darkness of the evening, some things appeared menacing, but the general air of the neighbourhood was quiet and serene, the rustle of Karakura humming like a forgotten song as Ichigo’s feet led him unflinching on a path he had taken a thousand times before.

The Ishida home was exactly how Ichigo remembered it, all clean lines and with that faint sense of coldness, though in this timeline it was far less pronounced, almost overtaken by the warmth of the family within. Ryūken would never be an overly affectionate man and his home reflected some of that even if the other members of his family sorely contested it. Ichigo knocked once and silently prayed he wasn’t interrupting their dinner as he waited for the door to open, or for a Quincy arrow to materialize beside his skull. Either was at the moment acceptable.

After a minute and the sound of shuffling feet, the door swung open to reveal the weathered and kind face of Sōken Ishida, eyes wide behind the rim of his glasses as the man took in the Captain standing in front of him. Before Ichigo could speak in greeting to the elder, Sōken stepped forward and swept Ichigo into a quick hug, the reaitsu of the Quincy reaching out in cool calming waves to wash over Ichigo.

The elder pulled back after a quiet second, crow’s feet crinkling in the corner of his eyes as he smiled up at Ichigo in obvious warmth. Ichigo returned the same courtesy, fondness saturating his features like living sunlight as the elder Quincy swept his eyes over Ichigo, checking for bodily harm; more than a few times the Captain had appeared in some state of injury.

“Ichigo it is good to see you. Come in.”

Sōken said with the rustling whispering tones of the elderly as he stepped aside, and the earthy glow of the interior spilt out onto the doorstep. Ichigo nodded in kind, following the old man into the house with his reaitsu sweeping out about him in greeting and replied, “It is good to see you as well Sōken.”

Closing the door with a polite click Ichigo continued to follow the elder as he led the orange-haired Captain to what served as the living room in the Ishida household. Senses reaching out beyond his fingertips Ichigo identified the presences residing in the house with careful ease, knowing Ryūken was already more than likely aware of his presence. The man had never openly disapproved of
Ichigo in Sōken’s presence or Uryū’s, on the elder’s instinct, but Ichigo knew in the same manner of Ryūken’s character that he disapproved of everyone.

The sound of quiet conversation accompanied by running water settled upon the two spiritual beings as Ichigo followed Sōken into the living room and its connection to the kitchen. With a pause of reaitsu the silver-haired Quincy turned to face Ichigo, eyes still kind in their serious hue he asked gravely, “As much as I love seeing you again Ichigo, I sense this visit is of great consequence. Is everything alright?”

Ichigo scrubbed a hand over his face at the question and glanced towards the ground, a nice varnished hardwood, in thought and avoidance only once glancing into the patient yet spear driven eyes of the Ishida elder. Zangetsu-Ossan’s reassurance hummed softly through Ichigo’s mind like the reshoring of waves upon the sand as Ichigo took a breath and mustered his courage before saying, “There is a faction in Karakura town that is seeking revenge against Soul Society and they may try to attack your family.”

Sōken’s eyes widened at the statement before his brow furrowed and his reaitsu paced listlessly at the knowledge, swirling with the promise of protection and harm to enemies. The silence lasted only a moment before the elder looked up, gaze knowing beyond all the years of his mortal life as Sōken asked, “But that is not all is it?”

Ichigo’s shoulders slumped at the statement the words like a clock striking a final hour, even as he conceded with a nod, fingers clenching reflexively over where the hilt of Zangetsu would rest in his Shinigami form. The elder arched a brow at the revealing gesture and asked, “Then you’ve felt it?”

The Captain of the Tenth nodded once in sharp acknowledgement, thoughts like glass stained by time darkening at the thought of what would soon sweep upon the world. How he wouldn’t be able to protect everyone, how he knew it was impossible to predict the actions of the future in such a tremulous state. A fracture of Ichigo was also relieved at thought of it, the end of the great parade of enemies, the idea of peace.

Sōken nodded once in understanding, reaitsu sharp and like electricity where it surrounded the old man. It was likely Ichigo knew, though tried to ignore, that the old man would not live past or maybe even to see the Quincy war, it was for the best as the man, like Ichigo believed in peace between the two races as inevitable as war was in the end. Still, it heartened Ichigo to see that same spark of life he admired in the elder Ishida.

As if sensing wandering thoughts tunnelling deeper into the core of his problems the elder Quincy rested a palm on Ichigo’s arm; eyes understanding, he reassured, “Do not worry Ichigo, fate has a way of tying up loose ends to create a grand tapestry for all of its faults.”

Ichigo cracked a grin at the wise words the mentor had spoken and nodded his thanks, reaitsu reaching out to surround the elder in the imitation of an embrace. Sōken smiled in kind before ancient eyes turned to the kitchen where the light had faded along with the ripple of water.

Uryū and Kanae stepped out from the kitchen in unison, the mother and son bent together like intertwined trees speaking in soft hushed whispers and knowing winks as the young Quincy gestured faintly with his hands, livelier than the young man Ichigo had known before ancient eyes turned to the kitchen where the light had faded along with the ripple of water.

The young Quincy strode forward and once more Ichigo received a hug, he was receiving a lot of hugs, as the high school student winked at Ichigo before pulling back to smile warmly. Ichigo mirrored the action studying the happiness and life residing behind the thin glasses and asked fondly,
“So how is my favourite Ishida doing?”

Sōken faked a hurt expression at the question in the background, and Kanae raised a hand to wipe away crocodile tears even as Ishida laughed, the sound bright and airy, and replied, “Far better than you Ichigo-jii from what I’ve been hearing of Soul Society.”

“Nonsense.”

Ichigo replied with a blank expression earning a bark of laughter from Sōken at the sharp reply. Kanae took the short opportunity to sweep forward to receive a gentle hug; her constitution was still weak as she had never been as strong as Masaki for all the icy glaciers in her soul.

“Not what’s this I’m hearing about a dangerous faction in Karakura town? Hopefully, you don’t mean the Yakuza that follow the twins around like lost puppies.”

Kanae intoned with a wry smile as Uryū gently aided his mother to a seat with softness like dew about his features. Ichigo grimaced briefly even as his lips quirked up in a flash at the mention of the twins’ successful taming of the Yakuza before he shared a silent gaze with Sōken.

With a weary sigh, Ichigo studied the Ishida family in front of him, excluding Ryūken who was listening from the hallway, dower bastard, they deserved to know the truth and warranted Ichigo’s protection as much as the Kurosaki family. Ichigo didn’t know whose side they would reside on when the time came, but in the meantime, and even during the war Ichigo would protect them with his life as all his friends and family.

“Have you heard of the Bount before?”

When Ichigo left the Ishida household it was under the cover of darkness, the kind that draped across one’s brow where every rustle was the tide of a new suspicion. Most of the night was held at bay though; in thanks to the warmth of the Ishida household, the crinkle of laughing eyes and sardonic humour, for all that seriousness had also been plated before the family. Ichigo’s hand lingered at his side for a moment as he entered the street and shadows, warped by lamplight, twisted and fluttered in a strange dance around him.

Letting his senses reach out in a familiar practised motion, Ichigo easily located Rukia in the Kurosaki household, the family all accounted for and without hint of danger. Behind the young Captain rested the Ishida household, and when Ichigo searched further, he located the separate presences of the many friends he had once known in his own past. At the presence of the many people he had once known, their own incarnations in Ichigo’s timeline his thoughts relentlessly darted to that strange fever dream, one that had at the same time been far beyond a dream.

It had been beyond strange as if he was submerged beneath the waters of his Inner world once more, to see his friends again, it had been moving and heartbreaking at the same time. To see them as he knew them and to have them recognize and speak to him of times past, some part of Ichigo had been beyond soothed by it all, even if Rukia had persisted in smacking him upside the head for being an idiot.

Their confrontation had been desperately needed at the time, a reminder of where he came from, but also of who he was. Living in the changed past for so long had shaped Ichigo, so much so that sometimes it was hard to recall the vivid scent of the sake his father preferred or the flash of a too feral smile on the battlefield. And some days he didn’t know whether it was truly beneficial or not that the past had become faded around the edges with the burden of time. Chuckling softly at the
memory, Ichigo recalled the image of Orihime’s smile, blond hair whispering about, Chad’s silent grin and calming presence, or Uryu’s disdainful fondness and silent relief.

The whole thing held the same otherworldly sense of the dream that had also occurred; almost as if his soul had taken leave of the plane he resided on, the one where he had met the Soul King. It all seemed almost too fantastical to be real in a strange sense, among all the things Ichigo had experienced, battles with unimaginable foes, strange creations or inventions, he had never spoken with the Kami of their world.

He had seen the being once in his own timeline, forever sealed and silent had actively participated in the being’s death. But it had been different then, the rush of battle looming all around Ichigo, ever relentless like a pack of wolves with his scent. There had been a lingering peace and stillness to the dream, one that whispered of timelessness and the sands of the universe.

Curling his fingers towards his sleeves Ichigo’s fingers sought the gift, one whose purpose was still unidentified as much as he had studied it, that the Soul King had given Ichigo. He paused in rueful realisation that he was still in a gigai, the sensation minute discomfort squeezing his frame, and shook his head in amusement and acknowledgement of his own obliviousness. He wondered if perhaps it would play a part in the coming future, or if it was simply a promise of something else.

Curiously he let his thoughts stray wondering once more to the ancient pages he had discovered in the old antic shop, hidden behind intricate locks and knowing eyes. The text was an amalgamation of different writers (something he had only recently realised) bound between one cover, some spoke of a future where all fell to ruin without the aid of some great cataclysm, others spoke of a mysterious being, Kami descended upon earth walking among their villages, eyes like the sky in their wisdom. In some accounts it was clear it had been written in Soul Society, others held vague elements that suggested its nature could belong to a feudal Japan.

What was perhaps the most interesting or infuriating was the untranslated account at the back written in a vaguely familiar script Ichigo had been unable to translate, amidst what time he found for translating during a war and other things, it found no basis in anything Ichigo had seen before, nor found in the archives. Nothing of the pages was identifiable to him and he was more than tempted to thrust the crinkling pages upon Sosuke and see what the genius would make of it.

As Ichigo paced along the road, soft hues of dampened light highlighting a flash of emerald in the foliage or crystals in the sky reflected his ever-changing thoughts as he wondered on the Bount and Soul Society. Sosuke had probably already found the missing information in the systems, likely only noticing it recently because of the upheaval of war, and the Vizard incident before his ascension to captaincy. Still, it left thoughts of the Shinigami who had become disillusioned with Soul Society stirring his thoughts; Ichinose was his name if Ichigo recalled correctly. Things had happened in much the same manner in the Eleventh division when Kenpachi killed the former Captain but Ichigo wondered if the Shinigami had still become disillusioned with the changed Soul Society.

There was also the matter of the female Bount, the one who had become disillusioned with Kariya’s plans if he could save any of them Ichigo would attempt to do so, if only to repay the actions of Soul Society. But that all depended on the Bounts actions, he was no puppet master to predict every step of some invisible chess board or one to attempt to manipulate a person’s free will. Though he did pray the twins would refrain from revealing themselves or their Quincy nature if possible.

Hesitating in his step as Ichigo’s reaitsu alighted on a hostile presence, one he knew belonged to a Bount for invisible it was among the flow and life of Karakura, Ichigo paused and let his eyes sweep surroundings, taking in the familiar sprawling skyscrapers of Karakura his feet had unconsciously led him through on his mindless ramblings. The sound of a struggle made itself known as Ichigo’s eyes
landed on an alleyway illuminated only barely by a flickering street lamp which caught on the edges of thick brown tresses, and another body pressed against a wall.

Ruminating on fate and withholding a curse Ichigo quickly stepped out of his gigai and laid the fake body behind a pair of garbage bins with a moue of irony recalling the many times he had darted out of his own body before straightening seriousness and battle-hardened in his features. Ichigo stepped into the alleyway with a flare of reaitsu bright as a star and commanding attention as Zangetsu hummed alongside his mind, adrenaline running a marathon as the Bount hovered over the soul stopped and turned to face Ichigo, the picture of a vampire disturbed from feeding. The orange-haired Shinigami almost wanted to laugh at the irony of it as Yoshino Sōma’s cool eyes landed on Ichigo with a flash of fear and weary caution.

“Leave the soul alone.”

The Captain of the Tenth commanded as he drew Zangetsu with a hiss that rang in the night as a lone car shuffled by lights washing over and illuminating the forged metal. Yoshino stepped away from the soul, a man in a suit who slumped to the ground, still alive but barely so, he would likely live if he received medical care; that is if Ichigo could draw the battle away from the area. Silently he flicked his reaitsu to Yoruichi, knowing the Captain had visited the mortal realm on Kisuke’s insistence before he returned his attention to the Bount. She watched him with steely defiant eyes, arms drifting closer together, sparks almost catching before Ichigo’s eyes she asked, “Are you going to kill me Shinigami?”

“Not if I don’t have to if you stop consuming souls, Soul Society is content to leave your kind alone. There is a way we could assist those who seek safety.”

Ichigo finished somewhat gently with an incline of his head in the drifting halted silence, the presence of the other Bount above them a peripheral hum on Ichigo’s senses as he watched emotions play across the elegant woman’s features, anger at Soul Society or maybe the insinuation in his words, hope like shards of glass gathered together at the thought of escaping madness and death, before it dispersed under cool calculation and understanding. They both knew that for the moment the battle was as inevitable as the sun rising in the east.

The young Captain wanted to sigh at what he saw, knowing that for now there would be no way to escape battle, and knowing that he would not battle the elegant Bount alone, the one in the shadows would also likely fight. But at least Ichigo conceded, as Yoshino narrowed her eyes at him, he had sown the seeds of an idea within the female Bount who had deserted Kariya in his own timeline. Though the other in the shadows if it was who Ichigo thought it was, was far too power hungry for the peace he offered in any case. What he spoke was true enough; Kisuke would likely be more than able to find a place for the Bount in his shop or under it in any matter without Soul Society’s protest.

“We seek revenge for the life Soul Society has wrought upon us, not their hand of acceptance or peace. We will create a world safe for the Bount.”

Yoshino stated something cold and repetitive in the smooth drawl of her voice as the other Bount dropped down beside her. A snake curled over the man’s shoulder, and steely brown eyes stared out at Ichigo from a well-carved face. Part of him wanted to sigh that it was the snake guy; Utagawa if Ichigo remembered correctly, while another part of him remained silent.

In rebuff of his silence, Yoshino let the pieces of jewellery decorating her hands clash together and produce a spark, one that caught fire over her head and released the doll, a great hulking giant of fire, and magma like a being thrust from a volcano. The air in the alleyway suddenly became hot and all-consuming as flames flickered like fireflies and Ichigo shifted into a battle-ready stance idly recalling
the few times he had sparred with the Soutaicho. The male Bount brought out a gold pocket watch that glinted like a dragon’s horde and with a swing the elegant piece of jewellery and the snake on his shoulder transformed into a long gold whip.

“You will be an interesting meal.”

Utagawa commented with an arrogant tone and a sneer. Ichigo decided then and there as his mind recalled the multiple cases of food-related comments and general supremacy the man had preached, that the male Bount could die, if only because his lust for power and view of humans was as tainted as Kariya. Grinning in a feral motion Ichigo studied the two with heavy brows and cautioned once more, “Soul Society will take this as an act of war. But know that surrender is always an option.”

“If this is war, so be it.”

Yoshino replied casually almost dismissive as her doll, like a titan in the narrow alleyway, slid across the pavement in a heap of fire. Ichigo frowned, senses briefly catching Yoruichi before his attention was riveted on the battle as Zangetsu caught the doll’s arm fire sparking against the blade but doing nothing to the tempered steel as the large weight bore against his arms. Hearing the slithering of snakes behind him Ichigo summoned his reaitsu and released a wordless Getsuga Tensho, the bright reiatsu cut through the doll’s arm even as Ichigo whipped around and ducked a snake that had lunged for his unprotected neck, Zangetsu whipping out rapid fast to slice through the reptile and behead it.

Tugging at the restraints of the seal Ichigo had agreed to wear when Rukia pressed it upon him, Ichigo let his reaitsu rise as he beheaded another snake and turned backed against a wall so that he might face both enemies. The doll flung a fireball at Ichigo and he caught it on Zangetsu’s blade, ignoring the sparks that caught on his shihakusho as he sent a wordless Shakkahō with his other hand at the mass of snakes surging towards him.

Rolling to the ground Ichigo ducked under the fire doll’s swipe and shot towards the two Bount, Zangetsu reaching for the male Bount who watched with wide eyes before flicking his wrist, the whip springing to life and bouncing off the closed in alleyway; it was not the best area for a whip-wielder. Ichigo ducked under the doll and slid easily to the side, flipping Zangetsu in a reverse as instincts rustled about him and reaitsu surged throughout his blade as he stabbed the fire doll, a Getsuga Tensho blowing the fire being apart in a scattering display of light and heat.

Before Ichigo could cast a binding kido at the snake Bount to hopefully even the odds, with a broad unhinged grin the man cast his ultimate seal technique and Ichigo submerged a growl and instead allowed his reaitsu to submerge beneath his skin and strengthen his Hierro. If he let his blut vein activate a tiny bit, he only hoped the snake Bount wouldn’t notice. Taking a step forward Ichigo released a Getsuga Tensho at the pillar of snakes that surged from the earth, the bright black energy cutting through the snakes and hurling towards the snake Bount.

With a broad challenging grin at their shocked expressions, Ichigo stepped into the air allowing reaitsu to solidify beneath his feet. Feeling the intense pressure and heat of a fire surging through the air the orange-haired Captain turned to face the fire doll as a wall of flames surged to cover him from all sides, Ichigo grit his teeth and bore the flames clashing ceaselessly against his skin as he cast a rapid flurry of Shakkahō through the flames to disperse the doll again, before turning to face the Utagawa. The man had a wide shocked expression, almost comedically, dressing his features as Ichigo stepped forward and the snakes swarming across the alleyway crumbled to ash in the face of the fire still cloaking his skin and tearing off bits of his shihakusho before his reaitsu regenerated the material.

With a crackle of light, the eyes of the male Bount twisting with malic and cunning, the runes
disappeared and with a snap the whip surged towards Ichigo and entangled itself around Zangetsu, as the flame doll rose up behind him, one large arm surging towards his head. With a frown of concentration and will Ichigo let one hand drift behind him and with a small incantation released a byakurai that collided with the incoming fist as he tugged Zangetsu close to his chest with a harsh movement and the snake Bount followed regardless of his will.

Ichigo punched the Bount across the alleyway as his doll hissed at Ichigo still entangled around Zangetsu. Ichigo hissed back petulantly as reaitsu rose around the blade and he released a Getsuga Tenso, pulverising the snake, as the male Bount cried out as he collided with a brick wall. Yoshino, when Ichigo’s eyes landed on her, was watching him with cold calculating eyes clogged with a hint of knowing, seeing only the battle, as her doll roared, and the heat rose. At that moment Ichigo really wished Tōshirō was on the mission, or that Rukia was here with her ice zanpaktou.

Instead, he caught the broad swath of flame that surged towards him and batted it aside, charging forward Zangetsu clashed against a sword of liquid fire, bending against Zangetsu and moulding like a shield scorching its way towards Ichigo. The young Captain released another Getsuga Tensho knowing the battle was one of attrition, one that Ichigo would inevitably win even with his sealed reaitsu.

As a storm of fireballs charged towards Ichigo he ducked one and let another Getsuga Tensho surge forward, feet briefly touching the pavement only to jerk in surprise as a pillar of snakes shot forward, surging toward him with all the fiery of medusa incarnate. Ichigo beheaded the snakes in a broad arc, almost wishing for his old cleaver blade before his senses were blaring like great sirens and Ichigo twisted to the side.

The young Captain grunted as a spray of venom caught his side, missing most of his major internal organs and the broad swath of his back, Ichigo allowed his Hierro to tighten as the venom attempted to eat through his skin. With a sharp inhale and Zangetsu humming wrathfully in his mind Ichigo turned and let the blade whip from his hands, some part of him regretting the action even as he knew it was inevitable. Taking a life was never easy. It never should be easy.

Ichigo felt his zanpaktou find its target before he turned his attention to the fire doll and Yoshino who watched with wide eyes, there was no lost sadness in her eyes at the closing death of her comrade, only wary acceptance. She had always been the most human of them, but that did little to disavow her nature. She swayed briefly on her feet, and Ichigo levelled her with a warning stare, eyes telling her to flee. The elegant Bount hesitated for a moment, studying him with careful eyes, noting the expression etched into his features before she and her doll disappeared the fire soaking the alleyway following her.

Hissing through clenched teeth Ichigo ignored the sluggish drip of blood down his back, and the thoughts of Rukia or Kisuke’s reaction, and instead turned to face Utagawa. He was clutching at Zangetsu, breath rasping from his teeth wetly as blood coated his lips, Ichigo let out a mournful sigh as he walked forward and grasped the hilt of Zangetsu.

The orange-haired Captain stared into the eyes of the Bount saw his emotions and the last of his life and with a pulse of his reiatsu allowed a Getsuga Tensho to spill through the blade turning the body to dust and ending the Bount’s suffering.

Turning away from the body Ichigo stepped out of the alleyway and into the pale moonlight of the night, mentally assuaging the wound on his back and knowing it was nothing fatal. It would leave a scar, but Ichigo had long ago dismissed any shame of scars from battle. His only worry was the reaction of his mother hen friends, though he could likely wrap it with Zangetsu’s help.

Sheathing his blade Ichigo inhaled the crisp night air and strode towards his gigai, thoughts
acknowledging that as always things never happened the same way twice, always different in minute
details. His fingers curled briefly into his sleeve, pressing against cool metal before he slipped into his
gigai and stood, facing the east and the path to the Shōten. With Zangetsu humming reassuringly like
a cloak settled around Ichigo’s shoulders the young Captain began to walk, ignoring flashes of the
past and the scent of fire lingering and flickering, instead he bathed in the crisp night and the pass of
lone cars on a silent road.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading; I hope you enjoyed the interactions between Ichigo and the
Kurosaki family. Also, was anyone surprised by how Ichigo handles Utagawa?
Reviews/comments are always appreciated
Ruth

Chapter Notes

Ruth

Pity or Compassion

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 61. This arc has involved a lot of research but most of it was worthwhile... I think. Read on and enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

“You idiot! How could you get injured? I thought you had your Hierro?”

Rukia lectured and exclaimed at the same time, hovering over Ichigo with all the menacing presence of the devil incarnate etched into the fury of her features and in the mean presence, one likely cultivated with Unohana’s help, filling the room. Ichigo cautiously shied away from the angered midget and continued to let her rant, the words washing over him and filling the room like a buzzing storm of sharp barbs. He would interject when she had settled somewhat in her rant, in the meantime, it was best to simply brace himself, let the nagging wear itself out and continue wrapping the wound on his back with a bit of effort.

Which, the wound, for Rukia’s information, wasn’t serious in the slightest, or at least not to Ichigo’s more battle inclined senses. In reality, it was more of a flesh wound in all seriousness and though it would leave a scar, a wide spread of discoloured skin spreading across his side; it wasn’t like he didn’t have a hundred others, some that actually ached in the chill, or pulled at his muscles on occasion.

The female lieutenant had stared for a long drawn out moment when she had stomped into the room, after Kisuke had informed her of his injury, darting as fast as possible in the early morning from the Kurosaki household, to stumble upon Ichigo with his shihakusho splayed to the side. The orange-haired Shinigami had been attempting to wrap his own wound because he was not letting Kisuke and his sloppy skills attempt anything, when the woman entered. The man was a genius at sewing or mechanics, but wrapping wounds were and had always been Tessai’s speciality.

Ichigo jerked from drifting thoughts as Rukia waved a hand in front of his eyes, a frown furrowing her brows and curving her lips as her eyes asked if he had even been paying attention while she had been talking with all the morality of an expectant positive answer. Rubbing a hand over his features
Ichigo sighed and attempted to twist his torso checking his manoeuvrability as he responded with a hint of a hiss and a lesson in his voice, “Rukia even the best of us get injured sometimes. It was a surprise attack. But I’m fine, the wound is superficial and later I’ll finish applying the healing kido needed alright? I know you’re upset you weren’t there to fight with me but sometimes we can’t predict the future or the actions of others.”

Rukia glanced up from where her gaze had drifted to stare at the ground during Ichigo’s impromptu encouraging and reassuring speech. The midget had serious eyes, shining with a thin veneer of vulnerability that came with being a metaphysical teenager, even if in reality she was over a hundred years old. There was a reason the Ichigo and Rukia of his timeline had gotten along so well, and it wasn’t just their abrasive personalities.

Shaking his head in fondness Ichigo reached out and ruffled the Kuchiki’s hair and received a petulant glare and a swat at his arm. Ichigo just grinned in response and settled comfortably once more at the low table, sipping at the tea one of the Shinigami-on-loan had made, they had decent skills, and decent was far better than what meagre attempts Kisuke managed to scrounge up.

Studying the lieutenant in front of him, Ichigo idly thought on how Rukia had matured and changed since the war, and even before the war in meeting the twins. She was far less stiff in private with those that she cared for, as it had always been, and Hisana’s touch had also been beyond beneficial in shaping the kind nature Rukia often guarded with an icy shell. But she also understood life, and in extension the role of honour a lot better; not that she still didn’t suffer moments of propriety or teenager angst/insecurity. Thinking of teenagers Ichigo tilted his head and asked, “Are you going to attend the high school again while we’re here?”

Rukia glanced up from the table where she had been studying the swirling wood grains half startled at his question as if she had expected Ichigo to command her focus onto the mission at hand or maybe pretend her friendship with the twins didn’t exist. Ichigo suppressed a laugh at the expression, even as the midget narrowed her eyes in suspicious before asking, “Why?”

“It would give you more time to hang out with the Kurosaki siblings and their friends. In addition, you would be able to protect them easily from the Bount if they attack if you’re with them near all the time.”

Ichigo explained with a kind knowing smile; feeling for a moment remarkably old and like Ukitake or Kyroraku, as Rukia’s eyes visibly lit up across from him in a way that made Ichigo’s heart flutter as much in fondness as in remembrance of nights swinging about Rungokai and ducking into whatever shop caught the midget’s eyes. Glancing at a mostly correct, missing a few parts and half assembled, clock on the pale beige walls Ichigo smirked in mischief and announced, “Then you better hurry, school starts in half an hour.”

Rukia glanced at him like a deer in headlights, or a person catching sight of some towering indomitable wave, she spared a moment to glare fiercely at Ichigo with all the ice inside her small soul before she darted from the table and shut the door with a slam as if hell’s gates were upon her heels. At the thought of hell and all its trials, Ichigo rested his head on the table with a thunk, and let his eyes lazily slid to the cup of tea, wisps of steam curling lazily and blissfully unaware of life.

A moment later the door slid open with a quiet rattle that belayed the scientist’s refusal to buy new doors even when the fifty-year-old ones were falling apart. Lifting his head from the table Ichigo blinked blearily at Kisuke leaning casually against the doorway with a coy knowing smile; the kind that had near constantly decorated the man’s features when he was plotting, or in on a plot as the circumstances often were.

“Now why was Kuchiki-san running about so frantically?”
The blond questioned in intrigue as he glided into the room and seated himself at the table with all the grace of a predator and yet at the same time harnessing his inner sloth, taking a drink from Ichigo’s tea before frowning at the contents, likely not enough sugar. Ichigo debated briefly on remaining silent just to see the man’s petulance at not having his curiosity satisfied before with a resolute sigh accompanied by a grin the orange-haired Captain answered, “She’s getting ready for high school, which starts in half-an-hour.”

The man made a sound of gleeful acknowledgement before pulling out a device from somewhere within his sleeve, Ichigo ignored the other sounds of shuffling and vague crinkling that preceded the process and instead decided to study his tea, closely guarded to his chest, as if it held the secrets to the universe. Before the steaming liquid could swallow his conscious whole the door once more slammed open and Rukia appeared panting and a touch wild-eyed her gaze landed with all the ferocity of a starving animal on Kisuke who only glanced up once before casually commenting, “In the closet on your left with the rainbow stickers, ignore the other bodies.”

Rukia nodded unperturbed, yelled, “Bye,” and was gone in the next second the sound of the front door sliding close echoing throughout the Shōten. It was followed briefly by a lingering silence that swelled and rose to a crescendo as once more Ichigo let the tea absorb his thoughts.

“Kisuke?”

Ichigo questioned pensively glancing up to study the scientist who was reading whatever data the device he was holding was displaying with eyes alight like a fire. The blond glanced up and with a waggle of his brow asked, “Yes Ichi-kun?”

“Technically we’re about the same age.”

Ichigo responded to the ending typically used for those younger, with a shake of his head at the man’s antics, it was mostly true if one included Ichigo’s years lived in the past timeline. Regardless of the fact he was still one of the youngest captains, which many others did not hesitate to lord over his head, though Tōshirō would change that. The scientist chuckled and fixed the Captain with a knowing look before gesturing for Ichigo to continue with his question.

“If some of the Bount want to find safety here at the Shōten would that be okay?”

Ichigo asked quietly, almost demurely with a quirk of his head, something asking of his friend in his voice. Kisuke stared at Ichigo with Athena grey eyes, stroking the stubble on his chin that Yoruichi both hated and loved, in thought as he considered the idea; likely plotting out experiments or some way to turn the freeloaders into his personal scapegoats.

“I don’t see why not. What about Soul Society though?”

Kisuke finally responded after drawing out the tension for a few moments of sadistic pleasure as the man was wont to do. At the question, Ichigo curled his looks, something defiant washing over his features in challenge. At the familiar expression Kisuke chuckled, features lighting up he commented and reassured, “I doubt we’ll have to worry, considering you’re the golden boy of Soul Society Ichigo.”

Tilting his head at the strange nickname; one he hadn’t heard before, Ichigo furrowed his brow in curiosity. He knew he had many names, some relating to his hair, others his mysterious nature; he knew he was something of a legend, like most of the Gotei 13 upper hierarchy, among the citizens of Rungokai, but being called the golden boy was certainly a first. Kisuke laughed uproariously at Ichigo’s expression, lips forming a broad grin as he shook his head in fond amusement and replied, “You are quite favoured among the upper echelon of Soul Society Ichigo. For Kami’s sake, the
Soutaicho practically adopted you.”

Ichigo made a vague oh sound in realisation before he shrugged in acceptance, it wasn’t as if his goals in Soul Society had been to curry favour with the higher-ups, it had more been in the nature of seeking relationships and personalities he was familiar with. Kisuke shook his head, where he was studying Ichigo, with the sort of bespectacled look the orange-haired Shinigami was often fixed with when someone discovered yet another of his impossible truths.

Before the conversation could continue a ringing tune, not unlike a cell phone, filled the room and Kisuke with dignity and integrity shuffled through his sleeves, near endless in their capacity for space, and pulled out another device. The scientist studied the small box with serious grey eyes before he glanced at Ichigo and commented, “Looks like the cavalry is arriving.”

Ichigo nodded and suppressed a groan, mustering the strength to stand as half of him was torn with elation that the rest of the Shinigami were arriving, even as another part of him dreaded the incoming chaos. Allowing the scientist to exit the room first, Ichigo dutifully followed the blond into the courtyard of the Shōten, bathed in the soft hues of early morning casting the earth in tones of a dream.

With a swell of reiatsu, familiar shoji doors materialized with all the bearing and elegance Ichigo had long since become familiar with as the doors slid open to reveal four silhouettes. Shinji followed by three lieutenants strolled casually into the courtyard, eyes sweeping about and observing his surroundings before landing on Ichigo. Rangiku on the left of the blond was surveying the living world with bright eyes, sparkling with excitement yet cut with seriousness beneath like polished diamonds. Gin a half step behind his girlfriend was carefully allowing his gaze to flick from Rangiku to Ichigo with all the beady predatory motions of a snake studying one’s prey. Ichigo decided it had been a wise choice to invite Gin along. Lisa was on Shinji’s right occasionally fixing both blond Shinigami with an irritated expression before letting her gaze land on Ichigo with a soft sort of fondness.

“Ichigo, what’s this I’ve been hearing about vampires?”

Shinji questioned casually with a sly quality to his gaze as he paused in front of Ichigo and Kisuke, trading the scientist with one of his cheshire grins before allowing the full force of his focus to land on Ichigo. The orange-haired Captain shook his head in rueful amusement and tactfully avoided the question for the moment by responding, “Hello to you to Shinji. Hello Gin, Rangiku, Lisa. Thank you all for coming.”

Shinji squawked outrageously at the dismissal of his question, and blatantly his existence, as Lisa in the background muffled her laughter into her hand before waving quietly at Ichigo with eyes alight with amusement. Rangiku looked close to hugging Ichigo simply to see her Captain squirm again, or just for fondness’ sake but in the end, to Ichigo’s gratitude, only winked in greeting and blew a kiss. Gin undeterred by Rangiku’s actions shot Ichigo a sly fox grin in greeting, eyes still wide-open for all their shut appearance in the same manner as always, though Ichigo sensed a hint of amusement from the young prodigy.

Returning his attention to Shinji who was staring at Ichigo in affront, glancing between the youth and Kisuke as if trying to convey his emotions to the scientist, the orange-haired Captain shook his head and swatted his friend upside the head with a pointed look. Shinji hissed but relented with a pout, eyes glimmering with a promise that Ichigo knew he would pay for later. Rolling his eyes with a shrug of his shoulders Ichigo considered the group of Shinigami and asked, “What do you know about the Bount?”

At the mention of their enemy and the mission at hand, the Shinigami hardened; the easy aura of
camaraderie dropping away to be replaced by the ancient guardians of the afterlife. Shinji, amber eyes glowing in promise and battle-lust, considered Ichigo for a moment before replying, “We had a captains’ meeting yesterday. Lot of it was all case of emergency procedures ya know the deal. Soutaicho stated ya were already there, and we were following to handle it- “

“What Shinji is dallying to say is that Aizen-taicho informed us that the Bount are a mod soul experiment gone wrong, they feed on human souls to gain power and are seeking a way to enter Soul Society to gain revenge.”

Lisa interrupted, the two other Vizard knowing of Shinji’s tendency to embellish at times, or just procrastinate the source material in general. Ichigo nodded in thanks to his former co-lieutenant who grinned in promise, hand straying to the hilt of her zanpaktou. Shinji glanced between the two, mouth opening and closing before he frowned and muttered petulantly about mutiny; Kisuke shuffled over to the other blond and pet his shoulder in a vaguely consoling manner. Rangiku giggled at their squabbling even as Gin watched everything with curiosity and amusement.

“I’ve explained most of this twice over, Kisuke you can finish briefing.”

The orange-haired Captain stated sharply with a crisp nod towards the blond scientist who studied Ichigo from under the brim of his hat with dark eyes before nodding. What Ichigo had spoken was true, he was more than tired of explaining the whole situation, and if he could shove that responsibility on Kisuke he would do so gladly.

“Kariya is the leader of the Bount; currently they are located in a mansion on the outskirts of town. Ichigo’s reconnaissance reported ten Bount, though there are nine now as Ichigo engaged in battle with two early this morning and killed one. He was injured by the way. In any case, their goal is to access a Quincy to enter Soul Society where they will be stronger due to the reaitsu saturated air. I, in my brilliance, have created mod souls that can sense their presence. And that’s about all; oh other than the fact that one or more of them might desert if we so provide the opportunity.”

Kisuke spoke cheerfully with a hint of mischievous malice as he pronounced ‘reconnaissance’ with all the hint needed that anyone knowing Ichigo’s true past would so desire to clue into the man’s reference, before declaring Ichigo’s wound with a sort of vindictive joy. The orange-haired Captain scrubbed a hand over his features as both Lisa and Shinji’s gaze (along with Rangiku though she was mild in her concern) swung to Ichigo with all the concerned force of a mother bear protecting their children, almost silently demanding to see the wound or cart him off to Unohana.

“What Kisuke failed to mention was that the injury was minor and is almost completely healed already.”

Ichigo bit back, the placating words settling the two slightly; though Ichigo knew Shinji would likely still demand to see the wound in any case. Rangiku a puzzled expression on her features, reflecting the cunning mind often hidden behind the pretty exterior, studied both the orange-haired Captain and the scientist before asking, “Nee how many Quincy are in Karakura town?”

“There are seven.”

Kisuke stared without inflexion as if the existence of Quincy after the genocide of the Blood War was normal and not something to report to Soul Society in the slightest. None of the Shinigami reacted with shock to the information which Ichigo was internally grateful for, even as Shinji narrowed his eyes in thought, more of the tactical kind, while Gin and Rangiku spoke in hushed tones, and Lisa sidled beside Ichigo.

“Are you really okay Ichigo?”
The young woman asked concern born of their long friendship saturating her voice; Ichigo nodded unhesitant glancing into her eyes to reassure her for a moment before he fixed his gaze upon Kisuke. The scientist was fiddling with a device but paused under the weight of Ichigo’s gaze and nodded imperceptibly once more handing the reins of control to the young Captain. Ichigo coughed once loudly obviously, gaining the attention of the Shinigami still standing in the warm light of mid-morning and stated, “For the moment we’re going to patrol the streets of Karakura to stop the Bount from attacking any souls. If you can, try and convert some of the Bount from their mission to destroy Soul Society. We’ll muster an attack on the mansion within the next few days. I should probably warn you guys now, there is a Shinigami who deserted wi- “

Ichigo trailed off as the door to the Shōten teetered open and Ririn in the bird plushie and blue outfit hopped out at the same time as one of Kisuke’s devices began to sing-song about the danger in a squealing high-pitch. The mod soul beelined towards the group of Shinigami and in her chirping voice announced, “The Bounts have attacked the high school.”

Kisuke glanced up from his device and nodded his acquiesce to the news. Ichigo dragged a hand over his face with a low curse and turned to face the gathered Shinigami all who faced him with the eyes of determined warriors, reaitsu humming throughout the air. Shaking his head in rueful amusement Ichigo let another curse, one directed at fate, slip out under his breath before he turned and faced Kisuke.

“Send Yoruichi to make sure their families are okay.”

The scientist tipped his head in acknowledgement of the command and some part of Ichigo’s heart rested easier knowing they would be okay. With Shiro chanting bloodlust in his ear, and Ossan resonating reassurance Ichigo turned to the gathered Shinigami and instructed with a bloodthirsty grin, “Follow me.”

X

Ichigo arrived first, landing in front of the school with a whirl of dust and caution clinging to every line of his body. The orange-haired Captain quickly surveyed the area, reaitsu reaching out and sweeping for any hostile presences before searching for familiar ones, eyes hard as steel as Zangetsu hung unsheathed at his side, the blade humming in anticipation. The other Shinigami landed behind Ichigo as silent as the wind that blew through the near-empty courtyard presences like silver muffled by cloth.

At first glance everything appeared normal in the mid-day sun, the squat school building towering above them as students studied in their classes and the city around them inhaled and exhaled. But as Ichigo listened closely he could hear the faint sounds of a battle lost somewhere behind the high school that sent nostalgia rippling through his core as he recalled the many adventures, some more mischievous than others that had occurred in Karakura. Glancing back at his companions, Ichigo caught the eyes of the Shinigami, determination reflecting like hardened glass in all their eyes, he moved his head once to direct them to follow his movement before allowing flash step to carry his feet forward.

Great arcs of ice decorated the courtyard filling the air with glittering spirals that shone and reflected like a kaleidoscope as water whirled about sending the crystalline figures crashing to the pavement. The water twins, who had attacked Uryū in the hospital in Ichigo’s timeline, were facing Rukia who held Sode No Shirayuki in its unsealed form, Chad standing beside the young woman in silent support, as he fired blasts of energy at the twins to distract them.

On the other side of the field, the twins and Uryū faced Gō Koga and his doll. Karin and Uryū were firing Quincy arrows (or well Karin’s equivalent of arrows they were more sword-like) at the metal
doll. The condensed reishi was guided truly but most skittered off the metal with a shower of sparks unsuccessful at piercing the thick metal but able to immobilize the almost spider-like creature’s limbs temporarily. At the same time, Yuzu chanted a mix of Bakudō and Hado firing both at the doll and the Bount, flashes of light as a Shakkahō, followed by a Byakurai, and a Sai filled the air.

Ichigo was beyond glad the twins had refrained from unsheathing their zanpakutou in the fight relying on their Quincy powers, even if it painted a larger target on their backs for the Bount. It protected their family and unwanted inquiries. There would already be questions about Quincy living in Karakura town, but Shinigami-Quincy-hollow hybrids were not something Soul Society needed to discover yet (he was still waiting for the day when he revealed his own biology).

“Lieutenant Kuchiki, need some assistance?”

Ichigo called out with a grin as Shinji stepped up beside the orange-haired Captain observing their enemies and their allies with careful interest clouded with bloodlust, noting with a careful tactical strength the abilities of both sides. In a dramatic flair, that Shinji had likely coordinated the three lieutenants fanned out behind the two captains presenting a united front to the Bount.

Rukia jerked and her eyes harshly caught Ichigo’s in surprise as Sode No Shirayuki coated the ground in a thin layer of ice followed by large pillars spearing the air around the Bount twins and Chad fired his reaitsu towards one of the twins. The female lieutenant scowled at Ichigo and rolled her eyes as if offended he had offered help even if beneath all she looked relieved at their appearance. Ichigo ignored the vague sense of déjà vu and instead winked at the lieutenant and flash-stepped across the courtyard to catch one of the metal doll’s large spider-like limbs on the naked blade of Zangetsu.

Taking his movement as a sign of action the other Shinigami darted forward, Rangiku, Gin, and Lisa stepping forward to aid Rukia and Chad in a touch of overkill as Shinji appeared beside Ichigo with a broad carefree grin. As Ichigo strained against the weight of the metal doll over his shoulder he called out in greeting to the three teens standing somewhat in a stupor behind him, “Hello Yuzu, Karin, Uryū, nice to see you all again so soon.”

“Ichi-nii we could have handled it.”

Karin replied in greeting as she crossed her arms over her chest before with a determined frown that was almost eerily familiar she once more materialized her bow and fired at a stray limb that had inched its way towards Shinji’s neck. The blond nodded in thanks with a grin even as the metal doll skidded back at the force of a rapid combo of attacks Ichigo released in the intermediary their arrival had created. The doll rolled back unfazed by the deep gouges in the metal and with a shift as if something out of alchemy the doll merged into the form of a machine gun. Ichigo had only a moment to erect a kido shield spanning across the teens and Shinji before the make-shift bullets collided with the shield with all the weight of shards of ice crashing to the ground.

“Gō Koga if you surrender now, Soul Society will be lenient, you will be allowed to live in the mortal realm or seek shelter elsewhere. Soul Society does not wish to destroy the Bount, the genocide of a race, they have forsaken that path. Soul Society wants to make reparations for their mistakes, for the suffering they have caused your race. But if you seek revenge against Soul Society then we have no choice but to stop you.”

Ichigo yelled over the roar of the machine guns commanding attention with his eyes and the fire in his voice, as Uryū and Karin huddled behind a shield Yuzu had erected; one that remained standing even in the face of the assault, stared at him with wide eyes. The large Bount jerked to the side at Ichigo’s words as if the vitriol of Soul Society had been the only words the Bount had expected to hear. Gō Koga levelled Ichigo with a slow searching gaze, the heat of battle suspended as if by a
At the same time, Ichigo felt Shinji’s own confused gaze at his side, the blond likely questioning why they were offering such an option to the faction that, like many others, sought vengeance on Soul Society. Ichigo wished there had been more time to explain the situation to the Shinigami before the attack had happened, explain how they were the last of their race, how most had been killed by or had outlived the humans surrounding them. But the orange-haired Shinigami knew fate was never so easy, always sliding from one path to another, twisting around itself in great tangles almost like an ouroboros in nature.

The Bount continued to search Ichigo’s eyes, searching for honesty, questioning the veracity of his words with a fragile denied hope and acceptance even as stone-cold logic tickled into place and a frown burrowed across the man’s features and the doll morphed from a machine gun to a cloud of small metal spheres that shot forward in answer to Ichigo’s warning. The orange-haired Captain muted a sigh, knowing in the end hopefully he would be able to save a few members of the dying race; he never wanted to see extinction of that kind again, or on the level of the end of the world.

With Zangetsu rushing through his ears and veins like the sea Ichigo released a Getsuga Tensho that cut through the sea of metal orbs like Moses through the Red sea in a brilliant arc of black reaitsu before charging towards the buff male Bount. The Getsuga Tensho slammed against a wall of metal as the Bount’s doll reformed protecting her wielder and leaving him unharmed as the spider-like form once more emerged into existence. Dropping the kido surrounding them Ichigo traded a glance with Shinji before he ordered the teenagers behind him in a calm but clearly commanding voice, “Stay back and provide support, try to subdue the Bount, if you stop him the doll will stop its attacks.”

Yuzu nodded in firm agreement and Uryū followed the motion even as Karin looked on the border of rebelliously ignoring his instructions she nodded, understanding and seriousness collecting in her eyes. Ichigo grinned and returned his attention to the battle even as he ducked an overhead swing from a blade like limb and Shinji darted underneath to slash at the doll’s unprotected side. Ichigo responded by firing a Byakurai through the doll’s head, knowing that even with a multitude of attacks the metal being would simply separate and reform unless its wielder was stopped.

Ichigo was peripherally aware of the others fighting the water twins, and the three teenagers behind him aiding in their fight with conveniently placed kido, arrows, and attempting to restrain the male Bount. In unison, the two captains dodged and slashed moving in an easy tandem that had developed as they trained their inner hollows in an abandoned cave and fought on the sands of Hueco Mundo.

Releasing a slightly over-powered Getsuga Tensho at the doll, forcing it to once more separate into its spherical form Ichigo whipped around instincts buzzing on the border of his senses as a large gust of wind hurtled towards the teenagers still rallied in a pyramid formation. With a tug on Zangetsu’s power, Ichigo released another Getsuga Tensho, the black reaitsu tangling inside the wind as he used shunpo to appear in front of the teenagers unprepared for the sudden attack.

Kariya stood in front of him, leaning casually against one of the school chain-linked fences, white hair gleaming like polished marble in the sunlight, as Yoshino hovered behind the leader of the Bount along with another female Bount with slicked green hair and a crimson fan. Part of Ichigo felt sympathy and a touch of empathy for the man in front of him, for the immortality and the duress of time upon one’s sanity, for watching one’s entire race fall, and for all he had lost. But another part of Ichigo had already long ago accepted that some people were beyond saving (but sometimes even those thought beyond saving if given a chance could try).

“Well if it isn’t the Shinigami Captain who killed Utagawa.”

The man stated in a slow elegant drawl stepping casually into the sunlight as if to put at bay any swinging pocket watch ticking away every second thought.
myths of sunlight weakening their powers, position commanding and powerful as a hush fell over the battlefield at the arrival of the Bounts’ leader. Ichigo straightened out of the battle stance he had slid into and faced the man, letting his eyes stare into depths tattered with insanity he responded, “Jin Kariya.”

“Oh, you know of me? Then you know we seek vengeance on Soul Society for this half-life they have doomed us to, for our existence, for shunting us out the door and never looking back.”

Kariya responded words a fever even as they were said with staid cool elegance, the Bounts in the courtyard looked to their leader with almost adoring eyes as if blind to the madness all except for Yoshino and a few others who hid their gazes well, while acting attentive to their leader listened with wary caution. Ichigo frowned at the statement as the Shinigami in the courtyard tightened at the tides of war swelling about their feet, and the eyes of both sides slid to the Quincy in the courtyard, Shinji and Lisa were standing protectively near the twins and Uryū as if challenging someone to take a step closer.

“Soul Society was wrong. They shouldn’t have abandoned the Bount. And Soul Society is willing to make reparations, to accept our faults. We failed, and we know it. We don’t seek war, and if any of you, anyone at all wishes to stop fighting, then we will not attack you, we can even offer you shelter. Jin Kariya you have lived to see the near extinction of your race and madness of any slight is understandable but please consider stopping your quest for vengeance. You don’t need to sacrifice yourselves, your lives have meaning.”

Ichigo’s words were slow and clear, burning with a hidden passion that was forcibly kept on a simmer, as much as he wanted to yell at them that they shouldn’t waste their lives on a foolish endeavour of vengeance, or preach Soul Society’s changes he knew that it was like throwing sand at a brick wall. However useless in most cases, Ichigo knew some of the Bount in the courtyard, and likely those hidden in wait to aid their comrades had heard his words.

Yoshino stood stock still behind Kariya, gaze darting to the man expectantly waiting for his response in a way the belayed the way one knew an old lover’s heart, even as her gaze flickered to Ichigo in contemplation of his words and offer of a hand however faint for her to take. Kariya in response, faltered for a fraction of a moment, gaze confused before he tipped his head back and laughed, the sound grating and rustling throughout the courtyard, sending shivers down Ichigo’s spine even as he stared silent and with all the posture of a stone guardian at the leader.

“Peace? Forgiveness? No. The Bount will have their vengeance and create a new paradise for our race, one where the Quincy will not be prosecuted, and the Shinigami will be gone. We will do so if we have to kill every soul before us to gain the power.”

Kariya spoke eyes almost glowing, as the Bount shifted in agreement and many in the courtyard shifted in surprise, Yoshino’s eyes widened with dawning realisation at the true extent of madness the white-haired Bount held. Ichigo’s shoulders slumped in partial defeat even as Zangetsu was shifted in his hands with a resonating acceptance and as the sun was shadowed by passing clouds the battle recommenced with a great surge and heave of reaitsu.

Ichigo and Kariya studied each other in a tense silence, one that raged and rippled around them as Rukia and Chad continued to deal with the water twins, Rangiku and Gin teamed up to deal with the fan-wielding Bount, Lisa aided the three teens, and Shinji darted forward to deal with Yoshino. The standoff lasted only a moment before the air stilled and then began to swirl snatching at Ichigo’s shihakusho and pulling at his limbs, in response Ichigo flared his reaitsu allowing it to coat his body in arcs of thick ebony that braided and twisted with the wind as Kariya charged forward with a snarl written across his features.
Zangetsu snapped up to deflect the harsh blasts of wind that cut like a scythe through the air as Kariya maintained a barrier like solid glass around himself and summoned a handful of tornados with a deranged laugh. The young Captain grit his teeth in determination and waited till the tunnels of wind were almost within arms reach before releasing a Getsuga Tensho, the energy spiralled through the air and cut through the tornados merging with the heavy wind even as Ichigo darted through the storm Hierro tugged tightly to his skin. It was at times like these Ichigo desperately wished for an elemental zanpaktou sword, as while Zangetsu was amazing when faced with certain elements, raw energy wasn’t always enough to completely combat its effects or it was just damn tricky.

As Ichigo cleared the winds whipping about, Zangetsu snapped up to deflect a bolt of lightning that arched off the blade glowing like a lightsaber in Kariya’s hands. With furrowed brows, Ichigo dodged another bolt of lightning and released a low powered Getsuga Tensho followed by a Byakurai in an attempt to pierce the barrier surrounding the leader of the Bount. Kariya let the attacks clash against his wind barrier in a screaming collision of two forces raging against one another, one a supposedly immovable object, and the other an unstoppable force. It was vindictively pleasing to watch surprise skitter across Jin Kariya’s features when a large crack appeared in the barrier.

Before Ichigo could press his advantage the white-haired Bount charged forward blade crackling ominously as the sky overhead shuddered in warning. Zangetsu caught the blade that was simultaneously heavy and light with ease as reaitsu coated the sealed blade and Ichigo struggled against Kariya’s strength. A moment later they sprung apart before Kariya charged swinging overhead, as Ichigo raised Zangetsu to catch the blade, which flowed to a quick reverse aiming for Ichigo’s chest. The orange-haired Shinigami twisted fluidly out of the way even as Zangetsu snapped out towards the white-haired Bount’s neck, only to be stopped by a swell of air that caught Zangetsu like a wall of ice.

Flicking his blade back towards his centre Ichigo caught Kariya’s next attack with a grind of metal that produced sparks and small spits of lightning that rent the air between the two fighters supercharged and seeped in tension. Ichigo allowed reaitsu to pool beneath his fingers, negating the effects of the lightning so close to his skin and threatening to electrify him, and charging a point-blank Getsuga Tensho Ichigo released it with a grin.

The attack slammed into a hastily erected wind barrier sending the Bount hurtling half-way across the courtyard even as a scurry of tornados formed into existence in retaliation. Kariya stumbled to his feet, appearance tousled even as flames of madness collapsed across his face and the Bount hurled across the courtyard, following his attack blade raised to harm as lightning slashed at the ground around Ichigo in an increasingly intimidating manner. Ichigo cut through the tornados, ignored the lightning and surged forward to catch the blade. The two opponents struggled against the other, opposing strengths sliding one blade close to the other’s chest as Ichigo grit his teeth at the lightning attempting to strike him only to meet with his Hierro or a well-timed dodge as Ichigo slid away and re-engaged Kariya.

They continued to clash, as throughout the courtyard the other Shinigami and Bount battled, the sounds of fighting a great cacophony that ebbed and flowed along with the reaitsu filling the air in an oppressive manner; like a thick summer heat drifting and settling over one’s shoulders. As Ichigo paced a half-step back, noting Kariya’s wearing demeanour as the leader attempted to keep up with Ichigo’s stamina, the orange-haired Shinigami felt the atmosphere tense, though the sound of battle still raged on something lingered.

Ichigo’s eyes subtly swept the courtyard as he blocked an overhead strike from Kariya and retorted with a slash towards the man’s midsection. As his eyes swept through the battle, his senses flared in warning, in a way that was both distinctly unfamiliar to Ichigo and yet horrid in its sense, because Ichigo was used to trusting his instincts in regard to protecting himself in battle, but when they were
blaring to protect others?

Without conscious thought, Ichigo was moving a blur across the courtyard to intercept a zanpaktou that had appeared a snake in the sunlight as it had crept through the long grasses of battle. The twins and Uryū jerked in shock behind Ichigo, even as the orange-haired captains stared into the flint hardened eyes of the deserter Ichinose. The man was staring at Ichigo with vaguely muted shock at having his attack intercepted, the Shinigami likely planning to sweep in and snatch the girls or Uryū while no one was looking. It made Ichigo’s blood boil in a way that lingered in a horrible sensation that pulled at his senses like he was once more an adolescent.

Tamping down on the rage and protective instincts rearing their foul and proud head, Ichigo jerked Ichinose’s zanpaktou away and in the lingering silence his interruption had caused asked the man, “You’re a Shinigami. Why are you fighting against us?”

Ichinose wrinkled a brow, an expression of loathing seeped with anger slipping across his features as he responded, “The Shinigami are nothing but bloodthirsty savages who care nothing for justice or law. I watched my Captain slain, just so another could take his place.”

The deserter spoke in a serious tone as their wills strained against one another. Ichigo frowned at the man’s statement even as the tension drifting through the air began to gather like a storm swelling on the horizon.

“Soul Society is nothing like that anymore, once perhaps but not so now. We have a militia in Rungokai and better care in general. Though I suppose you are from the Eleventh division?”

Ichigo questioned and Ichinose said nothing, eyes flickering with something hesitant and thoughtful before he scowled and let his zanpaktou swing out and whip towards Ichigo’s neck with a rapid metal slicing cruelly through the air. Ichigo twisted aside and pivoted as Kariya appeared behind Ichigo; too close to the twins for the orange-haired Captain’s liking. Zangetsu humming through his body and mind Ichigo released a powerful Getsuga Tensho. In the next second, Ichigo flicked Zangetsu to catch Ichinose’s zanpaktou and sent a binding kido over his shoulder toward Kariya.

The tension in the air reached a rapid crescendo as an elegant pair of shoji doors opened in the courtyard and Renji glided out followed closely by Ikkaku with all the ceremonial bang of a thousand gongs. The man grinned at Rukia, and Ichigo ignored other thoughts of the redhead, memories drifting in a familiar wave to the surface, as the brash Shinigami called out, “Need a bit of help?”

At the appearance of the two Shinigami, Kariya traded a glance with Ichinose, loaded with unsaid words and a hint of sanity masked in taciturn sensibility, before he gestured for a retreat. The deserter Shinigami made one last attempt to strike through Ichigo’s defence as lightning slammed into Ichigo from the other side. The orange-haired Shinigami carelessly battered Ichinose’s zanpaktou away, tired of useless games and attempting to convince people of wavering loyalties and called out, “The offer of sanctuary still stands, whether the Bount die-out is your decision.”

With those parting words the Bount dispersed, Yoshino casting an aspiring look to Ichigo before following Kariya, Koga paused long enough to study Ichigo intently before he left as well. The young Captain’s shoulders slumped minutely at the retreat of their opponents as he turned around to appraise the state of the twins and Uryū. They looked a little worse for the wear but overall seemed exhilarated in the post-battle adrenaline glow.

“Are you all okay?”

The orange-haired Captain questioned, directing the query to all the souls gathered in the courtyard
as the others shook off the presence of battle. Karin and Yuzu shared a silent look, communication a flawless working between the two before they nodded with mirroring smiles, one a touch more bloodthirsty than the other. Uryū nodded briefly in assurance, clipped and pristine as always even as his eyes carefully observed his cousins’ states.

Shinji sidled over to stand beside Ichigo to survey the surprisingly minimal damage to the courtyard, as Rukia hit Renji upside the head for coming at all, Rangiku and Gin conversed in soft tones even as the flamboyant lieutenant waved happily at her Captain noticing Ichigo’s gaze. Chad stood beside the twins a silent but sure presence, and Lisa ignored Ikkaku whining about missing the battle and had instead pulled out a novel from somewhere within her shihakusho.

“Quite the characters eh Ichi?”

The blond drawled casually as Ichigo sheathed Zangetsu with a nod, thoughts drifting over the battle and attempting to analyze what could have been said differently if there was something he perhaps could have done to stop the extinction of the Bounts. As if sensing his dark thoughts, Shinji clasped a hand on Ichigo’s shoulder forcefully drawing him from spiralling trails and with a wide grin admonished, “Come let’s go help with the cleaning, and then you can introduce me to the fearsome four over there.”

Ichigo muffled his laughter into his sleeve at the name and nodded, pushing aside his worries for the moment to focus on the people surrounding him. The young Captain had a feeling everything wasn’t quite as finished to plan as it yet seemed.

X

The knock was quiet almost a whisper in the warmth of the Shōten as the gathered Shinigami piled about the room, chatting, sharing tea and humorous stories that left others blushing in embarrassment, and generally ribbing each other. Ichigo glanced around and noticed he was one of the only ones to hear it among the happy post-battle incessant noise, other than Lisa whose keen eyes tracked the orange-haired Captain as he rose gracefully to his feet and slipped from the room in the imitation of a passing shadow.

The female lieutenant followed him, solid and reassuring in a way that had been built in his first life and honed to a fine needlepoint when they had served under the same Captain. They didn’t speak as they made their way to the front of the Shōten, the candy storefront, there was a certain understanding in the air between them and a lack of need for communication as their zanpaktou glinted in a sliver of promise.

Ichigo opened the door slowly, cautiously, only to take a half step back in shock when he glimpsed the pale form of Yoshino, hair tangled about her features and eyes sorrowful, she stared first at Ichigo with something both hostile and hopeful before her gaze drifted past the orange-haired Shinigami to Lisa.

“I’m sorry. Kariya, he wanted to consume too many souls, and he wanted to sacrifice me. And I was so lost, there was no other option…”

The female Bount trailed off from tripping worried words clearly distraught, and before the Captain could comfort the refined woman, or invite her inside Lisa stepped forward offering a kind warm smile, the ones saved for Nano and responded, “It’s okay you’re safe here,” as she guided the woman inside with an arm over her shoulder.

Ichigo shook his head with a rueful glance at the stars before following inside, knowing once more the games had changed as the Bount would be unable to create the Bitto, and Yoshino, if Ichigo had
any say in the matter, would not die. Zangetsu humming reassurance and amusement Ichigo closed the door to the night and followed Lisa into the warmth of the Shōten.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading I hope you all enjoyed the interactions between the Shinigami, and the Bount, as well as the difference from the original plot. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Sunlight!
Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 62, some new perspectives and what is pretty much the last chapter of the Bount arc (sorry if you guys wanted more time spent on it, but there’s more than a few other arcs to cover). If anyone is wondering when the Quincy arc will start I would guesstimate anywhere around chapter 70-75. I hope you all enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

Yoshino settled uncomfortably in the seat the female Shinigami had guided her to with a kind smile and wary eyes like hardened steel tempered a hundred times over. Yoshino wasn’t surprised that the Shinigami all regarded her with wary caution as if any moment expecting an invisible switch to flip and for her attack, but a few hours before she had been their enemy in nearly every way and now she was in their base of operations proclaiming her own traitorous nature. It was almost a strange parody of the Shinigami who had allied with the Bount. Or at least it all sounded so vaguely noble in her mind, but under the weight of the stares, some accusing, others trying to understand, the woman, who had long ago outgrown embarrassment wanted to shrink back unto herself.

She had thought before the Shinigami had arrived, that she could deal with Kariya herself, she was close to him, and had been training for years on end with Goethe to achieve a fusion. But those thoughts had all been shattered and reformed into something half-resembling a plan when the man in front of her had offered a chance at survival, eyes bright and promising. As much as living near endless years wore one down like thin sheets of tissue paper, Yoshino wanted to live, more importantly, wanted to live without the weight of revenge and hatred hanging off her shoulders. She wanted to see the next day, the new inventions of the future, tomorrow. The orange-haired Shinigami had offered it, eyes more promising than that of the many she had met in her life on the earth, restlessly seeking some meaning to her existence.
But it was beyond the promise and strength of the Shinigami that had convinced her to turn away from Kariya; from the man she had once loved as true as night falls. It had been the years of sorrow and grief, there for all the world to see, but scabbed over with new experiences, new meaning, and an ancientness that perhaps did not speak of mortal years but wisdom all the same.

It had been those eyes, ones that reminded her of her own years of living and sparked a shred of empathy for the man who she barely knew but for what the windows open to all told. That and what Kariya had done when they had all returned from the altercation at the high school. He had raged and frothed about plans being disrupted, all the known Quincy that resided in Karakura were no longer an easy target to outnumber or to persuade in any matter.

Then the man had turned those eyes on Yoshino, seeing beyond her, and beyond reason with the same egotistical need for vengeance that had frightened her thoughts into betrayal in the first place. Some of the others had been equally unsure, the Shinigami who had deserted had been quiet in contemplation and Go Kōga had brooded in one corner while the others talked and plotted, about how they would capture a Quincy, and whether to do it all by force. During it all, Kariya’s eyes had continued to stray to Yoshino glowing with unholy light and malevolent ideas.

Shivering, Yoshino tugged her attention forcefully to the moment at hand and watched as the orange-haired Shinigami placated the others. His words were both commanding and sincere as he spoke of the near genocide of her race with understanding, and how he had sworn to her safety and would fight the others if they were so inclined to challenge him; the bald one looked particularly eager to do so, on principle of a fight alone.

The female Shinigami leaned close to Yoshino while still maintaining a respectful distance and whispered quietly, “We won’t change our minds so easily, when Ichigo offered you sanctuary he meant it, and if there’s one thing the orange-haired brat doesn’t do is go back on his word.”

Yoshino nodded at the kind words bitten with familiar and fond vitriol at the orange-haired Shinigami-Ichigo and smiled in thanks even as the door creaked open behind her with a shuffling alike to wind through the long grasses or the creeping age of wood played by the wind. Craning her neck around as the others’ gazes drifted towards the door, Yoshino was greeted with the image of a man in something like a lab coat, blond almost gold hair, and a stripped bucket hat shadowing cunning dagger-like eyes.

The man, who was obviously a Shinigami of some nature, surveyed the room quickly and efficiently like a predator in a new environment before his eyes landed on Yoshino. For one terrifying moment those eyes were like dark voids of interest, curiosity, thoughts running through them with a calculating hard edge before it was gone and the man smiled disarmingly and ambled into the room with a happy gait.

“Now Ichi, picking up another stray I see?”

The man in the striped hat asked with a coy smile that turned his expression into something teasing, as the orange-haired Shinigami spluttered for a moment before he scowled at the man with striped-hat and resolutely said nothing with his arms petulantly crossed over his chest. Chuckling to himself the man turned to face Yoshino and with a bow sweeping his hat off his head introduced himself, “Hello, my name is Kisuke Urahara, I own this shop, the Urahara Shōten, and if you would like I can provide you with sanctuary for as long as needed. Though I warn you I do not take freeloaders lightly.”

The gail man had flipped from one moment to the next, taking on a serious persona, eyes twinkling with intrigue and promise as he studied Yoshino with a gimlet eye. In the background, a red-haired Shinigami with tattoos complained loudly about freeloaders, and a small Shinigami, the one with the
ice zanpaktou, bashed the red-headed male over the head.

Yoshino studied the man for a moment before she let her gaze drift past the Shinigami and to Ichigo watching the scene with careful eyes, and to the other Shinigami, all watching with a sort of unhostile neutrality that did little to soothe Yoshino’s heart, but rested some worry still lingering.

She considered it the idea of working for the man and staying in the candy shop which housed this base for Shinigami in the back. It was safe, the man in front of her exuding the type of power that wasn’t dependant on reaitsu alone, and with the constant flow of Shinigami Kariya wouldn’t dare to attack the building. Furthermore, once it was all over she could leave, but for now, she was safe.

Pulling her coat tighter about her arms in a measure of security Yoshino caught the dagger-like eyes of the man in front of her and with a nod responded, “I would be honoured if you would allow me to stay here.”

Once more the man teetered from one mood to the next as he grinned and clapped his hands as if a child with a new toy; which was a mildly disturbing thought. The orange-haired Shinigami behind the man with the striped-hat slumped with a sigh of relief at her acquiescence to staying, even as another Shinigami, one with short blond hair in a bob-cut and an aura of age that few in the room possessed called out, “Now hold all your horses, how do we know ya not some spy meant to infiltrate our base and slither through our plans like a sneak?”

Yoshino cringed at the question, knowing it was beyond valid considering her desertion was a multitude of reasons of which few she could share. All eyes in the room swung first to the blond who studied her with beady eyes, before swinging to Yoshino in obvious contemplation, as if attempting to see her role as the suspicious blond had painted it.

A silver-haired Shinigami with eyes like slits studied her with a quiet knowing intensity before he commented with a bit of a grin to his voice, “She ain’t ta type.”

Yoshino wasn’t sure whether to thank the silver-haired man or scowl at him for the insult to her skills at deception but decided on nodding her gratitude even as the woman sitting beside the man swatted his shoulder with a bit of a scowl. Ichigo tensed near imperceptibly, expression twisted into something thoughtful and yet remarkably placid before he said, “How about we listen to what she has to say?”

The orange-haired Shinigami’s words silenced the others, whose rising whispers had begun to border on a cacophony, with a quiet almost shamed looks their eyes settled on her. Yoshino took a deep breath and drew on the strength ground into the marrow of her soul after an eternity of living among humans. She would convince the Shinigami of her innocence, she had to; going back to Kariya was not an option, not if she wanted to live.

“Kariya… he was once inspiring, whole in a way he isn’t now. I never agreed with his way of consuming souls for power, not when we can live without it. But I had loved him then in a way that has grown sour now. He wants to consume too many souls in his lust for vengeance, and I’m afraid of what else he might do in the face of that. I want to live, as much as my existence has been long on this earth I want to continue to watch it grow.”

Silence followed her words, but it was the kind of contemplative silence where the audience pondered the words and attempted to come to a decision, it left nerves fluttering about her belly as she picked at the frayed cloth of one of her sleeves. The female-Shinigami beside her, the one who seemed understanding and caring beneath a cool exterior smiled in an encouraging manner as the orange-haired Shinigami took a step closer to her in insinuation of where his loyalties would lie in this matter.
The Shinigami with the short blond hair shook his head with a grin that was far too wide to be anything other than predatory, laughed and commented, “Well that’s that then.”

Yoshino’s shoulders tensed at the words unknowing of their context before the man directed the carnivorous gin at her and continued, “Ya ain’t lying, Gin woulda called ya on it had ya been. And Ichi here with his saviour complex ain’t gonna let us do anything dramatic so welcome to the Urahara Shōten.”

Yoshino swallowed her relief at the acceptance of the group of Shinigami, some were still regarding her with suspicious eyes, but most of them had accepted the words of the short-haired Shinigami easily.

“Ichigo why don’t you guide our guest to one of the new rooms, we still have a briefing to finish much to the joy of the others gathered.”

The man with the striped bucket hat commanded, or rather asked in a disguising nice sing-song tone, of the orange-haired Shinigami, who startled at the words drifting from whatever space his mind had occupied. The orange-haired Shinigami’s gaze landed on the man with the striped hat and he nodded once in agreement before levering to his feet with a graceful motion. Yoshino nodded her head once more in thanks to the man who had provided such hospitality and with a last nod in farewell to the other Shinigami followed the orange-haired man out of the warmth of the small living room.

The hallway was almost graciously still compared to the constant energy of the living room, Yoshino breathed slightly at ease now that she was out of the eyes of the Shinigami as she stepped into the small space. The moment the rickety door rattled closed behind her and sealed away the other Shinigami, Ichigo turned to face her, eyes smouldering with a fierceness like a burning star as he studied Yoshino. After a second, his shoulders slumped and the expression faded away to be replaced by one that reflected a deep exhaustion that was more than bone-deep before that too was gone.

An almost silent conversation drifted between the lone occupants of the hallway, one where Ichigo asked her to be respectful, to try and live with the man with the striped hat, accompanied by a good dose of apologies and promises to try and save what Bount he could. In response to the honest, almost strangely naïve in their intensity unspoken words, Yoshino allowed her eyes to reflect acceptance and the same sort of determination and promise.

Nodding to himself Ichigo turned and began to walk through the hallways at a semi-sedate pace, one that allowed Yoshino to catch up to the man’s longer strides and listened as he commented, “Kisuke is a good man, a scientist at heart, but with ethics and morals buried somewhere underneath it all. Even if you can’t find a place the Shōten is always open, though Shinigami don’t have the same concept of time as your kind, we’ve still lived many years more than that of the average human.”

Ichigo informed her kindly, with a fondness to his tone that betrayed his intimacy with the man even as he paused in front of a plain door orientated with a myriad of colourful stickers, and other bright things. The orange-haired Shinigami leaned casually against the doorway as Yoshino cautiously slid the door open, and commented, “We’ll likely start the final assault within the next few days if you need to say any goodbyes I recommend you do so discreetly and inform one of us so we can accompany you. If you ever need anything, I’m happy to help, goodnight.”

The orange-haired Shinigami finished with a nod and a smile that sent Yoshino’s emotions scuttering about inside her head, it wasn’t that the smile was attractive (though it was), but more the genuine emotion behind it and a sense of something more behind it. A promise, to aid, to help, that lingered and resounded as truly as any of the old gods.
Yoshino nodded in gratitude, thoughts briefly drifting to Kariya wondering if she should attempt to say goodbye to the man she had once loved or if there were any of the Bount she needed to see before they might never meet again. Ichigo smiled once more before he turned away and strode back towards the living room, his figure cutting into the shadows before merging with them and leaving only the empty quiet of her thoughts.

For a moment, Yoshino turned to face the guest room she had been offered, it was small but airy and with a simple theme much like one might see in a human hotel, though with touches of a historical feel. The room, as lovely in its plainness as it was, lingered with the silence and Yoshino, wary of this new unfound situation glanced towards where the orange-haired Shinigami had come from and made a decision.

Creeping back along the hallways, one hand sliding along the cool wall Yoshino once more came upon the living space, the simple shoji door guarding the entryway closed but doing little to block the sound of voices escaping the room. Yoshino paused beside the doorway and quietly listened as the voices spoke.

“We need to attack soon, if this keeps going on they could try to attack one of the Quincy with force.”

One voice commented, deep and male with a sensible tone, one that was more familiar than the others and likely Ichigo. Another voice soon joined the first and added, “Not to mention the potential to harm the souls of Karakura town.”

The second voice was female, deep and crisp and concluding excellently on what some of Kariya’s future plans had entailed. Yoshino frowned thoughts drifting to plans that had had too high a cost, demanding more than Yoshino was comfortable with, even with her own apathy of the matter, the lust for vengeance long gone cold in the face of time.

“Someone needs to stay behind when we attack in case one of the Bount slips out of our net.”

Another voice commented, likely the man with the stripped-hat as a general consensus of agreement followed the sound logic. A second later another male voice spoke, “Its best if you stay behind Urahara-san, and it is likely Aizen-taicho will be visiting the mortal world to aid you in securing the Bount.”

“The kid’s got it right, everything should be fine with us going and leaving the situation to those kooks.”

Another voice interjected with a low rasping drawl dripping with amusement and teasing as the sound of someone spluttering in offence reached Yoshino’s ears. Before the person who had likely been insulted could defend themselves, another voice spoke up, “Alright everyone listen up, we know that there will be nine in the mansion including the deserter. I’ll deal with Kariya and the one with the metal doll, Renji and Ikkaku deal with the old Bount; he has a huge doll. Gin deal with the creepy one with the glasses; watch out for the deck of cards. Rukia please deal with the water twins and if you need to you can bring in the three Quincy from earlier to assist you but remember that you risk putting their lives in danger if you do so. Lisa, Rangiku take on the Bount with the fan and the one with the orange hair, watch out he has a means of possession. Shinji deal with the deserter, see if you can convince him of Soul Society’s innocence, if Renji or Ikkaku are finished with their battle take them with you.”

The voice, which Yoshino identified as the orange-haired Shinigami finished, to the silence and rapt attention of the room before him. Yoshino held her breath for a moment even as her eyes crinkled in thought and she wondered how the man, one who had hardly met all of the Bount knew so much...
about them and their powers. It wasn’t simply reconnaissance there was something in his voice that spoke of a deeper knowledge or understanding.

A chorus of agreement followed the commands, accompanied by good-natured mumbling, and a bit of ribbing. Yoshino muffled laughter into the palm of her hand at the nature of the Shinigami and turned away, feeling the exhaustion of the night's events begin to drag at her eyelids and steps.

The days to come would be different and likely difficult, but Yoshino wanted to survive, wanted to see what new things the Shinigami would do, see how they had changed from the once bloodthirsty killers they were once heralded as. Walking down the hallway Yoshino’s shoulders felt invisibly lighter while at the same time heavy with the weight of her resolution to the future.

X

Ichigo ducked under the swing of a zanpaktou, one that vibrated through the air like a piano wire as it sliced above his head at a wicked angle. The orange-haired Shinigami pivoted on his feet and let Zangetsu slam upwards to catch the other blade arcing towards his neck crackling with electricity in an untampered maelstrom that sent shivers trespassing through Ichigo’s spine. Winds blew about the mansion, crashing and billowing through shattered windows and tearing at his shihaksho with vicious abandon as Ichigo ducked under another overhead swing from Kariya, eyes alight like a madman, and launched a kick towards the man’s torso before whipping around to catch Ichinose’s zanpaktou on the broad edge of Zangetsu’s blade.

As the young Captain reversed his blade in a quick motion that slid the other Shinigami’s zanpaktou away from his torso and flicked it towards the deserter’s neck, Ichigo wondered how everything had come to this point. Oh, the plan had all started normally enough, or as normal as one could find when it came to the Shinigami in any situation. The likelihood of a plan succeeding perfectly, however, slim had started out well. They had entered the mansion, sans twins to Ichigo’s immense relief (though he knew they were likely patrolling the streets, and that Rukia was actually with them considering one of the mod souls warnings about the twin Bounts in Karakura). Then in a chaotic typical fashion everyone had gotten caught up in one battle after another, separating and fleeing to different parts of the mansion; as to be expected none of it was to his planning.

He wasn’t worried, for the most part; he knew the competence of his comrades, in many cases intimately. But just because they held more power than the Bount didn’t exclude the fact that they could still be defeated just as easily as they could win depending on the matched powers and skill sets. One could be a master with a fan, but when facing a sword some of that was negated depending on the tactician or the skill-set of one’s opponent.

It was the same in any battle Ichigo acknowledged as he swirled away from a storm of lightning striking the ground with deadly intent, sending rubble and dust into the air with a wicked vengeance. Ichigo had only a moment to tense in preparation as he watched Ichinose step a half pace away and with eyes drenched in familiar battle-state revealed his Shikai in a surge of light that was near blinding and accompanied by a waterfall of reaitsu.

Ichigo squinted at the bright light, briefly contemplating keeping his eyes open for the remainder of the fight before allowing them to slide close with a tug of Zangetsu’s reaitsu. Ichinose’s zanpaktou was one of light and perception, however, in the same manner of some other illusion type zanpaktou, if your mind was strong enough and you relied on other senses one could negate some of the effects. Letting Zangetsu switch to his left hand Ichigo raised the blade and easily deflected against the barrage of shadows that spun towards him even as the smell of ozone in the atmosphere increased in preparation. Darting forward with a swift burst of shunpo, Ichigo ignored the lightning striking behind him, and the gusts of wind that began to warp like the shadows and strike at him and let
Zangetsu fold towards Ichinose’s torso.

The deserter caught the heavy weight of Zangetsu on his own blade of light, surprise and a myriad of other tangled emotions emanating from the blade as Ichigo was pushed off and sent back a half pace before being submitted to another onslaught from both sides. Ducking and dodging in rapid motion as Kariya’s increasingly sloppy but heavy strikes countered Ichinose’s darting lightning fast attacks; Ichigo briefly spared a thought to wonder how the others were doing; wondering if Go Kōga had survived the battle with Ichigo, and at the same moment cursing and wondering where Shinji had run off to, or perhaps one of the members (or former) of the Eleventh division.

As his opponents’ attacks increased in intensity, mini tornados collecting about the air and whipping lightning about as if it was confetti and the shadows bounced off of the illumination of the lightning and surged towards Ichigo, the orange-haired Captain flashed away from the battle to stand a semi-safe distance away, he knew it was time to up the ante a slight bit. Channelling his reaitsu to Shiro’s sadistic amusement Ichigo allowed the reaitsu to well in his blade and with a great upheaval parted the form of his sealed blade into his dual zanpaktou.

Kariya and Ichinose aborted their movements to attack in a brief halting motion at the reveal of his dual zanpaktou, the dark metal glinting strangely, almost glowing ethereally in the miasma of light and shadows that filled the room like something from a lava lamp, where space itself seemed confused. The surprised halt of action lasted only a moment before reaitsu rippled and coiled like a great snake preparing for attack and Ichigo watched with weary eyes, almost wishing for Ossan’s shades, as balls of light filled the air hovering like will-o-the-wisps all ethereal and still before they surged towards him wicked fast.

With a burst of shunpo, Ichigo crossed the grand polished marble floors of the mansion, cracked and chipped like a bygone decade, Zangetsu sure and singing in his hands as he attempted to avoid the attack chasing his heels. As he landed, the balls of light once more swarmed him and formed a cage of light around him, pressure building and increasing with the intent to crush him as the air continued to swell with ozone.

Shaking his head for a moment to focus his concentration Ichigo materialized Ossan’s glasses anyway and let his reaitsu surge forth consciously aware of how restricted he needed to be within the mortal world because of the seals. With Shiro crowing in his ears Ichigo took another limited breath and pushed his reaitsu against the barrier surrounding him with all the force of a tamed supernova. The shield of light resisted his efforts for a moment, straining in a way that highlighted the full colour spectrum entrapped around him like an oil spill before with another surge of reaitsu the light around him cracked like a mirror and fell apart revealing the mansion looking half like ancient ruins due to the damage their battle had caused. Kariya jerked from where he had been looming over the deserter, the last of his words spilling like echoes through the vast receiving hall.

Ichigo let Zangetsu swing through the air at his side in what he knew would be an intimidating move and let something slightly less than feral grace his lips as he regarded his opponents. Kariya was still staring at him with crimson eyes and unsettling mix of blank despondence and swirling madness, as Ichinose stared agape that his trap had failed. With a snarl from the white-haired Bount, the clouds overhead rumbled and thundered light beginning to appear through the shattered windows as Kariya took a slow sinuous step forward that was both tipsy on madness and lethal with fury at the same moment.

As Ichinose slipped to his feet, and Kariya raised the blade form of his doll, the doors hanging onto their hinges through sheer luck slammed open and Renji strode inside accompanied by Shinji, who was covered with a dubious amount of blood, and eyes like liquid gold alight with glee and his hollow powers.
“Ah, and ya chide me for making a mess Ichi.”

His friend chortled voice raspy in a telling double tone announcing their presences, Ichigo nodded in greeting to his friends as he kept his eye and mind on the battle in front of him. Kariya was watching everything with cunning eyes even as Ichinose had paused in his stalking to stare at Renji who was engaging in a ferocious stare-off with the former Eleventh division member.

“You there, traitor!”

Renji called out in clear challenge, voice echoing and yet a whisper under the roaring of the winds and sparks of lightning dancing through the air like sunlight. Ichigo shifted and Kariya heedless of the entry of the two Shinigami, and Ichinose’s own internal struggle surged forward lightning collecting about his form and wind sending it sprawling so from afar he looked as if composed of lightning. Ichigo lifted Zangetsu and let his reaitsu coat the blades seeping them in an unreleased Getsuga Tensho, as his Hierro activated to its full potential bleaching his skin to the colour of bone.

They collided with a surge of reaitsu and lightning clashing against each other in a great wave that scorched the ceiling and the floor as they ensconced Kariya and Ichigo in ethereal light. They traded blows at a speed that would have been hard for others to comprehend or see, as they moved the air wavered and the ground quaked. Back and forth they crossed a small space on the cracked floor, as reaitsu and lightning continued to collide in great shows of light that were humbling to view.

One part of Ichigo’s mind was centred on his friends and the deserter safe behind a barrier as the two forces of nature continued to collide, the other was focused on surviving the battle. Landing a kick to Kariya’s chest Ichigo sent the man flying, crashing into the far wall with a shatter of rubble and a screech of air. Standing straight Ichigo inhaled deeply, every line of his body coiled tight before he forced himself to relax knowing that his senses were still more than alert enough.

“Hey, Ichi need some help?”

Shinji called out, practically yelling over the orchestra of noise their battle was creating, concern lining his voice where he was standing tense beyond the cracked barrier. Flaring his reaitsu and shaking his head Ichigo swiftly responded, “No! Deal with the deserter. Peacefully if possible!”

Before the orange-haired Shinigami could check to see if his friend had heard the command, Kariya was surging forward skin glowing from within as he was swept up into merging with his doll, looking for all the world some divinity of lightning. Ichigo frowned as Zangetsu struggled against the weight of Kariya’s blade, the lightning veering towards his neck as the young Captain felt the full twisted span of his opponent’s scourged emotions. Just the same as Kariya felt Ichigo’s determination, his broadcasting of faint hues of the future unheeded as the very air shrieked with madness and battle. The young Captain wished the battle would end already, there was no need to prolong an already told ending, unless it could be changed, which Ichigo knew was unlikely but hoped for silently regardless.

They collided once more, moments dragging out into eternity as reaitsu and liquid electricity clashed like fireworks around them and lightning caught at Ichigo’s skin, as much as his reaitsu pulled at Kariya’s lightning. Sliding across the floor, the two opponents faced one another the small intermission in their fighting providing a moment of awareness to his own lack of breath, and the burn of his reaitsu as Kariya panted like a wild animal across from him. This would be their final charge.

With a roar of reaitsu, the two opponents surged forward, reaitsu humming through his veins, Ichigo ducked under Kariya’s overhead swing and let Zangetsu slice through Kariya’s defence. Landing in the shards of glass as the winds died down and silence rang eerie and unnerving Ichigo shifted and
turned to face Kariya ignoring the new wound tugging at his back.

The leader of the Bount was kneeling in shards of glass like shattered wings, uncaring as the drapes fluttered about him. Soundlessly Ichigo glided across the floor, Zangetsu held tightly in his hands as he remained alert and tense, and the feel of blood dripping down his back filtered into his awareness.

Kariya shifted as glass clicked and tinkled beneath Ichigo’s feet, turning to face the orange-haired Shinigami with empty eyes that spoke of the void, his hands were folded over his chest, over the wound there leaking crimson, even as his blade laid shattered beside him, likely having suffused itself with all Kariya’s power to cut through Ichigo’s Hierro. Shivering at the exhaustion dragging his every movement, Ichigo rolled his shoulders and walked the last few steps to stand in front of Kariya.

“How?”

The man questioned voice garbled and breathless, drifting mournfully in the empty air of the mansion. Questioning how he had lost, how everything had reached such a point. Ichigo crouched to face the man, staring into the Bount’s crimson eyes with a restlessness that dragged at his thoughts, guiding his actions to different paths before swirling to one decision, to who he was at his core. Pressing his hands above Kariya’s to help apply pressure and a light healing kido, all he was capable of until his reiatsu reserves restored themselves, he spoke, “Your race will live, they will not be forgotten to shadow… you could lead them to the future.”

Ichigo’s own voice was like the rustle of air tousling fall leaves along the pavement as he spoke haltingly sincerely in the timelessness of the moment that seemed to echo and rebound threatening to fade. As much as part of him cautioned offering peace and the future to Kariya, another part of Ichigo relentlessly believed in what he saw in the man’s eyes and how his own life had been shaped by mercy or lack of it.

The leader of the Bount glanced up, some of the madness draining away from his features along with the lifeforce coating their fingers, thoughts spinning about with all the force of a whirlwind. Kariya studied Ichigo with a soul-bearing intensity before the powerful Bount glanced at the ground letting the silence fill the atmosphere.

“You’ve seen what’s coming.”

Kariya stated; the words far more chilling than the aftershock of battle where they echoed and bounced throughout the receiving room. Ichigo broke eye-contact with the Bount and glanced out of the remnants of the window and nodded a frown dancing across his features. Verbally confirming it was something Ichigo was almost afraid of, as it tugged the truth of the inevitable closer.

The leader of the Bount frowned at the silent answer, for once his expression was clear; there was no dawning understanding, no great revelation or empathy, just calculating confirmation. Ichigo applied a bit more healing kido to the wound, as Zangetsu-Ossan hummed throughout his mind, and the moment hung between them.

Kariya shook his head after another moment of silence and said, “They’ll unite under Yoshino and Go Kōga if they’re still alive. I’ve made too many mistakes, lived too long, seen too much,” the leader of the Bount stared into Ichigo’s eyes with unshakeable resolution, looking weary and yet accepting at the same moment he continued, “I think you already understand Shinigami.”

Ichigo’s eyes widened at the bitterly true words, thoughts twisting over themselves as he tried to puzzle out and reason the words of the man dying in his arms. Kariya grinned, once wicked and sharp the young Captain could understand a little bit why Yoshino had fallen in love with the man.
Kariya took a deep rattling hopeless breath before his eyes re-centred on Ichigo with something asking there among the fading light. Frowning in understanding Ichigo reached over with one hand and grasped Zangetsu-Ossan’s small trench knife and allowed his reaitsu to seep into the Bount’s nerves dulling his senses, a trick Unohana had taught him after a long night at the Fourth, softly Ichigo questioned, “Are you sure? You could help your race flourish.”

Kariya nodded eyes fortified steel where they stared into Ichigo’s own and said, “I can’t guide them. Protect them.”

With a nod the young Captain positioned his blade over the Bount’s heart, hands shaking for a moment as his will wavered before solidifying. Taking a breath Ichigo finished the act all the while maintaining eye contact with Kariya as the light slowly faded and the man breathed out a sigh of relief before slumping lifeless in Ichigo’s arms. Sliding Kariya’s eyes closed Ichigo sighed and gently rested the body on the ground watching as it crumbled to dust in the fading hues of the night with mournful eyes.

Standing Ichigo sheathed Zangetsu and let his reaitsu searching for the others ascertaining their life, both Bount and Shinigami. With a sigh of relief, Ichigo ignored the burning of his eyes and the emotions welling in his chest and let his eyes drift to the sunlight piercing through shards glass like a kaleidoscope, the mess with the Bount was over. The ending had perhaps been far different from what he had expected but in the end, once more, lives had been saved.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed Yoshino’s perspective; next chapter will be the final bit of this arc and starting the next arc. Is there any arc in specific anyone would like to see next? Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!
Kisuke hovered over his newest patient, studying the large man with critical eyes as he assessed the damage; a large incision to his torso, multiple shallow incisions, and exhaustion. He attempted to put together a method of healing for the Bount, for all the Bount in his care, with his rather limited knowledge of their biology. Glancing up as the pair of twins shifted on the bedding he had placed them on with shallow groans of pain, Kisuke ignored the frown threatening to pull at his features. Part of him wanted to curse Ichigo for placing him in this position, while another part of him was at least happy they had avoided the extinction of an entire race once more.

Running a hand through his hair, the scientist rose somewhat gracefully to his feet and listened to Benihime’s good-natured rumbling as he crouched beside the deserter who was still unconscious much like his opponent. The idiot red-head had informed Ichigo that he had convinced the deserter of Soul Society’s innocence, or something of the sort through battle before falling unconscious. The man, Ichinose, had a few large incisions from Zabimaru, and incisions that would be difficult to heal due to Abarai’s serrated Shikai.

Allowing his hands to hover over the largest of the wounds, Kisuke pulled on his reserves of reaitsu and the familiar humming green glow of healing kido enshrouded his hands. If there had been one benefit of returning to Soul Society during the course of the manicured war against the Espada, it had been Unohana forcing him into the Fourth to refine his healing, however scary it was.

The door to what Kisuke privately thought of as the med bay, considering how many injured souls he had withheld within its bounds, slid open with a familiar rattle and revealed the female Bount who had fled her comrades. In her arms, she held a small bucket, some gauze, and a determined look plastered across her features. The blond scientist smiled in greeting and beckoned Yoshino inside with a tilt of his head as he continued to heal the deserter with a steady flow of reaitsu.
Yoshino stepped inside the room with sinuous grace, all perfected elegance subdued by the silence of the room and the severity of the past few days. She studied Kisuke for a few moments as if questioning his actions before she demurred her head and asked in a quiet whisper, “Who would you like me to bandage first?”

“Start with your comrade with the fan, please. Don’t worry about the larger wounds I’ll handle those.”

Kisuke replied kindly, ignoring whispering thoughts of teasing and questioning, even as his eyes strayed to the Bount and a thousand curiosities tickled at his mind. How long had some of them been alive? Was it a product of the soul combining with flesh? Were their bodies sustained through reaitsu or had their consumption of souls impacted the matter of their body. Shaking away the thoughts with a self-depreciating smile, Kisuke watched as the female Bount crouched beside her comrade and begin washing and bandaging the wounds with a practised care that once more forced his curiosity to the surface.

Turning away with a little shake of his head the blond scientist studied the deserter and the largest of wounds, most of which were healed into angry red scars; the man would live and Kisuke could refrain from spending all of his energy on one of the injured. Shuffling to his feet, the blond surveyed the room and silently wished Tessai was there to aid in healing, or just listen to him blabber on about what new discovery he had made, or what invention the Shinigami absolutely needed because they were so incompetent. At the same moment, he also wished for tea, he would be fine with any brew really, even his.

It had been a long few days, not as much for Kisuke who had mostly stayed out of the way of battle (except for his brief skirmish when the old Bount had decided to attack the Kurosaki household while the others attacked the school), but in hosting the Shinigami and dealing with the fallout of the battles. Though Kisuke acknowledged with a half-smile, he didn’t have the right to complain when it came to his duties in comparison to Ichigo, who was still doing damage control last the scientist had seen.

The orange-haired Shinigami had arrived with the others sometime around dawn, the twins having arrived with Rukia and two more injured Bount before that and then leaving to Kisuke’s immense relief. The orange-haired Captain had the deserter and the large male Bount slung over his shoulder (and he had been injured as well, the idiot without self-preservation). Shinji had followed behind with a limp; Renji slung over his shoulder, as Lisa, holding another Bount, at his side scowled at a heavily injured but somehow still walking Ikkaku. Rangiku and Gin had appeared a near hour later, looking a bit roughed up but overall in good health.

Kisuke had offered to heal the others and the Bount, but Ichigo, the stubborn asshole, had fixed Kisuke with a firm look of defiance that set Kisuke’s spirit sinking in understanding, and told the scientist to take care of the Bount. They had all filed into the Shōten like some strange blood-stained parade, and Kisuke had privately studied his friend. Ichigo, for all his presenting as a strong iron born individual, was vulnerable, and Kisuke had seen it in those expressive eyes.

Kaien would likely yell at him for allowing his brother to be hurt emotionally (and physically) once more, but Kisuke was more concerned with Ichigo’s general well-being; they all didn’t want a repeat of the first Incident, so, he had pulled Shinji aside and all but threatened him into taking care of the orange-haired idiot before he had marched into the med bay to deal with his new patients.

Benihime grumbled in his mind about focusing on patients and not reminiscing, which Kisuke accepted with a demure smile, his zanpaktou at least was happy that they had seen battle once more and tasted blood. As Kisuke crouched by Yoshino to take care of the female Bount with the
weaponised fans (very interesting aerodynamics, he wondered how they worked though they probably used air currents within), Kisuke began the healing kido and resolutely ignored the thoughts of aerodynamics and the Bounts’ dolls in general.

Instead, as he concentrated on the kido finding all the major critically wounded areas Kisuke wondered what new faction would rise to challenge Soul Society next. And he knew there would be another one. Ichigo may have hinted at it briefly during the war, but it was there in his eyes (along with a thousand other things that Kisuke wanted to dissect as much as he wanted to vanish), the only question was how many.

Already he had heard word of the Dangai acting strangely, and that was to exclude word of trouble within the noble houses which Kyroraku had complained of when they had all gathered for dinner. Kisuke sighed and shrugged; drawing a strange look from Yoshino who was still bandaging the wounds with abject care. They would deal with it when it occurred, and in the meantime, Kisuke would make a thousand and one counter plans.

The sound of footsteps and a low drawl breached Kisuke’s thoughts as he startled from where he was almost finished healing the woman as best as possible with his limited medical knowledge of the Bount, as he glanced towards the door where a familiar silhouette stood. After a second of more low conversation, the door slid open and Kisuke was greeted with the sight of Shinji slouched casually against the frame with all the sinewy grace of a predator. The Vizard looked far better than he had earlier in the morning where every line of his features had been drenched in exhaustion and fading bloodlust. Gin was standing beside the blond Captain, studying the injured Bount with a curious aura before his intensity swung to Kisuke making the scientist almost want to cringe as much as to stare back in challenge.

“Ichi’s finally asleep. Insisted on healing us all, then his own wounds the idiot. Lisa and Rangiku are making sure he won’t get up till he needs to. I know the damn kid has reserves the size of the moon, but you think he would be less of an idiot for all of his supposed genius when it comes to waiting for reserves to actually replenish.”

Shinji stated in lieu of greeting with a tick of annoyance and fondness blended across his features. Kisuke rolled his eyes good-naturedly at the man’s words and his answered question of Ichigo’s state. The information that Ichigo had finally passed out was completely unsurprising of the idiot who lacked any sense of self-care or preservation when it came to his comrades. Nodding his head in thanks to the blond Kisuke, he paused for a moment to glance down at the female Bount, ascertaining her state was survivable he rose to his feet and shuffled towards the door.

“Anything we can help with?”

The blond Captain asked honestly, eyes holding exhaustion like a child to a stuffed toy but still insistent on offering help regardless. The blond scientist shook his head, resting his hand on the blonde’s shoulder he replied with fondness softening his voice, “No, go get some sleep. Gin please make sure Hirako-taicho actually sleeps.”

Kisuke directed the last part at the lieutenant standing solid and silent as a statue at Shinji’s side (Kisuke wondered if the youth had come just to make sure the blond-Captain didn’t tip over on the way), Gin nodded even as Shinji pouted but relented with a nod. Letting a mischievous grin slip onto his features, in a cheerful crow, Kisuke added, “Now off you go. Sleep! You’re already dead after all.”

Shinji rolled his eyes but turned from Kisuke with a low raspy chuckle that sent interesting shivers down Kisuke’s spine and ambled down the hallway, Gin bowed once to Kisuke before he followed the blond Captain. Slumping slightly as the two Shinigami disappeared Kisuke dragged a hand
through his hair displacing his hat before he returned his attention to the med room and made his way to Go Kōga to deal with the large man’s wounds.

The blond scientist once more lost himself in healing the Bount before him, thoughts drifting idly to Soul Society, wondering how they were faring with the recovery efforts if their ties with Hueco Mundo had eroded so easily already, how they had reacted to the Bount in the first place. Another part of the scientist contemplated what Ichigo had revealed about the Quincy, their numbers and a little of forgotten history, but more importantly their weakness to hollow reaitsu.

That was why the orange-haired Captain had secured Hueco Mundo as a stable power base capable of their own defence in the first place. If Soul Society and Hueco Mundo both valued their freedom and basically living than they would fight together against the Quincy and provide a tactical advantage over those who had lived in the shadows.

Kisuke wondered furtively what else the youth was planning, what little he was willing to speak of the past was undetailed and vague. Sosuke and Kisuke had managed to get the youth mostly drunk one night (a true effort involving Sosuke spiking the drinks for good measure), Ichigo had spoken of the Quincy king with eyes more haunted then anything they had seen before. It made Kisuke wonder how the orange-haired Shinigami would fare when he undoubtedly faced the man once more.

As if thoughts of Quincy and Ichigo had dragged some new presences near the sounds of running breached the calm stillness of the med bay as two silhouettes ran past and a third followed at a slower pace. Before Kisuke could return to his work heedless of the interruption, the three shadows returned crowding around the doorway with whispers and laughter that bounced and popped.

“Girls? Is that you? Or has one of my experiments escaped again?”

The owner of the Shōten called in a knowing and exasperated tone as the shadows hidden by the thin rice-paper door stilled for a moment as one caught in the act might. The door once again slid open with a rattle and click revealing Yuzu with a timid expression decorating her gentle features, Karin unimpressed with her arms crossed over her chest, and Rukia rolling her eyes behind the twins, features bright in a way that the normally stoic Kuchiki rarely revealed.

“Hi Urahara-san,” Yuzu greeted at the same time as Karin inclined her head and said, “Hat-n-clogs.”

Kisuke swept his lovely stripped hat off his head with a welcoming and wide grin before he settled it once more in its rightful place atop his head and sent the three youths a questioning glance. Yuzu blushed in the manner Kisuke was coming to expect as typical whilst Karin, in an excellent impression of an angsty teenager Kisuke had the pleasure of meeting, rolled her eyes.

“Can we train in the basement?”

Yuzu questioned with a gentle grin, the kind that the scientist quickly concluded was the one in which you agreed to whatever was asked or face the terrible guilt of the younger twin’s puppy eyes. Karin scowled at the question, even as behind the twins Rukia levelled the blond scientist with a demanding, or maybe expectant gaze tinged with something asking.

Chuckling to himself Kisuke nodded and cautioned with a cheery whistle, “Just don’t destroy anything too much all my landscapers have suddenly quit and it would be a shame if certain freeloaders had to remodel the basement. Oh, and don’t be too loud, injured people are trying to sleep,” Rukia blanched at the barb as the twins nodded, and with a grin, Kisuke continued, “Now off you go, training to do, basements to destroy.”

Yuzu giggled and Kisuke resisted the urge to smile at the youngest Kurosaki in fondness as she
bowed in gratitude, Karin was also endearing as she fixed Kisuke with a stiff nod, eyes alight with hidden humour. The twins turned away from the med bay and began walking down the hallway leaving Rukia to signal her thanks with a half-smile and eyes promising to look after the twins before she slid the rickety door shut with a click.

Kisuke glanced down at the man he was healing and wryly commented, “Not much of a med bay with all the visitors eh? Not like you’d notice.”

At his sharp comment, Yoshino let out a laugh muffled into the palm of her hand, eyes sparkling with mirth where she was tending one of the water twins. Kisuke flashed the young woman a grin, and after sparing a moment for a quick diagnostic of the Bount in front of him rose to his feet, he ignored the cracks and pops of his joints and Benihime’s laughter and marched over to the elegant female. Squatting beside Yoshino, the blond scientist assessed the state of the twin Bounts in front of him, frowning as he noticed that while his healing was working, it wasn’t to the degrees he expected; it was likely something to do with their soul or body composition.

“Urahara-san… will the Bount really be safe here… from Soul Society?”

Yoshino questioned softly voice heavy with concern and a lingering fear that seemed to draw her features into stark-relief. Kisuke sighed at the question, almost wishing for a moment that Ichigo was there to act as a knight in shining armour to reassure the young woman that everything would be okay. Instead, he tugged his hat off to run a hand through his tangled blond hair and responded, “Soul Society hasn’t been blood-thirsty killers in a while; not since Ichigo arrived I would say.”

“Arrived?”

Yoshino questioned with a curious tilt to her head, eyes still holding lingering fear and concern though it was temporarily held at bay as calculating steel picked at his words and their meaning. Chuckling in good humour Kisuke reseated his hat on his head and letting it shade his eyes thought briefly about his response to the question before he replied, “Yes arrived, in a great big storm too; winds blowing, reaitsu everywhere. It was a good thing Kaien Shiba found him. Ichigo was a right mess back then but you didn’t hear me say that. Now well...”

Kisuke continued to babble as he monitored the states of the Bount before him, content to gossip with mostly useless information than anyone who had been in the Gotei 13 could figure out. Yoshino sat quietly the whole time, interrupting only to clarify (such as whether the rumours of a certain locked closet at the academy were actually true), before letting him continue. As the scientist talked he saw some of the deep-seated fears and anxiety hounding the woman clear; simple conversations, doing wonders for her nerves, and Kisuke’s as well if he was being honest.

As the former Captain trailed off speaking of the Shinigami Woman’s Association latest glorifying war material a comfortable contemplative silence settled between the two occupants of the room. Letting his gaze slide to the woman who continued to check the wounds of the Bount in front of her Kisuke decided he would be happy to have her at the Shōten if she was willing. Yoshino was intelligent, willing to help in any manner, made excellent tea, and had an understanding of the world most young Shinigami and mortals didn’t understand.

Yoshino shifted once more as if sensing his gaze and pinned Kisuke with a serious glance one that was equal parts vulnerable and the battle-worn soldier she questioned, “The Quincy will attack Soul Society soon, Kariya spoke of it once. Will we be expected to fight?”

The question was one that left intrigue pulling at Kisuke’s thoughts; he wondered how the leader of the Bount had heard of the approaching invasion. At the same time, the scientist wondered if that was part of the reason Ichigo was so insistent on dealing with the vengeance-seeking factions
peacefully or at least with an open mindset. He wondered if it was all an attempt to gain their favour and hopefully their hand in the coming battle; a grand game of chess where they were competing for the best pawns. But then this was Ichigo he was thinking about.

Kisuke almost wanted to be vague about his answer, manipulate it a bit so it seemed that helping them was only the right thing to do. It was saving the world after all. But instead, his pesky moral compass appeared just long enough to decide that he was not going to do that. Instead, Kisuke shook his head and replied, “No. You all were given your freedom and it’s yours to do with as you will. I will say that fighting them is a matter of universal survival, but whatever you do is your choice in the end.”

Yoshino glanced down at her hands at his words, thoughts cast into a deep ocean of pensiveness that Kisuke was not ready to brace. Silently the scientist shifted away from the young woman leaving her to her thoughts and instead meandered over to check on the deserter once more. As he ascertained the man’s condition, one of his devices vibrated where it was tucked into the many folds of his sleeves, Kisuke had respectfully muted them all so as not to disturb the quiet of the med bay. Ignoring the device, knowing if it was truly dire then it would be another different device the blond scientist returned his attention to the patient in front of him.

A near few minutes later the sound of low conversation and a familiar presence appeared and Kisuke quietly said with a bite of ire, “For Kami’s sake,” as he glanced towards the doorway and remarked that it was supposed to be a med bay. A quiet, peaceful place of healing, and instead everyone was insisting on marching in to announce whatever new intention or action suited their fancy. Brushing his long swaying haori off, Kisuke rose to his feet and let his reaitsu reach out in greeting as the door slid open with a quickly becoming irritating rattle.

Sosuke stood in the doorway, appearance immaculate as always, and expression a touch disdainful and amused where it lingered on the door Kisuke had happily plastered with stickers when he had been introduced to their amazing existence. A woman in a lab coat with honey hair pulled into a bun and a kind face stood behind Sosuke, appearance calm and polite till her eyes landed on the many Bount scattered about the floor.

“Sosuke I see you brought a guest.”

Kisuke said in lieu of greeting with a tip of his hat shadowing his eyes and a grin curved like a scythe. The other scientist nodded with an appeasing smile, the one that always irritated the blond slightly for far too many reasons, and replied, “Indeed, this is Ran’Tao; she created the Bount.”

“Is that why you were in Soul Society?”

The blond scientist questioned in response with a tilt of his head and a calculating gleam to his eyes, he was vaguely familiar with Ran’Tao and her existence but had never met the woman in person. At the beginning of the whole situation, Kisuke had expected Soul Society’s favourite genius to make an appearance, if only for curiosity’s sake, but had summarily concluded that the man obviously had some other task to prevent such a journey.

Sosuke nodded and stepped into the room, the scientist following behind him at a demure pace as the elegant Captain commented, “Hmm, yes Ichigo assigned me the task, insisted it was very important as with most favours the man asks. Of course, it was much easier to find her when Soul Society isn’t nearly so prejudiced or biased as it once was.”

Kisuke nodded at the comment and the hint of true emotion that shone through his occasional partner’s voice when he spoke of the changes Ichigo had enacted upon Soul Society, whether through force of his general presence. Without Ichigo, Sosuke would probably have fallen far into
the realms of a megalomaniac, and Soul Society would be a shell of what it could be.

“This many survived?”

The woman questioned voice wispy like willows in the wind on a brittle evening. At the female voice, Yoshino rose from where she was crouched over one of her comrades and stepped forward to stand beside Kisuke and study the woman. Nodding his acceptance, the blond scientist responded, “Yes, though my skills at healing them are minimal at best.”

Ran'Tao fixed Kisuke with a calculating look, intense as any creator in matters of their work before Yoshino glided forward intersecting the woman’s view of the blond scientist to speak to her in hushed tones. Allowing the two to speak in private Kisuke drifted forward to stand beside Sosuke noting the man’s curious gaze unhinged with a touch of that calculating madness that was usually kept under lock and key.

“How much more do you think…”?

The sometimes megalomaniac questioned faintly as if the words if spoken too loudly would be cemented in stone. Kisuke frowned trying to ascertain what the man at his side was asking. How many more invaders? How many more things that had slipped under Soul Society’s carefully maintained rug? How much more could Ichigo, and all of them take? At Sosuke’s inquiring glance Kisuke shrugged closer to the brown-haired man and flashed him a half cocky half ascertaining smile.

Before their conversation could continue Ran'Tao stepped forward once more and kindly questioned with carefully laced cyanide, “May I heal the Bounts Urahara-san?”

Kisuke, more than fond of his life, nodded and the woman after smiling in thanks in a way that seemed to make her soul radiate, turned and crouched over the prone form of the fan-wielding Bount. Sharing an amused look with Sosuke, one that seemed to demand where Ichigo found all these strange characters, Kisuke released a sigh of relief.

As much as he was content to take care of the Bount, he was more than happy to allow the creator to handle their care. He would provide sanctuary if needed with ease, hell even if they needed some artificial soul food he could probably whip that up (interesting idea save for later he absently mindedly noted). But it was a weight off his chest to not have their lives hanging over his head.

A knock on the door once again disturbed the sound of silence and healing, the sound light and almost a whisper before the door slid open with only the hint of a rattle and clack. Ichigo was hovering behind the doorway, eyes still a bit hazy, posture swaying with exhaustion, and his usually pristine shihakusho was still a mess. Kisuke scowled at his friend, and he knew Sosuke was mirroring the expression, the two of them like a pair of parents facing a child who had broken one too many rules.

Ichigo blanched at the twin force of their ire before he weakly lifted his cellphone with a wave and an air of abashment and apology. Scrubbing a hand over his features with a roll of his eyes Kisuke questioned, “I thought Rangiku and Lisa had glued you to the bed Ichigo?”

The orange-haired Captain tilted his head for a moment of confusion and to process the words before a small grin stole across his lips and he replied, “They fell asleep.”

“Of course they did, of their own violation as well I suppose.”

Sosuke commented in a sarcastic dry tone and a knowing stare. Ichigo blinked at the thinly veiled
Before the two could argue the logic of actually getting sleep when it was needed Kisuke took a half step forward and questioned, “Ichigo why are you up and about running through the Shōten?”

The orange-haired youth coloured once more at the question and smiled a touch apologetically before he responded, “Byakuya was/is worrying so I decided first to call him, but then I decided to just go to Soul Society already and soothe his fears there.”

Sosuke and Kisuke traded twin knowing looks because Ichigo had managed to sound incredibly like a teenager with a boyfriend and yet at the same time completely sane if a bit disoriented by exhaustion. Stepping forward so he could peer closely into Ichigo’s ever-defiant eyes Kisuke responded, “Your boyfriend has waited a week, he can wait one more day. If you think its necessary call him, but I doubt you could even open a Senkaimon right now. Call your boyfriend and go back to bed.”

Kisuke ignored Sosuke’s amusement at his mini-lecture and instead focused on Ichigo who blinked for a moment at Kisuke’s words before he frowned, looking for all the world like a puppy told he would never get to play again. After a moment, a hint of clarity stole into Ichigo’s eyes and he nodded with a resolute look of sadness that made both adults feel incredibly guilty and empathetic for the tired youth (who would always be a youth to them for all the age in his eyes).

“Come on Ichi, I’ll walk you to where everyone else is bunking.”

Sosuke commented with a warmth to his voice and expression that few souls ever saw. The orange-haired youth glanced up at the words and studied the brown-haired scientist sceptically for a moment before he consented with a nod. Sosuke traded a brief look and a promise to return with tea before he escorted the young Captain out of the room and down the hall, the last click of the door echoing a bit in the scientist’s mind.

Glancing back at the room where the Bount were lying unconscious and Ran’Taо was healing the Bount while talking to Yoshino, Kisuke let a small barely noticeable smile slip onto his features as Benihime’s reaitsu wrapped about him with all the pressure of a viper but the warmth of a hearth. Even among the attacks and the coming future, they were still souls, still a crazy family at the end of it all.

X

Yuzu idled slowly down the street with Karin walking mildly beside her, the pleasant afternoon breeze tangled about the trees and whistled through the streets, as a frown furrowed the young woman’s brow for a moment as something nipped at her senses. Biting her lip Yuzu wondered at the sense, like something was missing or forgotten, like an important test or due date for school that she couldn’t recall for the life of her.

Turning to glance at her twin Yuzu caught Karin’s own disgruntled expression, though for the ebony-haired twin that sort of expression was far more common. Karin glanced up, obviously sensing Yuzu’s gaze, and flashed her sister a grin, one that was a delicate balance between fond and teasing as she bumped her shoulder into Yuzu’s.

“How do you think Hō and Ban are doing?”

Karin questioned after a moment where her gaze had drifted towards the horizon for a second too long for Yuzu’s comfort. The words, spoken with some of Karin’s hidden compassion, jolted Yuzu
from more worried musings and instead drew her attention to the two Bount who had survived only through the intervention of Urahara-san and the original creator of the Bounts.

“Well we did see them yesterday and they seemed… happy?”

The blonde twin finished with a shrug allowing her eyes to drift freely about the streets as she thought on the two twins. Karin and Yuzu had stopped the Bount attack on Karakura using their Quincy powers as their uncle Ichigo would likely have advised, and Uryū had all but pragmatically growled about. For a moment, Yuzu’s thoughts slowed as she tried to puzzle over the strange gap in what logic and reason dictated and what her own memories of the battle insisted. They had only used their Quincy powers and kido, and yet they had been able to defeat two Bount who held elemental powers.

If they had released their Shikai, the younger twin knew without a doubt that the other twins wouldn’t have stood a chance, but they hadn’t, and yet her memories told her it was an easy battle. Feeling disturbed and restless Yuzu glanced over to Karin who seemed to be in a generally sour mood as she glared at the pavement with a heavy brow, before with a shake of her head the older twin glanced up and responded, “I guess it must be tough for them, living the way they have, not to mention adjusting to middle school.”

Karin finished with a knowing grin and half a breathy laugh lingering on her voice. Yuzu nodded recalling the somewhat morose expressions of Hō and Ban when the twins had talked to the two after they finished school. There had also been a touch of genuine joy and hope among all the typical dread of school that had sent Yuzu’s chest ablaze with warmth. With a resigned curve of her lips, Yuzu accepted that they had likely once more adopted more strays.

If Karin was one to find friends among strays and hold onto them with all the blazing fierceness of a raging fire, then Yuzu was the consistent embers drawing all to her hearth so she could care and provide for them. Rubbing her fingers in an idle motion as once more her thoughts circulated to a strange disconnect the younger twin glanced up when Karin flared her reaitsu.

Their home was within sight now, the Kurosaki clinic standing clean and welcoming amongst the familiar buildings of their neighbourhood. Most days their father worked in the clinic with their mother, but sometimes Isshin would leave to “take care of business” which Karin and Yuzu had quickly come to understand meant Shinigami business of some sort. Their mother also had days where she needed to “take care of business” but they had long ago ascertained whose bloodlines ran where.

It brought to her mind the conversation they had had with their mother a week before the Bount invasion. The whole living room had seemed to be draped in thick currents of dread and fear when their mother sat down and spoke of the Quincy, the Blood War, and the future in a quick factual tone. Part of Yuzu was still deathly furious at what Soul Society and the Quincy had done to each other when it had been explained clearly. Another part of her was terrified of what the resurgence of the Quincy could mean for her family.

Once more Karin nudged Yuzu with her reaitsu, a knowing sympathetic glance was directed her way as the door slid open. They were both preoccupied with drifting thoughts, the skies which had started in lovely clear shades of blue had begun to cloud over as if reflecting their lingering moods. Reflexively as the door swung open Yuzu ducked their father’s flying kick and Karin socked their old man in the chest with easy nonchalance regardless of the man’s whining.

Isshin had only started doing it after a few years of martial arts lessons and hadn’t stopped since, even when Karin used it as a vindictive way to express teenage angst and pent-up emotions. Their father went sailing back into the house to collide with a wall and a vague cry of pride or something
of the sort as Masaki appeared to take care of her husband with a resigned smile. Yuzu and Karin shared a knowing look with each other, rolling their eyes at their father’s goofy antics before they burst out laughing.

A moment later after they had toed off their shoes and all other manner of after-school routines, Yuzu padded into the kitchen where their mother was watching over the stove. A soft frown decorated her features, one that seemed to encapsulate the protectiveness of a mother in the laugh lines around her eyes, and around her faded smile. Masaki glanced up at Yuzu’s entrance letting her gaze drift briefly to whatever was cooking, likely tempura, if Yuzu was correct, before saying, “Don’t worry about helping today dear, I think your uncle Ichigo might have stopped by when no one was looking and left something in your room.”

The blond twin perked up at the mention of Ichigo, whose visits were infrequent and always quite interesting in one way or another. His last visit had been with the Bount on official Shinigami business, but he had been alone for the start of it. Once again Yuzu tilted her head in thought vaguely recalling that Isshin had once mentioned that usually, Shinigami travelled in pairs or groups of some sort.

Shaking away the lingering sense of discomfort, Yuzu nodded and darted over to plant a kiss on her mother’s cheek before she glided into the living room to drag Karin upstairs. The older twin protested for a moment at being disturbed from finishing whatever she had been working on before she saw the look on Yuzu’s features and slumped in acceptance.

As soon as the door had closed with a quiet click Yuzu’s eyes darted around the room, her reaitsu easily picking up on the sparse traces of reaitsu their uncle left whenever he went anywhere. Masaki had once explained it as an overabundance of reaitsu seeking to return to the earth or something of that nature.

A white piece of paper was lying innocently on the desk at the far end of the room, illuminated by a faint beam of sunlight it seemed to taunt the twins in the doorway with the knowledge it held. Yuzu shared a silent conversation in a look with Karin, one where they both agreed to investigate and agreed that something about the day was more than off.

The paper was smooth in Yuzu’s hands as she opened the letter, Karin peering over her shoulder in unhindered interest as the blond twin smoothed out the paper. Inside the letter, in their uncle’s familiarly jagged yet somehow elegant script was a mess of words written almost in a frantic manner.

"Karin, Yuzu, I wish I could deliver this message in person but I will likely be compromised by what is happening in Soul Society. Do you remember Rukia? You likely don’t, but she saved your lives and is a Shinigami, the younger sister of Byakuya. She is in grave danger within Soul Society, and no one, I repeat no one remembers her. You can ask Kisuke, Yoruichi, anyone and they’ll be confused. But I know you’ll believe and understand me, maybe even remember. She needs your help. I wish I could be there, and I’m sorry I’m involving you both in the first place when I never wanted you to be involved with Soul Society till it was utterly unavoidable, but I have an important lead I desperately need to follow. Good luck, and please stay safe so your mother doesn’t castrate me."

Yuzu jerked back in numb shock as she finished reading the letter and handed it to her sister so that Karin could absorb its startling contents at her own pace. Rukia, the name was like ripples upon a still lake ringing out and tugging at the water before fading too quickly. They had known this Shinigami, of that Yuzu was beyond certain, it was the only thing that made sense as to the strange gaps between memory and logic she had experienced throughout the day, that and the strangely discontented feeling bubbling in her chest like a woman’s intuition.
Karin let out a barrage of curses that had Yuzu glancing over undisturbed at their vulgarity in concern, as she finished reading the brief letter. Karin’s eyes were like fierce storms as she plopped onto the bed beside Yuzu with a heavy frown eyes sparkling like lightning in realization in much the same way as Yuzu. Whoever Rukia was, she had saved them, and they owed her the same debt regardless, whether she existed or not was simply truth based on their uncle’s words. The orange-haired young man had long ago convinced them that he wasn’t a man who lied easily or pulled jokes in any matter such as this.

“Do you remember her?”

The older twin questioned, softly, hesitantly, like a sword muffled by a sheath would save its sharpness, as Karin stared into the palm of her hands. Yuzu shook her head at the question and caught Karin’s gaze before she made a gesture in the ebony-haired twin’s direction implicating an expected response.

Karin shifted uneasily on the bed for a moment before she leaned against Yuzu and shared, “Like vague flashes that could be but almost nothing concrete.”

Yuzu frowned at her twin’s words as the disconcerting feeling inside her chest seemed to bubble up and the voice of their zanpaktou hummed encouragement with all the warmth of a newborn star. Letting her hand catch Karin’s the blond twin glanced into her sister’s eyes with a bit of a watery grin, a shrug, and stated, “We still haven’t been to Soul Society. Now’s as good a time as any.”

The ebony-haired twin rolled her eyes at Yuzu’s obvious bait, some of the cloud of malevolent sadness hanging over their heads dispersing at the light humour. For a moment conflict flickered across Karin’s features, it was the same sort of conflict that dwelled in Yuzu’s own head.

They wanted to aid the Shinigami who they couldn’t remember. Yet at the same time, the knowledge of what entering Soul Society could mean was as stark as crimson on the snow. They would reveal themselves to Soul Society, however slightly, and in consequence, risk endangering their family. They both inherently knew without a doubt that if they entered Soul Society and fought it would be with the Shinigami half of their inheritance.

Ichigo had once sat the two down, brow heavy, and eyes that were normally like a still lake hiding something submerged beneath its watery calm had erupted. The man who they considered a brother had spoken carefully of the dangers both the Shinigami and the Quincy provided to their existence because of their parentage. Ichigo’s eyes had burned than in the same way Yuzu recognized in Karin and herself when they protected others.

“Should we speak to mom?”

Yuzu questioned cautiously, knowing the matriarch of the Kurosaki household would be sensible in the situation, as opposed to their often overprotective father. Karin glanced over to Yuzu for a moment before she nodded, lips pursed with a general aura of determination.

As one unit they rose from the bed and descended the stairs, they couldn’t afford to waste time or wait for Ichigo to come back. Even if it was the easier thing to do, to push the burdens onto someone else’s shoulders, that didn’t make it right and they both knew it.

Their mother was in the kitchen humming some cheery tune underneath and whirling about with a fluid grace that was near awe-inspiring as always. Masaki paused in her motions to turn and face her daughters and in the next moment, her open and warm expression instantly shuttered to something hard and dangerous at the looks on their faces.
Yuzu and Karin traded a small look one that whispered about the fear of Kami their mother could bring forth with a single expression and solidified their will. Yuzu took a half step forward along with an inhale and said, “One of our friends in Soul Society is in danger. Ichi-nii sent a message asking for our help. We need to go to Soul Society.”

Masaki regarded the twins with a careful glance one that was as piercing as the chill of night and just as breathless, before she held out an expectant hand, eyes shining in a way that had both twins readying to stand their ground as much as bow in thanks. Yuzu carefully handed over the letter as the silence in the kitchen coalesced and thickened to a nearly unbearable temperature as their mother read the letter.

After another excruciating minute, Masaki Kurosaki glanced up, a furrow between her eyes, and studied her children. She caught both Karin’s and Yuzu’s eyes testing them without words before nodding in a slow careful manner.

Yuzu traded a smile, a bit rough around the edges but still beaming, with her sister at their mother’s permission, before a litany of gratitude was delivered to the Kurosaki matriarch. Their mother laughed and swept the twins into a tight hug whispers and prayers of protection filling the small cosy space before she stepped back.

Karin traded a determined nod with Yuzu and with a last peck on their mother’s cheek the twins darted from the house knowing their mother would handle their father’s likely overexuberant reaction (and the thought of him marching into Soul Society to protect his daughters was a slightly likely and scary one).

The Urahara Shōten appeared after a few minutes of running, still as dilapidated and shabby looking as ever though with the careworn sense of home that always soothed Yuzu’s senses. The twins snuck around to the back of the shop and entered through the more direct route, the one that didn’t involve the perusal of isles of candy all piled together in one great incarnate of temptation.

Quiet lingered in the back of the shop when they entered, the sound of shuffling and maybe vague talking faintly audible above the general hum of mechanics that always filled the Shōten. Yuzu traded a careful glance with her sister, one where Karin pointedly insinuated who was better at reaitsu sensing with a raised brow and let her own senses reach out searching for the ever illusive Urahara-san.

Smiling passively at her twin Yuzu led the way through the Shōten, waving briefly at the new employee who had previously been involved in the Bount conflict, before pausing at the room which led to the underground training area. Sharing another bemused look, one that asked why the man couldn’t invest in elevators or even escalators the twins began the long trek down the ladder to the broad cavern below.

Urahara-san was in the enclosed and fortified space that served as his lab, machines hulking guardedly about the area like abstract pieces of art; the man was there in the middle of the chaos completely at ease and likely revelling in it. Sensing their presences, the former Shinigami put down whatever increasingly explosive device he was working with and with a push on his wheeled chair spun out to meet the two.

“Girls what can I help you with?”

The man with the striped-bucket hat asked with a leering grin that wasn’t so much leering as unusually deceiving. Karin frowned at the man even as Yuzu fidgeted suddenly shy at the implications of what they were about to demand. With a huff, Karin stepped forward and said, “We need to go to Soul Society,” and handed Urahara-san Ichigo’s letter.
Intelligent grey eyes darkened and flashed like lightning in a storm as he read over the letter, those same eyes flickering to study the girls with carefully veiled curiosity and rapid-fire electrons. A minute later Kisuke handed the letter back to Karin, tipped his hat with a bit of muttering to himself and led them out into the broad expanse of the training area.

“Be very careful there girls. Only let your Shinigami reaitsu show through, say it’s a product of always having spiritual reaitsu in your family, or whatever else. You know Yoruichi, and Byakuya would likely help you as well. Stay safe please.”

Urahara instructed, with all the worry and overbearing of a parent sending their child off on their first day of school. Karin and Yuzu dutifully nodded along to the instructions, taking them to heart knowing the honesty and good intentions behind it all. For all the man was a scientist he seemed to genuinely care beneath it all.

At their comprehending expressions, Kisuke muttered once more to himself and resettled his hat on his head. With an elegant movement, the scientist unsheathed Benihime, the blade glinting in the artificial sunlight as it was thrust between the fabrics of the world. Idly Yuzu wondered if they would be able to do so with their own zanpaktou.

Familiar shoji doors glowed and fluttered into existence sliding open with artful nobleness and beckoning the twins forward. Karin nodded briefly in gratitude to the man who had aided them with little questioning, and Yuzu bowed in thanks before following her sister through the dangai.

The sensation of travelling through the dangai was strange. They had been told about it, of course, Isshin weaving one fantastic story after the next about running from the cleaner, the endless walls, and the metaphorical and physical light at the end of the tunnel. But even as reaitsu solidified beneath their feet and they kept moving forward both Yuzu and Karin silently agreed that their father’s stories could never have prepared them even acutely for what it all was like.

The faint pinprick of light at the end of the tunnel began to grow steadily larger as Karin and Yuzu raced towards it, and after a minute they could almost reach out and touch it. Sharing a small grin, one that was equal parts excitement and determination the twins stepped out of the dangai and into Soul Society.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed the end of the Bount arc. This next arc is based on the Bleach movie Fade to Black and will likely be pretty short. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Ham!
Anomia

Chapter Notes

Anomia

(n.) The inability to recall the names of people or things.

Hey everyone, we are here with chapter 64! Apologies for not posting last week I was going through a bit of a slump and needed a break but we should be back on schedule for a good while. Fair warning though that near the end of June I have my exams so the update schedule might get a bit disturbed. Read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

They had entered Seireitei easily in hindsight, Karin supposed, as they hid in an alcove; one of the many inhabiting the white walls of the Gotei 13, which was a maze in itself full of pockets and dead-ends. They were waiting in the interim as still and quiet as mice but for the cat perched on Karin’s shoulder, who would eat such mice, as alarms blared throughout the streets.

Though, whether it was due to their presence was debatable as they eavesdropped on a pair of Shinigami gossiping with a clucky vengeance. Part of it could have been due to where they had landed when they arrived through the shoji doors, awestruck and amazed, which had been placed conveniently near one of the Shiba compounds within Rungokai. Another part of it was Yoruichi appearing as a cat at the right moment without a lick of surprise on whiskered features leaving both twins to suspect Hat-n-Clogs’ intervention, and finally meeting Kūkaku Shiba.

The older sister of their uncle had taken one look at the two of them plus cat and welcomed them inside with a wide warm grin that they had seen far too many times on their father’s features, and occasionally rarely on their uncle’s (and it was scary to realize that same smile sometimes was their own). The woman who had welcomed them into her home had looked almost surprisingly like their father, and in some ways like their uncle, sans the orange hair. The twins had shared a knowing look at that wondering at their mother’s side of the family and what they got from them; what remained.

Their aunt, who Yoruichi had confided was practically the head of the Shiba clan; with their other uncle Kaien having a physical disability and still working for the Shinigami and Ichigo’s whole plethora of duties, had sat them down in a living room that was something out of a historical drama from the Edo period and offered them sake. After Yuzu had carefully and elegantly blustered an indignant denial (while Karin stoically glared in disapproval), Kūkaku had crowed with laughter, the deep hearty kind, before settling down with eyes like fire dancing upon the sky and a serious yet sly
What followed had been a whirlwind introduction to their youngest uncle, who felt more like a cousin for all of Ganju’s appearance and mannerisms (and he rode a boar which was totally awesome in Karin’s well-educated opinion on awesome things). Yuzu and the dimple-faced youth had gotten along terribly, which is to say perfectly, and Karin had comforted herself with listening to the two discuss and trade recipes by throwing barbs every once in awhile as Yoruichi and Kūkaku spoke silently to each other in the background in that adult-conversation manner.

Then after a quick sort of luncheon, Ganju had herded them along a secret path into the Gotei 13 after Kūkaku’s boisterous goodbye and bone-crushing hugs. It had all been a whirlwind experience but the twins had developed a fondness for the strange Shiba clan as they followed their uncle, Yoruichi sitting daintily on her sister’s shoulder with all the airs and graces one would expect from a feline. The entryway they had been led to was small and barely noticeable, less of a door and more a cohesion of bricks assembled just right. They had bid Ganju goodbye (who had blubbered a bit, but in the sort of manly way), who had, in turn, wished them luck and extracted a promise from Yuzu to visit again and share recipes.

As soon as they had stepped foot into Soul Society alarms had blared, Yoruichi on Yuzu’s shoulder had startled, as surprised at the unexpected alarm as the twins who were also harbouring a great deal of worry hidden beneath courage. The cat had wryly commented that she hadn’t heard these alarms before, though they weren’t particularly the worst type one could hear apparently and muttered about pesky paranoid scientists before urging the two into the alcove they were currently hiding in as a wave of Shinigami after Shinigami ran past.

“Can’t the Shinigami sense reaitsu?”

Yuzu questioned softly, voice strung tense like strings on a harp but still like steel with courage as the blond twin glanced up at the cat now perched on Karin’s shoulder. Golden eyes, like liquid sunlight, blinked at the question before the cat grinned, if cats could grin in any case, and responded sagely, “Well you both are hiding your reaitsu. But yes, usually most common Shinigami are able to sense reaitsu. However, if those Shinigami were from the Eleventh, which we're semi-close to, it would be a surprise if they could manage a low-level kido. It wasn’t always like this though, Soul Society used to be much weaker before your uncle arrived.”

“People always say things like that about Ichi-nii. That he improved Soul Society, changed the world or something with his presence, but no one ever says how.”

Karin commented with a scowl letting her eyes roll heavenward for a moment as she took a deep inhale she recalled the multiple such instances before her gaze once more flickered to the street and the hand attached firmly to her katana twitched as the voice of their zanpaktou hummed throughout her soul. Yoruichi laughed, a deep rumbling sound that trailed from the tips of beaded paws into Karin’s shoulder along with the pinpricks of dagger-like claws.

“Ichigo changed Soul Society in many ways, but primarily he insisted the Shinigami Academy focus lessons more on developing individual skill, producing more competent Shinigami that wouldn’t serve as cannon fodder. Then with a bit of prodding the Soutaicho, he changed the hierarchy so that while there may only be one Captain of each division, there can now be multiple lieutenants, and third seats, which helps to relieve the pressure of paperwork, and opens up positions for powerful Shinigami. Then there was the war with Hueco Mundo, which boosted the confidence and unity of the Shinigami, and a bit more. Though that wasn’t directly Ichigo, he was involved for sure but no one can pin it down. I mean I could, but then there would be no blackmail material for the Shinigami Women’s Association.”
Yoruichi finished with a low cackle that was the rumble of the devil upon the air, still hushed but daring all the same. Karin frowned as she processed the avalanche of information the Captain had shoved into such a short space of a breath. Karin noted what she hadn’t said by focusing only on their uncle’s effect on Soul Society in general and the soldiers and glossing over some topics such as the Soutaicho, who they had heard of from their father. Furthermore, from what was spoken of about the Winter Wars and beyond sounded like their uncle was more of a schemer than they had originally suspected.

They had always known though, even when they only reached Ichigo’s knee, that their uncle wasn’t normal, and not in the weird Shinigami term of the word. Their uncle had always had something otherworldly about himself as if he had looked at something so shocking that the rest of the world could only hope to catch a glimpse of the memory. They had spoken to their parents about, but both had soothed the questions with a practised ease.

Karin could almost sense her twin’s thoughts running along the same line, and as the ebony-haired sister glanced over she could see Yuzu sprawled against the wall, biting her lip with furrowed brows and one hand hovering over her zanpaktou. As Karin peered around the corner once again, trusting Yuzu’s instincts and the discreet sign of potential hostility, more out of caution than true necessity the alarms blaring cut off one by one leaving only the ever-disconcerting hum of reaitsu surrounding her and the fading echo of sandals on paved streets.

“Do you think it’s safe to move on now?”

Yuzu questioned tentatively as she slid to stand beside Karin with a fluid grace she had picked up from their mom, glancing at the near-empty streets with open curiosity. The cat on Karin’s shoulder shifted, digging her claws in a bit as she resettled before answering, “It should be fine, you both look the part and if anyone asks just say you’re from the Tenth, your uncle’s divisions.”

The cat finished calmly deep baritone rumbling off the walls for a moment before drifting off and fading into the solemn silence that seemed to linger with age. Seeing the endless sprawl of white buildings that formed the large part of the Gotei 13 had been awe-inspiring, even for Karin, as the sun crested the skies, and the stone seemed not so much glow but to almost hum in a visible manner with the reaitsu that was overly ambient about Soul Society.

Glancing at her younger sister, Karin could see that the blond was slightly reassured by the answer, and that was more than enough for Karin who had often simply decided on following her sister’s decisions when possible. It made things easier most times, and Karin was more than assured of her own autonomy to their parents’ relief. Shrugging her shoulders, the eldest Kurosaki sibling glanced up to Yoruichi and asked, “So where to next Yoruichi?”

The cat cocked her head for a moment in thought before she jumped off Karin’s shoulder strolling out of their small alcove with a prideful strut she said with amusement to her tone, “We should go and see Byakuya, he’ll likely have some clue as to what we need to do considering how close he is with Ichigo.”

Karin shared a quick look with Yuzu one that was shared doubts and fueled curiosity before they tentatively stepped into the cobbled streets of Soul Society and followed the feline gracefully walking in front of them. As the quiet silence lingered once more between the three Yuzu softly questioned, “Yoruichi-san why are you in your feline form? Aren’t you a Captain still? And do you know why Ichi-nii isn’t here?”

At the question that had been lingering on both twins’ minds, Yoruichi laughed, the deep rumbling sound almost akin to a purr bounding throughout the street as gold eyes were turned their way to pin them in place with all the gravity of a ship falling from the skies. The cat sat down in the middle of
the street and with a feline smile replied, “It’s more fun that way. And your uncle apparently had an important lead on something he’s been working on for literally centuries.”

Karin shared a pensive glance with Yuzu at the response, one where they lamented that most Shinigami were insane, and wondered what their uncle was searching for. The ebony-haired twin bumped her shoulder against Yuzu’s in reassurance and support and with a determined nod, the two followed the cat who was once more gliding through the streets as if she owned them.

After what felt like an eternity of walking, where they questioned the lack of shunpo and received yet more laughter before being forced to chase the cat, a speed demon from hell, they passed by a long staircase. Yoruichi confided with a wink and a secretive tone as they slowed to a tentative stop that it led to Sokyoku hill which hadn’t been used for centuries but was for executions. At the mention of its purpose, Yuzu paused in her careful steps a frown splitting her features and war burning in her eyes. Sensing her sister’s hesitation and reflecting the same dark thoughts Karin’s hand drifted to her own blade as her instincts screamed in warning and their zanpakutou hummed warm and furious.

Yoruichi continued walking for a few moments, her form like wispy shadows against the dull cobblestones before she too halted and turned to face the girls with calculating eyes. As the tense silence in the small courtyard continued to swell Yoruichi’s ears bowed and with something like apology mixed with glee she said, “I’m going to run ahead stay here.”

Then the cat disappeared around the corner in a blur of shunpo that was like dust on the wind before either of the twins could call for the cat to halt. When Karin glanced at her younger sister, Yuzu was sporting a dismayed and helpless look, one that Karin could feel bubbling inside her chest. They trusted Yoruichi, but they also knew she was the same sort of kin as Kisuke, which meant plotting, and maybe why she had run off had had their best interest at heart in the end, but there had also been some other subplot of that Karin was sure.

It was like a sense of betrayal but one where you knew the chance of it happening was likely, which lessened the blow somewhat; it still left Karin irritated as all hell. Yuzu beside Karin stiffened suddenly, and the instincts that had rung throughout Karin’s system like the toll of Soul Society’s own alarms once more blared to life.

A Shinigami appeared at one of the many entrances to the courtyard with a billow of reaitsu that was wild and untamed like a feral animal stalking towards them. The Shinigami had outrageously red hair almost more shocking than their uncle’s, he had tattoo’s sprawling across his forehead and Karin knew there were likely more beneath the shihakusho he wore, and there was a zanpakutou sheathed at his side. The twins shared a startled look at the appearance of the Shinigami, one who was a lieutenant if the badge on his shoulder was any indication, and the cast of his face, which reminded them both somewhat of the Karakura thugs before they had convinced them all to get jobs or join their gang, reminded them of that same will to fight.

“Halt! You’re the Ryoka who invaded the Gotei 13. I will stop whatever plans you have for Soul Society!”

The Shinigami lieutenant challenged dramatically a serious expression lining his features and tipping it with outright hostility as the blade in his hand hummed and reaitsu filled the small courtyard. Yuzu beside Karin shivered, whether with fear or the chills spiralling throughout the air at the dense reaitsu Karin couldn’t say, only that she felt the same. They both knew that fighting the lieutenant would be dangerous, they could potentially lose their lives, though if Yoruichi had been here she would have been able to halt the lieutenant.

Instead, they could try and run and risk encountering another Shinigami, perhaps even a Captain, and
make it difficult for Yoruichi to find them in the endless maze of Soul Society, not to mention the possibility of a chase, they had no idea of the man’s skills. So, sharing a silent look one where Yuzu insisted on reason but accepted the inevitable, the blond twin turned to face the lieutenant and said honestly, “We are not the ryoka, we are here with Shihōin-taicho to speak to Kuchiki-taicho. It is a matter of great importance to the safety of a friend.”

The crimson-haired Shinigami blanched for a moment at Yuzu’s words before he peered closely at the two with eyes driven like a cobra striking from the grass. There was something in the lieutenant’s features that Karin noticed as she stared blankly back; something lost or confused, perhaps best described as unbalanced. After a second, which felt as if it had been seeped in some viscous substance the lieutenant frowned, shaking his head in denial he replied, “You’re lying if you were with Shihōin-taicho then why did the alarms go off when they detected souls from the mortal world and where is she? Why are you here ryoka? To exploit our supposed weakness after the Winter War like all the others? To attack Kuchiki-taicho? I won’t let you.”

Karin caught a distressed look from her sister and sent a calming wave of reaitsu towards her younger sibling who straightened at the support and cast a small smile at Karin, one with all the strength of the earth grasped there. Karin’s hand tightened at the sheathed katana at her side as a wind blew through the courtyard and the stairs whistled with the force of it, the Shinigami continued to study them with wary caution blade glinting in warning as Yuzu attempted to convince the Shinigami once more and said, “We’re substitute Shinigami who live in the mortal realm but work for Soul Society, we’re from the Shiba-clan, please seek out your Captain to confirm such. We’ve come to save a friend, a Shinigami whose been forgotten and kidnapped. Her name is Rukia Kuchiki and we need to speak Kuchiki-taicho.”

The lieutenant recoiled as if he had been physically struck by the name even as confusion plastered itself across his angled features, once more dangerously swinging towards unbalanced. The red-head shook his head anger igniting in his eyes as he lifted his zanpaktou and said, “I am Renji Abarai’s lieutenant of the Sixth division and I will not let you pass ryoka.”

Yuzu frowned at the rough response as around the Shinigami reaitsu began to gather and the twins repeated the action. Karin hid the grin threatening to pull at her lips knowing the adrenaline kicking in and the prospect of a fight shouldn’t distract her and instead let determination crease her features as the twins drew their katana from their sheaths with a familiar hiss of metal.

“Yuzu handle defence, I’ll handle the offence.”

Karin spoke quietly to her sibling, a rough battle plan forming in her thoughts as she considered the man in front of them. He was taller than the twins, appeared to be a combat/close-range fighter as supposed to someone long-distance, had greater strength and reach than the twins, and would have Shikai and maybe Bankai. Yuzu nodded to the battle plan out of the corner of Karin’s peripheral vision as she kept her gaze firmly fixed on the Shinigami and Karin quietly added, “Use speed and kido. He’s physically stronger and has a longer reach, use tactic two.”

The blond twin nodded once more content to let Karin handle the planning and strategy. Yuzu was a miracle at using kido and finessing reaitsu control and sensitivity to the finest degree, hence her speciality with her Quincy powers, Karin, on the other hand, could manage a few kido at most, it was tactics and swordplay she could handle.

The silence lingered for a moment before the red-haired lieutenant lunged forward blade whistling through the air like a discordant warning note. Karin stepped to the side of the attack as Yuzu darted around to his blind spot and Karin swung her zanpaktou overhead adding gravity to her momentum as the lieutenant was temporarily off-balance. The man turned at the last second using it as a feint to
jab towards Karin’s torso even as her zanpaktou snapped quickly to guard and a Shakkahō burst into existence across the Shinigami’s left shoulder in a scorch of crimson reaitsu.

The red-head scowled and turned to face Yuzu displaying his unprotected back to Karin, a rookie move the ebony-haired twin was only too happy to take advantage of as she slid forward. The lieutenant whipped around at the last second as Karin’s katana sung through the air cleaving towards the Shinigami’s shoulder quick instincts saving the man’s spine. Abarai caught the blade against his own with a screech that resonated throughout the courtyard and Karin pushed on the force of gravity as her advantage as she forced the blade towards his neck in the flash and grind of steel. At the last moment Abarai ducked and his leg swept out to trip Karin, narrowly dodging a binding kido from Yuzu with the motion, which Karin hurriedly dodged as she jumped over the leg and flash-stepped back a half pace before moving forward once more to crash against the lieutenant’s blade from the air as reaitsu solidified beneath her feet.

They continued to pace through the open courtyard in a blur of shunpo that swept dust into the air like a miniature sandstorm as Yuzu covered Karin’s back and fired low-powered kido to distract the lieutenant and attempted to bind his arms. As their blades forced against one another in a clash of sparks and will, Karin could feel the lieutenant’s slightly greater strength even as she used her speed in shunpo to dart around and attack from the air once more.

The lieutenant turned at the last minute, zanpaktou snapping up as they scrapped with a loud screech and Karin reversed her blade and slashed towards the man’s unprotected thigh scoring a deep gash before she was forced to defend against a furious onset. As Abarai continued to slice, sliding from one combo to the next, scoring a few gashes across Karin’s skin, the older twin used her speed as an advantage to score a few hits of her own, the battle pulling her senses into hyper focus as all other thoughts fled.

After a minute, the two opponents broke away, light breathing filled the air along with the copious amounts of reaitsu and rubble the three fighters had released. Abarai scowled at the twins, it was a scowl that sharpened the eyes and echoed something lost about the man, for all the crazed high of a fight ignited the man’s fervour.

With a surge of reaitsu like a falling wave the Shinigami brought his blade in front of him and with a wicked grin called out, “Roar Zabimaru!”

The zanpaktou in his hands shifted, extending outwards and shaping itself so that it had small filaments in between the metal parts with spikes that extended outwards. Karin internally grimaced wondering at the unknown Shikai before her even as she shared a questioning glance with her sister before agreeing to wait. Their Shikai could wait till absolutely necessary.

With another breath, the lieutenant surged forward and his blade extended in front of him reaching out towards Karin. The raven-haired twin jerked out of the way of the blade using her speed to gain distance even as she prepared a counter-assault and darted in from the air. The Shinigami raised his zanpaktou which was once more not extended and caught the two with a screech of metal before he threw her off and let his blade follow the movement.

Karin rolled underneath the large blade that shot through the air like a cobra, and as she rose shot a Shakkahō towards the red-haired Shinigami who caught it on his already injured shoulder. The man growled and his zanpaktou once more extended whipping out wicked fast towards Karin who jerked to the side and dodged under the swing and rolled to the side only to swiftly shunpo away as the blade snapped once more towards her neck. As it cut towards her a third time Karin was to slow to dodge the blade entirely as it cut into her arm with all the bite of a serrated knife before retracting once more towards its owner.
Muffling a yell and knowing her sister was likely horrified, Karin glanced through her bangs at Abarai as she darted towards her sister. Yuzu was pale, a healing kido collecting faintly around her hands as she studied Karin before it faded at the look on the raven-haired twin’s face. They couldn’t continue battling the lieutenant without releasing their Shikai, it was tantamount to suicide with the man’s skill and his zanpaktou, though Karin had a certain idea about it how to defeat it.

Letting their reaitsu rise slightly untamed the twins turned to face their opponent as they let their blades interlock reaitsu gathering and sparking about the two as the air grew oppressive and heavy like a summer heatwave. Karin gave Yuzu a promising smile as their zanpaktou hummed throughout their minds the blades vibrating with almost physical tension.

Before they could release their Shikai, another Shinigami appeared, his reaitsu overpowering, cutting through their attempt to release Shikai with open shock. He wore a Captain’s haori, had silver jewellery in his hair, and Yoruichi on his shoulder. The man, who was likely Captain Kuchiki surveyed the battle with something close to an amused smile before he intoned with something dangerous and menacing, “Lieutenant Abarai.”

X

Yuzu shivered as the fading sunlight of Soul Society cast long shadows on the buildings surrounding them, and the rustle and chatter of what was called Rungokai listed restlessly as if the very air was strung tight. Rukia had only spoken once of the neighbourhood she’d grown up in, talking briefly with sad eyes about the state of most of Rungokai (although that had apparently changed), about the many friends who had passed onto the next life. It had been in the quiet of the morning after a night of fighting hollows and the fading buzz of adrenaline had made them all a bit tipsy and willing to speak. The twins had spoken about their mother and the attack by the hollow, about life in the mortal world and Rukia, had opened up in kind.

But to hear it all from the man who was Rukia’s older brother (and practically Ichigo’s spouse) had been eye-opening to hear of how he had found Rukia, and the young Captain’s wife Hisana, Rukia’s older sister. The office of the Captain had lingered with a solemn silence as the elegant Shinigami spoke about his family gazing out the windows with warm fondness and damp sadness in his eyes carefully guarded as they were. The twins had listened in rapt attention, Yuzu’s more empathic-nature mourning the man’s loss while Karin listened with the same kind of understanding, their former opponent sulked in the corner with carefully jaded eyes expression troubled and frayed at the edges, and Yoruichi had been a vague presence listening with knowing eyes and something like fondness for the Captain.

After Byakuya had finished speaking of where they could likely find Rukia, her home in Rungokai where she had grown up according to Hisana, he had stared at them silently for a minute. It hadn’t been intense or warning, or any other manner of intimidation it had simply been the man observing them with something close to warmth to his cool-silver eyes. After a moment, the Captain of the Sixth had turned away and spoke quietly and remorsefully that their uncle could not be there but he was there if they needed anything.

Later Yuzu would wonder how everything could have turned out if no one in Soul Society knew them or was available to help. Yuzu wondered if they would have had to fight their way through Soul Society and beyond to save their friend.

Yoruichi had commented at that point, mentioning that at least Aizen-taicho, the Captain of the Twelfth and apparently one of Ichigo’s close friends (they were learning a lot about their uncle), had been warned of impending scientific disaster. The two had shared a strange laugh over Yoruichi’s grinning words as the twins and the red-head Shinigami had been left to flounder in confusion. Yuzu
had caught Karin’s trail of thought of weird Shinigami with a muffled smile, knowing that even their father’s eccentricities could never have prepared them for the wonderful mess Soul Society was.

Yuzu snapped out of her pensive recollection as Karin jostled her shoulder with a charming grin full of teeth, one that most anyone facing Karin would call predatory, but Yuzu found it highlighted all the nice aspects of her older sister. There was a serious cast to the raven-haired twin beneath the smiling exterior though one that belayed how they both felt, the twins were both hesitant and cautious as they walked through the emptying streets of Rungokai, Yuzu’s senses guiding the way as she traced one of the only large reaitsu presences (but there were others, a militia of some sorts apparently) in the district with careful finesse that had long become habit.

They both had unspoken questions running through their minds. Whether they could save Rukia? Who had taken her in the first place? If they would ever remember the friend who had saved their lives? The questions buzzed beneath their skin and gnawed at their thoughts like a horde of locust upon summer crops, and Yuzu secretly despised the insecurity of it all and wondered how the Shinigami managed to deal with incident after incident. If she was them she would have gone a bit insane too.

The familiar reaitsu of their zanpaktou spirit washed over the twins in a burst of warmth that soothed their senses like a rich cup of cocoa on a winter night, or sitting by the fire, chasing away lingering doubts. Fingers drifting to the ornate red tassel attached to the hilt of her zanpaktou (Karin didn’t have one solely on principle, but she did have a metal ring of almost chains attached), Yuzu exhaled and refocused her attention on saving their friend; they couldn’t afford to let their minds wander.

On a whole, unlike the Shinigami, the twins were relatively lacking in battle experience. They dealt with everyday hollows, and occasionally an upper level one, but most of their advanced training came from when Ichigo visited or when they demanded Kisuke or one of the visiting Shinigami teach them. That wasn’t to say they weren’t powerful because they were. But power never equated experience.

Karin had whispered a bitter remark about adults shoving responsibilities onto teens’ shoulders, and for once Yuzu had understood their uncle’s insistence on keeping them out of the eye of Soul Society. Byakuya could have attempted to save his sister, Renji could have accompanied them, (though they both knew Yoruichi was following them) or hell the Soutaicho could probably have dealt with the situation in a minute. But in some ways Yuzu was grateful they were able to help their friend, because they owed her a debt, even if they couldn’t remember it.

Sharing a determined nod with her sister, one that also beckoned the raven-haired twin to follow, Yuzu launched into a quick shunpo, muddling through the vast pools of reaitsu like an ocean that was Soul Society. They landed at the foot of a hill rising over the nearby outskirts of a town where women took in the laundry and children ran about as worried mothers called for them to come in. The hill itself was relatively small compared to Sokyoku hill, but held a sense, something lingering all the same.

Karin’s reaitsu rustled like a cat bristling for a moment before it settled and sharpened like a wolf baring its teeth as the raven-haired twin glanced over to share a confident quirky smile with the younger sibling, one that was reassuring even if Yuzu didn’t need it as she fondly bumped shoulders with the older Kurosaki. It was at a moment like this, right before the next battle, that she wished she could manifest her Quincy powers, feel the strength of her mother’s powers reinforcing her. As familiar as she was now with the Shinigami aspect of her powers she would always find her comfort-zone in the familiar draw of a Quincy bow; Karin was the same but in reverse their zanpaktou calling to her. It suited the two more than fine when they were proficient enough in both to easily surprise their enemies.
They landed at the top of the hill with a quiet ripple of grass and instantly spotted three silhouettes painted against the backdrop of the sinking sun, graves like a solemn parade laid out behind them. There was a girl with blond hair with red dashing across the front of it wearing a white dress, a boy with the same outfit, black hair, and a wicked scythe, and behind them stood a woman who could only be Rukia for the remarkable resemblance she bore to the picture of Byakuya’s late wife.

“Rukia!”

Karin shouted happy at seeing their friend alive and whole, and maybe somewhat confused at the appearance of the boy and girl. Said strangers whipped around to face the twins with hostility plain on their features and desperation clinging there with a similar fervour. Rukia jerked back in confusion when Karin called her name, eyes like the crystals that formed on the grass in winter staring at the twins with a lost expression and plain confusion.

“Who are you?”

The woman questioned softly in a manner that seemed almost vulnerable as the Shinigami’s gaze darted to the boy and girl who were regarding the Kurosaki twins with obvious suspicion and the imminence of battle hanging cleanly above their heads. Yuzu reached out to grasp her sister’s wrist, halting Karin’s somewhat brash response Yuzu let her gaze stare into Rukia’s blue eyes willing their friend to remember as she replied, “I’m Yuzu and this is Karin, you saved our lives through your intervention in a battle. Your family in Soul Society misses you and is concerned, your older brother Byakuya is worried and confused. Please, we need to return to the Gotei 13 to sort this situation out. Peacefully.”

Yuzu spoke as diplomatically as possible, keeping her voice steady and with only gentle inflexion allowing the honesty of the situation to guide her actions as she continued to gaze into the eyes of their friend. Rukia blinked in confusion mouthing their names and Byakuya’s before with a cry of pain Rukia sunk to her knees and her hands reached up to cradle her head. The blond twin muffled the concern bubbling inside her chest as the heavy glares of the boy and girl were sent their way.

“What are you doing?! Stop it you’re hurting Rukia! You can’t take her away from us again!”

The girl yelled furiously eyes blazing as a reiatsu that flowed like sand upon the sea floor but was the colour of death seeped out from the blond girl. The boy at her side moved to stand protectively in front of Rukia, the scythe in his hand glimmering in the light of evening with the same dark reiatsu as the girl crouched in front of Rukia speaking to her in soft tones.

Karin beside Yuzu stiffened a hand straying to the katana sheathed at her side even as Yuzu could feel the confusion and uncertainty her older sister broadcasted. Taking a deep breath Yuzu pulled her reiatsu tightly around her and responded with pleading tones and truth to her tone, “Please we don’t want to hurt Rukia, or take her away. We just want to bring her back to Soul Society so that the other’s can remember her. We don’t want to separate you.”

Rukia shifted at their words wobbling to her feet in unsteady movements that cast the appearance she was as frail as to fall in the next gust of wind. The boy and girl traded a silent look as reiatsu ruffled through the grass in haunting echoes, their gazes were heavy with distrust and a pain that Yuzu couldn’t identify, something deep and dark. With a scowl, the boy stepped forward as the blond supported Rukia and challenged, “You’re lying! You just want to take Rukia away again!”

Again, so they had known Rukia in the past Yuzu concluded with a frown even as the boy’s reiatsu roiled through the air and the scythe was swept in a menacing manner. As the night skies continued to darken with overcast clouds the boy stepped forward and said, “I won’t let you take Rukia away from us.”
Seeing the obvious challenge of battle Yuzu glanced to the side and caught Karin’s gaze burning with determination and the will to fight to save their friend. The Kurosaki twins shared a faint nod and Yuzu caught the basic jest of Karin’s plans as the elder Kurosaki sibling unsheathed her katana with a hiss that was like a snake slithering through the grass waiting to strike.

The field swept itself into tense coils as Rukia watched with wide eyes from beneath the protective covering of the girl, and the boy frowned at them with eyes sharp and deadly. Gathering reaitsu beneath her feet Yuzu mentally recited the kido she could use to hopefully subdue the girl and boy without causing injury. If they could they would avoid hurting them, even if the hollow reaitsu burning the air and their lungs indicated some unhidden tale.

Karin and the boy moved forward at the same time blades clashing with a great shriek as Karin’s struggled against the scythe’s unusual shape. Like the whisper of a breeze, Yuzu cloaked herself in a kido that hid her appearance from idle observance and moved to a position where she could fire kido without worrying about hitting Karin. Beginning a binding kido Yuzu watched as Karin moved like a whip darting in and out using her smaller stature and speed to score the occasional gash as her blade whipped like an extension of her arm, the boy matched her movements carefully, using his scythe to generate motion and wider swings.

Some part of Yuzu wished to be there aiding her sister in the fight, battling beside her, but Yuzu knew when it came to simple swordplay Karin would insist on fighting their opponent with Yuzu acting as support. However, if they released their Shikai Yuzu would be in the thick of it beside her sister and their enemies would promptly cower.

Chasing away the vindictive thought, the type she usually kept close to her chest for rare occasions, Yuzu spotted an opening in the boy’s defence and released the binding kido. The glowing spell slammed into the boy sending him sprawling backwards to land beside his female companion and Rukia. A spare second later accompanied by a surge of roiling reaitsu the kido was broken, but at the same moment, Yuzu released a Shakkahō.

The boy caught the red spell on his scythe eyes surveying his surroundings before he was forced to defend against Karin’s aggressively refined attacks. While Karin fought in a blur of shunpo Yuzu’s eyes drifted to Rukia and the girl, she wondered if she could speak to them and try to convince them to see reason. They didn’t need to fight them. Yuzu knew she was being soft with the thought but at the same moment, she didn’t want to hurt Rukia if they truly knew her.

Releasing a hail of byakurai, Yuzu stealthily crossed the hill, the grass parting with her movements until she was standing near in front of Rukia and the girl. Crouching a fair distance out of severing range Yuzu dispelled the kido clinging to her skin slowly so it appeared that she simply faded into existence. The blond jerked back in shock, even as Rukia’s eyes widened into saucers, confusion and familiarity abounding hand in hand in crystal blue eyes.

“Please, we don’t want to separate you from Rukia, if you both come back with us to Soul Society and return everyone’s memories you would be able to stay with Rukia. You would likely even be accepted, Soul Society isn’t as prejudiced as it once was,” Which Yuzu was parroting, “and they would welcome you. Please, we don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Yuzu spoke softly voice warm and honest as she stared into the lost eyes of the girl in front of her. Rukia pressed against the girl’s side shifted forward to regard Yuzu carefully, one tentative hand reached out to rest a tentative palm on Yuzu’s cheek, the flesh cool with the night air. The atmosphere lingered between the three women as the blond girl glanced between Yuzu and Rukia before her gaze darted to her brother and Karin.

Suddenly the tentative peace was disrupted as the boy was sent flying towards the three and Yuzu
moved in one smooth motion unsheathing her blade to catch the large scythe against her katana. The boy stared into her eyes with something close to fury even as Yuzu ducked under the blade and Karin attacked from the side drawing the boy’s attention.

Instincts screaming in warning Yuzu whipped around to face the blond as a punch was sent her way, Yuzu ducked under the blow and sprung back a half step reaitsu bubbling beneath her skin as she prepared a kido. Frowning as Yuzu’s eyes darted to Rukia who was standing alone regarding everything with a lost expression, and to the blond, the Kurosaki twin questioned, “Why are you attacking me? We don’t want to fight you.”

The blond frowned again lips curling downwards and in another second surged forward. Yuzu stepped to the side to avoid the punch but paused surprise as the girl kept moving forward darting into the duel to stand beside her brother. Sparing Rukia a quick glance accompanied by a reassuring smile, Yuzu rushed to join the fray and ignored the curses she could feel her sister mouthing.

Karin was dodging the blond’s clumsy strikes even as she fought against the boy’s wicked scythe and Yuzu slipped into the flow of it easily, reaitsu gathering around her hands as she released a Shakkahō followed by a binding kido. The kido hit the girl who tumbled back at the force of it, and the boy followed catching the girl easily as black reaitsu rolled across the ground in a slow creeping motion.

The Kurosaki twins faced the boy and the girl from across the field, the night air sharp and biting as clouds hung heavy and ominous. Karin flicked her zanpaktou slightly a silent command to prepare for Shikai if necessary. They didn’t want to hurt the boy and the girl and if they could take them in without injuring them it would be best. As much as they wanted to acquiesce to the demands of the souls in front of them, Rukia was their friend and above all, they wouldn’t leave her behind.

The two opposing forces readied to charge, reaitsu filling the air like thunder and lightning as the twins’ zanpaktou hummed in their minds. With the space of a breath, they charged forward the earth blurring beneath their feet as they rushed forward.

Both sides came to a halt as Rukia appeared in the centre of the field, whether she had used shunpo was a mystery that no one would likely solve anytime soon. Rukia held up both hands to halt all four of them and flashed the Kurosaki twins a quick reassessing smile before she faced the boy and girl with a soft smile, something wondrous and warm in her eyes.

“Please, don’t fight over me. Homura, Shizuku,” Here Rukia paused to nod to the boy and then the girl before continuing, “I don’t want you to be hurt, I’ll still be friends with you, I value you. But I have duties I need to attend to, family. You’re my family you will be welcomed in Soul Society. Please stop fighting.”

The boy and girl, Homura and Shizuku regarded Rukia with wide eyes and obvious shock at the names, tears springing into the girl’s eyes as she stared at Rukia. Yuzu shared a surprised glance with Karin who had a grin tugging at the corner of her lips that Yuzu could feel on her own lips.

After a minute, the girl and boy nodded and Rukia grinned bright and blinding as Homura and Shizuku rushed forward to embrace the raven-haired Shinigami. There would still be problems to solve; the matter of the hollow reiatsu and everyone’s memory of Rukia was a few, but Yuzu knew they would make it through it. As Karin fondly bumped her shoulder against Yuzu’s the twins shared a relieved smile watching their friend embrace the boy and girl, knowing everything would be okay.

X
Ichigo lilted into their room exhaustion dragging at his steps, blearily he reminded himself to apologize to Unohana when he spoke to her when he woke up, which would be sometime in the next week if it wasn’t a life or death situation. A candle painted the room in soft shades of gold highlighting familiar sheets, ornaments, and the like which settled something tense in his chest, the paranoia of battle and the hunt slipping away as Ichigo’s reaitsu blindly reached out for a familiar presence.

The orange-haired Shinigami exhaled softly as he found who he was looking for and pulled himself together enough to slip out onto the porch. Byakuya was sitting on one of the steps a cup of sake wisping steam into the night air in graceful arcs as the Captain of the Sixth stared into the dark that blanketed the skies. Ichigo knew Byakuya had already sensed his presence and so with little dramatics Ichigo dropped to the step beside his partner the movement jostling exhausted muscles.

Piercing silver eyes slowly crawled their way over Ichigo, noting the obvious signs of exhaustion and the hints of triumph gathered in Ichigo’s brown eyes, which in the light of the oil lamps glinted like burnished copper. Wordlessly Byakuya handed over his cup of sake and Ichigo smiled in thanks leaning against the man with a sigh that seemed to hold the weight of the world in its grasp.

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

Byakuya questioned quietly respectful of the silence of the night that lingered broken only by mother nature’s hand. Ichigo’s eyes flickered at the question as he glanced into the cup of sake warming his hands with an indescribable expression before he replied in a tone that rustled like leaves across the ground, “Not what, but whom.”

The Captain of the Sixth’s eyes widened at the answer and he regarded his partner with a careful look as Ichigo took a slow sip of the hot liquid fingers tracing nonsensical patterns along the ceramic. The images flashed through Ichigo’s mind years of research and wondering, questioning and curiosity, answered and non-answers all bound together into one great revelation and a hundred new mysteries.

One hand unconsciously drifted to Zangetsu’s hilt as Ichigo replied in a voice that conveyed a need for secrecy, “The person who wrote the book… they’re still alive. I don’t know how or where, but things that have been happening, that shouldn’t have been happening without intervention like Aizen’s have been happening. Labs and inventions that shouldn’t exist unless… whispers of a Kami among far-reaching souls, things that don’t make sense.”

Ichigo repressed a shiver as he finished eyes staring sightlessly as he tried to hold onto his thoughts grasping at them like the last wisps of a dream. Byakuya frowned at the words reaitsu fluttering like cherry blossoms in the wind before the man leaned closer to Ichigo reaitsu reaching out to comfort his partner as he recognized certain symptoms that always occurred when Ichigo was exhausted.

“It felt like déjà vu of some kind… and it doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t seem malevolent or benevolent, just something that is.”

The orange-haired Shinigami trailed off, blinking the weariness filling his eyes away as he tried to hold onto his thoughts grasping at them like the last wisps of a dream. Byakuya frowned at the words reaitsu fluttering like cherry blossoms in the wind before the man leaned closer to Ichigo and turned so that he could stare into eyes that were unbroken with determination, reforged countless times.

“We’ll figure everything out Ichigo, everything, everyone will be safe. For now, you need to rest and then you can lecture the twins and then Kaien will lecture you and we can wander Rungokai and run into Ukitake-taicho and Kyroraku-taicho and somehow end up swindled into paying the bill and in a
drinking contest, and your lieutenant will yell at you, and we’ll keep living and we’ll make it. Soul Society is strong Ichigo, its soul is strong.”

Ichigo chortled a sleepy laugh at his partner’s words and nodded leaning against the man as Zangetsu hummed warm and content to be home again. He would take whatever was thrown his way and run with it, and Ichigo wouldn’t have to do it alone.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I know this arc may have seemed a bit rushed, but I didn’t want to spend too much time on it because of all the other arcs we still need to cover. If Renji’s actions seem out of character to anyone; he is off put because of his relationship with Rukia which affects his personality and rational decisions. Also, the part in the movies with the grey worm things didn’t happen because Sosuke is the Captain of the Twelfth and wouldn’t allow that to happen (he’s also a bastard and installed a bunch of weird alarms and the like behind everyone’s back). Additionally, sorry not sorry about the tease for the twins’ Shikai, it will be revealed eventually. Next arc will be the Noble arc with Captain Amagai. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!
Shibboleth

(n.) A peculiarity of pronunciation, behavior, mode of dress, etc., that distinguishes a particular class or set of persons.

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 65, I hope you all enjoy this arc which wraps up pretty quickly but is still pretty interesting. Read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo let his gaze idly drift to the street in front of him, senses faintly searching their surroundings in a well-ingrained habit that he would likely never shake, not that he wanted to when being aware of your surroundings could be the difference between life and death. Kaien walked beside him in the odd half-step walk he now maintained with the prosthetic attached to his calf, it was made of a foamy grey plastic and made a hollow sort of tapping sound as it clicked on the paved streets of Rungokai.

When Sosuke had presented the false limb to the Shiba head with a sly but genuine smile, Kaien had almost cried, something vulnerable and soft in his eyes and the way his hands had shaken as if cradling new life that Ichigo had easily recognized. The limb wasn’t the same as having a flesh and blood leg; it didn’t solve everything; Kaien still had issues with mobility, he couldn’t walk for too long on the prosthetic, and for all its support it was still a weakness in battle. But it provided the bright-eyed lieutenant with the ability to walk the streets of Soul Society and serve his family once more, allowing Kaien’s personality to shine through again) with new purpose and wisdom.

Kaien had been subdued in the months following the loss of his leg; it wasn’t visible to the casual observer, or even likely to those who knew the man the best, but Ichigo was a master at recognizing deception; even to one’s self. To see his brother’s eyes glowing again with all the luminescence of the deep ocean settled something in Ichigo’s chest, even if it came with the price of having the overly energetic brother bouncing along like a puppy at his side chattering a storm.

“Ichigo.”

Kaien called his name in a long drawn out whine that was inherently irritating in a way only a sibling could make a name sound. Heaving a long-suffering sigh Ichigo ran a hand through his hair and with a grimace to his smile turned his attention to his brother. Kaien perked up slightly at receiving Ichigo’s attention and not a sharp dismissal drenched heavily in snark before a pout tugged the lieutenant’s lips towards the earth and the man plastered himself to Ichigo’s side as he whined, “It’s
And the guessing game began Ichigo thought with a roll of his eyes wondering what it was this time his brother was whining about; it could be anything from the Shinigami Women’s Association’s new promo material, to Lisa being mean to him. After a second of lamenting, eyes upturned to the skies in prayer, Kaien turned sea blue eyes to Ichigo’s unimpressed features and elaborated, “It’s not fair that I didn’t get to meet the twins! Kūkaku got to meet them, and Ganju! And meanwhile, they didn’t even stop by the Thirteenth. When am I going to get to meet those infamous sisters of yours Ichigo?”

Kaien finished with a deep petulant frown and the orange-haired Shinigami currently plastered to his brother’s side repressed the urge to rest his palm on his face or vent in some other physical manner. As much as Ichigo wanted to shut Kaien’s whining down he also sympathized slightly, the twins had already returned home by the time he returned, and while the knowledge set his worried heart at ease Ichigo wished he could have spoken to Karin and Yuzu.

He was beyond proud of them for how they had handled the situation. They had refrained from using their Quincy powers and revealing their Shikai (which in a place such as Soul Society was impressive in of itself) and they had managed to save the boy and the girl who had kidnapped Rukia, something Ichigo doubted he would have accomplished in their place. Part of Ichigo, the scheming part was also incredibly happy with how everything had turned out, they had gained two new allies, and the twins cover as simple substitute Shinigami had been maintained.

“Ichigo pay attention to me, don’t leave me hanging.”

The lieutenant whined as he poked Ichigo on the cheek with a put-out look eyes wavering with crocodile tears and a pout pulling at the lieutenant’s lips. Delivering his brother a disbelieving look, Ichigo rolled his eyes and with a touch of admonishment and reassurance replied, “You’ll probably get to meet them later Kaien, and if you’re really that desperate I’m pretty sure that now Yuzu and Ganju have met there will be future visits to trade recipes, and Karin will definitely want to try her hand at fighting you and seeing Kūkaku’s explosives.”

Ichigo’s older brother pursed his lips thoughtfully at the words before he nodded in agreement posture slumping in defeat as he added, “Still,” before he popped up into his usual chipper pose, and added, “I’m just happy Rukia is okay, and that I can remember her!”

The orange-haired Captain laughed at his brother’s words nodding in agreement posture beamed at Ichigo for the semi-rare public displays of affection. As they continued walking through the streets of Rungokai; Ichigo keeping his pace slower so that Kaien wouldn’t struggle, the lieutenant studying the packed earth beneath their feet added in a somewhat sombre tone, “It’s strange what you find out about people that you never knew. I would never have imagined Rukia’s past if she hadn’t told me, growing up in Rungokai and stealing from the rich like a little vigilante or terror. I’m glad Sosuke will be able to help her friends, she deserves happiness for all she’s experienced and so do they.”

“In my own timeline they fused with Rukia and the only way to save her was to kill them but in the end, it saved them, in the same way, slaying a hollow does. I think I like this ending better, especially considering how Shinigami or even souls with hollow reitsu aren’t that strange anymore. Once Sosuke stabilizes them, Byakuya told me Rukia wants them to enter the academy and join the Thirteenth.”

Ichigo responded quietly fondness and happiness seeping into his tone even as he ignored the ominous truth of Kaien’s words regarding his own past. Few souls knew what Ichigo had truly lived and he intended it to stay that way even if the knowledge he held was beyond valuable. Kaien nodded with a smile as he absorbed the information likely more than happy to hear of the fate of the
girl and the boy knowing it would make Rukia happy. Honestly, Ichigo’s older brother had a knack for picking up strays, or even just children running around; he was evidence of the fact, and the Captain had no doubt Kaien would soon be adopting the girl and boy as well.

Fingers drifting lightly across the katana sheathed at his side as a wave of reiatsu settled reassuringly across his shoulders, Ichigo idly observed Rungokai; the brats running through the streets, vendors selling their wares with boisterous shouts, the clamouring of life crowding about, and asked, “Have you hear of the new lieutenant in Rose’s division?”

Kaien’s eyes flickered from where they had been carefully watching children run throughout the street with crinkled eyes and a corner of a smile and focused their intensity upon Ichigo as the lieutenant responded, “Amagai right? Seems a bit secretive, heard he was from a special task force or something. Heard he's trying to expand the Gotei to a fourteenth so he can gain a captaincy but otherwise seems honourable enough.”

The orange-haired Captain nodded a frown quirking his lips as he wondered how this situation would play out, he had already set some careful precautions in place but as always Ichigo preferred to let fate guide her own hand (he knew trying to do so himself was nigh impossible). It was certainly interesting how things had already turned out considering the man’s attempts to gain a higher standing were alike to ones Ichigo had mused upon before. He wondered in vague thoughts if they could save the man from committing suicide and in a reoccurring pattern once more gain an ally.

At Ichigo’s continued silence Kaien peered closer at the orange-haired Shinigami, sea green eyes thick with scrutiny before the lieutenant recoiled back and asked in an aghast tone, “He’s not another one, is he?!”

Ichigo chuckled a touch evilly at his brother’s concerned question even as beneath the short-lived amusement he felt the exhaustion of it all weigh him down like lead wrapped around his ankles. If he was calculating right they still had about four different incursions before the Quincy war, and that was chaos in of itself that Ichigo didn’t want to deal with; thinking of it alone made his head hurt. It all felt so strange, looking back on everything that had happened, it seemed like only yesterday he was in the academy with Byakuya and now he was reaching the end of a life-long mission. Ichigo didn’t know what he would do afterwards but some of the answers were present enough for him to grasp at ideas.

“Seriously?!”

Kaien exclaimed a pitch higher than normal at Ichigo’s non-answer before he slumped and groaned pitifully. Ichigo reassuringly pet his brother on the head knowing it would irritate the lieutenant, he was also a sibling and there was a sort of vindictive pleasure in annoying one’s siblings. Levelling Ichigo with a mutinous glare Kaien morosely added, “It’s not fair.”

Ichigo nodded placatingly at the words that rung with an element of universal truth even as Shiro echoed the sentiment in Ichigo’s mind and Ossan’s deep chuckled accompanied the whining. Grinning softly to himself with a knowing look to the deep brown Ichigo casually added, “At least you didn’t have to deal with huge grey worms.”

“Huge grey what-now?”

Kaien questioned as he stared Ichigo, cautiously noting the mischievous glint in his younger brother’s eyes. Ichigo in response only winked and wandered ahead a few paces to browse the wares of a jeweller with a wide variety of glistening pieces. As he idly observed the glowing jewels his reiatsu picked up on multiple approaching presences and with a remorseful sigh he returned to Kaien’s side and tapped his katana in a precise motion twice.
The Shiba head twitched to attention at the silent signal, hand straying in a fluid motion to rest unassumingly on Nejibana’s elegant hilt, eyes straying to their surroundings in intense scrutiny with an alertness to his movements that was a shift from the normally lackadaisical lieutenant. A moment later, a blur of bright crimson and gold collided with Ichigo’s chest forcing a rapid exhale of air. The orange-haired Shinigami jerked back at the motion but let his arms wrap instinctively around the girl in his arms as he carefully caught his balance and set her gently on the ground.

Rurichiyo Kasumiōji’s bright green eyes stared up into Ichigo’s own with something like fear balanced beneath a careful mask of cold indifference lips set into a thin line and eyes uncaring with their hardness. The young heiress muttered an apology under her breath and made to jerk away from Ichigo’s loose but careful hold only to flinch as the sound of steel clashing against steel split the peaceful air of the Rungokai street.

Glancing up Ichigo caught sight of his brother locked in combat with one of the many assassins sent after the young girl in his arms. The assassin’s Bakkōtō was a large javelin, but the man’s skill was lacking with the weapon in comparison to the way Kaien flowed from move to move as fluid as the water he commanded. Nejibana was an extension of his arms as Kaien parried the assault and disarmed the assassin in an almost-too fast motion. Knowing his brother had the situation handled Ichigo returned his attention to the young heiress who was watching the battle with wide eyes and a tremor to her mouth.

“Are you okay?”

Ichigo questioned gently as if he was speaking to one of his sisters, the young girl flinched at his words before turning to face him fully eyes carefully observing the Captain’s haori artfully disguised as a simple haori, because Ichigo didn’t like to advertise his status, and perhaps of more note the Shiba insignia carefully carved into the wood of his sheath. Her eyes then flickered to Kaien, noting both their similar features and as Kaien whipped around the tattoo proudly marking his forearm, before her gaze once more returned to Ichigo.

“Are you from the Shiba clan?”

Rurichiyo questioned tentatively voice hesitant with a vulnerability to her expression that roused Ichigo’s protective instincts. Nodding his head, the orange-haired Captain crouched slightly so he could look into jewel tone green eyes and questioned with careful understanding, “You’re from the Kasumiōji clan, aren’t you? Are you okay? Do you need help? Do you know who’s after you?”

The girl nodded to his questions as a frown wrinkled her brow, aristocratic features sharpening as her gaze darted to the assassin now receiving Kaien’s tender mercy for daring to attempt to hurt a child. Seeing the uncertainty prickling at the edge of her features as she glanced around her Ichigo reassured the youth, “It’s okay we won’t let anyone hurt you, both as our duty as members of the Shiba clan, and as representatives of the Gotei 13.”

Rurichiyo’s eyes widened slightly before she nodded stepping closer to Ichigo as if to absorb his warmth or protection, earning a wave of reaitsu and a wink from the Captain whose hand strayed easily to Zangetsu’s hilt. Ichigo’s reaitsu as it surveyed the area located the girl’s attendants a short distance away and as Kaien finished dealing with the assassins Ichigo quietly reassured the youth, waiting till Kaien returned to hear the explanation he already knew.

“Rurichiyo-sama!”

The girl’s attendants called as they arrived in a flurry of dust and panic, katana at the ready as they regarded the scene with wide shocked eyes almost comedic in their expressions. Ichigo muffled the urge to laugh at the scene but was mostly unsuccessful as Rurichiyo joined in with a brightness to her
features Ichigo instantly decided he liked.

Kaien at the same moment dragged the assassin over, the man had been immobilized with what looked to be a kido spell but was still semi-conscious. Ichigo’s older brother possessed a slightly disgruntled expression on his features as he plopped the deadweight beside his feet and shared a questioning glance with Ichigo, pain briefly gracing his features as he shifted on his feet.

Ichigo flashed his brother a reassuring smile even as Rurichiyo greeted her attendants in a rush of whispers that were close to yelling. Kaien shifted uneasily on his feet though there was less of a frantic motion to it now as his gaze darted to the young heiress with a raised brow that communicated a myriad of different questions all centring on the child before them. The orange-haired Shinigami tapped Zangetsu in response and winked suggesting he would handle everything, which earned Ichigo a light scowl and a roll of Kaien’s sea-green eyes.

Noticing that the tearful reunion between the three souls had concluded Ichigo coughed in a completely unsubtle way to draw everyone’s attention to the situation at hand. With a nod to the attendants, Ichigo said, “I’m Ichigo Shiba and this is my brother Kaien Shiba, the head of the Shiba clan. If it would be acceptable to Kasumiōji-san we can return to the Shiba household where the situation can be explained in safety and the young heiress will be safe from would-be assassins.”

The attendants shared a silent talk over their lady’s head that communicated their will to protect the blond, even as Rurichiyo regarded Ichigo with hopeful eyes leaving the man to wonder how long the youth had been on the run. It irked Ichigo slightly at the same time as he made peace with the fact that he wasn’t omnipotent and couldn’t predict everything. She reminded him slightly of Karin and Yuzu with her rough attitude and kind appearance which left Ichigo with a bunch of protective instincts he would rather shunt onto his brother.

After a second of conference, where Ichigo carefully tracked the inclosing presences that were drawing ever-nearer, Rurichiyo stepped forward and with an elegant bow stated, “The head of the Kasumiōji clan accepts your offer and is in your debt.”

Kaien grinned at the formal wording and in a moment of seriousness as he took up the mantle of the Shiba head he responded with a deep bow accompanied by a friendly smile and bright eyes. Tapping two fingers against Zangetsu Ichigo said with quiet urgency, “Kaien please escort Kasumiōji-san and her attendants to the compound, I will meet you there, but first I’ll deal with our friends and bring them to Sosuke.”

The orange-haired Shinigami finished with a grin that bordered on terrifying to the unwary, Kaien merely nodded, eyes flickering like a tsunami for all its power before the lieutenant smiled amicably knowing where they studied Ichigo with a certain gravity to them in the hand that strayed to Nejibana’s hilt.

Rurichiyo made to protest along with her attendants before Kaien leaned over to whisper something in the heiress’ ear, all visible tension dissipating at his words. With a wink, Kaien led the three souls from the district in a blur of shunpo leaving the orange-haired Shinigami alone. Ichigo glanced at the unconscious assassin still chained by his feet and wondered at his life as three assassins flickered into existence; blades wicked like their warped reaitsu.

Ichigo sighed and unsheathed Zangetsu with a sing of metal against sheath and sprung forward unhesitant and unwilling to give them an advantage. Zangetsu cut through the air and colliding with a broad axe, the sound ringing out through the street and sending citizens scattering. Ichigo solidified reaitsu beneath his feet and rose into the air as he used gravity to swing Zangetsu overhead and cut through the large axe with a surge of reaitsu. The assassin stared in stunned confusion and Ichigo took mercy on the man and knocked him unconscious with Zangetsu’s pommel before he flipped
around to catch the large end of the blade not unlike something one might see used to fell horses.

For assassins who were meant to be inconspicuous, they certainly used large weapons. Dodging under another swing Ichigo sunk to a crouch as a katana swung over his head where his torso would have been. Sweeping one of his legs out, Ichigo tripped the man with the large broad blade and a second later popped to his feet and caught the katana on the broad edge of Zangetsu before countering in a rapid flurry of blows.

Sensing his other opponent rising and preparing for an attack Ichigo cast a quick kiddo towards the katana-user, who jumped out of the way as Ichigo pivoted and caught the large blade. Straining against the strength behind the attack, Ichigo dug his heels into the ground and at the last moment as the assassin over-strained himself Ichigo ducked under the blade throwing the man off-balance and delivered a strike with his pommel to the back of the man’s neck.

Turning to face the katana wielder Ichigo caught sight of fear staining the assassin’s features in broad strokes; channeling Shiro, Ichigo let a wicked grin slip onto his features and gold bleed into his eyes he said, “Tell your master that the head of the Kasumiōji clan is under the protection of the Shiba clan.”

With pale features, the assassin disappeared in a blur of shunpo leaving the astounded crowd of Rungokai citizens who had come to watch the battle standing in shock whispers breaking out in a way Ichigo knew would make their way to the Shinigami Women’s Association. Running a hand through his hair Ichigo re-sheathed Zangetsu in a smooth practised motion and carefully picked up the three unconscious assassins. Nodding once to the citizens, Ichigo left the crowded street in a burst of shunpo darting towards the Twelfth where Sosuke was likely sequestered away, having forgotten about the real world once again.

Ichigo left the three assassins on the doorstep with instructions to deliver the three to Sosuke along with the name of the Kasumiōji clan with a confused but resigned third-seat. As much as the Captain wanted to greet his friend in person and drag him out of the lab for real food, it was best not to keep his family waiting; he would just do it a few times in the next week when he returned for information. Turning away from the Twelfth Ichigo listened to the hum of Ossan’s reaitsu as he picked up speed and returned along familiar paths towards the main Shiba compound.

Something in Ichigo’s chest uncoiled as he landed in front of the building that had long become a home to him, the feel of his family’s reaitsu embedded in the very foundation of the building and the life that flourished about it. The orange-haired Captain entered the Shiba compound quietly, nodding briefly to the many servants who scurried about running to and from with one task or another as Ichigo’s reiatsu located Ganju in the kitchen, and the others all gathered in the main sitting room.

Ichigo debated briefly between entering the living room immediately or quickly saying hello to his youngest brother; before his decision was made for him as a clatter of pots and pans drew his attention spelling a smile across his features. The door to the kitchen opened with a smooth rattling sound and Ichigo was greeted with the amusing sight of his younger brother covered in flour staring at a pot simmering over the stove with glaring intensity.

The orange-haired Shinigami watched his brother cook for a quiet minute before he turned from the doorway leaving his brother to concentrate on the food and made his way towards the sitting room. Pausing outside the doorway Ichigo observed the reaitsu of the occupants of the room and took a calming breath as he mentally formed the rough basis of a plan of attack before he slid the door open.

The main sitting room, the one they used to entertain guests, was awash in rich shades of deep blue and a pale yellow that complimented the occasional burst of sakura pink nicely, it was all stylized in a heavy Edo-centric fashion that gave Ichigo a brief wave of nostalgia whenever he entered the
room. Rurichiyo and her attendants were seated opposite the door providing them with a tactical advantage; the young heiress was seated in the centre with her attendants on either side. Kaien and Kūkaku were perched in front of Ichigo, a low tea table set between the two noble families providing a picturesque idea of a meeting if one could not sense the tension bubbling beneath it all.

Gracefully Ichigo seated himself on the other side of Kaien and nodded in greeting to the youth who sat with all the poise and grace of a queen, fingers daintily grasping a cup of tea with thin pinched lips and white knuckles. Kaien turned to face Ichigo, concern lining his features where it pulled at the corners of his mouth and the way he tapped out a relentless rhythm as he raised a questioning brow. Kūkaku studied him with piercing eyes opposite their brother, something tense about her that burned with the same fiery instinct Ichigo had long come to respect and admire. The Shiba Captain tapped his fingers once against Zangetsu’s pommel signifying to his family that everything was okay and that they could speak of everything later.

Turning to face the young heiress Ichigo bowed his head in greeting and said, “Apologies for the delay Kasumiōji-san, the assassins have been apprehended and an official case will be started. Perhaps you could inform us of your situation?”

Rurichiyo stared at her hands coiled delicately in her lap a frown furrowing her brow as her attendants blustered and fluttered about Ichigo’s forwardness. After a moment of thought, the young heiress glanced from her hands into Ichigo’s amber eyes staring in the lingering silence for a moment before she nodded with a faded smile that was like watercolour spread too thin, beautiful but apparent in its drawn-out state.

“My steward Gyōkaku Kumoi wants to rule my clan. To do so he needs to marry me to my fiancé and then dispose of me or dispose of me now and fake a will. He is the one producing and selling the Bakkōtō to the assassins. My mother died during childbirth, and my father was very ill a few years ago and recently passed away, so the mantle of head of the Kasumiōji clan has fallen to me. Because I am young Gyōkaku will try to take advantage of me or terminate me, so he can assume power.”

Kaien beside Ichigo stiffened and the orange-haired Captain could feel the pure fury radiating from his brother at the acts of the Kasumiōji clan’s steward, the Shiba clan valued family above all else and such a blatant betrayal of such would stir the wrath of any Shiba. Kūkaku on the other side of Kaien was equally furious for the young heiress before them though hers was a cold fury, unlike Kaien’s burning rage. Ichigo nodded his thanks for the explanation and flashed Rurichiyo a smile for her courage.

The Shiba head exhaled sharply for a moment before the shards of glass cutting into his features dispersed and with the warmth and radiance of a thousand suns Kaien promised, “The Shiba clan would be happy to protect the heir of the Kasumiōji clan until evidence is found of this conspiracy and the perpetrators are brought to justice.”

“The Kasumiōji clan is thankful for the Shiba clan’s offer and will gratefully accept owing them a debt if ever needed.”

Rurichiyo replied formally, maturity and seriousness clinging to her features like a mantle before it fell away again under the force of a relieved smile. Pouring a cup of tea for himself Ichigo drank the steaming liquid slowly contentedly absorbing the warmth before the cup was set down with a careful clink and Ichigo spoke, “I have delivered the assassins to the Twelfth division who will likely find the physical proof necessary to condemn your former steward. In the meantime, if it is acceptable Kasumiōji-san my partner and I can investigate as well.”

Rurichiyo studied Ichigo in thought, green eyes bright and lively with intelligence before she nodded in a slow careful motion. Allowing a small smile to slip onto his features Ichigo nodded his thanks
and once more sipped at the steaming tea idly planning how he could convince Byakuya to accompany him on an invasion of a noble family’s home.

Glancing from the tea Ichigo watched as Kaien ever the entertainer began to tell a detailed recounting of the many times Ganju had returned with some strange impossible pet earning bubbly laughter from the young heiress. Ichigo smiled into his cup knowing everything would turn out all right, even if they were all exhausted by the end of it all. Again.

X

They watched from the shadows of an alcove as an old man in rich crimson robes ornamented with a thick gold lining that glimmered in the night’s thick horizon moved his hands in a dramatic manner, one eye glinting as he pointed at sheets and grinned with all the vileness of polluted water. Across from the corrupt steward the leader of the assassins stood; lilac hair a bright contrast to the rich earth tones filling the room and the scar parting his features a jagged flaming red in the oil lamps. They shared a silent glance from their position in the shadows communicating a plan of attack and what the objective of the attack was actually supposed to be as they watched the steward speak to the assassin.

It had been a long week, waiting for Sosuke to return with proof of the steward of the Kasumiōji clan’s betrayal, fighting would be assassin after assassin, dealing with/teaching Rurichiyo about entitlement and respect, investigating with Byakuya behind the scenes. Then there had been the Captains meetings to clarify the situation and speaking with the Soutaicho to gain permission to do everything legally, which in the long run meant less paperwork.

In the end, though, it had been worth it all; they had influenced Rurichiyo and she would likely make a great impact on Soul Society, and they had found irredeemable proof. A whisper of reiatsu against his cheek drew Ichigo’s attention and his eyes flickered to Byakuya, whose Kenseikan glimmered fae-like under the moonlight, eyes hooded and features in a mask of duty. They shared a quick nod and Ichigo quirked his lips briefly into a smile before refocusing.

With a whisper of the air through paved streets, Ichigo crouched on the opposite side of the window, reiatsu pulled tight to his skin as he peered inside, Byakuya mirroring the action on the other side waited for Ichigo to move first. With a challenging grin that lit up his eyes so that they glowed in the deep where they connected with Byakuya’s own bright eyes, the orange-haired Captain beckoned with a hand over his shoulder.

The two captains broke through the window with a shatter of glass that glowed like white fire and was a dissonant harmony in the night, the streets still blanketed by an evening slumber. The cowardice steward let out a high-pitched screech at the sudden intrusion eyes wide and features white even as he edged back likely towards some hidden weapon. Meanwhile, the assassin unsheathed his katana with a deadly hiss and a frown taking a step forward to face the two captains. Sharing a quick glance with Byakuya, the orange-haired Captain nodded his head once towards the man cowering in the corner and unsheathed Zangetsu in a fluid motion reiatsu filling the room in deadly warning.

Byakuya in the same quick manner dodged a rushed lunge with a dagger, easily disarming the old man as he cast a binding kido at the steward and in the elegant monotone of the Kuchiki heir intoned, “Gyōkaku Kumoi and Hanza Nukui you are under arrest under the jurisdiction of the Gotei 13 for attempted murder and blackmail of the head of the Kasumiōji clan. Surrender quietly and you will receive a fair trial, resist and we will resort to using force.”

The steward whimpered at Byakuya’s feet from where he had fallen whether from shock or the force of the kido as the cool tone lilted through the air in a commanding disposition. The leader of the
assassins stared at Ichigo with wild furious eyes blade still held taut at his side as his fingers tightened white-knuckled around the blade. A tense silence filled the small study decorated in rich furniture before the steward struggled to his feet with an angry blotchy red that matched the jewel in his eyes flushing his face as he blustered, “You have no proof! You cannot arrest me!”

Byakuya chuckled lowly at the steward’s vehement denial as Ichigo raised a brow and with a shark-toothed grin commented, “The proof is right here, how else would you explain your meeting with a known assassin who is the leader of the ones attacking the head of the Kasumiōji clan. Not to forget that the assassins that have been apprehended have testified to your involvement.”

Gyōkaku paled, all colour draining from his features to leave wide eyes that darted accusingly to the assassin before pleadingly to the Captain standing before him like judgement incarnate. In the split second where Ichigo’s eyes had locked onto that of the traitor, Nukui moved forward in a blur of shunpo blade slithering towards Ichigo’s neck with only a whisper of displaced air speaking of the assassin’s skill.

Ichigo ducked the blade while allowing Zangetsu to snap up and halt the assassin’s movements so as to prevent the blade from impaling the steward who was behind Ichigo, which the man would likely attempt to do to cover his own tracks hence Byakuya guarding the man. As Ichigo dodged under an overhead swing, he responded with a quick flurry of jabs pushing the assassin towards the far wall and onto the defensive, as he battled the man he recalled that in his timeline the assassin had chosen to serve Gyōkaku over Rurichiyo because he saw her as weak, and yet the steward was made of a far less deserving spine in the end.

Moving in the tightly enclosed space Ichigo allowed Zangetsu to flow from attack to attack matching the lilac-haired man’s attack with practised ease and vibrant determination. As much as Rurichiyo’s whining and self-entitled attitude could be annoying, the girl had a strong character beneath it all and a respect towards her servants that many nobles lacked, and beside that Kūkaku had been quick to whip any typical noble attitudes out of the youth and encourage a bit of chaos in place of dignity.

Catching sight of familiar silver eyes watching the battle with careful precision Ichigo nodded once as he whirled away from the glowing mirror of the assassins Bakkōtō, he couldn’t allow the man to access his special ability, it would put the steward’s life in greater danger, and would make everything a touch more difficult than was necessary. As Ichigo swept under an overhead strike he responded by shoving Zangetsu’s pommel into the assassin’s torso, winding the man and providing the distraction needed for Byakuya to cast a binding kido immobilizing the assassin. It wasn’t necessarily fair, but in battles with assassins, fair wasn’t a concept.

Hanza hunched over on the ground attempting to regain his breath as his Bakkōtō clattered from his numb hands, the sound of the metal colliding with the wood was like a gunshot in the tense enclosed space of the office. The steward let out a pitiful whine brought low by the collapse of his plans and knowing that they now had irredeemable proof the man confessed, “Alright I wanted power and to take over the clan, but I wasn’t the one who organized everything! It was someone else a benefactor who did it, they were the real mastermind.”

As Gyōkaku spoke a sly gleam entered his eyes as they flickered between a stack of envelopes knowingly and back to the two captains some new cunning plan filtering into place. Byakuya blinked a bit wide-eyed in shock at the words but mostly unsurprised considering what little Ichigo had let slip (and really it had been Byakuya investigating with Ichigo providing helpful clues and pointers). The Captain of the Sixth regarded the traitor with narrow eyes that commanded justice along with his imposing presence and stated, “You will still face trial for your part in the conspiracy.”

“Ah, but if I tell you the identity of my benefactor perhaps my sentence may be lightened?”
The steward suggested with a leer in the way that the suggestion was more of a command or blackmail. At the traitor’s words, the assassin’s head snapped up eyes wide and brows crinkling, his hands curled into fists at his side. Ichigo felt sympathy for the assassin in the sudden light of revelations of the steward’s true character and the whole truth of the matter. Idly the orange-haired Captain wondered if the young heiress might accept the assassin into her household once more if he showed convincing remorse; though he would still stand trial first and it was beyond Ichigo’s control whether the man continued to serve the Kasumiōji clan.

Studying the steward with the weight of his reaitsu behind his gaze Ichigo scrutinized the man before with Shiro chuckling throughout his mind the orange-haired Shinigami turned to face his companion and idly commented with a lack of inflection, “He’s probably lying to save his own skin, we should turn them into the Omimitsukidō’s careful care and leave the trial to Soul Society’s justice system.”

“I’m not lying! My benefactor is even a part of your corrupted Gotei 13!”

The steward exclaimed the jewel in his eye appearing to darken as the man flustered red with indignation. Byakuya cast Ichigo a bemused glance hidden within an elegantly raised brow and the subtle curve of his lips that managed to appear disdainful to an absent observer. Studying the man still sprawled on the floor Ichigo’s hand drifted to his katana and he questioned with cyanide lacing his voice, “Would you be willing to testify in front of the captains and lieutenants of the ‘corrupt’ Gotei 13.”

The orange-haired Shinigami masked most of the irritation lacing his voice at the suggestion that the Gotei 13 was corrupt. It was beyond certain that many of those higher in the Gotei 13 hierarchy were strange, but in this timeline, there were no traitors to defile the name of the Gotei 13; and Ichigo frankly took pride in that.

The steward’s one good eye darted around the ornate office observing everything with the sort of helpless desperation of an animal looking for an escape before a light visibly shone behind the man’s eye and with all the faux innocence the old man could muster the steward conceded with a nod and a greedy smile. Ichigo nodded a quiet sigh slipping from his chest as he traded a silent look with Byakuya who was watching the whole scene play out with calculating eyes.

Grabbing the assassin by the back of his shihakusho and picking up the weapon to tuck into his obi temporarily, Ichigo wordlessly summoned a Jigokuchō as Byakuya across from the orange-haired Captain picked up the old man with muffled distaste pulling at the corners of his lips. As much as the Kuchiki head may have despised his meddling bidding old elders the man still respected them and the idea of them betraying the clan was displeasing; Ichigo was just happy most of the Shiba elders were drunkards or your picturesque grandparents.

The graceful creature fluttered into the mostly wrecked office a moment later and landed on Ichigo’s outstretched hand, smiling fondly at the dainty creature Ichigo leaned forward and whispered a message for the Soutaicho to call a meeting and another message for Yoruichi. The butterfly drifted from Ichigo’s hand and out through the window and with a glance to his partner to assure everything was okay Ichigo darted out the window and into the still quiet streets of one of the richer districts of Rungokai following the path of the Jigokuchō.

As Ichigo moved swiftly over familiar terra cotta roofing the assassin remained a dead weight against his back and feeling curiosity peck at his insides Ichigo questioned, “Why did you betray your clan?”

The assassin remained quiet as the wind whipped by and Ichigo had the sixth sense the assassin was likely flipping Ichigo a rude gesture in response to his question, but he ignored it as they drew ever closer to the Gotei 13, sprawling buildings of white rising in the distance a familiar sight. A minute later the assassin with a low rumble of muffled words drenched in something like petulance if the
drawn-out word were any indication said, “Rurichiyo-sama was too weak.”

Ichigo nodded at the words spoken with a distinct lack of real emotion as they landed close to the First division knowing that strength was everything to some people; whether physical or that of willpower. Running a finger over Zangetsu’s polished hilt Ichigo murmured with a tone laced with experience earned and fought, “Sometimes character of strength is far greater than what we can physically see, especially when we haven’t finished growing, though I doubt it would meet your standards in any circumstance.”

Byakuya landed behind Ichigo a moment later with the clatter of sandaled feet upon the cobblestone, in the rushing quiet of the night the steward’s voice cajoling and bargaining was as loud as the croaking of frogs by a pond and just as irritating. The large doors to the First swung open with illusionary ease, well oiled hinged creaking slightly under the weight of the doors in any case.

“Got yourself another catch I see Ichi.”

Shinji commented with a grin where he was leaning against one of the pillars with carefully manicured nonchalance balanced throughout his lax shoulders and cocky grin. Ichigo only chuckled and nodded in response as he entered the First, Byakuya following behind him with muffled amusement of his own seeping into his reaitsu beneath a thin veneer of annoyance.

“Most of the others are already here, though some of the lieutenants had to be wrangled from their beds and the like.”

Shinji chortled as he followed them, amber eyes glowing in the low light the oil lamps provided, as Ichigo could hear Byakuya mumble half-heartedly about extra weight behind the orange-haired Shinigami. Nodding his thanks to Shinji who had delivered the information the three captains, plus the accused, paced quickly through the long halls of the First until they arrived at the large doors that marked the meeting room.

Ichigo could feel the many captains and lieutenants gathered inside, a sea of reaitsu as bright and colourful as any on earth filled with various personalities and the like. Shinji winked at the Captain of the Tenth and the Captain of the Sixth before quietly slipping into the meeting room near unnoticed, likely hoping to escape nagging from Hiyori or Love’s light chiding and providing the opportunity for a dramatic entrance.

Byakuya’s silver eyes caught Ichigo’s own as they waited for a quiet moment, the steward having fallen silent and the assassin like a rag doll, quietly with a tilt of his head and lines dodging at his eyes Byakuya questioned if his partner was alright. Ichigo responded with a small smile that extended to his eyes before the expression was wiped away with a clean nod and the large doors to the meeting room shuddered open.

Silence fell where previously inane chatter had filled the void at the sight of the two captains with an old man and an assassin slung over the shoulders. In all honesty, Ichigo knew it was likely a comedic sight but a respectful silence filled the room nonetheless as Ichigo and Byakuya entered.

The Soutaicho at the head of the room slammed his staff onto the ground commanding attention and quieting any whispers before they could start. Piercing coal eyes stared at Ichigo from beneath heavy brows as the old man bowed his head in a barely imperceptible manner and said, “Shiba-taicho, Kuchiki-taicho, you have requested an emergency meeting in correlation to the Kasumiōji conspiracy please state your reasoning.”

In well-practised unison, Ichigo and Byakuya set the steward and the assassin on the ground before surveying the gathered captains and lieutenants. Ichigo’s gaze lingered on Amagai hidden in the
shadows and watching everything with a passive expression, before he returned his attention to the room at large and stated, “Before you are the steward of the Kasumiōji clan, and the leader of the assassins sent after the head of the Kasumiōji clan, when they were apprehended today based on sufficient evidence gathered by Aizen-taicho and ourselves the steward revealed that a member of the Gotei 13, likely of the upper hierarchy, was the benefactor of the steward’s conspiracy.”

Whispers broke out in a great flurry at Ichigo’s revelation and suspicion was cast about the room as the eyes of the crowd turned to one individual after another. In the midst of the chaos, Ichigo watched Amagai carefully in case the man decided to act upon the abundant chaos. A large crack echoed throughout the room, silencing the growing hysteria in one quick motion, all eyes turned to face the Soutaicho whose eyes glowed with liquid fire even as he nodded for Ichigo continue.

“The steward has asked for leniency for himself and his comrade in exchange for the name of the traitor.”

Ichigo stated simply watching as the old man jerked slightly in surprise at Ichigo’s wording and the assassin’s hands once more formed into tightly-clenched fists. The gathered captains and lieutenants studied the accused with all the unsettling force a crowd of powerful beings could possess even as Amagai stepped deeper into the shadows hand straying to his katana.

The Soutaicho nodded once in agreement acquiescing to the demand and wordlessly Yoruichi stepped out of the line of captains, Soi-fon and another lieutenant (thankfully not the idiot from Ichigo’s timeline) followed the feline Captain to stand before the accused. All eyes focused on the steward whose thin hands with parchment-like skin shook visibly where they clenched at his kimono, the man bowed his head for a moment before he glanced into the eyes of the Soutaicho and began, “The traitor is in this very room he- “

Before the steward could finish a wave of reaitsu floored the room sparking upon the air with oppressive heat forcing the old man to collapse. Amagai stepped into the centre of the room Bakkōtō held at the ready while his katana remained sheathed. Ichigo muffled a curse under his breath at the appearance of the Bakkōtō knowing it was dangerous, perhaps more so in a room full of Shinigami, especially if the Soutaicho or the man released their Bankai.

All eyes centred on Amagai as the traitor focused his attention on the Soutaicho the temperature in the room rising in a slow inferno as Amagai stated, “My father’s name was Shin’etsu Kisaragi and it is through your blade that my father was killed.”

Amagai’s voice was heavy with accusation, his posture a stiff line of outrage as across from the man the Soutaicho regarded the traitor with a heavy brow, a frown tugging at the old man’s lips as his hand strayed ever slowly towards the hilt of Ryūjin Jakka and replied, “Your father was overtaken by his Bakkōtō during his investigation into the Kasumiōji clan, to save him from a half-life I killed him.”

Yamamoto’s old voice rough with age was heavy with remorse but clear and concise nonetheless as the ancient Shinigami stared into the eyes of Amagai, features that were usually carved into strict sternness like a statue were open and accepting of the young man’s anger. Silently under Yoruichi’s careful eye, the two Second division members removed the steward and assassin from the room as the heat continued to rise and the captains and lieutenants regarded the brewing situation with tense and wary eyes.

Suddenly the Bakkōtō in Amagai’s hand pulsed green as he manoeuvred the blade in front of him, his expression invisible to Ichigo’s eyes even as his movements were jerky and stiff like a marionette with broken strings. With a pulse of reaitsu, the captains and lieutenants’ zanpaktou were rendered immobile and the man darted from the room in a wicked flash of shunpo.
Ignoring the aching tear in Ichigo’s chest at not being able to feel Zangetsu, the way his eyes burned, and his thoughts streamlined into panic, Ichigo nodded once to the Soutaicho encouraging him to follow and reassuring that Ichigo could handle it, he knew it was the old man’s fight. The Soutaicho nodded gratitude shifting like embers in his eyes and followed the traitor in a burst of reiatsu leaving a meeting room full of panicked Shinigami.

With a flare of hollow reiatsu that spread to every corner and snapped at the negative emotions filling the room, Ichigo successfully caught the attention of the panicking captains and lieutenants. Taking a deep breath Ichigo’s hand casually rested on Zangetsu’s hilt in silent self-reassurance even as he looked into the eyes of his comrades and commanded, “Everyone please calm down, your connection with your zanpaktou will return within a few minutes. Please leave the matter of the traitor in the Soutaicho’s hands and return to your divisions. A message will be sent to everyone when the situation is finished. In the meantime, we cannot allow Soul Society to be defenceless while we run about in panic.”

At Ichigo’s words many of the Shinigami who were frozen as if having seen medusa relaxed nodding quietly to themselves or regarding their zanpaktou with careful concerned eyes. The orange-haired Captain had long ago learned that without orders and reasoning people would continue to panic, though panic would always occur regardless. The Shinigami lingered for a few moments huddling in groups to reassure each other or speak in quiet whispers as if the situation didn’t hang above their heads; an executioner’s axe waiting to fall.

Flaring his reaitsu once more in reminder Ichigo watched as some of the captains and lieutenants flashed Ichigo guilty smiles before disappearing in a burst of shunpo. As the others began to file out of the room Byakuya stepped up beside Ichigo and wordlessly let his fingers drift across Ichigo’s own for a sparse second before returning to the hilt of Senbonzakura.

“Ma ma Ichi, yet another show of your excellent aptitude for captaincy. Maybe you can be the Soutaicho when Yamamoto finally retires.”

Kyoraku said in his familiar low drawl with a coy smile and wink shadowed from beneath the brim of his hat as he approached with Jushiro. A weariness furrowed the expressions of both captains hidden though it was making Ichigo’s heart echo with empathy, while behind them Kaien was bickering fondly with Rukia and Nano was glaring silently at her Captain while Lisa read a magazine.

In lieu of the comment Ichigo delivered his close friend a dry glare, dry as the Sahara desert; it was well-known among the upper-hierarchy that Ichigo was only waiting for the right moment to shuck his captaincy at his lieutenant (who was also glaring at Ichigo, likely for yet again being involved in some new plot). Shunsui only laughed at Ichigo’s glare, the corners of his eyes crinkling in fond warm amusement, while Jushiro smiled into the sleeve of his shihakusho with knowing eyes that winked with mischief.

Glancing around the now empty hall Ichigo let his reaitsu reach out searching for the Soutaicho who was fighting Amagai on top of Sokyoku hill, what a surprise. As his senses reached out he could feel Zangetsu’s returning presence, his zanpaktou’s concern and warmth like a balm to frantic thoughts shoved hurriedly under the rug.

When Ichigo returned his attention to the Shinigami in front of him it was to the amusement of everyone, Kaien regarded Ichigo with a knowing look that was drenched in concern, while Lisa was rolling her eyes at him, and Byakuya had pressed himself closer to Ichigo. It was Shunsui who made a shooshing motion with his hands, Jushiro nodding beside him, and said, “Go make sure Yam-jii doesn’t retire early.”
The words were spoken with faux casualty as Shunsui’s brows furrowed and a barely there frown caught at the man’s lips as his hands worryingly stroked at Katen Kyōkotsu’s handles. Ichigo glanced briefly to Byakuya in indecision wanting to support his friends as much as he wanted to be there for the man who had become like a grandfather to him. Byakuya with a knowing smile lightly donning his features bumped his shoulder with Ichigo and nodded his eyes conveying a thousand parting words that Ichigo responded to with a wave of reaitsu and a grin.

“Aye aye, Captain. Stay safe everyone.”

Ichigo said in farewell winking at Shunsui and Jushiro before he pivoted and let a burst of reiatsu alight beneath his feet as he moved towards Sokyoku hill. The heat surrounding the large landmark was intense, near blistering as it drove at Ichigo’s lungs and made his eyes water where he spotted the Soutaicho and Amagai ensconced upon the hill in a sea of roiling fire.

Pulling his reaitsu around himself Ichigo touched lightly onto the ground devoid of all grass but now bearing a motley mix of sand and ash as Zangetsu whispered in his mind. The Soutaicho was facing Amagai even with Ryūjin Jakka sealed, the heat providing no effect to the old man, who had long ago become resistant to heat, Ichigo almost wished for the same as the very air crackled with fire, oxygen burning away at a rapid rate.

The battle was concluding, both opponents were panting and Ichigo could see a few small wounds decorating the Soutaicho’s body and a large gash stretched across Amagai’s torso. There was a revelation in the man’s wide eyes and a loosely held katana as he faced the Soutaicho with tears gathering. The old man radiated an aura of sorrow and solemn apology that reminded Ichigo intensely of one of the nights in the Winter War when he had been visited by the grim old man.

“You could repay your father’s actions and fight with the Gotei 13, we need good soldiers, good men like you… there is a war coming and we all need to stay together if we want to live. Your father should not have died, but neither should you so carelessly throw your life away, you have the chance to live to use it.”

Yamamoto stated slowly voice rough and dragging with exhaustion but burned with a passion all the same that echoed in the old man’s straight spine and the near visible aura of reiatsu the surrounded the man in a shimmering mirage of heat. Amagai stared at the Soutaicho for a moment in silence before he slumped to his knees defeated and his hands reached up to cover his eyes as sobs racked his body.

With a flicker of the wind the flames began to die out around them and inhaling in slight relief, Ichigo walked forward to stand beside the Soutaicho a healing kido already dancing around his hands in wisps of green. The Soutaicho turned to Ichigo as he approached, and a smile graced the old man’s lips shaping his face in a way few rarely saw, eyes warm like a hearth and just as providing. Ichigo grinned in return as Zangetsu hummed proudly in his mind and Amagai slowly dried his tears regarding the world as if seeing it for what it was once more, the fog of death stripped away. Unohana would likely lecture them all for smoke inhalation and injuries but they had avoided yet another causality and Ichigo couldn’t stop the relief that plundered the worry and stole it away to replace it with a lingering happiness.

X

Chapter End Notes
Thank you all for reading I hope you like this rendition of this arc, it was actually pretty fun to write. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Trapezoid!
The streets of Rungokai bustled with light chatter in a pleasant background hum as Ichigo lazily strolled through the paved streets, reaitsu mapping out his surroundings as he observed the many citizens moving about. It was a beautiful day the orange-haired Shinigami acknowledged with a slight quirk of his lips as beside him Byakuya studied the passing scenery with light eyes; the ice cold Kuchiki mask nowhere to be found. It left something fluttery in Ichigo’s chest at the peace he felt seeping into his system, any slithering thoughts of the future temporarily banished in the airy sunshine.

It had only been a week since the Soutaicho had defeated Amagai, who was now serving in the First division, a fact few Shinigami knew the whole truth of, and the Kasumiōji clan had returned to some semblance of order like the rest of Soul Society. Some part of Ichigo was wary of what would occur next, wondering and planning on numerous inevitabilities that had a distaste for order and logic, but at the same time he knew that Soul Society could handle it, the very notion had been reinforced countless times.

“Do you think they’ve already arrived?”

Byakuya questioned quietly as he leaned closer to Ichigo to ask above the din of noise surrounding them. The orange-haired Shinigami’s thoughts somersaulted over the question for a moment as he distantly recalled that they were, in fact, strolling towards a destination, and not just dazedly admiring the prosperity that now flourished in most of the districts. Some were still close to destitute, and to say all lives were within luxury’s grasp would be vastly incorrect, but there were greater amounts of food, less hollow attacks, and overall those with reaitsu were inducted into the academy or the local militia for training sooner.

The Kuchiki head next to Ichigo bumped his shoulder against the orange-haired Shinigami with a low amused chuckle that resonated from the man’s chest and filled the air in a way that regardless

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**Susurrus**

**Chapter Notes**

Susurrus

(n.) A whispering or rustling sound; a murmur.

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 66 and a new arc. Fair warning it’s really unlikely I’ll update next week; my weekends are really booked and it’s that time of year for exams and culminating assignments. Regardless I hope you all enjoy, read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
never ceased to bring a slight smile to Ichigo’s lips. Shaking his head knowingly Ichigo caught sight of crinkling eyes as Byakuya studied Ichigo with a knowing look, it wasn’t the first time the orange-haired Captain had gotten lost in his own thoughts and someone was needed to tug him back. Ichigo grinned a touch apologetically, but mostly shamelessly with a wide grin and finally replied, “I doubt it, Shunsui is probably being berated by Nano or Lisa, and Jūshirō’s band of lieutenants and third seats are likely worrying after his health again.”

The two captains laughed together at Ichigo’s well-meaning comment that was more than likely true, as they slipped through the streets with passing ease. Just another pair of souls in simple shihakusho that appeared quite easily as kimonos, passing vendors who sold jewels glittering like a dragon’s hoard, and chefs roasting food over hot spits perfuming the air. Byakuya rolled his eyes at Ichigo even as his lips continued to form a smile and tangling his fingers briefly with Ichigo’s own he replied, “You’re probably right. That just means more sake for us, or rather you.”

“Hey, I don’t drink that much sake!”

Ichigo protested with a petulant frown eyes glimmering at his partner from underneath furrowed brows, a hand splayed dramatically over his breast as the other reached towards Zangetsu sheathed at his side. Byakuya faced Ichigo’s irritation with a bland stare, his own silver eyes crinkling in mirth at Ichigo’s reaction as he replied sardonically, “No you only do that when you’re depressed, plotting, thinking, reminiscing, happy, sad-“

“Okay, okay I get it. But honestly, I can drink if I want to! I can actually hold my liquor, unlike some people.”

Ichigo retorted throwing his hands up in the air and shoving a glare at Byakuya for suggesting that Ichigo was an alcoholic, even though they both knew it was light fun and Ichigo would never indulge in such an addiction, not when it had gotten people killed. The Captain of the Sixth blinked innocently, glancing up into the air at Ichigo’s accusation that he couldn’t hold his liquor (partially true) pretending he hadn’t heard the words and being the better man.

“That’s only around you idiot, considering if you really want to get drunk you drink as much as a horse; Shibas and their damn tolerance.”

Byakuya finished with a scowl and a put-out look as his gaze darted off to the side, Ichigo laughed at his partner’s words and in a mockingly comforting manner patted him on the shoulder, a grin splitting his features and crinkling his eyes all the while Byakuya rolled his eyes at Ichigo and the two shared a grin before returning to a companionable silence as they drew closer to their destination.

“Shiba-san! Kuchiki-san!”

A voice called out disrupting the lull of the street and drawing the attention of the owners of such names. Ichigo thought the voice sounded vaguely familiar as he shared a curious glance with Byakuya and the two captains turned around to peer at the sea of people walking through the busy streets. A moment later a head of golden hair appeared accompanied by familiar a familiar smile as Rurichiyo drew closer to the two older souls.

Smiling fondly at the young Kasumiōji head Ichigo and Byakuya dipped into a shallow bow and the orange-haired Shinigami greeted with a complete lack of propriety, “Hello Rurichiyo, how are you?”

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Smiling fondly at the young Kasumiōji head Ichigo and Byakuya dipped into a shallow bow and the orange-haired Shinigami greeted with a complete lack of propriety, “Hello Rurichiyo, how are you?”

The youth dropped into a quick bow, her attendants and husband appearing in a flurry of worry behind the young woman who grinned knowingly with mischief crinkling her eyes and dancing across her lips as she replied, “I’m very well. I just wanted to thank you both again for your aid with my clan.”
Ichigo reached forward and ruffled the blonde’s hair as once more the attendants moaned about dignity, respect, propriety, and the like and with a wink replied, “We were happy to help. How’s the married life, and clan responsibility?”

Briefly, green eyes darkened at the mention of responsibility before the youth shrugged with a helpless grin tugging at her lips as she splayed her arms to the side and responded, “It is what it, but I’m grateful Kaien gave me some tips. My husband is really nice and understands that I’m the one who’s in charge of the clan, though Kūkaku probably helped with that.”

The Kasumiōji head admitted with a laugh as Ichigo and Byakuya shared silent knowing looks that resignedly acknowledged Ichigo’s crazy siblings before they both returned their attention to the young woman in front of them and Byakuya commented, “If you ever need anything the Kuchiki and Shiba clans would be happy to help.”

Rurichiyo nodded and glanced over her shoulder to see her husband scowling at the attendants as all three darted concerned glances towards the young head every few moments in. She returned her attention to the two captain’s eyes knowing and a bit sad as reluctantly the young woman stated, “I should return now, it was lovely seeing you both and I’ll definitely see you at the summer ball. Bye!”

The blond darted forward to give the two a quick hug, pure mischief quirking her lips into crescents and glittering her eyes before she darted away with a wave over her shoulder. Ichigo wiped away the mute shock bubbling in his chest at the girl’s actions and instead grinned, wide and a bit prideful at the wonderful mess they had once again converted another noble to. Byakuya beside Ichigo waved to the young woman even as he groaned and fixed Ichigo with a knowing glare and stated crisply, “We are not converting all the nobles.”

As they turned and continued walking Ichigo pouted, even though he honestly agreed, it would be far too much work and many of them had poles so far up their asses they could only speak in stilted half sentences. Fixing his partner with a bemused look Ichigo grinned from the corner of his eyes and suggested lightly, “What if we hold a ball and the dress code is- “

Byakuya fixed Ichigo with a shake of his head and a quirk to his lips muffled by a frown. Sighing in defeat Ichigo slumped helplessly against Byakuya who laughed at his partner’s actions even as he pushed Ichigo to his feet and pointedly jerked his head in front of them. Across the busy road stood a small tea house, the walls furnished in simple timber with opaque windows like smoke, and a charm to it that seemed stained into the little sign swaying above the door. In front of the tea shop, Jūshirō and Shunsui were conversing silently heads bowed together.

As the two younger captains crossed the street Shunsui glanced up from where he had been speaking to Jūshirō and with a wide grin blooming beneath his old straw hat the man greeted with an over-energetic wave, “Ichi-kun, Bya-kun!”

Ichigo waved in response as Jūshirō nodded in greeting even as Byakuya with a low groan rested his palm on his forehead and mumbled about devil cats before resuming his pleasant demeanour. When they were within arms reach of the two elder captains, Shunsui happily pulled Byakuya and Ichigo into an overly fond group hug while Jūshirō watched on with an amused tilt to his lips. He looked healthier if Ichigo thought about it as he stared at the older man over Shunsui’s shoulder, there was a deeper pallor to his skin, and the exhaustion that had seemed to cling to every inch of the kind man had faded somewhat, it nourished the seeds of hope growing about his chest.

“It’s almost like you haven’t seen them since yesterday.”

Jūshirō commented with a knowing smile directed towards the curly-haired Captain who only grinned, bright and unrepentant at the white-haired Captain before he flashed a wink at Ichigo and
Byakuya. Sharing a bemused look with his partner Ichigo contented himself for a moment watching Shunsui plead with Jūshirō in the afternoon light as warmth seeped into his skin before with a shake of his head Ichigo stepped forward and elegantly intoned, “Shall we enter gentlemen?”

Byakuya muffled a snort into the back of his hand at Shunsui’s abashed expression and Jūshirō’s triumphantly glowing eyes as the white-haired man agreed with a nod, approval lining his brows as he carefully slid open the door. Shunsui winked once more at Ichigo and followed the Captain of the Thirteenth inside the Grinning Dragon. Laughing under his breath Ichigo briefly tangled his fingers with Byakuya’s before they entered the fine establishment.

After a sparse second of waiting inside the dimly lit interior, where a wide room was held with low tables, wonderfully painted screen dividing the dining area, and the golden halo glow of the oil lamps, a server bustled to the front of the room and observed them with clairvoyant eyes before guiding them to a table with a polished smile and whisking off again. Ichigo was hardly fazed by the strange waiter and had long ago accepted that if one was in the service industry, particularly restaurants, they were always a touch crazy, not that he could judge. They slid into a small booth, the smell of tobacco lingering on the air as Byakuya squished in beside Ichigo who was now facing Shunsui, the man grinning like a loon as he poured over the menu without fear of Nano or Lisa’s vengeance hanging over his shoulders.

“I’m surprised you were here before us.”

The orange-haired Shinigami stared with a touch of curiosity as he browsed one of the menus with an idle eye, watching as Jūshirō and Shunsui traded a silent conversation before Jūshirō spoke up, “It was certainly difficult, and we only arrived right before you by luck. Kaien insisted on a check-up from Unohana, Rukia insisted I have a cane in case of emergencies, Kiyone and Sentarō insisted they accompany me, and about three other third-seats attempted to shove various medical or otherwise inconsequential things such as umbrellas on me.”

Jūshirō finished with a grinning laugh, eyes bright with mirth and fondness. Ichigo laughed at the man’s words which had been spoken with a touch of exasperation as Byakuya joined in. In all honesty, Ichigo had no idea how the man dealt with so many overprotective subordinates, Kaien was bad enough on his own.

“Ma ma Ju you had it easy, Nano-chan and Lisa-chan were both ruthless, they confiscated all the sake and forced me to watch as they dumped it.”

Shunsui said with good-natured self-pity as he studied the swirling grains of the table with a forlorn sigh. Jūshirō rolled his eyes at his partner’s act and reached over to tilt Shunsui’s hat over the brim of his eyes as Ichigo shook his head at the man, and Byakuya hid a small grin.

The waiter returned at that moment and before anyone could place an order Shunsui lifted his head off of the table so fast it might have been a blur and rattled off an extensive order before sending the waiter away once they had written everything down. In the lingering silence of the waiter’s absence, Ichigo rubbed the bridge of his nose with amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes and Byakuya hid a small grin.

Ichigo’s head shifted from where he had been observing Jūshirō lecture Shunsui on his alcohol indulgence and swivelled towards the entrance where a familiar presence, radiating something tense and worried, shuffled inside. The orange-haired Captain knew the other Captain wasn’t here simply to have a good cup of sake because there were far more decent looking bars closer to the Gotei 13. His suspicions were confirmed when Sosuke’s piercing brown eyes connected with Ichigo’s own across the room and the man’s tense posture slumped for a minute before he glided effortlessly
through the many patrons crowding the restaurant. As if sensing the change in the atmosphere the
other captains had fallen quiet and with little prompting, Byakuya moved over to leave room for
Sosuke.

The Captain of the Twelfth division nodded respectfully in greeting to the other captains before his
attention zered in on Ichigo. One hand fiddling with a device in his pocket, in a carefully controlled
mask of crisp confidence that hid the interest and panic mixing in his eyes, Sosuke stated, “The
Shinenju has appeared in the mortal world.”

“Fuck.”

Ichigo cursed as a gust of cool air made itself home in his chest evaporating the previous warmth as
Sosuke’s words hung in the air. At Ichigo’s curse, the other captains were instantly alert beneath a
casual air of relaxation as Shunsui commented, “Ma language Ichi.”

Byakuya regarded Ichigo and Sosuke with sharp eyes, hand straying unconsciously to Senbonzakura
broadcasting his concern. Ichigo only levelled Shunsui with a roll of his eyes filled with something
rebellious, while Jūshirō attempted to break the silence and asked, “What’s a Shinenju?”

Ichigo and Sosuke traded a tight glance that sparked like lightning in the space between the two
before Ichigo beckoned the scientist to join them at the table. At that moment their waiter returned
with a bottle of sake and a multitude of cups, placing both on the table before darting away. A
silence lingered over the table as Sosuke slid into the booth and the sake was wordlessly poured. It
was only after Ichigo had stared into his cup for a quiet moment where his thoughts raced
everywhere, and he recalled his own timeline before he glanced into the worried eyes of his friends
and began.

“Sometimes in the process of reincarnation, a few souls get lost. Some of the time they find their way
back and that leads to a time displacement, but most of the time they end up in the Valley of Screams
where their memories are separated from their souls. Those memories form a being called a Shinenju
who has the ability to control those souls, called blanks, which end up in the Valley of Screams. The
Shinenju has the ability to basically collapse the dangai and merge Soul Society and the mortal
world, which would be catastrophic.”

A grim mood settled over the table as Ichigo finished and took a shot of liquid courage, as Sosuke
beside the orange-haired Shinigami fiddled with one of his devices, likely contacting Kisuke. The
three captains studied Ichigo for a moment varying forms of seriousness carved into their features,
before Byakuya commented with a bit of a sigh and a sad curve to his lips, “This happened then
didn’t it?”

Ichigo only nodded in response, fingers tightening around the mug in his hands as he recalled Senna,
Ganryū, her sacrifice, and the unfilled promise. Shunsui and Jūshirō shared a knowing look that was
all concern and grief wrapped up in their sad smiles, while Sosuke only sipped at the sake in front of
him with something bitter staining his features. Byakuya frowned in concern, the motion furrowing
his brows and pulling at his lips as he shifted closer to Ichigo, fingers reaching out to tangle with
Ichigo’s own underneath the table.

“Why does this present a problem now Ichigo?”

Jūshirō asked, wise eyes staring at both Sosuke and Ichigo with sharp thoughtfulness, as the white-
haired Captain idly shifted the cup in his hands. Ichigo drew a hand through his hair at the question a
frown furrowing its way onto his face as he replied, “As has become a common theme, Soul Society
made an enemy through their actions in the past, the Ryōdoji clan were exiled from Soul Society
roughly one thousand years ago, they entered the dangai and continued to wander there until they
stumbled upon the Valley of Screams and learned how to harness the power there, they call themselves the Dark Ones now, but that’s their origin. To get revenge against Soul Society, like most everyone else recently, they plan to use the Shinenju to merge the two worlds.”

Ichigo’s voice felt a bit hoarse and he wasn’t sure if it was exhaustion or speaking at length that had caused it, regardless the orange-haired Shinigami took another sip of the sake in front of him focusing on the taste for a moment as the Shinigami around him reacted to his tale. Byakuya was studying the grains of the table with something pensive in his eyes, posture closed and hands idle, across from his partner Shunsui and Jūshirō were speaking to each other in low hushed tones, faces drawn and grave. Sosuke was once more sipping at his cup of sake with a white-knuckled grasp that betrayed his thoughts of the whole situation.

As much as the scientist was happy now, happier than he ever was before he dropped his plans of megalomania, he still saw beneath the peaceful and benign façade Soul Society often presented. They both knew Soul Society had changed; it wasn’t the same as it had been one-thousand years ago, but regardless mistakes of the past had a way of cropping up and reminding everyone of their own ineffability.

“Kami sometimes it’s hard to remember how everything was back then and to be reminded of what we didn’t see…”

Shunsui commented with a shake of his head, straw-hat tilted low over his eyes and casting them in shadows as his remorseful tenor filled the enclosed booth. Jūshirō had a pained look on his features at his partner’s words but it was softened when his eyes passed over the youth in front of him, reminding Ichigo of many midnight conversations with the pair of captains who had lived through more than Ichigo could hope to surpass. Their waiter appeared again in a whirl of a simple black kimono, plates balanced delicately on each arm, pulling the attention of the Shinigami away from heavy thoughts as the waiter smiled kindly and placed the plates on the table before whisking off once more.

Shunsui had ordered a wide variety of things, most looked beyond appetizing, steaming rice, miso soup, sukiyaki, tempura, and udon, all artfully arranged with the scent of meat and other fragrant spices filling the air. It was honestly a bit much, but a well-needed distraction nonetheless, and for a few moments the booth was filled only with the sound of cutlery clinking as the food was consumed.

Ichigo’s thoughts wandered as he consumed some of the tempura, thoughts briefly darting to his mother’s recipe before they trailed to the twins. He wondered if the girls had met Senna, he knew they certainly didn’t have the same difficulties with Kon that Ichigo had had considering Kisuke had already had his fun and had made a promise of safety to the over-protective Captain.

The whole situation dragged at his nerves as he tried to recall the events that occurred, he knew they had met Senna at one of the local fairs, and things had evolved from there to Soul Society trying to apprehend Senna, which had finished with the final battle, but small details seemed to slip from his hands like grains of sand sometimes. Like everything that happened in between, it was like a blur in his memories, just as the image of Senna felt a bit faded.

If possible Ichigo wanted to avoid even drawing close to the event of the different worlds merging, but the Dark Ones would need to be dealt with now before another Shinenju appeared and there wasn’t anyone aware of the danger they represented. Furthermore, Ichigo knew there wasn’t a way to save Senna, not truly, considering she wasn’t a soul to begin with.

The orange-haired Captain had never shared the information with his friend but during the wars, sometimes he felt her presence (and that of others), most commonly in the dangai. Knowing he couldn’t save her in the same sense Ichigo endeavoured that her days in the mortal world at least be
pleasant. Then there was the matter of the mission to the mortal world; as much as Ichigo wanted to handle everything and save his friends, he knew it would only hurt them in the long run when they also needed opportunities to grow. That was why he was more than considering sending Tōshirō with them.

Another event was drawing closer, and afterwards, the youth would likely be ready to take the captaincy, the promotion helping the youth to grow more than staying a subordinate possibly could. Ichigo had taught the brat damn near everything he knew, and something warm and fond sparked faintly in his chest whenever he thought of the white-haired midget who had become like an apprentice to him, but they both knew they were beyond the point where Ichigo could aid Tōshirō’s growth.

“So Ichigo, what’s the plan?”

Shunsui questioned in between a mouthful of rice staring at the orange-haired Captain from beneath the brim of his hat. Pulling his attention away from the food in front of him and the thoughts surrounding him, Ichigo repeated the question in his mind for a moment. Feeling the attention of the other Shinigami, Ichigo glanced at the plate in front of idly playing with his food he replied, “We need to send a task force to the mortal world in the first place to protect the Shinenju, who will fade on their own, we should also inform them of the truth as well. We need to draw the attention of the Dark Ones, we can’t let them slip into obscurity and wait a thousand years to attack again when no one will be aware. The best course of action then is to use the Shinenju as a trap to lure them out, and then defeat them.”

Sosuke hummed at the plan as Shunsui and Jūshirō carried out another silent conversation (they were masters of the art that Byakuya and Ichigo could only hope to emulate), and Byakuya studied Ichigo for a moment with squinting suspicious eyes and a frown tilting the corners of his lips. The Kuchiki heir leaned closer to his partner and tangled his fingers with Ichigo’s, understanding simmering reluctantly in his reaitsu as his posture went stiff but he leant into Ichigo all the same. They didn’t want to separate once more (because Byakuya had long ago learned that without him there Ichigo was far more likely to get injured or just plain draw fate’s eyes), but it would be better for Soul Society in the long run if the Captain of the Sixth was there to watch over everything.

“Who are you proposing for the mission Ichigo?”

Jūshirō questioned with a tilt of his head, eyes crinkling gently and highlighting the laugh lines around the elder Shinigami’s eyes as he studied Ichigo. The orange-haired Shinigami pursed his lips for a minute before he replied, “Well Sosuke would murder me if I didn’t invite him to come,” said Captain scoffed and shot Ichigo a dirty look, who ignored it and continued, “Tōshirō needs to come for training purposes and the like, Rukia will throw a fit if she misses on a trip to the mortal realm, if that’s okay with you Jūshirō?”

Ichigo questioned with a tilt of his head, the white-haired Shinigami laughed, the sound like water in a river bed bright and airy as the elder Shinigami replied, “I don’t mind at all Ichigo, it will save me from some of the incessant over-protective actions of my subordinates.”

Laughter rippled around the table at Jūshirō’s comment as empty dishes were pushed towards the center and with a nod Ichigo continued, “I think it would be good for Shūhei to visit the mortal world, and probably Renji as well.” Ichigo’s gaze darted to his partner who consented with a nod, silver eyes sparkling, and Ichigo continued, “A small team sounds about best so that’s probably good considering our resident substitute Shinigami as well.”

A general air of pensiveness surrounded the table even as with a low laugh Shunsui commented, “And you’re included in the mission no doubt Ichigo?”
The orange-haired Captain rolled his eyes at his friend’s antics and nodded, fingers unconsciously drifting to Zangetsu’s hilt for a moment. A second later Sosuke stated, “I’ll go sort out our travel, you want to leave as soon as possible correct Ichigo?” Ichigo nodded and the scientist added, “Good, I’ll send Jigokuchō to the lieutenants you mentioned, Kensei-san as well.”

With those words, the scientist sidled gracefully out of the booth and pointedly adjusted the glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. Grinning at his friend’s familiar mannerisms Ichigo nodded and the others murmured farewells as Sosuke bowed and left the restaurant in a dramatic swirl of fabric, ever the megalomaniac.

Running a hand through his hair Ichigo made a mental planning list of tasks he needed to finish before they departed; a lecture for Rangiku, secret instructions for his other third seats, paperwork, contacting Isshin, speaking to Tōshirō beforehand, and leaving a message for the Soutaicho, which he could get Shunsui and Jūshirō to deliver.

Glancing up from where his thoughts had spelt themselves out, Ichigo caught the eyes of his two mentors and questioned, “Can you please take this information to the Soutaicho?”

Jūshirō smiled and nodded even as Shunsui grinned and reached across the table to rustle Ichigo’s hair, earning him a swat, and replied, “No sweat Ichi, now go prepare for the latest vengeance combatting mission.”

Rolling his eyes at the curly-haired Captain, Ichigo flashed the two a fond smile, before he turned his attention to his partner. Byakuya had a brave face on, but the silver of his eyes were warped with a familiar sadness that Ichigo had become well-experienced with. Wordlessly the orange-haired Captain tangled his fingers with Byakuya’s own, silently reassuring the other Captain, he knew the man worried about him, a conversation drifting to the forefront of his mind.

“What if you get hurt and I’m not there, not there even at the end.”

The words had been spoken early in the morning with fear and terror gripping at his partner’s voice, and Ichigo had made half-promises in return. Quirking his lips at his partner Ichigo pressed a chaste kiss to the hand held in his, eyes winking at Byakuya from underneath his bangs. With a warm smile, Ichigo rose to his feet, placed some money on the table and with a wave over his shoulder determination blazing in his eyes Ichigo left the restaurant.

X

Tōshirō frowned at his Captain as they stepped out of the shoji doors and into the dusty almost abandoned looking yard of the Urahara Shōten. The young lieutenant had been to the mortal world on more than a few occasions for various missions and he was still largely undecided on whether he liked the odd experience of visiting the mortal world. Every time it seemed he was overwhelmed with new sights, sounds, experiences, and people happily cooing over his appearance (he wasn’t short damn it). Thinking of his own youthful appearance, a tactic he used so that his enemies underestimated him, Tōshirō recalled his Captain’s grinning features whenever the white-haired lieutenant complained. He always nodded along with a sympathetic eye and sly absolutely knowing grin curving his features.

That was perhaps one of the most annoying facets of his Captain, the constant sense that the man knew something you did not. At least Ichigo had the sense, not to lord such information, which he obviously did possess, over others, but it still irritated Tōshirō to hell and back when the man held that particular gleam in his eyes; not to forget the man’s constant plotting.

To any outside observer, Shiba-taicho likely appeared a paragon of what Shinigami were supposed
to be, brave, determined, skilled, unflinching, intelligent; and he was all of those things, but he was also a self-sacrificing idiot who couldn’t recognize his own exhaustion if it slapped him in the face. Not to mention the way he constantly threw himself into whatever situation cropped up, and there were plenty, with a vigour that would horrify a lesser man, of which there were many. It was a constant thing too if a situation occurred than without a doubt Ichigo was in the middle of it, the eye of the storm, bringer of chaos and the like.

Tōshirō got to deal with the fallout, which more often than not meant piles of paperwork towering towards the ceiling precariously balanced on what little desk space was available, but also meant lecturing his Captain. The man didn’t have to get himself involved in the situations, there was plenty of powerful Shinigami in the Gotei 13, but the man had a hero complex the size and complexity of Soul Society. Hence the recent mission, directing his thoughts towards the man, who walked casually in front of the group with an air of ease that damn near blended with the area, Tōshirō’s glare increased in frosty intensity; the Captain of the Tenth, of course, acted unaware.

As much as the young lieutenant could complain about his self-sacrificing, plotting, bastard of a Captain, Tōshirō held an immense respect for the man who had picked up the division after Isshin-san left (and as much as the upper hierarchy tried to hide the truth, saying he was dead or missing in action, they all knew the man had finally found a woman who could handle him), and had continued to shape Soul Society. From the academy to Rungokai Ichigo had sprung change after change, allowing for Tōshirō to attend the academy earlier and to actually learn a bit at the academy.

Not to mention what the man had done for his subordinates, he scheduled weekly group training sessions where he personally saw to everyone’s training; encouraging development and evolution, he more than handled the weight and responsibilities of his division, sometimes taking on more than he should, and he had taken Tōshirō under his figurative wing. As much as the youth would be reluctant to admit it he thought of Shiba-taicho as a mentor, the man had seen past Tōshirō’s cold and dutiful outer shell (as he seemed to do with everyone, sometimes it was like Ichigo already knew you) and had pulled his potential out by force. It had been tough, Ichigo was a stern teacher and he could be a bastard, but he had shown Tōshirō things he likely never would have stumbled on by himself, not to mention the aid Kaien had provided.

Shrugging away thoughts running in familiar circles as Hyōrinmaru’s rumbling laughter echoed in his mind and vibrated in his chest, Tōshirō observed as the other Shinigami stepped through the shoji doors, two captains and a bunch of lieutenants it almost seemed a recipe for disaster. Abarai and Hisagi were squabbling with each other, up close in each other’s personal space with challenging grins decorating their features along with irritation. Rukia was standing beside Tōshirō, practically buzzing with excitement as her eyes darted around the yard of the Urahara Shōten with unhidden energy, Tōshirō could hardly blame the lieutenant. He had heard extensively of the twins who served as substitute Shinigami from the other ice-type lieutenant in many of the lieutenant training sessions (basically an excuse for certain captains to socialize). In front of the group was Aizen-taicho, the man regarding the Shōten with crinkling eyes and pursed lips, one hand settled comfortably on the hilt of his zanpaktou.

Ichigo was beside the scientist, regarding the Shōten with obvious warmth even as his hand tightened in a white-knuckled grip on the hilt of Zangetsu. As if sensing the gaze of his lieutenant the orange-haired Captain peered over his shoulder at Tōshirō and Rukia and winked once conspiratorially before returning his attention to the doors of the Shōten which slid open with a rattling crack that echoed like a particularly strong kido spell in the near-abandoned yard now filled with Shinigami.

Kisuke Urahara, former Captain of the Twelfth, who was also still unofficial co-Captain of the Twelfth stepped onto the veranda with a stripped bucket hat perched low over his eyes and a cane in his hands, he looked almost a comical figure, though Tōshirō knew the cane itself alone held more
than meets the eyes. Whenever Tōshirō visited the mortal world it always ended in some dealing with the eccentric scientist who many would say was too curious for his own good, Tōshirō could hardly form an opinion other than agreement on said eccentricities based on what he had seen.

Aizen-taicho stepped forward and the two clasped arms for a silent moment where Tōshirō could almost feel the weight of unspoken words hanging in the air between the two geniuses, then the former Captain faced the group at large, but mostly Shiba-taicho and stated, “Mhmm another party of people Ichigo? You could warn a man. Well come in, come in.”

The scientist beckoned with his cane, wide eyes and a jovial smile spilling across his features and into his voice while eyes like flint studied the group. With a whiff of his haori, the man turned inside and Tōshirō acknowledged that the rumour that one needed to have a flair for dramatics to enter the upper hierarchy was certainly true. A nudge in his side pulled Tōshirō away from mournful laments about impending captaincy and greater antics. The white-haired Shinigami turned to meet Rukia’s small grin, quirked with mischief and energy, Tōshirō let his lips curve gently in response to the contagious energy of the young woman.

Tōshirō knew he had always appeared cold (and physically he was always cold) to others, but after striking a friendship with Rukia, as well as his mentorship under Ichigo, Tōshirō had learned to open up a bit more. He still wasn’t an over-expressive bundle of puppy-love like Shiba-san’s brother, and both Hyōrinmaru and Tōshirō were fine with acknowledging emotions and displaying them in small gestures rather than anything exuberant and big.

Rukia’s grin widened if possible, the slightly smaller figure practically vibrating with excitement before the Tōshirō could question in half-concern if the lieutenant was physically and mentally okay they were led into the Shōten. Immediately, the overwhelming smell of incense followed by candy filled the air as Tōshirō observed the familiar clutter of the scientist’s residence, furniture wrapped and fixed a hundred times stranded haphazardly, unfinished diagrams decorating the walls, stickers attached to random locations (and if you were there long enough you were bound to attract one yourself) and an overall general feel of homeliness that couldn’t hide the lying under taste of burnt something.

The scientist glided through the many halls that filled the place, the inside seemingly larger than the outside, Aizen-taicho at the man’s elbow as they conversed in low voices that were like the gusts of wind scraping across the sea. A minute later the former-Captain halted at a door adorned with a multitude of bright coloured stickers and turned to face the assembled company of Shinigami with an enterprising grin and opened the door.

Inside was one of the many sitting rooms the Shōten hosted, it was one of the larger ones filled with a comfortable motley of seating that Tōshirō carefully lowered himself on as the other Shinigami filed into the room. At the opposite end of the room three young women sat, two of them were obviously the twins Rukia had spoken in length of, and a third sat between them likely the Shinenju of the hastily done mission briefing they had been given.

The person who Tōshirō assumed was Yuzu due to the honey blond hair had a softness about her features, something gentle to the faint reitsu presence Tōshirō could pick up on. She reminded the young lieutenant of the willow trees graceful and powerful all the same, she regarded the various Shinigami with crinkled eyes and a tiny frown. Her sister appeared like night to the sunlight of her sister with raven hair, a bright furious presence, and a generally grumpy disposition that reminded the lieutenant somewhat of his own Captain’s mannerisms (and if they shared certain obvious Shiba traits Tōshirō would hold his silence). The third girl has spiky inky hair with a yellow ribbon wrapped through it and a school uniform on, she looked uncomfortable and her presence was strange almost like the dangai, which was conclusive enough for Tōshirō’s suspicions.
Instinctively, Tōshirō’s attention darted to his Captain, the last to enter the room (it was either last or first depending on the situation), the man’s eyes surveyed the room pausing slightly at the sight of the twins before they focused on the Shinenju. It was one of those people Tōshirō acknowledged with a frown as his Captain’s face shuttered for a moment emotion leaking away like water from cupped hands before a faux calm settled there.

It was common knowledge among the denizens of the Gotei 13 that the Captain of the Tenth had been through war, what war no one knew, though the true depth of such trauma was limited to those who interacted regularly with the young Captain. The first day in office under the man Tōshirō had been pulled aside by Kaien who had spoken hesitantly about his younger brother’s PTSD and the signs and symptoms Tōshirō needed to be aware of.

It had been a slow process understanding his Captain. Why Ichigo couldn’t stand being in the cold for too long, how if Ichigo was sleeping you couldn’t touch him without flaring your reaitsu, physical contact was limited, and certain words and phrases sent him into flashbacks occasionally. Moreover, the idiot couldn’t care for himself, hence making sure the man actually ate lunch, went to his appointments with Unohana-taicho, and when the man needed to go home early etc.

During his tenure as lieutenant under Ichigo, Tōshirō had likely learned more about mental health than most of Soul Society combined could even contemplate. Occasionally like what had just happened Ichigo met someone who reminded him of his past and he froze, the freezing was better than the anxiety attacks or the times when the idea of self-care became abstract.

As if sensing Ichigo’s mental state, Aizen-taicho stepped closer to his fellow Captain and Ichigo slowly untensed to the relief of the gathered Shinigami who knew the man well enough to recognize the signs. Tōshirō sent a silent thanks to the man as Ichigo settled down and an expectant silence filled the air. A spare second latter, Urahara-san who was of course, still standing, clapped his hands with a grin and announced, “Well onto introductions! On the left of the room, we have Yuzu Kurosaki, the blond, and Karin Kurosaki, the angry one; substitute Shinigami. In between the twins is Senna who is aware of the situation as are the twins. On the right side of the room we have Ichigo, orange hair, Shūhei, the man with shoulders, Renji our resident pineapple freeloader, Rukia the only female, Tōshirō; icy, and of course Sosuke.”

Kisuke finished with a wide sweep of his arms grinning like a loon at the number of feathers he had managed to ruffle with introductions alone. Tōshirō shook his head at the man’s actions, ignoring his own minute irritation, even as Aizen-taicho stood up and swatted the blond-scientist over the head while various hot-headed people yelled indignantly. Ichigo’s low laughter filled the chaotic squabbling and chiding silencing the small sitting room as one by one the various occupants fell quiet.

The scientist sat in the middle of the room like an intermediary, with a pleased grin lighting up as his eyes as he fixed his posture all with the vague motions of a bird proudly preening its feathers. At the now, lingering silence accompanied by the attention of the Shinigami and mortals; Kisuke’s eyes darkened and a sense of seriousness slipped into the atmosphere.

“Well, not that introductions are finished perhaps we can get onto the mission planning. As I’ve already stated the twins and Senna have already been briefed on the matter, and Senna had agreed to cooperate in our efforts to halt the Dark Ones’ plans.”

The former-Captain stated voice light as if talking pleasant conversation to mask the gravity of his words tugging them into the hollow of Tōshirō’s chest. Knowingly the lieutenant’s gaze drifted to his Captain who had a soft smile baring his teeth as he mumbled under his breath, “Bet Yuzu made that happen.”
That answered a question Tōshirō had harboured for a while he supposed. The Captain of the Tenth often disappeared, sometimes for days on end, occasionally he appeared injured, exhausted, or some other manner of unwell. But most of the time he returned with a lighter step and a softness to his eyes Tōshirō only saw his Captain hold around Captain Kuchiki.

“So, what’s the plan? Locate their base of operation and go in guns blazing and the like, like last time?”

The raven-haired twin questioned interrupting Tōshirō’s musings, her voice questioning and respectful though lingering with something rebellious as he sister’s lips curved into a secretive smile, warm eyes twinkling. Kisuke shook his head where he was seated in the middle of the room, the brim of his hat pulled low over his eyes as he nodded to Ichigo who was glancing at the twins out of the corner of his eyes.

“We were thinking the best way to capture the Dark Ones, so they can stand trial would be to stage Soul Society apprehending Senna using her as bait to lure them out, apologies but we need to capture them, but we should be able to protect you.”

The orange-haired Captain stated with an uneasy smile abashedly scratching the back of his head as he stared at the Shinenju who in return was still curiously studying the Shinigami, her gaze returning to Ichigo every few second with a concentrated frown before darting away again. Yuzu, the blond twin smiled suddenly eyes wide as she twitched in place and commented, “Well it’s a good thing then that we’ve been walking around the fair with Senna and one of Urahara-sans temps came and talked to us.”

Tōshirō’s mind took a second to comprehend the sentence and some of the slang used, of which he would never get used to, before he got the general gist of what the young woman had stated. If the dry look of relief spelling itself across Ichigo’s features was anything the young lieutenant would take it as a good sign that the Shinenju had been noticed. The other Shinigami shifted at the blonde’s words trading cautious glances and whispered murmurs of battle.

“Where will we stage this trap?”

Shūhei questioned logically piping up from where he had otherwise remained silent observing the conversation. All eyes turned towards Urahara, and beyond the man to the twins who knew Karakura town best. Urahara pulled a fan out of his sleeves, endless in their volume as they were, and flapped the flimsy paper in front of his features while flint eyes blinked in thought. Yuzu and Karin shared a silent conversation that felt almost audible and at the same time felt like telepathy between the two before they turned to face the gathered Shinigami.

“There are some old warehouses near where the fair is, and it’s in our territory so we can empty it with ease to avoid casualties.”

Karin commented nonchalantly after another moment of silence and a last silent word with her sister. At the twin’s words, Kisuke snapped his fan shut and grinned brightly at the presented solution even as Tōshirō ran the words through his mind again and the others stared at the twins suspiciously.

“In your territory? What are you, mini yakuza bosses?”

Renji questioned loudly, eyebrows wide in disbelief as he landed the twins with a sceptical glance. The twins glanced at each other once before breaking out into laughter, the two different sounds forming a pleasant harmony. While Karin continued to laugh, falling to lean against Senna, Yuzu caught her breath and with a blank face replied, “Yes.”
The red-haired lieutenant and Rukia squawked simultaneously at the monotone answer, even as Ichigo chuckled with that damn irritating knowing expression and something prideful; while Shūhei studied the floor as if contemplating life itself. A moment later once Rukia had recovered from her shock she demanded, “You two run the local yakuza? When? How? Does your mother know?”

The Kuchiki lieutenant’s questions sparked another round of laughter from the twins who Tōshirō was beginning to develop a medium of concern for at the flush dusting their cheeks and the tears leaking from Karin’s eyes. As the twins continued to laugh to the bewilderment of everyone perhaps except Ichigo, and the two scientists; smug bastards, Senna carefully shifted out of the pile of substitute Shinigami.

“It kind of happened naturally, the local thugs kept attacking us, and mom encouraged us to deal with them while Otou-san wanted to ‘protect our honour’ and well now we run the yakuza in Karakura town.”

Yuzu explained with a disarming smile that instantly sent warning shivers cascading down Tōshirō’s spine like sheets of ice, even Hyōrinmaru recoiled suddenly aware. As pleasant as the blond-twin appeared Tōshirō suddenly held little doubt the young woman was as close to cyanide as Unohana-taicho. Rukia made lost sounds for a moment while the others remained flabbergasted and the white-haired lieutenant started a mental countdown to Rukia’s inevitable scolding. As predicted a moment later the tiny lieutenant was scolding the twins to the amusement of most of the room, the twins included who nodded convincingly at the right moments and looked remorseful when called for.

“You should have seen their father’s reaction when they built their criminal mastermind empire.”

Ichigo whispered suddenly beside Tōshirō, as he did, the man could move scarily silently and sometimes it felt as if there was nothing there beside him even though the outrageous hair (which his Captain vehemently proclaimed was natural) was beyond eye-catching. Tōshirō turned to face his Captain and caught sight of mischief quirking a grin, rolling his eyes at the man Tōshirō let a vague imitation of a smile appear as he replied in a monotone deadpan, “I’m sure it was hilarious taicho.”

“And this is why you’re my favourite lieutenant Tōshirō.”

The orange-haired Captain replied with a bit of a sappy grin, eyes crinkling softly where they studied Tōshirō. The white-haired lieutenant resolutely ignored the blush the words inspired and instead huffed and rolled his eyes at his Captain. Ichigo always did that, normally stoic and the like one minute, then suddenly sappy and fond the next.

“Better not let Kaien here that Shiba-taicho”

Tōshirō cautioned ignoring his Captain’s spluttering as he returned his attention to the sitting room and noticed that Rukia had finally fallen quiet and the air was filled only with the sound of whispers and the shuffle of cloth. Aizen-taicho pushed the glasses on the bridge of his nose, and in a voice that always reminded Tōshirō of unsheathed steel said, “Perhaps we could continue to work out our plan, such as who will guard Senna and who will fight our opponents?”

It was stated as a benign question, but underneath was an order and near instantly or at least very quickly the others fell silent turning their attention once more to the situation before them. Tōshirō thought over their strategy for a moment considering what he knew of everyone’s strengths he surveyed the others before his gaze inevitably fell to his Captain. This was always the time the man stepped forward to lead the others providing a well-thought plan and sound logic.

Ichigo noticed Tōshirō’s expectant gaze and with a grin that reached his eyes only shook his head. Mentally cursing but also unsurprised Tōshirō surveyed the others, noting their somewhat blank
faces the lieutenant sighed and added, “It would probably be best if the twins and Shiba-taicho protected Senna, Shiba-taicho is more than capable of handling anyone who slips through our defence, but we should position Rukia closer to serve as backup. Renji, Shūhei, and I can serve as offensive fighters due to our zanpaktou.”

The white-haired lieutenant felt his Captain’s pride radiating through the air at his words and resolutely ignored the man who would likely be grinning like any exuberant Shiba. Urahara and Aizen shared a brief look, and the lieutenant knew better than to try and direct the scientists, even as the others thought about Tōshirō’s suggested battle plan. It took into account the relative strengths of the Shinigami present and the fact that as Senna possessed the greater danger if captured, their top fighter would defend her.

“Well, that sounds like a plan then! Unless there are any objections or suggestions?”

Kisuke spoke with a wide grin only half-hidden by his fan as his eyes cut from beneath the brim of his hat piercing their way through one’s eyes and straight to the heart as the man guided the conversation along. The others glanced around like when the Soutaicho asked a question at a meeting and no one wants to answer for lack of knowledge or is brave enough to face the man.

“Uh Shiba-taicho, what if lethal force if required?”

Shūhei questioned hesitantly dropping his stoic persona in the face of using their zanpaktou to take a life. The lieutenant of the Seventh valued life in a way that few people could comprehend and his relationship with his zanpaktou was certainly strange, but in the end, the man was still powerful, and rumour held close to achieving his Bankai (not that he listened only that Rangiku insisted on talking constantly about everything).

At those words, the temperature in the room seemed to drop, not that Tōshirō physically felt it, and Shiba-taicho’s eyes darkened for a moment so that they were like a void consuming all thoughts and leaving only whispers before he nodded. The sombre air lingered for a moment before Kisuke clapped his hands together jerking many out of a reverie and stated, “Well how about some tea and we can finesse the details.”

Everyone nodded agreeable to the idea even as Ichigo immediately rose to his feet and moved to stand in front of the brightly decorated doorway blocking the blond-scientist’s path the orange-haired Captain stated, “There is no way in hell I’m letting you make the tea while I’m here Kisuke, you’ll burn the water. Again.”

“It was once!”

The former-Captain replied petulantly with a frown and a slump of his posture to Ichigo’s ice cold eyes. The orange-haired Shinigami simply shook his head and flashed a quick commanding glance to Aizen and said, “I’ll make the tea, no one let Kisuke anywhere near the kitchen.”

Then Tōshirō’s Captain darted out of the room leaving a silence in his wake for a moment before laughter burst into the air like a cascade of fireworks at the despondent expression carved into the scientist’s features as Aizen tugged him to the ground. Tōshirō knew that his Captain was plotting, letting the lieutenants take the reins (training probably), but the man would never hold his plots over the lives of others, even if Tōshirō knew he was going to be glaring at the bastard for days afterwards. Regardless, watching the others laughing, the twins and Senna joining in, Tōshirō knew it would all turn out alright in the end. Hyōrinmaru rumbled contentedly in agreement as the door slid open and Ichigo shuffled in with trays balanced on his arm and a proud as a peacock smile sparkling another round of laughter.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, apologies once again that I probably won’t update next week. I hope you guys liked Tōshirō’s perspective and the beginning of this arc. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Lime!!
Chionophile

Chapter Notes

Chionophile
(n.) Person who loves cold weather, snow.

Hello everyone, we are back with chapter 67, apologies for the short hiatus I should be back on schedule now. I hope you all enjoy, read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shoji doors slowly shuddered open in front of the small group of Shinigami gathered in the large warehouse. Flickering industrial lights illuminated the alert features of the gathered sentinels as Ichigo stood beside Senna before the gate to Soul Society. The air thrummed with a heavy tension, the kind that lingered on one’s shoulders and choked the air so that it was like one stood at the peak of a mountain.

Tōshirō on the left wing of their formation regarded their surroundings with wary eyes, peering at the intense shadows that filled the corners of the warehouse and sheathed large supply crates in shadow; they were all tense, waiting impatiently for then Dark Ones to make an appearance. The warehouse itself was located at the outskirts of Karakura; one the twins had happily proclaimed they were free to destroy, but the gathered reaitsu of so many Shinigami, however sealed, did little to dissuade the notion that they were a bright red target.

The twins, who stood almost directly behind Ichigo, were shooting Senna encouraging looks that masked the nervousness flittering about their reaitsu, backed by a will Tōshirō couldn’t help but admire. They were young, and though they had obviously received prior training, they were still only teenagers, and for that Tōshirō respected them. Shūhei behind Tōshirō shifted on his feet as the shoji doors began a slow dramatic crawl open.

Their goal wasn’t to bring the Shinenju to Soul Society, as the Dark Ones would likely not attempt to follow, rather wait for another opportunity; of which they couldn’t afford. A moment later as the gates final finished opening, white light scattering onto the dusty floor of the warehouse like new snowfall; suddenly, the doors behind them the ones to the warehouse’s entrance slammed open with a bang that was heart-stopping and just as striking but not wholly unexpected.

Instantly, the Shinigami fluttered into a formation in a blur of shunpo that was near an optical illusion as Ichigo and Senna were folded into the centre of their loose circle. Facing the doors, Tōshirō could see nothing but the empty streets of an early morning, sunlight just beginning to bring life to the
world around them. But the reaitsu presence of the banished clan was acrid in the air as Tōshirō’s hand drifted to Hyōrinmaru, the dragon spirit’s cool reiatsu soothing rustled nerves and flaring reaitsu in a way that clearly stated the spirit’s desire to protect Soul Society and subsequently the mortal world.

They flickered into being one by one in an impressive display of coordinated shunpo, a large man wearing a veil with clubs the size of Tōshirō in his hands, a woman with purple hair that vaguely reminded the lieutenant of a certain third seat, a man with what looked to be rocket launchers on his back, a large man with colouring similar to one of the Espada, and many of the new recruits now that Soul Society was actually adapting, a small man with black hair and a snake-like appearance reminiscent of Gin, and finally their leader Ganryū appeared closest to the exit.

The man looked at the Shinigami from above his nose, eyes cold and features monotone as they studied the gathered Shinigami unimpressed before his gaze fell on Senna and those cold eyes changed to something ravenous. A still silence settled over the opposing forces as they both studied their opponents and the shoji doors slid shut with a nearly inaudible click, even in the hollow warehouse.

As the silence and tense atmosphere continued to build, the young lieutenant could feel his Captain staring at Ganryū with all the unmovable force of an object in motion, his eyes blazing as fierce as the Soutaicho’s Shikai where they challenged their leader. A minute later, the Dark Ones made the first move as the snake-like man disappeared in a blur of shunpo and reappeared in the air next to Ichigo’s head.

The Captain of the Tenth caught the attack on his forearm even as the pressure of the kick forced wind to rush through Ichigo’s hair and scattered dust like shards of glass. The orange-haired Captain batted away the man in mid-air sending him flying towards his comrades where he rolled and landed with a crouch, Ichigo all the while staring into the eyes of Ganryū. It was the silent signal to begin the battle and Tōshirō had only a moment to sigh faintly before Hyōrinmaru slid from his sheath with the grace of thin sheets of ice, the sound ringing and echoing as both sides drew their weapons.

Fanning forward, the Shinigami chosen to act as the offence moved to the centre of the warehouse to meet their opponents. Inwardly, Tōshirō mourned his fate as the man with clubs the size of his (not) small statue were hefted to face him like some great mountain troll of the legends his grandmother had cackled about. As a large club slammed into the cement where he once stood, cracks splintering the material, and Tōshirō ducked away from the other club he briefly observed Rukia fighting the other woman, Renji fighting the large man, and Shūhei fighting the man with the explosives, and then his attention was once more forcefully drawn to the battle in front of him.

Tōshirō dropped into a crouch as a large club swung through the air where his head once rested on his shoulders with all the force of an approaching missile. From his low crouch, the lieutenant slashed with Hyōrinmaru at his opponent’s leg before darting back to avoid an overhead swing from the heavy club. It was a strange game of cat and mouse as Tōshirō ducked away from the man’s heavy clubs, igniting a ferocity that only channelled the man’s strength but did little to aid the Dark One in actually hitting Tōshirō.

Feeling the temperature drop as Rukia released her Shikai, Tōshirō briefly considered delaying releasing Hyōrinmaru before he acknowledged that in the end, the skill his Shikai provided would be essential in ending the battle against the giant in front of him. With a whisper of reaitsu, something Ichigo had spent long-suffering lectures on the necessity of, Hyōrinmaru shifted form into Shikai and the temperature dropped another few degrees.

As the lieutenant slipped behind the man, he delicately thrust Hyōrinmaru into the cement, a cool
breeze rustling over his shoulders, as strategy ran through his mind. Then his opponent turned to face
the lieutenant of the Tenth and Tōshirō was moving forward once more in a slow undistinguished
circle around the man.

Tōshirō couldn’t afford to waste time fighting the man who was so clearly below him in skill, not
when the main threat was still present and watching in dark amusement; like a predator stalking his
prey, at the end of the warehouse as his subordinates and the Shinigami fought. Part of the lieutenant
wondered why Ganryū had not attacked Ichigo, who had been clearly antagonizing the man, the
reckless self-sacrificing bastard. Tōshirō acknowledged it was likely something to do with the man’s
less than sane state of mind, that or a desire to wait till they had expanded their energy and then dart
in to take the Shinenju.

A plan that would ultimately be unsuccessful, even if Ichigo was currently dealing with the snake-
like man, the twins were still standing on either side of Senna, unsheathed katana glinting in clear
warning. But Tōshirō wouldn’t force the girls to fight Ganryū, they weren’t ready and none of the
Shinigami present wanted to welcome the twins into Soul Society in that way. The sooner they
defeated the Dark Ones, with preferably as few injured as possible, the better.

Tōshirō’s opponent bellowed like a charging bull, furious and wailing, drawing the young
lieutenant’s attention once more to the battle in front of him. Sharp eyes quickly surveyed his
surroundings as the Dark One lumbered forward and with a grin that channelled his Captain at his
most vindictive Tōshirō called out, “Rokui Hyōketsujin.”

His opponent hesitated slightly at Tōshirō’s words, but it was already far too late as with a burst of
reaitsu a pillar of ice encased the Dark One, filling the room with cool icy currents as Tōshirō studied
his opponent for a quiet minute. Ichigo had drilled it into Tōshirō’s head multiple times that one
never turned their back on an opponent when down, because far more likely than not they would rise
again. But Tōshirō’s opponent seemed well and truly frozen beyond a point of reasonable return so,
Tōshirō returned his attention to the battles surrounding him.

Rukia was still embroiled in the battle against the purple haired female, ice decorating the warehouse
around her and glowing ethereally in the flickering lights overhead, Renji was grinning like a
madman while he fought, as expected of a former member of the Eleventh. Shūhei was fighting with
a solemn expression backed by a determination that was as unflinching as unsheathed steel, and
Ichigo fought the snake man with careful concentration.

It seemed that Ganryū had also noticed the occupation of the other Shinigami and was moving in the
shadows, an impressive feat considering his snow-white hair, towards the twins and consequently
Senna. At that moment, Tōshirō could almost feel the eyes of his Captain pushing him forward
guiding his feet to drop into shunpo and step in front of the man who wished to hurt the twins and
Senna.

The part of Tōshirō that housed a spirit hundreds of centuries old and was far wiser than any human
soul scoffed at Ichigo’s simple manoeuvring in an attempt to provide more real-world experience for
his lieutenant. Another part of Tōshirō was happy that his Captain thought he could handle the leader
of the Dark Ones. But he could also feel what lay unspoken between the lieutenant and Captain
bubbling to the surface once more.

Their swords clashed with a ring of steel that sent sparks scattering throughout the air as Hyōrinmaru
roared in warning through Tōshirō’s reaitsu, advising the foolish exile in front of them to halt in his
attempt to seek revenge on Soul Society. The white-haired soul jerked at the intense wave of cold
that bathed the small space between the two before he snarled, the expression contorting his features
to something cruel and callous.
The lieutenant could feel the twins and the Shinenju behind him, the twins having moved to provide better defence standing between Ganryū and Senna with katana glinting with promise. Squashing undue concern for the youths behind him, Tōshirō called out as he forced his blade forward against Ganryū’s to send the exile off balance, “Step back and find an occupied space with a wall.”

After the quick instruction, providing a point of reference for the three, Tōshirō was forced to focus on the enemy in front of him as reiatsu crashed along the interior of the warehouse and clambered together to create one unceasing cacophony. The lieutenant was forced to dodge a heavy overhead strike and slipped forward from underneath the swing and slammed the pommel of his hilt into Ganryū’s gut, Ichigo never taught anyone how to play fair only how to survive, the man gasped out a breath clearly winded and fell back a few steps.

A burst of furious reaitsu lit the air between them and Ganryū surged forward in a shunpo that was a blur of motion even to Tōshirō’s eyes. The young lieutenant let his instincts guide him as he ducked under an overhead swing and was forced to jam Hyōrinmaru up to counter against the blade thrust towards his torso. The two blades skittered against one another with an ungainly screech before Tōshirō sprung back and was forced to defend against an onslaught of rapid attacks.

The leader of the Dark Ones came at the lieutenant, in the same manner Ichigo did when he was in one of his furious training moods, which is to say with all the force of a raging Kami and the skill to accompany it. For a moment, as Tōshirō dodged and lunged and was forced to duck as the same blade came whirring overhead, Tōshirō felt unease curl inside his chest accompanied by a seed of fear. The negative emotions were chased away a moment later as Hyōrinmaru roared in the young lieutenant’s mind reassuring him and allowing Tōshirō to calm himself as he took a slow breath and faced his opponent.

They clashed once more in a rapid flurry of exchanges; Tōshirō ducked under an overhead strike and retaliated by whipping Hyōrinmaru out to the side on a path for the man’s torso. Ganryū dodged and in retaliation reversed his blade driving it towards the young lieutenant’s chest. Tōshirō coated one of his hands and in a technique that imitated the Hierro of the Vizard in protecting his skin; Tōshirō caught the naked blade with his hand.

Ganryū reared back in surprise even as with Tōshirō’s other hand Hyōrinmaru sliced through the air towards Ganryū’s neck, the blade singing through the air. The man’s eyes widened before he ducked, temporarily relinquishing his hold on his blade. The leader of the Dark Ones retaliated from a low crouch launching a kick into Tōshirō’s chest, sending the young lieutenant flying and forcing the blade he was holding to clatter to the cement of the warehouse floor, loud as a firework in the ensuing silence.

Instead of moving forward to finish Tōshirō off, or at least attempt to, Ganryū’s attention turned to the twins and the Shinenju, something ravenous and poisoned like a viper in his eyes where Tōshirō could see them from his position on the concrete. Cursing under his breath, Tōshirō levered himself to his feet and as the man launched forward to attack the twins, who had stepped in front of Senna, Tōshirō gathered his reaitsu and with a slash of Hyōrinmaru’s blade, the celestial protector roaring in Tōshirō’s mind he formed the ice wall Ryōjin Hyōheki.

Ganryū was forced to halt in his lilting charge and turned to face Tōshirō with a fury so uncontained it left shivers sliding down Tōshirō’s spine even as his spirit roared in challenge. The lieutenant narrowed his eyes at the man as he rose fully to his feet, Hyōrinmaru held before him in clear retaliation. For a moment, Tōshirō wondered if the leader of the Dark Ones would be crazy enough to turn his back on Tōshirō in search of gathering the Shinenju. Instead, the man shot forward a blazing blur of ebony that Tōshirō could only barely track as Hyōrinmaru rose to catch the heavy force of the blade on his.
The small lieutenant struggled against the larger man’s blade for a moment before he sprung back and channelling his reaitsu to Hyōrinmaru’s roar. Tōshirō formed the great dragon from his blade and sent it spiralling towards Ganryū who stared in wide-eyed shock for a moment before narrow features once more contorted in anger. The leader of the Dark Ones raised his sword and in one choppy motion bisected the large dragon of ice. Tōshirō, however, followed the attack and appeared above Ganryū, zanpaktou glinting in the light as he brought the blade down.

The leader of the Dark Ones jerked in surprise even as his blade rose to catch Hyōrinmaru, gravity for once aiding Tōshirō as he bore down on the man, the invisible weight of Hyōrinmaru’s ice wings a comforting presence as Tōshirō stared into the eyes of his opponent. Ganryūrolled forcing Tōshirō to flip to the ground only to immediately dart up as the man’s blade came singing towards Tōshirō’s neck.

The young lieutenant dodged under the blade and let Hyōrinmaru whip out in retaliation, as he clashed with Ganryū’s blade Tōshirō disengaged and launched into a quick shunpo that Shihōin-taicho would appreciate and appeared behind his opponent. Once more, with a wave of reaitsu, Tōshirō pulled Hyōrinmaru’s form into the world and sent the ice dragon barreling towards the leader of the Dark Ones.

Ganryū turned and caught the dragon’s maw on the edge of his blade, the force of Hyōrinmaru pushing him into the concrete and back as he struggled against the might of the celestial warrior. Channelling his reaitsu once more, Tōshirō created another Hyōrinmaru his zanpaktou flashing through the air as the warehouse’s temperature continued to drop and another dragon joined its twin in attacking Ganryū.

The man struggled against the dragons for a moment before with a flare of his reiatsu, an acrid yellow colour, and a flash of his sword the dragons were reduced to large chunks of ice. Tōshirō hid his shock focus pulling at his veins and thoughts as he instead flew forward ignoring the exhaustion he could feel beginning to pull at his senses. Fighting with almost half of his reaitsu sealed was draining and dangerous when facing an enemy of Ganryū’s calibre; if the fight extended for much longer Tōshirō would be forced to release his Bankai.

Their blades clashed and moved in a flurry of motion, arching high and spinning away from one moment to the next as Tōshirō dodged a lunge and retaliated with a strike of his own. The young lieutenant’s opponent’s features were slowly being stained with a thick madness that did little to detract from his skill with a blade and his overwhelming presence as Tōshirō continued to clash with the leader of the Dark Ones.

Using shunpo Tōshirō carefully distracted his opponent, knowing that using this technique was a risk considering it had already been seen, as he darted forward to attack Ganryū before springing away once more. Finally, warily regarding his opponent Tōshirō gathered his reaitsu and with a slash of Hyōrinmaru a pillar of ice encased the leader of the Dark Ones, features frozen where they glared at Tōshirō.

Unlike with his first opponent, Tōshirō knew the chances of Rokui Hyōketsujin working were slim considering the man’s impressive reaitsu, so, the young lieutenant cautiously watched the ice and the figure inside instincts on high alert. A moment later the ice cracked and splintered with a sound that was akin to a wall crumbling, before being followed by the shards of ice clattering to the floor in a dissonant screech.

Tōshirō darted forward unhesitant and pressed the edge of Hyōrinmaru to the man’s neck, cold blue eyes cautioning the man at the mercy of unsheathed steel to remain still. Around the two the others had ceased fighting, the Shinigami standing beside their downed opponents, a bit worse for wear but
far better than the Dark Ones sprawled on unforgiving cement. Ganryū’s eyes wildly whipped around seeing his plans fall apart around him, those same eyes continuously darted to the Shinenju before observing his allies with a realisation that slithered throughout the man’s reitsu.

Instincts screaming in warning, Tōshirō only had a moment to step forward to block the man before he appeared behind the Shinenju holding the blade to her neck. The twins turned to face the man zanpaktou raised as the tension in the room skyrocketed. For a moment, silence lingered as a standoff was reached between the two forces either waiting for the other to make the first move. The Shinenju in that moment looked at both of the twins with a smile and something to her eyes that Tōshirō couldn’t hope to understand before she unsheathed her zanpaktou and in one quick motion stabbed the blade through herself and into the man behind her.

Ganryū stumbled away from the Shinenju, even as Senna fell to the ground, unhinged laughter rattling and echoing through the warehouse as the leader of the Dark Ones choked out with blood on his lips, “One day, something more powerful will come, and Soul Society will burn to the ground.”

The words were ominous tinged with madness and echoing throughout the minds of all present. Tōshirō stepped forward intent to attempt to heal the man, as behind him Yuzu attempted to heal the Shinenju, so he could receive a trial. A warm hand on the young lieutenant’s shoulder halted the motion and he glanced up at his Captain, orange hair as eye-catching as always. Ichigo was staring into Ganryū’s eyes and there was something beyond cold to the Captain of the Tenth’s eyes as he stated, “Soul Society will not fall.”

The words resounded with promise and truth, the type that made it feel as if the earth was shaking and the air tighter with the weight of them. The moment left, fleeing in the next second as Ganryū fell to the ground, the last of his breath warbling out to the stunned Shinigami even as Tōshirō’s Captain stalked forward and slid the man’s eyes closed. Then the orange-haired Captain rose to his feet and with exhaustion clinging to his shoulder, he crouched beside the twins, the Shinenju limp in their arms.

They all looked away as the twins and Ichigo left, the sounds of sobs echoing on the breeze as a fire started in Tōshirō’s chest and burned its way into his throat and eyes in a distinctly unpleasant manner. Slumping to the ground with an exhale, Tōshirō sheathed Hyōrinmaru and silently thanked the spirit for protecting and guiding him in battle even as his own thoughts lingered and whispered. A moment later, Rukia plopped to the ground beside Tōshirō with a half-quirked grin and blood staining the front of her shihakusho. They sat in the silence, almost waiting for an end that had already happened.

Ichigo returned half an hour later when they had finally all started to move around the shock of the battle fading in the necessity of healing. Tōshirō was hunched over Shūhei, kido glowing about his fingers as he grinned to himself, they had flipped a coin and Rukia got to deal with Renji, who like any Eleventh division member was a horrible patient. They had already healed their own wounds, the few Tōshirō hadn’t even realised he had and Rukia’s own as well.

The Captain of the Tenth looked tired, in that way he always did after battles and after death, but there was something like relief to his features as he surveyed his comrades, determined eyes sweeping over their forms. No one asked what had happened to the Shinenju, and though Tōshirō had suspicions he did not question his Captain as the man crouched beside him and aided the lieutenant in healing Shūhei.

“T’m proud of you Tōshirō, you did very well today.”

Ichigo spoke, his voice a bit rough with emotion but honest nonetheless where those soul-piercing
eyes continued to focus on Shūhei. Tōshirō nodded a frown quirking his lips as guilt burrowed its way beneath his skin and he replied, “But I allowed Ganryū to escape, it was my fault that—“

“It wasn’t your fault Tōshirō, I doubt any of us would have been able to stop him at that point. Regardless everything has ended now, and perhaps for the best, do not feel guilty. You tried your best and you fought valiantly. If you hadn’t distracted him in the first place the situation could have become dire.”

His Captain spoke, sternness and gentleness a strange lilt in his voice as his reaitsu warm and soothing rushed over Tōshirō in a way that he could feel the protectiveness Ichigo harboured for his friends and family. Reluctantly, Tōshirō nodded the words bouncing around his head with truth, he would recover and maybe he would always carry a bit of guilt, but what Ichigo had said was right, what had happened was finished it was time to focus on the present.

X

The night hung dark over Karakura town like someone had draped a thick curtain over everything with scarce a star to pierce the veil. Ichigo resisted the urge to shift on his feet where he hovered under the cover of darkness, a cloak hiding his shock of outrageous hair on Rangiku’s insistence, as he surveyed his surroundings. His subordinates were scattered strategically throughout the area, as Rangiku carefully flitted about monitoring the others with a mothering few knew the woman possessed; offering them hot drinks and keeping them awake with a saucy tale.

Tōshirō a short distance on the other side of the royal procession was as quiet and solemn a sentinel as Ichigo, understanding the gravity of the procession they were guarding. The Captain of the Tenth’s reaitsu reached out searching for enemies he could only faintly feel but knew were there nonetheless as his own gaze strayed to the elaborate chest holding the Ōin. The very air was tight with expectation, drawing an ever-choking noose around Ichigo’s throat as his hand drifted to Zangetsu’s hilt. If he strained his hearing, he could hear the Shinigami wondering at the power of the Ōin carried by the royal procession and the heavy security detailed for it.

Ichigo already knew the power the Ōin held, had seen it in action, or at least a fraction of what it could be when wielded by a Shinigami who only possessed Shikai. The form it had taken had been frightening and strange, but no less powerful as Kusaka had defeated Shinigami after Shinigami in a form like something out of a legend.

For all the power of a Kami, the Ōin presented it was nothing compared to the vastness, the way the universe slipped through the being’s fingers, the Kami of their world held. Thinking about his meeting with the lynchpin who held the universe together sent shivers cascading down Ichigo’s spine and left a strange earthy taste in his mouth. Unconsciously his fingers reached into the sleeve of his shihakusho and slid a finger over the thin cold needle the being had given him; its purpose still unknown.

He wondered why the Ōin even existed, so many things still unexplained, the wars had brought revelations, but they had also brought questions. The whole existence of the Soul King’s Realm had been one shock after another from his own heritage to the existence of the Soul King (not to mention his relation to Yhwach). It made Ichigo wonder what even the Shinigami couldn’t see.

The Captain of the Tenth questioned briefly, barely entertaining the thought, what would happen if he took the power of the Ōin. The thought of it terrified Ichigo because he knew, had seen it; absolute power corrupts absolutely. Ichigo shut the idea down before he could more than glance ideally at it as a dark chill seeped into his veins. Zangetsu hummed in Ichigo’s mind as his instincts continued to rustle in tandem with the leaves around them and the royal procession continued its slow trundle through the skies.
Ichigo frankly thought it was stupid that they were doing it in the mortal world where they were far more vulnerable to attack considering the necessity of seals, but he hadn’t protested when the Soutaicho had personally handed the mission to Ichigo. Not to mention, the training session occurring in Hueco Mundo which involved sending a whole brigade of captains, lieutenants, and other Shinigami to the sand-filled world for some friendly training all under Shinji’s watchful eyes.

The old man had suspected, as he did whenever an incident corresponding to a scripted future arrived, perhaps in Ichigo’s expression or the small preparations he had begun to make. But had only nodded once, ancient embers stirring with a wisdom and trust Ichigo felt burning in his chest. It left a small fond smile slipping onto his features when he considered and felt how much trust the old man placed with Ichigo. Sometimes he felt the weight of it, the expectations surrounding him built from the ground up once more, but it was different from when he had been young and naive, or at least Ichigo hoped so.

Regardless, the Captain of the Tenth accepted the mission with a promise saturating his veins and filling the marrow of his bones, along with a determination to keep damage control to a minimum; they did not need to experience the giant ice dragon creature once more. No, this mission was solely for Tōshirō, who had been ready to become a Captain for a century at least.

Part of Ichigo had been greedy in wanting to prepare the lieutenant as much as possible and giving the youth a chance to grow before shouldering such a responsibility. However, the idea of relinquishing the position he had held for so long felt like a strange concept. At the same time, Ichigo was more than content to slip into the shadows and allow the youth to flourish; if it meant less paperwork that was a bonus.

Glancing from where his eyes had centred on the dark forest around them, one that housed a thousand eyes, Ichigo glanced to where Tōshirō was standing stiff and alert. Studying Tōshirō Ichigo sighed as his thoughts swirled and Zangetsu buzzed warm in his chest. A second later, he flared reaitsu and once the Captain caught the eyes of his lieutenant he beckoned the youth, who was also wearing a hood, over.

“Taicho?”

The young man questioned with a tilt of his head and a frown beginning to furrow his brow as if he almost expected Ichigo to be unreasonable like Isshin. Tamping down on the sprouts of well-meant hurt and the desire to tease the youth, Ichigo rubbed a hand over his forehead for a moment before his gaze was drawn to his lieutenant. Tōshirō stared back unflinching, icy blue eyes almost glowing in the darkness surrounding them waiting patiently for Ichigo’s words in the same way the youth had supported him during his tenure as Captain of the Tenth.

For a moment Ichigo struggled; lost for words he wanted to reassure his lieutenant, wanted to comfort the youth and tell him what Central 46 did was wrong (horrible, cruel, terrifying, wrong) and there was a reason they weren’t assembled anymore; and would never be so again after Ichigo couldn’t stop them in time. But that would only receive scepticism along with confusion and perhaps a swat (Rukia had taught the other lieutenant too well).

“Stay safe.”

Ichigo said with a curve to his lips even as his eyes were sombre and piercing staring through his lieutenant to the radiance beyond. Tōshirō was silent for a moment, posture stiff and eyes unsure as he studied Ichigo as if he could extract what his captain was trying to say through sight alone before he nodded. The Captain of the Tenth ruffled the lieutenant’s hair underneath the hood and Tōshirō in response swatted an Ichigo with a growl and flickered back to his position like a moth under the cover of darkness.
A half-hour later, Ichigo tensed imperceptibly, fist white-knuckled on Zangetsu’s hilt as reiatsu burst into the night, tinted acrid with hollow presence. A ball of electricity white and glowing in a way that cast long shadows shot towards the royal procession like a bullet.

“Defense formation six.”

Ichigo called out as he stepped in front of the Arrancar, Zangetsu clashing with the lightning in a flare of sparks and brightness that illuminated their surroundings and the second Arrancar bursting bright with fire. At Ichigo’s command, the various members of the Tenth division pulled close to the royal procession, zanpaktou unsheathed as the ones talented in kido began to cast a kido barrier to protect the Ōin. Meanwhile, the more combat suited division members fanned out in a small circle around the kido casters, the reiatsu of multiple Shinigami releasing their Shikai covering the night in a heavy blanket.

The ball of lightning hissed and spat at Ichigo, but against the Hierro bleaching his white hands, the electrical conductivity was useless. The Arrancar disengaged and as she stood a short distance away Ichigo channelled his reiatsu and released a Getsuga Tensho, the ebony reiatsu cutting through the fabric of night to clash against the lightning in a geyser of ebony and ivory.

Peripherally, Ichigo could feel Rangiku and the other third seat fighting the fire Arrancar (their names were Yin and Yang, but which was which Ichigo had no clue, as always horrible with faces and often names), and Tōshirō was standing with his subordinates even as the masked Kusaka appeared. The two opponents stared for a moment, seconds frozen in ice before the glint of a katana being drawn flashed in shaky shadows and Tōshirō was clashing with his old friend.

As Zangetsu collided with the ball of lightning, once more redirecting its path away from the Ōin, Ichigo wished he could stop Tōshirō from fighting his old friend, wished that the whole situation could disappear into the ether. But, the Captain of the Tenth knew it needed to be resolved and so focused on the fight in front of him even as he sensed Tōshirō clashing with Kusaka.

They continued to fight off the three attackers, forcing them away from the barrier and protecting their subordinates, as the kido held and the dawn began to grace the skies in hues of blue, they were close almost at the shrine where the Ōin would be transferred once more. As Ichigo sent the lightning Arrancar flying he watched with narrowed eyes as the fire Arrancar darted away from Rangiku and Yoshimi, the other third seat, to stand beside her twin. Toshiro was still battling Kusaka, but they had lagged behind reiatsu bursting into the air accompanied by ripples of shock and grief.

Feeling a surge of reiatsu, Ichigo darted in front of the Ōin, Zangetsu snapping up against Ichigo’s chest to fend off the combined attack. Lightning and fire roared and smashed against Zangetsu with all the ferocity of a wild animal as Ichigo’s skin seemed to glow in the rising sun and his own reiatsu raged against the force of the attack. Ichigo ignored the small cut that pierced his Hierro as he whipped around to block the fire Arrancar’s torrent of fire, and Rangiku and Yoshimi distracted the lightning Arrancar.

The Captain of the Tenth felt the moment Tōshirō fell; reiatsu a void of grief, anger, sadness, pain, all swirling together before dimming to nothing. Viciously Ichigo ignored the intense urge to search for his wayward lieutenant as they slowly descended towards a shrine well-hidden amongst the surrounding forest; he knew he couldn’t search for his erstwhile lieutenant while defending the Ōin. In the end, Ichigo couldn’t let Kusaka capture the powerful object, even if it meant he couldn’t support Tōshirō how he wanted to.

Flaring his reiatsu once in warning to his subordinates, Ichigo channelled his reiatsu, ebony spiking along Zangetsu before with a grin that was all teeth the Captain of the Tenth released a Getsuga Tensho that seemed to cleave the skies in two. The twin Arrancar were forced to flee and Ichigo...
caught sight of Kusaka, eyes wild where they stared at the Ōin and the wave of reaitsu surging towards him, unavoidable and all-consuming. With a last scowl, the man left in a flicker of reaitsu, the morning chill clinging to the air with his departing.

Ichigo’s shoulders slumped as his senses continued to stretch, observing their surroundings and faintly searching even as they arrived at the shrine. The royal procession slowly touched down and with a nod to his subordinates the various Shinigami released the kido barrier and stepped away to form a small perimeter, senses still alert and wary. It almost reminded Ichigo of the time he and the rest of the Eighth division had been forced to guard a noble, though that had been far less invigorating and more a lesson on patience.

A shoji door slid open in the early rays of sunlight, reaitsu leaking out to fill the space as Ōetsu Nimaiya stepped out of the gates, eyes like flint surveying their surroundings before landing on Ichigo. The two shared a brief nod, one where Ichigo ignored flashes of memory of training in the royal palace, of discovering his true Zangetsu. The Royal Guard surveyed the Ōin and with a final nod at the Shinigami led the royal procession through the shoji doors, the air beginning to fill with birdsong as Ichigo’s subordinates gathered close to their captain.

“Taicho, lieutenant-Hitsugaya-”

Rangiku began, clear concern lingering in her tone and filling pretty blue eyes. Ichigo nodded even as his eyes swept over his subordinates assessing their conditions he said, “I know, Yoshimi please organize a search party to see if you can find lieutenant Hitsugaya, I doubt you will. The rest of you please return to Soul Society and recover from the mission. Rangiku please carry my request for a captains meeting when I return to the Soutaicho. You all did very well today.”

His subordinates smiled at Ichigo with a warmth to their features that Ichigo could feel stirring in his own chest even as a worry for their lieutenant lingered as well. Nodding once in dismissal Yoshimi began to organize a search party and Rangiku after a long look gathered the rest of the Shinigami to return to Soul Society.

Running a hand through his hair, Ichigo displaced his hood and basked in the early morning sunlight for a quiet moment before with a sigh he turned his attention to Karakura. He would need to speak to Kisuke briefly, and then check with Yoshimi’s likely unsuccessful results, and then explain the situation to the captains. It was always one headache after another in Ichigo’s life.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed the start of this arc. After this we only have two more! Then the Quincy war. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Natron!
Yuzu stared from the doorway at the Shinigami lying unconscious in the guest bedroom that Ichi-nii used whenever he visited. The young lieutenant, Tōshirō, if they remembered correctly, and they only remembered because he looked close to them in age, had been found by Karin early that morning passed out on the sidewalk and dripping blood. Warning bells had been ringing in both twins’ minds at the sight of the white-haired young man, and Karin hadn’t hesitated to sneak the lieutenant into the guest room.

Their mother likely knew they were harbouring an undead lieutenant of a military organization considering her impressive reaitsu sensing abilities. But she hadn’t said anything which both twins were thankful for considering their father’s reactions to the mere thought of a boyfriend; overdramatic and loud.

The blond twin had spent most of the morning healing the various wounds decorating the lieutenant’s body while Karin went to scout for information from Urahara. It perhaps would have been best if they both had gone to talk to the cunning scientist who liked to run laps with his words and easily irritated Karin, but Yuzu needed to stay with her patient. Karin had returned, as expected, in a right fit glowering at the slightest movement and had grudgingly relayed the news on Yuzu’s insistence.

It turned out that Ichi-nii’s division had been guarding a highly valued object of the Soul King called the Ōin as it was transported to another location. Along the way, they had been attacked by an unknown faction and during the battle, the lieutenant had disappeared. The Tenth division was still searching for their missing member even as they investigated the faction that had attempted to steal the valuable object.

The revelation that the Shinigami unconscious in their guest bedroom was missing had sparked a whispered argument about whether to reveal his location so his division could retrieve him. Yuzu
had at first thought it was best to contact Soul Society, but Karin had pushed and growled that they should wait till the lieutenant woke up, what Kisuke revealed wasn’t always the whole story in the end. Reluctantly, the younger sibling had agreed, acknowledging to the approving hum of their zanpaktou that it was also far too likely their older brother was meddling again.

A flicker of reaitsu, like embers sparking in the hearth, flared behind Yuzu and she pivoted to glance into the steely eyes of her twin sister. Karin had a half-frown marring her features, eyes troubled and darkening like an oncoming storm where they stared past Yuzu into the guest bedroom. The younger twin could understand her sister’s train of thought, could almost feel it echoing at the back of her own mind sometimes, she was unhappy; for a multitude of reasons from plotting to inevitability.

Reaching out Yuzu tangled her fingers with Karin’s and flashed her older sister a reassuring smile, one that promised everything would turn out alright in the end. They had the power to protect their family, and their friends, if Ichigo’s lieutenant needed them they could afford to offer their assistance. The tense line of Karin’s shoulders visibly slumped at the wordless reassurance and her lips quirked up briefly before silver eyes narrowed once more darting past Yuzu and into the guest room.

At the same time, Yuzu caught a slight burst of reaitsu signalling that her patient was likely awakening, slipping from the realm of unconscious slowly but surely. The blond flashed a quick warning smile at her twin before she turned and entered the guest room features serious and sharp in a way she had learned from the Captain of the Fourth. Unohana-taicho was an amazing healer, and beyond that, she managed to tame the many rambunctious members of the Gotei 13; she was one of Yuzu’s role models and many had come to bemoan such.

Tōshirō was lying on his back staring at the ceiling with cloudy eyes, likely still mostly unconscious and just becoming aware of his surroundings. When Karin had brought the lieutenant in he had radiated a deep grief that reminded Yuzu of the time where they almost lost their mother; that same grief was still there beneath the surface and it drew a frown unconsciously to Yuzu’s lips. Running a hand through her hair tugging it back and into a bun Yuzu cleaned her hands and mused on the benefits of therapy as she stepped into the view of her patient, reaitsu a steady humming presence.

The lieutenant blinked, pupils focusing on Yuzu slowly but surely before his gaze darted about the room observing the modern architecture in pale yellow and white then fell to Karin lingering in the doorway. The lieutenant made to speak before grimacing and Yuzu smiled encouragingly as she handed the white-haired youth a cup of water and answered, “Karin found you passed out on the street last night, near bleeding out. I’ve healed most of your major wounds, but your reiatsu is still depleted so I would recommend waiting before engaging in battle soon. Your squad has apparently sent out search teams, and from what we’ve heard they’re only looking to recover you.”

Tōshirō blinked blankly at Yuzu, likely struggling to process the information as he continued to wake up. Yuzu muffled the urge to giggle at the youth’s flabbergasted expression and instead gently set the glass down. After a moment, the lieutenant gingerly pushed himself into a seated position with Yuzu’s help, hand reaching unconsciously for his zanpaktou as he said, “Thank you for your aid Kurosaki-san. Have you alerted Soul Society to my location?”

“‘You can call me Yuzu, lieutenant-san. We haven’t alerted Soul Society but if you would like us to?’”

Yuzu replied with a warm smile ignoring her overprotective sister hovering in the background with a scowl and an aura worthy of a something demonic. A watery smile slipped onto Tōshirō’s lips before he shook his head and pushed aside the covers. The blond immediately stepped in front of her patient eyes sharp and cutting even as a pleasantly cyanide smile laced her lips and she cautioned, “‘Now lieutenant-san I think it would be best if you rested for a little while longer, I understand you likely
have pressing matters to attend to, but you’ve just woken up and I would appreciate it if you don’t reinjure yourself so soon.”

The youth took one look at the aura flooding the room and surrounding Yuzu before he weakly nodded and slipped once more under the covers. Karin’s cackling filled the room, and Yuzu threw her sister a smile that silenced the laughter before settling beside her patient once more.

A peaceful silence filled the room and after a minute Karin plopped onto one of the spare couches, a sports magazine clutched in her hands even as ever cautious shifty eyes peered over the edge of the magazine. Yuzu ignored her sister’s humorous actions and continued checking over the young man, hands aglow with kido, who was studying his hands and the hilt of his zanpaktou with a lost look to his eyes. The young woman’s heart went out to the lieutenant, she didn’t like seeing people in pain, emotional or physical, and if she could do anything to help the youth then she would. It was why Yuzu was training to be a nurse, she wanted to help people, and the easiest way was through healing.

“Is everything alright lieutenant-san? You don’t have to speak if you don’t want to, but sometimes talking helps, and my mother always says that talking and a good meal is always the best medicine...”

Yuzu trailed off with an abashed smile realising she was beginning to blabber a bit as she tended to do whenever she was focused on something. The lieutenant attempted to hide a small smile, something genuine that reflected in his eyes, at Yuzu’s words and quietly he responded, like a spring thaw, “Tōshirō, you can call me Tōshirō Yuzu-san... I met an old friend from my past. We had the same zanpaktou and Central 46 decreed we had to battle to the death. Kusaka was murdered and yet, and yet he’s alive. I don’t know how, but I know it’s my fault he died.”

Yuzu frowned a brief acknowledgement of happiness at receiving permission to call the lieutenant by his first name that was quickly overshadowed by the sympathy sprouting in her chest and the desire to help the lieutenant. Tōshirō glanced at Hyōrinmaru with a tormented expression, as if he was considering committing seppuku over his guilt, it made the situation stark and real at that moment.

“It wasn’t your fault. If you’re going to blame anyone blame those bastards at Central 46, not yourself. You’re honourable Tōshirō, I can tell that much, and that isn’t just Ichi-nii’s influence. There is no way that you willingly attacked your friend. He died and now he’s back. You can apologize, you can say you’re sorry a thousand times but if he doesn’t accept it you can’t change his mind. If you hold onto that guilt, those negative emotions you’ll just suffer, and your friends will as well. You deserve to be happy, screw the bastards who did that to you, heck screw tradition and laws. Hold onto what you have and live in the moment you hear me Tōshirō? Cause that’s the only true way to live with your guilt. Don’t regret you lived, mourn the passing of your friend, but if you let that guilt control you, then, in the end, you’re the one who’s losing.”

Karin spoke, loud and demanding with a fiery insatiable charisma before Yuzu could even formulate advice to offer to the white-haired lieutenant. The words lingered on the air, bright with charisma and passion where the raven-haired Shinigami stared into icy blue eyes, her own blazing like a thousand supernovas. Tōshirō stared back in blank shock, eyes wide and his hand a white-knuckled fist around his zanpaktou.

After a moment, where the earth itself seemed to hold its breath, another watery smile slipped onto Tōshirō’s features, shudders wracking his lithe frame, and tears appearing as he nodded and replied, “Yeah I understand.”

The lieutenant’s reaitsu wrapped itself like a cocoon around the young man, as the tears trailing like glistening ice slowly dried and the young man’s shudders faded. Yuzu meanwhile sat by her patient,
a soft yellow blanket now wrapped around the man, as she allowed the warmth of her reaitsu to seep into the air.

Part of Yuzu wanted to slap her sister for metaphorically and emotionally ripping the bandage off the issue, while another part of the younger twin wanted to stare in awe at her sister’s ability to drive to the heart of the matter in a few words and make it as so simple. Regardless, Yuzu was only thankful they had been able to help Tōshirō even as her own thoughts turned towards the Central 46, for a moment she wished they were still in existence if only so that she could see vengeance delivered; instead, the blond considered talking to Yoruichi or Unohana.

“Thank you, both of you. I know if I was with taicho he would have done much the same, though probably with far more fighting and bruises than necessary.”

Tōshirō spoke, voice rough with emotion but clear in its honesty accompanied by a rueful and knowing smile. Karin nodded once in agreement muffling her amusement, reaitsu roaring with it, even as Yuzu grinned at the mention of their older brother, who was definitely a sadist and would totally beat the lieutenant into submission of the truth.

“When we were younger we almost lost our mother because we couldn’t differentiate between spirits and the living. A hollow appeared, and she would have died if Ichi-nii hadn’t been there. We couldn’t do anything, and if Ichigo hadn’t been there our mother wouldn’t be making lunch in the kitchen. If we had held onto that guilt we wouldn’t be able to move forward. I think Ichigo is an expert at moving forward regardless of your history.”

Yuzu finished with a rueful sigh as she contemplated their brother’s tendencies to throw himself headfirst into the first sign of chaos, and briefly recalled that day on the riverbank. Karin’s reaitsu reached over to Yuzu, comforting and reassuring as the younger twin flashed a reassuring smile at her sister before returning her attention to her patient. Tōshirō studied the twins with understanding eyes, seeing a bit more than perhaps he had before. With a grin, the lieutenant commented, “Could you expect anything else of Ichigo?”

Laughter rang throughout the room at the truthful comment, dissipating the heavy atmosphere and leaving in its place a bright ringing melody. The three adolescents settled quietly in the guestroom, Karin flicking through her sports magazine once more, though, with less overprotective glaring, Tōshirō had sunken into a meditation likely speaking to his zanpaktou, and Yuzu stared out the window enjoying the peace while it lasted.

A flicker of movement in the noon-day sun darted across the street, a fleeting shadow, catching Yuzu’s eyes and forcing sudden alertness. With a concerned frown and a furrow of her brows, Yuzu moved closer to the window reaitsu reaching out to search their surroundings.

“Karin, it looks like we have company.”

Yuzu stated calmly and simply as if commenting on the weather as her reaitsu caught the traces of acrid hollow reaitsu swirling about the street, two of them, Arrancar, likely elementally aligned by the feel of it. Unbidden Yuzu’s hand slipped into her pocket, running over the mod soul dispenser Urahara had given them as Karin shuffled to her feet eyes sharp as steel where they studied the street.

The lieutenant, likely sensing the rising danger fell out of his meditation with cautious eyes that observed his surroundings with abrupt wariness. Karin stepped soundlessly closer to Yuzu to peer out into the streets as she commented, “Well we might as well go and greet our uninvited guest. It’s lucky the streets are empty today.”

Yuzu nodded to the sharp tone and with a breath swallowed the mod soul pill, gently setting her
The blond twin turned sharply from where she had been studying the street to stare at her patient still swaying on his feet, but with an edge of determination sharpening his features like glaciers. Feeling her sister’s train of thought Yuzu flared her reaitsu filling the room with a heavy miasma, eyes narrowed and furious, the young woman stated, “You still need rest Tōshirō-san, at the moment you would only hinder us, or act as support. Please reserve your strength. We can handle these opponents, unlike Shinigami in the mortal world, our reaitsu isn’t sealed and we have Shikai. It is for the best if you continue to rest while we handle the intruders.”

Tōshirō jerked at her words, skin palling at the likely horrifying aura behind the blond Kurosaki, even as the lieutenant’s eyes darted to the window and he jerked as if he wanted to protest. Karin scoffed and with a roll of her eyes as she unsheathed her katana commented, “Just listen to her brat. You can save your reaitsu for the boss fight.”

The white-haired lieutenant frowned at Karin’s words, eyes flickering to his zanpaktou and the twins before he submitted with a nod, a frown pulling at his lips. Smiling in an overtly pleasant manner, Yuzu shuffled the lieutenant into the guest bed once more before turning to face the window.

The blond twin shared a quiet glance with her sister affirming their plan of action as she flashed the lieutenant a last warning smile before following her sister through the walls and onto the streets. A second later, two Arrancar stepped out, one in an overly crimson theme and the other mirroring her twin in blue. The two opposing forces studied each other for a quiet moment when the tension lingering in the streets skyrocketed so that the very life around them seemed to still.

Then the blue one blurred into a ball of lightning and shot forward at the same moment as the red one transformed into a ball of fire. Yuzu silently questioned why her life was so strange as her zanpaktou snapped up to defend against the ball of lightning attempting to burn its way through her blade. Letting blut vein activate to protect her skin against the electricity sparking about her blade, Yuzu forced her zanpaktou against the ball of lightning while at the same moment she channelled a binding kido.

Releasing Sai, she watched as the ball of electricity reverted back to a semi-human form and flew back against a wall with a crash loud and jarring in the afternoon peace. In the back of her mind, Yuzu could feel Karin clashing with the red one, fire against fire, adrenaline pumping, as two blades clashed. The lightning Arrancar stepped out of the rubble, reaitsu sparking like electricity against the pavement as she unsheathed her katana and with narrowed eyes flew at the blond twin, once more forcing Yuzu’s attention on the battle in front of her.

Their katana collided with a screech as Yuzu snapped her zanpaktou up and forced her it against the blade bearing against her with all the greater height of her opponent. Yuzu ducked under the blade and with a burst of shunpo appeared behind the Arrancar a few feet in the air as she brought her zanpaktou down in an overhead strike. The Arrancar whipped around and caught Yuzu’s katana on the broad edge of her zanpaktou before turning in mid-air forcing Yuzu to roll to the ground and dart up once more.

Their katana clashed in a collision of sparks, as Yuzu reversed her blade and directed it towards the Arrancar’s torso, her katana was blocked, and Yuzu was forced to defend as she ducked between a flurry of attacks. Whipping around with a spike of reaitsu Yuzu cast a Shakkahō and retaliated zanpaktou singing through the air and humming in her mind as she settled into the battle.
Like a faint whisper, Yuzu could feel Karin’s state as she ducked under an overhead swing and pivoted from the ground forcing the pommel of her zanpaktou into the Arrancar’s chin. It had been distracting the first time they had fought together, feeling vaguely the other twin’s actions almost mirroring your own, but eventually, they had settled, and it eased a small knot of tension and worry in Yuzu’s chest to feel her sister’s state while they fought.

As the blue Arrancar across from the blond twin shouldered out of the rubble of the neighbouring house (she was ignoring the guilt in face of surviving), Yuzu shared a quick glance with her sister. One that affirmed they needed to fight their opponents together, where they would be stronger, and be able to finish the battle soon. It would also allow for Yuzu to provide support and Karin to worry less about defence.

So, as the blue Arrancar shot towards Yuzu with all the force of a freight train, the blond Shinigami stepped aside and let Karin catch the ball of lightning on her blade. With a burst of shunpo Yuzu appeared beside Karin and let her zanpaktou snap up against the ball of fire scorching the air in waves of heat.

Instinctively the twins moved together in a long-choreographed routine as Karin attacked while Yuzu defended, covering each other’s blind spots and providing support where necessary. The two Arrancar, in the same manner, shifted into a fluid symmetry, fire and lightning colliding in the air and surging towards the twins in great sweeps that scored the very breath upon their lungs, only to collide against interlocked katana.

Panting for breath Yuzu ran a hand through sweat-soaked hair and traded a glance with her sister, one of sharp determination reforged into rough cut diamond. They needed to end the battle soon, they couldn’t afford to let the rest of the street get damaged and their own reserves combined with using blut vein weren’t eternal, and eventually one of them would get sloppy (the same could be said for their opponents, however). With an agreeing nod as the two Arrancar stepped forward the twins channelled their reaitsu.

A fierce wind blew through the street as Yuzu and Karin stepped closer together, crimson reaitsu spilling about them before with a feral grin Karin called out, “Ten no Šenkōgetsu (celestial piercing moon).”

A brilliant column of reaitsu enshrouded the twins spilling about the air in heavy gales before diminishing to nothing as the two Arrancar warily watched the silhouettes become clear in the piercing afternoon sunlight. Yuzu couldn’t hide the small smile threatening to spill across her face at the feel of their Shikai wrapping around them, the duality of their zanpaktou’s voice echoing their excitement in their minds as the metal gauntlets covering Karin’s hands and the elegant weight of the Gunbai in Yuzu’s hands grounded the twins to the moment.

The Arrancar were still only for a moment at the sight of the twin’s Shikai, and the distinct lack of katana before they charged forward once more, lightning and fire spitting about the street. Karin rushed forward to meet them and caught the edge of the blue Arrancar’s blade with her left hand even as she was ducking away from the red Arrancar’s katana and using her purchase on the sword in her hand to launch into a roundhouse kick.

The thing most people didn’t understand about Karin was that she liked to use her hands, she was tactile by nature, she had grown up on the streets using her fists to beat up the local yakuza and whoever else challenged her. Using a katana had come naturally to Karin, but in the end, Yuzu’s older sister would always prefer to fight with her fists, but when fighting against Shinigami who almost solely used sharp weapons, bare fists weren’t an option; hence their Shikai.

The same could be said for Yuzu, who had always preferred to fight from a distance and to provide
support to her friends. A bow, however, was a bit obvious, and the Gunbai was an alternative that both deceived her opponent and allowed Yuzu to both support and heal.

As Karin ducked under an overhead swing from the red Arrancar, the blue one attempted to launch forward at the raven-haired Shinigami. Frowning, Yuzu balanced the large fans in her hand and with a surge of reaitsu sent the heavy bladed fan flying. The Gunbai slashed in front of the lightning Arrancar deflecting her katana and exploding in a burst of red kido, forcing the lightning Arrancar to collide with the already damaged, and luckily abandoned house, across the street.

In the same moment, Karin pivoted under an overhead swing and with a surge of reaitsu thrust her fist into the fire Arrancar’s stomach, steam arcing around the fist even as the Arrancar joined her twin in the rubble. The Kurosaki siblings waited tensely for a moment to see if their opponents would rise, reaitsu strung still upon the air and the adrenaline running through the veins heightened every shift of debris.

With a crash, a wave of lightning and flames combined surged towards the twins from beneath the wall, swallowing the street and reaching towards the sun. Tugging on her reaitsu where it attempted to escape in mild exhaustion Yuzu raised her fans and stepped in front of her sister, forming a half circle that diverted the brunt of the attack away from the twins and forced it to disperse. The twin Arrancar stepped out of the rubble, blood leaking from a multitude of small lacerations as in sync they hefted their katana and launched forward.

Yuzu ducked under the overhead strike, darting behind with a whisper of shunpo she slammed her katana into the back of the fire Arrancar’s neck in an area that would instantly cause her opponent to lose consciousness while causing minimal damage as Karin slammed her fist into the lightning Arrancar’s torso followed by a first to the back of the skull. Panting Yuzu caught her unconscious opponent and gently lowered her to the ground as Karin repeated the motion with significantly less care for the red Arrancar.

The twins shared a tired relieved smile as the adrenaline began to fade and the weight of their exhaustion began to kick in even as they straightened and surveyed the surrounding damage. Muffling a sigh, Yuzu cast a binding kido on each of the Arrancar as Karin pulled out her phone and dialled Urahara-san who would deal with the Arrancar, and the damage their fight had caused.

“I’m going to go check on Tōshirō-san.”

Yuzu stated softly, knowing her sister would be twitchy after the fight, as the blond twin turned to face their home, and the guest bedroom window. Karin made a vague noise of agreement where she was standing guard over their opponents, eyes hard where they flickered between Yuzu and the streets before softening slightly in acknowledgement.

Entering the guest bedroom with a gratuitous use of shunpo, Yuzu surveyed the empty room and let a clear frown settle onto her lips accompanying the furrow in her brow as she noted her missing patient. Running a hand through her hair Yuzu observed the lieutenant had left a note, along with his badge, and couldn’t help but think what Karin would say in the situation. With a concerned curve to her lips, Yuzu plotted the lieutenant’s demise for the next time she saw the white-haired youth and thought that perhaps they should have informed Ichigo if only to avoid the whole situation.

X

It was peaceful in the clearing, the kind of tranquillity that seeped into your skin, simply flowed through oneself and invested a sense of timelessness. It was quiet, interrupted only by the gentle melody of the wind, and Tōshirō’s thoughts. The earth was rich below him and around him, nature blossomed, but his attention remained solely on the stone in front of him, smooth like marble but with
all the appearance of a river stone; it had one name carved into the shear surface. A katana lay in front of the stone, the wood of its sheath glinting in the sunlight as a sliver of steel reflected Tōshirō’s visage.

Idly the young man shifted, one hand straying to brush over the bandages binding his chest, and the large gash beneath it pulsing with the beat of his heart. This was where they had trained in their spare time, where they had laughed and debated over theory, or why the academy needed to fire a certain teacher or hire a new one.

Tōshirō had wanted to save Kusaka, some part of him desperate for things to return to the simplicity of childhood, of not worrying about anything beyond the next exam or what kido they would cover next. But another part of Tōshirō, the one that was weathered by his experiences knew that unlike the multiple factions they had converted to Soul Society or at least made allies of, it wasn’t possible to do so with Kusaka.

Madness had already curled into the fibre of his old friend’s being, traced in every too deep line of his face. Tōshirō had apologized when they had met in the warehouse, begged forgiveness and for the man to return to Soul Society. But he hadn’t been able to dissuade his friend from his quest for godhood, Kusaka had stared at Tōshirō for a long moment and his eyes had glinted as if in some new device to gain the Ōin before their twin zanpaktou had clashed.

It had been exhilarating and terrifying in the same measure, Kusaka’s time in Hueco Mundo had given his technique something primal and unrestrained but it couldn’t compare to Tōshirō’s years of experience and the existence of his Bankai. And maybe that was what still hurt beyond the acceptance that some things were inevitable, that he had apologized and could do nothing more; the injustice of it all.

If Central 46 had never decreed their duel then Kusaka would never have died in the first place, but then again perhaps jealousy and resentment would have festered in the end. He just wished that the battle had ended differently if he could have, Tōshirō would have saved Kusaka, would have avoided the way the man left an obvious opening, and returned him to Soul Society. Tōshirō could still see the moment, almost in slow motion, the blood, Hyōrinmaru roaring in his mind, the last words, and tears.

What had happened, was what was done, Tōshirō couldn’t go back to a week ago and tell himself to stay with the Kurosaki twins (if only to avoid the fierce berating he had received from Yuzu), tell himself not to enter the warehouse, to instead send someone else. A part of the white-haired Shinigami hoped his friend had finally found peace, it made it easier to deal with even with the acceptance he had gained at the end of the battle.

Perhaps they had both known that they were past the point of no return, Kusaka hadn’t wanted to return to Soul Society, not when all his objectives were dust in the wind, so he had decided to end it. A feint followed by an opening and too much momentum, and Tōshirō could swear he still felt the blood on his fingers, heard last words resonating on the wind.

Hyōrinmaru made a vague snuffling sound in the back of Tōshirō’s head, the guardian spirit had been quiet, respectful of Tōshirō’s fond reminiscing and grief-laden mourning but had likely decided his wielder had moped for too long. Blinking the white-haired Shinigami returned his attention to the stone in front of him, carefully he ran a hand over the rough stone feeling the texture and engraving the carved words into his mind.

Kusaka’s death was symbolic in a sense, the death of his past and the acceptance of the present to move forward into the future. They had both known what the mission had represented, Ichigo likely long before anyone could even guess, it was always that way with the orange-haired Shinigami, eyes
Tōshirō wasn’t completely certain how he felt about it, on one hand, he was ready for the challenge it presented, the chance to broaden his horizons and perspective as well as earn respect from his peers. On the other hand, it was an immense responsibility, where the weight of those depending on him was his to carry, he would need to make executive decisions that were conscious of everyone’s safety and needs.

But Ichigo had been training Tōshirō to be a Captain for years, even if no one had realized till recently. The orange-haired Shinigami had coached Tōshirō through how to lead a division, passed on the paperwork and guided him through it with a careful eye, helped him improve his own technique, and demonstrated the values a Captain should hold. With his Captain’s seal of approval and offer of aid when necessary Tōshirō felt like he could handle the responsibility.

He would do it because he wanted to protect the citizens of Rungokai and those of the mortal world. The white-haired Shinigami wanted to aid and mentor others as Ichigo had, he wanted to make an impact on his society, and Tōshirō wanted to honour his promise with Kusaka and his grandmother.

It still left the question of why Ichigo was stepping down in the first place. Everyone in the Gotei 13 knew the man hated paperwork and being in the spotlight, as well as Ichigo’s tendency to disappear for weeks at a time. But Ichigo had held the position for almost a century and while Ichigo did often appear exhausted, that was due to his chronic insomnia and exhaustion not to mention the whole other slew of issues the man carted around, but Ichigo wasn’t even in a slump.

There had been rumours of course, as to be expected in Soul Society, some stating he was eloping with Kuchiki-san, others spoke of the man retiring to the Royal Guard. Tōshirō half suspected, half knew it was because Ichigo was pushing for younger Shinigami to gain new positions, and in consequence a voice, as well as wishing to step out of the limelight, that and the man’s ridiculous plotting.

A familiar graceful figure landed on the stone resting untouched by time in front of the white-haired man fluttering its wings once before landing on Tōshirō’s outstretched finger. As he listened to the message he wondered at the future of Soul Society, near all of the lieutenants had Bankai, and a few third seats, in addition, the Soutaicho was getting on in age and there were rumours of retirement. Change had been on the winds since the Ichigo’s arrival to Soul Society, but it felt like a great hurricane swirling ever closer.

However, Tōshirō suspected there was one more large hurdle before any large shuffle of the hierarchy could happen. It was in the air and in the words of their enemies such as Kariya, something was coming, and the very bedrock of Soul Society felt it. Shaking off the feeling and drifting thoughts, Tōshirō listened to the hum of Hyōrinmaru taking comfort in the presence of his zanpaktou.

He would need to thank the Kurosaki twins the next time he saw them, he would likely gain a few bruises in the process, they had healed him and defended him without question and he had fled. In some way they reminded him of Ichigo, maybe it was the curve of Yuzu’s smile or the glint of Karin’s eye, but the feeling was there all the same and distantly he wondered once more at their relation.

The messenger fluttered away from Tōshirō’s fingers and with it, the graceful being took what was left of the young man’s free time. Sighing minutely, Tōshirō glanced around the clearing, near one of the districts Tōshirō had grown up in, observing every detail with a fond eye. Rising to his feet, Tōshirō tucked Hyōrinmaru into his obi and draped the haori over his shoulders, the weight settling immeasurably heavy before Tōshirō’s spine straightened eyes narrowed as he breathed and
Hyōrinmaru roared in acceptance.

With a burst of reaitsu, Tōshirō disappeared from the clearing, travelling quickly through a familiar maze of streets, and appeared in the First division courtyard. Hirako was lazing at the front, napping on one of the stretches of walls, always happy to enter last and greet everyone else. A familiar head of strawberry blond hair and a bright pink sash caught Tōshirō’s attention and he strode over to one of his lieutenants who was conversing with Ichimaru.

If Tōshirō could have he would have appointed Yoshimi as his sole lieutenant, she was dedicated, smart, and reminded him slightly of a less uptight Soi-fon. But Ichigo had insisted, and Tōshirō knew realistically that the Rangiku was excellent at mothering and was more than proficient with her zanpaktou. After the years of serving collectively under Ichigo, they had a camaraderie, even if Tōshirō wished the woman would complete more of the paperwork. Rangiku turned as he approached, bright blue eyes sparkling as she swept her shorter Captain into a hug that Tōshirō valiantly tried to escape from while Gin, the sly fox-faced bastard, laughed.

After a minute, the woman set Tōshirō down and he nodded once in acknowledgement to the couple before entering the First. The reaitsu signatures of various captains and lieutenants saturated the building and filling the air in a nearly inaudible hum and as he walked he spotted Aizen-taicho speaking to Shihōin-taicho in a corner; likely plotting how to inconvenience Ichigo as much as possible. The colossal meeting room doors were propped open in greeting and with a breath, Tōshirō walked through the doors observing those who were already in place, or at least in the room speaking in casual conversation with others.

Ichigo stood behind the Soutaicho on the man’s left, while on the right lieutenant Sasakibe stood, the Soutaicho presiding over the room like a father watching his children with the same sort of proud glint to his eyes. Ichigo grinned with a proud smile as Ukitake-san waved, and Yoshimi grinned at her Captain. Tōshirō drifted into his place and knew that everything would turn out, maybe Ichigo was tired, and maybe Tōshirō had failed Kusaka, but he wouldn’t fail his division and he would be prepared to face the future.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and the reveals. A bit of an explanation for the twins Shikai, so very little was actually revealed about their Shikai other than its appearance, but definitely, Karin is primarily offence and Yuzu defence. When Yuzu uses kido with her zanpaktou that isn’t its ability just her being awesome at kido. However, their Shikai ability had been hinted both in this chapter and previously. Feel free to leave any guesses about their Shikai. Also, for the Gotei 13 Invading Army Arc I’ll be going through it pretty quickly, unless anyone really wants to see it fully fleshed out? Thank you for reading, reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Valhalla!
Venial

Chapter Notes

Venial
(adj.) Able to be forgiven or pardoned; not seriously wrong, as a sin.

Hello everyone, we are here with chapter 69, I hope you all enjoy!

*To the guest review Linamia: Thank you very much! Ichigo’s parents do know that he was their son. Some of the captains already know, but the rest perhaps ;)

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo panted as he ducked under the heavy swing of a javelin, the wind whipping about his ears accompanying the blade’s motion. With a burst of shunpo, Ichigo appeared behind Kagerōza, reiatsu gathering along his arms and behind his eyes as he released a Getsuga Tensho. The wave of ebony reiatsu sliced through the pavement of Soul Society in a shower of rubble, Ichigo’s frustration evident in his lack of control, and charged towards the mod-soul.

Kagerōza whipped around, a sneer marring plain features as his zanpaktou twirled in front of him in an attempt to halt the onslaught of the tsunami of reiatsu, forcing the man a few inches back and flaring out on either side of his blade. Ichigo gave the man no time to counterattack as he appeared in the mod-soul’s personal space and slammed the hilt of Zangetsu-Shiro’s blade into the mod-soul’s torso. The scientist was sent flying colliding with a wall in a shower of rubble that clattered around Ichigo with all the noise of an avalanche and filled the air with a thick curtain of dust.

The orange-haired lieutenant released a sigh, shoulders still drawn tense, as he regarded the collapsed wall debating the merits of taking a moment to breathe and allowing Kagerōza respite or capturing the scientist immediately. Running a hand through his hair Ichigo cursed his sense of duty and began to slowly walk forward if he was taking his time, there was no one around to complain.

All the division Shinigami were in their barracks waiting out the brunt of the newest attack, one led by the faces of their own superiors which would lead to confusion and low morale, not to mention the possibility of more reigai. The whole situation made Ichigo want to slap someone, preferably a certain brown-haired scientist who should have halted the whole thing in the first place. Though in truth some of the guilt did rest on Ichigo who hadn’t warned the man of an insane mod-soul creator within his division or the mod-soul who sought to finish his master’s plans.

Ichigo was tired of managing the situation regardless. It didn’t help that he had been forced to fight
an evil clone of Byakuya, at least the thing was an idiot, but the mental scars were still forming nonetheless; in part due to his own callousness and apathy in dealing with something that looked like Byakuya. That battle had ended, of course, on top of Sokyoku hill and had immediately been followed by a confrontation with the hair stylist disaster in front of him; because fate forbid Ichigo didn’t fight the main villain most of the time.

The orange-haired Shinigami just wanted to deliver the mod-soul into the hands of Sosuke along with a good beating for the scientist and then return home and hole away with a cup of tea until the Soutaicho called or the world was ending. Of course, that wouldn’t be possible till the whole situation was wrapped up, including Nozomi who had appeared in the mortal world, and surprise became friends with the twins.

Ichigo was honestly contemplating just leaving her there and letting the girls continue their crusade to gather a group of high powered females on their quest for feminism. It would probably be easier in the end. The orange-haired Shinigami only hoped the others had dealt with the rest of the Regai, at the least, it would provide the upper hierarchy with knowledge of each other’s weaknesses, so they could better defend each other in battle.

As the lieutenant reached the collapsed wall, dust still lazily billowing in the wind, the rubble shifted and Kagerōza flew out of the ruins with a strike of reaitsu that pounded like a headache in Ichigo’s skull. The tall mod-soul crashed forward into Ichigo, the force of his body throwing the two to the cracked streets. Instantly, Ichigo rolled over and pinned Kagerōza to the ground, the man glared up at Ichigo and with a snarl smashed his head forward. Ichigo cursed feeling blood trickle past his lips but remained where he was pinning the mod soul to the paved white stones of Soul Society.

With a burst of reaitsu, Kagerōza overpowered Ichigo temporarily and flipped the two opponents, forcing the air out of Ichigo’s lungs as his back collided with the pavement. Ichigo had only a moment to be dizzy before he kneed Kagerōza in the chest and followed through with a kick that sent the man flying back. In a battle of dirty tactics, Ichigo would always win due to his adolescence on the streets of Karakura, and the rules of war when you were fighting for your life.

The lieutenant sprung to his feet and grasped Zangetsu’s larger blade, Zangetsu-Ossan’s smaller blade a comforting weight on his hip as he stalked towards the mod-soul who was picking himself off the ground and grasping for his zanpaktou which was still back in the rubble of one of the barracks. Kagerōza staggered to his feet and his hands began to glow with kido, a rookie mistake when your opponent could clearly see it, glaring at Ichigo as if the force of his hate alone could halt the orange-haired Shinigami.

In a flicker of ebony cloth, Ichigo appeared behind the mod-soul and knocked the hilt of his pommel into the back of Kagerōza’s head disrupting his focus and temporarily stunning the man. With a wobble, the mod-soul fell back into Ichigo’s arms and briefly he contemplated if he had used too much force before acknowledging there was likely pre-existing head trauma from colliding with a wall.

Exhaling deeply, Ichigo resealed Zangetsu reaitsu sweeping beneath his skin as he heaved the unconscious man over his shoulder and with a flicker of shunpo made his way to the Twelfth division, where he could sense a few of the upper hierarchy clustered around a certain scientist. Evenly Ichigo paced over the terracotta rooftops keeping a peripheral eye on his unconscious victim as he had a minor existential crisis of realisation.

After this, the only faction left that had appeared in Ichigo’s own timeline was Kokutō and his hellish mission which Ichigo had already begun to plan how to deal with; it involved the Vizard and Urahara’s genius. There were also the Fullbringgers, but Ichigo wasn’t sure whether they would make
an attempt to seek revenge on Soul Society immediately. The twins weren’t exactly open about their status as substitute Shinigami, nor was Soul Society weakened, in fact, they appeared stronger than ever so, whether Ginjō would make a move was undetermined.

After that, would be the Quincy invasion. Memories flashed through his mind’s eye as bright as a solar flare and just as blinding in its intensity and Ichigo was forced to pause for a moment before he could continue. Something inside Ichigo, a very small part of him hidden behind layers of age was happy that it was finally happening that they were reaching the metaphorical end at last; no more factions hellbent on the destruction of Soul Society and its Shinigami. The majority of Ichigo however, was utterly terrified of what it would bring; he could only hope he had prepared his comrades for the true might of the Quincy and the destruction they would bring.

With a whisper upon the cobblestones, Ichigo landed in front of the Twelfth division and continued past the beehive of Shinigami scurrying about the front entrance who spared only cursory glances towards Ichigo before returning to their work. The lieutenant walked through cool climate-controlled hallways, ignoring the strange sounds that jumped from the walls as he made his way to his friend’s reaitsu signature. Sosuke was standing in what was generally considered his office but was more of an open laboratory with a desk at the very back in shaded darkness for dramatic effect.

The brown-haired Captain was leaning against one of his inventions, a great coil of metal shaped almost like a crucible, glasses tucked into the curve of his shihakusho, which meant the more megalomaniac Sosuke rather than sane Sosuke as Ichigo had long come to differentiate. The scientist was speaking to Byakuya, who had yet to visibly notice Ichigo, Yumichika, who was likely doing Kenpachi’s duties, and Rose, who leaned all sinew grace against the desk with a slight frown. There was also a body on the ground and a pinch to Sosuke’s brow.

The Captain was the first to notice Ichigo, pausing mid-explanation to observe the orange-haired Shinigami, who could only ever be one person, hovering in the doorway. Receiving a nod, Ichigo entered the room and carefully picked his way through the mess of wires and other haphazard things that were strewn about the floor to stand just outside the small group of Shinigami.

Byakuya stared at the scientist for a moment before his gaze drifted to Ichigo, allowing his eyes to survey his partner in a cursory search for injuries. His gaze paused on the unconscious mod-soul slung over Ichigo’s shoulder for a moment and then with an elegantly raised brow, eyes like piano wire connected with Ichigo’s own. Concern filtered across the Captain of the Sixth’s angled features and Ichigo knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would be talking about his battle with the Kuchiki-clone that night.

The orange-haired Shinigami awkwardly waved with the hand not supporting the body thrown over his shoulder as Rose’s attention along with Yumichika’s drifted to the newest addition in their merry gettogether. The Captain of the Third nodded once in greeting, a trace of a smile curving his lips though it was bare with stress and a grimness Ichigo wished he could erase from his comrade’s eyes. Sometimes, Ichigo wished for the secluded community their Vizard training had instilled, the sense of companionship that had been forged between them; he was getting old always wishing for simpler times.

Yumichika turned from the body on the ground, which he had been tastefully avoiding by studying Rose with that sort of light in his eyes Ichigo had long learned to fear and studied Ichigo with a quirky grin that highlighted the dimples in his cheeks. The man bustled forward, shouldering past Byakuya to stare at Ichigo for a long moment before the lieutenant nodded to himself and with a raised brow, that shifted the colourful feathers flaring about his eye, tapped Ichigo’s shihakusho and said, “You should really ditch the long sleeves Ichigo-san.”
Ichigo nodded in an appeasing manner and watched with hidden amusement as the lieutenant smiled pleased and returned to facing Sosuke who was watching everything with thinly veiled amusement. Rolling his shoulders, Ichigo carefully set Kagerōza on the floor near his creator, before with a raised brow directed towards the scientist watching everything with a smug air Ichigo questioned, “So Sosuke how is the situation? One that was totally avoidable in the first place, because I know you keep watch over your subordinates, unlike some powerful Shinigami.”

The Captain of the Twelfth flinched, a very slight movement but more than enough of a tell to Ichigo who had known the scientist for many years, accompanied by an impression of a frown one might see on Roman statues. The man only stared mildly back as if to suggest he was innocent of any and all accusations levelled his way; Ichigo resisted the urge to slap the man and instead pinched the bridge of his nose with a drawn-out sigh.

“All the reigai have been defeated and apprehended, they will be studied for possible future use. Yushima has been disposed of by the Onmitsukidō to prevent further attempts at seeking vengeance on Soul Society. And Kagerōza has been delivered to our doorstep by you.”

Sosuke stated, in a voice that held a hint of irony accompanied by a pinch of a smile and a complete and utter lack of remorse. Ichigo tipped his head back to the heavens as if asking the gods above why he had been saddled with such a manipulative bastard for a friend before he recalled this was his own doing. With a low growl saturating his voice Ichigo warned, “The next time you have even an infinitesimal moment of peace I am dragging you to the First for a spar, where I will proceed to make sure you become achingly familiar with the soil there.”

The scientist blanched for a moment at the threat, his skin paling rapidly at the words, before it was swept under a mask of polite calmness. Beside the orange-haired lieutenant, Byakuya was muffling laughter into the sleeve of his shihakusho, his amusement wrapped around Ichigo like a blanket in the heavy thrall of his reaitsu. Yumichika and Rose were trading a knowing expression, the kind that never bode well for anyone, and it wasn’t a wonder that the two were honorary members of the Shinigami women’s association.

“It was a great training measure that provided ample experience for our comrades to learn each other’s faults so as to better protect them in battle.”

Sosuke said, like a true manipulator, the man could be a master politician if he put any effort into it; of course, it was far more likely he would get fed up and slaughter them all again. While Ichigo conceded the point with a sharp nod, he raised a brow that conveyed his scrutiny and disdain regardless, there were other methods that didn’t involve Ichigo fighting Byakuya.

“Is the kido ready?”

Ichigo questioned quietly where Sosuke was studying the orange-haired lieutenant with brow-heavy intent. The scientist pursed his lips for a moment before he nodded, his displeasure at the rough plan Ichigo had conveyed making itself known. So, what if Hell made their hollow sides react, they were all in control, and besides it was far too likely Kokutō had awoken and was planning to attack the twins in order to free himself. Sosuke knew that but was being a bastard about it because he hadn’t been able to figure it out on his own without Kisuke’s aid.

“Wasn’t there a girl?”

Rose asked, interrupting the staring match that had erupted between Sosuke and Ichigo, defusing the tension that had begun to fill the room in the same way a sweltering summer day made everyone uncomfortable and in desperate need of a breath of fresh air. Sosuke nodded in acquiesce to the question even as Ichigo gave the blond shifty eyes and refocused his attention on the curious gazes
directed his way. It was like they expected him to know everything; to be fair he usually knew quite a bit of everything regarding the situation.

“She’s with the twins, they’ve adopted her into their group so good luck trying to bring her here. It would like an invasion, again, but worse. Don’t worry about it.”

Ichigo answered with a half shrug while Yumichika looked vaguely enamoured with the idea of the twins and their friends, in the way that conveyed interest and a wish to travel to the mortal world. Rose nodded his thanks surveying the bodies on the floor with a sharpness to his gaze that left the echo of a haunting dissonance in the air, it made Ichigo wonder what the blond was recalling or thinking of. Sosuke frowned, though it was more of a pout, at the blatant hands-off Ichigo had delivered to the scientist but Ichigo ignored that.

A groan drew Ichigo’s attention to the floor where Kagerōza was vaguely returning to conscious, the others all stared at the man for a quiet moment of indecision before Ichigo, who wanted to leave the situation in the hands of Sosuke, so he could clean up his mess stated, “I’ll leave you to your fun Sosuke. And don’t forget, your first moment of peace I’m beating you into the earth for being a sly bastard.”

With a pointed glare at Sosuke who had pulled on innocent airs along with his glasses, and a wave to Rose and Yumichika, who were making plans to go out for dinner, Ichigo turned to face Byakuya. The raven-haired Captain shook his head with a fond smile at his partner’s actions and began to exit the lab, Ichigo easily falling into stride as they exited the Twelfth.

“I have to check on the Soutaicho, make sure he isn’t working himself to death. But then we could go home and relax? Well, I mean except for Rukia and probably Kaien because he’s feeling particularly like an overgrown puppy today.”

Ichigo said as they stepped into the bright light of the early afternoon, capturing the pale walls of Soul Society in stark relief, something tense dropping from his shoulders as they walked down familiar streets. Byakuya hummed in agreement, a touch of a smile curling about his lips, and at that moment as the sun glinted in raven hair and they walked down the street Ichigo felt his chest flutter.

Bumping his shoulder against his partner’s Ichigo grinned at Byakuya, bright and unrepentant, and darted off in a flash of shunpo laughter breaking free to spill into the air as he heard the Captain curse behind him; being a lieutenant was fun as it often meant fewer rules and less paperwork.

Ichigo knew there was a catastrophe on the horizon, extending long spindly fingers composed of shadows towards Soul Society, knew all of what had passed and some of what could come. But he would live for now in the moment even as he continued to plan to protect his family, to protect Soul Society. As Byakuya collided with Ichigo in a swirl of limbs he laughed and ignored the press of memories in face of the sunlight.

X

Hell was just like Ichigo remembered it, well if you discounted the hell on earth that was his life in the past that never was, dark and filled with the kind of cold that seeps beneath your skin and never leaves, the cries of the damned circling about their heads like a swarm of vultures while Shiro bristled beneath his skin. He could feel the spirit’s bloodlust kindled by the very atmosphere of the realm pounding in his head and the others sported equally grim expressions. Shinji’s eyes glowed a feral yellow to match the shine of his hair and Rose already had his mask tipped over his head as the small group of Shinigami darted away from the Kushanāda lumbering after them.

They hadn’t even been planning to enter Hell for a few weeks at least, a bit of a break before the
next invasion, which was well-deserved, but then Shuren just had to enter the mortal world and attempt to attack the twins (Urahara had intervened and used one of the seals he had created with the aid of Tessai. Hence, the Vizard gathering once more, to venture into the depths of Hell on the command of the Soutaicho.

Ichigo had received a large amount of scepticism, mostly from Shinji, when he had called them all together and asked them to accompany him into Hell because they were all hollowfied Shinigami and that seemed a slight recipe for disaster. Ichigo knew that the reason he had lost control in his original timeline had been partially due to the nature of Hell, but also largely due to the lack of communication and understanding between Shiro and himself; but unlike when he was an adolescent, he had a close relationship with his zanpaktou spirits and the weight of the secrets his bloodline kept no longer strained their bond.

Furthermore, Hell would likely allow many of the Vizard to access their Vasto Lorde form, which would be a great asset in the Quincy war (and okay he was plotting a slight bit). After a moment of deliberation between the Vizard, they had agreed to follow Ichigo on his mad escapade, expressions grim but honest where they looked to Ichigo. The Lieutenant knew that it had been their loyalty to him that had convinced the rest of the Vizard to accompany him, not some inane desire to fight or to see Hell and something in his chest seemed to tumble over itself at the thought. Thereafter, Sosuke had appeared as if from thin air with a knowing grin and a way to enter Hell without using the strange gate that was hovering over Karakura town.

Ichigo had spoken to the scientist(s) weeks in advance knowing the possibility of having to enter Hell once more was likely, even without a gate. The two along with Tessai had begun to create an entirely new kido for such purposes; that and other kido that would be necessary soon.

When they had first entered Hell, the others had blanched at the desolation and despair that permeated the very air like the tainted scent of rotten fruit. Ichigo had moved forward reaito bristling beneath his skin and the others had reluctantly followed once they had gained their bearings. The Hell Guardians had appeared a moment later, large and hulking the great beasts had all turned as one to focus on Ichigo for an unsettling moment, staring at him silently and for a near infinity of a moment, before their gazes had turned to the others and they had lumbered forward guillotine blades raised.

The orange-haired lieutenant was just glad no one had been kidnapped to serve Kokutō’s nefarious but slightly well-meant plans, and while his head was pounding and there was a tightness in his chest that reminded him of the feeling of loss. It was easily ignored in the adrenaline coursing through his veins as Mashiro bounced ahead in front of him with Kensei dutifully following along, Rose was wallowing about the nature of hell while Love interjected, Lisa was towing Hiyori along who was attempting to throw her sandal at the Kushanāda, and Shinji was grinning like a loon beside Ichigo.

It was nostalgic to be fighting with his comrades, people who in his own timeline had become closer than blood after years upon the same battlefield, breathing the same air and shedding the same sorrow. Unlike in his own timeline though, it wasn’t often the Vizard as a collective were sent on missions, not when there wasn’t an opponent or a war that needed a strong force to handle the situation; they were all as powerful as captains in their own right.

A Kushanāda appeared in front of the group of Vizard forcing them to diverge into small groups as they flitted about like a swarm of locusts. Glowing ochre eyes centred on Ichigo and with a shriek of wind that whipped about Ichigo’s shihakusho the Hell Guardian swung his large blade towards the orange-haired Shinigami. Cursing under his breath, Ichigo flickered away in a burst of shunpo
tugging Shinji with him who had been staring at the incoming blade with wide eyes that gleamed like unshorn silver in their shock.

Briefly, Ichigo wondered if the Kushanāda considered him a sinner and were hence focusing their efforts on himself. They wouldn’t be wrong, Ichigo supposed, he had spilt so much blood enough to drench the fields he had fought in. He had done immoral acts in the name of war, in the name of surviving, but that no less excused the truth even if war did indeed make monsters of everyone.

“Oi King ya ain’t a sinner, ya more like a damn martyr. Stop with the stupid self-doubt ya idiot.”

Shiro chided dual tone voice rasping and echoing through Ichigo’s thoughts along with the general feel of the spirit’s warmth. Ossan hummed in agreement the Quincy spirit quiet and reserved as of late due to the nature of the coming war. Ichigo broadcasted his gratitude for the spirit’s reassurance, he knew the crimes of his old life, but he had sought forgiveness and repentance; there was a reason that if possible Ichigo sought allies over enemies.

The Vizard regrouped under a small outcropping, not easily noticeable and temporarily out of view of the Kushanāda, currently, their mission was to find the escapees and deal with them if possible before they could enter the human world again. Ichigo wondered whether they would stumble blindly onto them, or if Kokutō would make an appearance once more.

“How did it happen last time?”

Shinji questioned softly where he had squished beside Ichigo, wary eyes surveying their surroundings before flicking to regard Ichigo with a flash of teeth. For a minute Ichigo stared in incomprehension because he was very certain he would recall telling Shinji the truth. It occurred to him then that Kisuke and Sosuke had probably told the man, either that or they had dropped enough hints; Shinji wasn’t a genius, but he was damn cunning when he needed to be.

Shaking his head with a resigned sigh and noting the curious looks from the others Ichigo wondered how much they all knew and when they had figured it all out. An elbow in his side prompted a scowl and Ichigo with a bit of Shiro bleeding into his voice replied, “I became the King of Hell temporarily.”

The blond Captain blinked for a moment before he devolved into inaudible laughter, his body shaking with the force of it and a flush blooming across his cheeks. Ichigo rolled his eyes at the man and his antics and surveyed the rest who were either staring at Shinji in partial concern or at Ichigo with something not necessarily demanding (he wondered briefly if more people knew then he knew of, likely all members of the “Protect Ichigo” club).

Before anyone else could speak, a roar split the silence and the heavy sound of a Kushanāda thundering across the craggy plains made itself known. Instantly, the others were alert and, on their feet, and Ichigo knew with a resigned sort of notion that afterwards, they would all be having a nice long conversation. But at the moment, they were in battle and couldn’t afford to sit down and have a group therapy session. A flicker of reiatsu made itself known, and as if having been summoned, a bit late, by Ichigo’s thoughts Kokutō appeared, a stark ghost against the crimson skies and demanded, “Follow me!”

The Vizard looked to Ichigo who nodded imperceptibly, Kokutō would be the best path to Shuren and would ultimately allow them to halt his actions with less difficulty. The group of Shinigami darted out from the underpass and followed Kokutō over the rocky terrain that composed much of Hell, leaving the Kushanāda to follow after them.

They paused on a rocky outcropping near a field Ichigo recognized as the place they had battled
Shuren in his original timeline. Briefly, the orange-haired Shinigami wondered if the others realised their guide had led them into the third layer of Hell. Kokutō turned to face the group at large and with a slight bow stated his name and began to rattle off his life story and his reasons for aiding the Shinigami. Ichigo, who knew all of that, ignored most of his words only absently listening as his reaitsu searched the plains around them and Shiro’s reaitsu roiled inside his head once more.

Instincts screaming in warning Ichigo whirled around Zangetsu sliding silently from its sheath to catch Shuren’s blade. The Togabito stared at Ichigo, eyes wide and mouth open in astonishment that Ichigo was able to detect his presence even as the other Togabito appeared in a surge of reaitsu. The Vizard surrounding Ichigo shifted unsheathing katana in a chorus that filled the air as they likely recalled Ichigo’s warning. He had cautioned the Vizard before they entered Hell that their hollow would likely act up especially in battle but that in the end, they were in control.

Ichigo let Shiro’s reaitsu bleed through to the surface colouring his eyes golden as he forced his blade against Shuren with a shower of sparks. The Togabito frowned and released a wave of fire that charred the air and settled heat along Ichigo’s shoulders even as he rolled to the ground and popped up. The lieutenant ducked under a blade singing towards his head and responded in kind lunging forward to clash against Shuren with a collision of sparks, he sidestepped a jab before allowing his blade to swing towards Shuren’s torso. The fire-wielder caught Zangetsu against his own blade and released a towering wave of fire at the same moment, the light of it dancing across his features and illuminating the shadows held within.

The orange-haired lieutenant darted away from the wave of fire, Hierro bleaching his skin ivory in the face of the grasping flames. Kokutō darted in front of Shuren before Ichigo could step forward the two clashing in a brilliant spectacle of metal and fire. Ichigo frowned at the Togabito but allowed his attention briefly to drift to the other Vizard, they were all sporting their masks, gleaming like moonlight in the atmosphere of Hell as hollow reaitsu raged about the air. The lieutenant could sense that a few, namely Shinji, were on the threshold between partial and complete hollowification.

Turning his attention once more to his own battle Ichigo flew forward crimson reaitsu circulating his blade as he landed beside Kokutō and caught Shuren’s blade against the broad edge of Zangetsu. They moved in quick paces tearing up the landscape about them and setting fire to their surroundings. Up, down, over, sideways, Ichigo settled into the motion of battle instincts a buzzing swarm inside his head as Shiro growled lowly his mask forming across Ichigo’s features as they battled.

The bandages covering half of Kokutō’s features had been torn away along with the upper right half of Ichigo’s shihakusho when they finally brought Shuren down. Incapacitating him beyond the point of regeneration and driving his chains into the land beneath them where the Hell Guardians, slowly lumbering towards them in a large mob, would reach him. Ichigo panted for breath for a moment slowly straightening as the other Vizard continued to battle their opponents who had been revived sometime during his battle.

Ichigo’s spine straightened as a chill chased his skin and he whipped around to stare at Kokutō who was studying Ichigo with eyes that harboured a glint not caused by the surrounding fire, a split grin dancing across his features as in one smooth motion he turned and threw his katana at Shinji. The blond Captain who had silently acknowledged the Togabito as a temporary ally wasn’t prepared for the literal knife in the back, but his instincts were as keen as ever and he stepped to the side allowing him to avoid a fatal injury.

The orange-haired Shinigami stared incomprehensibly for a moment at the katana sticking out of Shinji’s lower abdomen before his gaze flickered to the others all who were staring at Shinji with wide-eyed shock and worry. The moment they let go was tangible as reaitsu filled the air like
someone had suddenly dumped the ocean’s contents into Hell, fire glinting off of pale ivory masks and the other bone features of his comrades. Shinji, bone-like filaments lining his back and arms yanked the katana from his abdomen, white liquid rushing to fill the hole in the blond’s chest as he stared at his opponent.

Kokutō was smiling, wide and chilling at the transformation of the Vizard, the smile set the creature inside Ichigo’s chest growling, set his senses ablaze. If Shinji’s instincts had been a fraction too slow, the blond would be dead; Ichigo would not, could not, allow one of his comrades to die not after everything. Crimson reaitsu exploded around the lieutenant, his hair lengthening and the tattoos arcing towards the hole in his chest appearing.

“Let’s show him why we don’t mess with our family King.”

Shiro growled rage saturating their veins, and Ichigo grinned beneath the cool mask covering his features. Kokutō had made a grave mistake in attacking one of Ichigo’s friends and as he bent his head a cero forming at the point of his horns, Ichigo knew he wouldn’t live to regret it.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading I hope you enjoyed the Gotei Invading Army arc though it was covered briefly, as well as the Hell Verse Movie (which was fun to write). How do you all think the other Vizard would look as Vasto Lorde? Next chapter we will be starting the Thousand Year Blood War. Reviews/Comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Crustacean!
Hello everyone, the moment is finally here this chapter we are stating the Quincy arc! I hope you all enjoy the brief coverage of the Fullbringers arc and the beginning of the Quincy war, it’s bittersweet to finally reach the end. Read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Karin coughed blood, the taste of iron pooling in her mouth as she pushed herself up from the cracked pavement, her muscles protesting and the cut on her shoulder throbbing, the pain dulled by adrenaline. Ten no Senkōgetsu bristled in her mind at the sheer audacity of their enemies as she stumbled for a moment regarding her opponent who watched the battle with a half hint of a cocky smile glinting along the edge of his claymore. Yuzu was pale where she stood beside Karin the Gunbai held in her hands shaking; whether with fear or anger, the older sibling couldn’t identify, even as Yuzu began a quick healing kido to stop the blood.

Frowning, Karin stepped in front of her sister and analyzed her opponent; Kūgo Ginjō. A former Substitute Shinigami, and now the leader of Xcution, who had decided that the only way to seek revenge on Soul Society, who had apparently betrayed him by tracking his reaitsu (seriously why?), was through attacking the Kurosaki twins’ family and friends. He had attempted to recruit Chad who was also apparently a Fullbringer; their friend who they shared a promise with, who trained with them every week so that they could defend Karakura, who had protected them when they needed it and they had returned the gesture in kind. They had failed, (though they had given Chad some answers) but it had been enough of a warning sign to the twins, enough to make Karin glare with suspicion at the man who oozed bad news when he attempted to talk to her, and for Yuzu to suggest calling Ichigo.

He hadn’t answered, which had been troubling in of itself. So, they had voyaged to hat-n-clogs shop where the shifty Shinigami had stared at the twins over the lip of his fan for a good century before handing over a note from Ichigo. It had warned them of Tsukishima, apologized that he was unavailable (and a reason hadn’t been given but they were both more than aware of what was brewing on the horizon), informed them that Rukia was arriving as a representative of Soul Society, and a force of Shinigami would be dispatched the following week.
The twins had debated the merit of waiting for Soul Society to arrive and handle the situation, they had had no clue how to deal with Xcution, and there were arguably more of them. They held no grudges against Soul Society, therefore, a plan of infiltration was weak at best and attacking them outright on their own was a risky manoeuvre.

But Xcution had attacked them, had gone after Nozomi, Chad, and even Tatsuki in the hope of drawing Soul Society’s attention, it seemed like a foolish move considering what little connection the twins held with Soul Society. It was obvious that Xcution were idiots or desperate. Kisuke had happily suggested setting a trap if they continued to attack their family, and Yuzu had been more than happy to plot with Uryū; Karin was just content with getting to beat up the bastard who had attacked her friends.

If Karin glanced around her she could see Nozomi, Chad, and Uryū in one area of the abandoned warehouse they had led the members of Xcution to, while the Bount Twins and Rukia were in another area of the warehouse (and Yuzu had protested the still in middle school twins fighting with them, but in the end had relented). They were all engaged with their own opponents reaitsu filling the air like an incoming storm while water whipped about in the same equivalence of a tsunami.

It was a far different sight from what had occurred when they had first entered the warehouse, leading most of Xcution (the old man had stayed behind) on a merry chase after questionable chemistry near their base had exploded. They had stumbled inside, the Fullbringers stumbling after them and when they were all gathered Tsukishima and Ginjō had stepped forward to parley or spew propaganda. They had felt the reaitsu fill the air, bitter with a faint hollow taint and something worse as Ginjō questioned why they had led them here. He had been stalling for time.

There had been a moment, terrifying in a way that sunk to the very depth of Karin’s being where Chad had begun to walk forward, eyes frighteningly blank. Whether they had planned to use him as a pawn or a hostage Karin couldn’t say. But she had felt fear and anger coiled so tightly in her chest she could barely breathe, and she wondered if this was what soldiers felt when they faced something too horrifying to comprehend. Before the situation could get out of hand Rukia had stepped forward, Shikai glinting in the pale light and with eyes that seemed to suck all warmth from the room she had encased Tsukishima in a pillar of ice ten feet thick.

The mere thought of what the bastard had intended to do lit a fire in Karin’s chest and she wouldn’t let the man walk out of the warehouse without paying for the attacks on her friends regardless of Soul Society arriving within the next hour.

Clenching her fists as Ginjō’s reaitsu flared, Karin shot a quick reassuring glance over her shoulder to Yuzu, who had finished the healing, before she shot forward. The air around them was filled with a heavy mist as Karin coalesced reaitsu beneath her feet and used her perch to jump in the air above Ginjō’s head; he was getting cocky thinking a lucky shot would stop Karin. The raven-haired man’s claymore whipped up in an attempt to bisect Karin, who only coated her hands in ice and caught the blade halting the motion of the blade and sending the ice spiralling down the steel.

The Fullbringer attempted to use Karin’s grasp on the blade to throw her to the ground as he slammed his claymore towards the already cracked pavement. Karin let go of the blade and used the momentum to launch a roundhouse kick towards the bastard’s smug face. Ginjō’s sharp features widened in surprise before flickering to anger as the man ducked her kick and whirled around with his broad blade.

The raven-haired twin ducked under the blade hearing the air snap above her as the blade passed. Taking the advantage offered Karin darted into the man’s personal space and let her fist collide with the man’s torso fire collecting around the heavy gauntlets protecting her hands. The leader of
Xcution flew back crashing into the ground air leaving his lungs in a wheeze at the force of Karin’s punch even as she chased after him not giving him the chance to use the reach his weapon provided.

In this battle, Karin had the advantage, she was light on her feet and fought in close quarters. Ginjō, on the other hand, had a sword which leant to a long reach and overall, he was much slower than the Kurosaki who had trained with Yoruichi Shihōin, the proclaimed Goddess of Flash.

Ginjō caught himself where the pavement cushioned his fall and slowed his momentum, stabbing his large blade into the ground he turned using the force of it to launch forward at Karin. The raven-haired twin ducked under the attack but as she made to attack his open torso once more Ginjō dropped his claymore and brought his fist around for a sharp uppercut. The raven-haired Kurosaki narrowly dodged the uppercut, stepping back on uneven footing she was forced to spin out of the way as Ginjō pressed his advantage.

Before the man could advance further on Karin’s precarious stance a Gunbai flew through the air and landed at the man’s foot. Immediately, ice encased the limb shooting up and around the man’s leg and immobilizing his movement. Ginjō snarled and with the broad end of his blade shattered the ice, revealing the gash the bladed fan had left in his leg. Karin didn’t give the man a chance to recover as she flashed a grateful smile at her sister and surged forth.

She landed on the Fullbringer’s blade as he attempted a hasty swing, and when he moved to slam the blade into the ground Karin shot forward and launched a quick combo targeting the man’s head and torso before darting out of range as the man attempted to elbow her. As Karin skidded across the warehouse floor, Ginjō swung his blade out to the side vermilion energy crackling along the blade like lightning and casting the planes of his face into harsh light. With a crackle of energy, the man brought his blade down towards Karin and a torrent of screaming green energy shot towards her.

Karin mused for a spare second on dodging the attack but knew that would cause greater amounts of damage and could cause a distraction or hurt her friends. Instead, Karin raised her fists and crossed them forming an x as the wave of reaitusu slammed into her gauntlets. As the energy dispersed around her gauntlets, their zanpaktou practically crowing in triumph, Karin glimpsed a shadow behind Ginjō before Yuzu appeared as if from thin air.

Ginjō straightened from his attack only to feel the press of a bladed fan at his throat, Yuzu standing behind the man using reaitusu to elevate her to his height had a furrow between her brow and clenched teeth. That was the thing when they fought, most people forgot Yuzu in the heat of battle, and when the twins were fighting, they weren’t going to fight clean. They were women and their opponents were more often than not males, which often left a power imbalance; they underestimated the twins and that was their mistake.

No one said a word, the sound of fighting still echoing throughout the large warehouse space, as Ginjō stood still the blade resting a hair’s breadth away from his neck as the twins remained cautious. In a flicker of movement, Ginjō slammed his elbow into Yuzu’s torso sending the blonde flying back to collide harshly with the ground.

“Yuzu!”

Karin called out, voice thick with emotion as she watched her younger sibling collide harshly with the pavement. Protective rage bubbled and filled Karin as she thought of her enemy attacking her baby sister. Yuzu was a distance fighter, so she was out of the battle, out of harm's way, and dammit it was Karin’s job to protect her!

Before Ginjō could advance on Yuzu, Karin shot forward and in a rapid burst of shunpo connected her fist with Ginjō’s smug face. The Fullbringer was sent crashing into the ground and Karin ignored
him instead rushing towards Yuzu who was slowly shouldering her way to her feet. The blond flashed a pained smile towards Karin even as she coughed and one of her hands began to glow with kido.

Karin knew they were in the middle of a battle, but she couldn’t help checking her sister over, it was her fault Yuzu had been hurt and it was her duty to look after the blond. Yuzu tapped Karin’s hand in a reassuring manner and gently said, “I’m fine, finish the bastard.”

The older Kurosaki sibling nodded with a grim frown and turned to face Ginjō who was grinning as a wave of green reaitsu once more careened towards the girls. Karin rose to her feet and once more dispersed the energy, standing protectively in front of Yuzu before she stepped forward and appeared in front of Ginjō quickly launching a jab to his torso followed by an uppercut and finishing with a roundhouse kick.

The Fullbringer staggered back for a moment at the force of Karin’s attack but she didn’t give him a minute to recover as she followed him punching his stomach, under his chin, elbowing his groin as he sunk to his knees before with a crackle of reaitsu ice encased his hands and feet. Ginjō stared in shock at Karin, likely not expecting a female teenager to defeat him (they were always surprised), even as Yuzu handed her a Gunbai and cast a restraining kido.

“You’re an idiot you know that? You think the way to get revenge is to attack a bunch of teenagers? We might be associated with Soul Society but that doesn’t mean we serve them or anything like that crap, they don’t need us for that, they’re the freakin Gotei 13. They monitored your powers you say, they were out to get you, holding you back? Well, for one thing, you killed other Shinigami! So, in hindsight maybe it was a good idea in the long run, and two you were alive. Do you know what too much power can do to someone alive? Even if humans are flexible we can only hold so much. If we were one person we wouldn’t live past the age of fifty! “

“You say Soul Society is corrupt, that their run by a shadow organization or whatever. Not anymore. They got rid of the Central 46 bastards before I was even born! And yes, there are still problems, still feedback, but it’s not current. Yes, you were wronged but Soul Society has changed, it’s different, there’s far more equality, better resources, hell even Rungokai is better.

“Do you even have a clue what’s coming? Now isn’t the time for infighting, or for petty revenge quests. Get it through your thick skull that Soul Society was willing to make reparations and you ignored them. Focus on the fact that if we don’t band together there won’t be a Soul Society to fight, there won’t be a world to live in!”

Karin ranted glaring at Ginjō as she panted for breath reaitsu swirling around her like a tempest and catching on the silence of the warehouse. She glanced around noting the halted battles the attention riveted on Karin and Ginjō, and Yuzu standing beside her a hand wrapped about Karin’s. When she returned her attention to Ginjō she saw the dawning realisation buried beneath the shock of loss and whatever else the man was processing.

Curling her fingers into Yuzu’s the older twin shared a look with her sibling, encouraging the blonde to take the lead. Yuzu smiled softly before turning to face the rest of the Fullbringers who were staring at their leader with varying expressions of shock, revelation, or indecision.

“If you still seek revenge on Soul Society then they will be here within the next ten minutes and you will swiftly be apprehended, it is likely that your sentence will be light considering what crimes you have committed. If you want to leave, then do so now but remember that Soul Society is far more powerful than a band of teenagers. Regardless, a war is coming and whether you survive depends on whether you will fight. If you are apprehended it is likely you will fight in Hueco Mundo or Soul Society if you remain in the human world than this will be your battleground.”
Yuzu stated voice echoing throughout the warehouse commanding and powerful in a way few people saw of her sister. Yuzu was just as charismatic as Karin, though the blonde’s power lay in her smile and kind nature. The various Fullbringer shifted eyeing their opponents and their leader, Karin facing Ginjō saw the conflicted expression on his features and stated, “The choice also extends to you, but I recommend you go to Soul Society and from there Hueco Mundo if you really want to make a difference. After that, you’ll be in the prime location for revenge.”

Karin cautioned with a bare touch of an ironic grin, Ginjō studied her for a long moment before he nodded and with that motion, the other Fullbringers surrendered. A moment later, the doors to the warehouse opened as if by the will of the wind and Ichigo, followed by his partner and a contingent of lieutenants stepped into the warehouse. The orange-haired Shinigami shared a glance with the Kuchiki Captain before the lieutenants dispersed to apprehend the Fullbringers and Ichigo glided towards Yuzu and Karin.

“Nice of you to finally arrive Ichi-nii.”

Karin greeted dryly while Yuzu slapped her on the arm in reproach, their brother just eyed the two in fond amusement laced with caution as he identified any wounds before his gaze flickered to Ginjō and back to the twins with an apologetic tinge.

“Ginjō surrendered on the condition Xcution be allowed to fight in Hueco Mundo when they come.”

Yuzu stated informing their brother whose eye’s widened at the information and he murmured, “You know? Of course, you, if I can feel him waking you will as well,” before in a much louder tone he stated, “That can be arranged.”

Ichigo nodded to Byakuya who had been standing a fair distance behind his partner, the Captain swept forward glanced at the ice before returning his attention to the twins unimpressed. Yuzu blustered apologies even as Karin unfroze the man’s limbs and allowed the Captain to lead Ginjō away to where the other Fullbringer were standing, while the twins’ allies were speaking to a lieutenant.

The twins turned to face Ichigo, he looked tired, and not the regular tired that hung about him like a second skin, this was deeper and near intangible in its existence, there was also something grim to his features. Ichigo sighed and ran a hand through his hair before regarding the two with careful looks filled with affection he stated, “You both know you’ll be stationed in the mortal world, right?” They nodded, they didn’t like it, but they understood, he continued, “Kisuke will be briefing you once the plans are ready. It’s unlikely any of the Sternritter will appear but if they do you have a wide variety of allies to draw on and I think Nel was considering coming to help out as well. You likely won’t see me again till the end of the battle,” The, if I survive, went unsaid, “But I won’t allow him to win, I won’t allow him to destroy our world. You are both so brave and amazing, I love you both please stay safe.”

They both rushed forward and hugged Ichigo, their brother who was tired, who had done so much for them, for the whole world and deserved a break. Karin tightened her arms around him knowing this could be the last time she might ever hug him, even as Yuzu whispered, “Be safe Ichi-nii, please come back.”

Ichigo nodded and pulled back for a moment eyes crinkling in fondness as he studied the two of them before he ruffled their hair and turned to where his partner was calling him. Yuzu entangled their fingers together sharing a sad smile and Karin could only nod in understanding even as their spirit hummed in their minds and the future lingered on the horizon.
The room was bright, the kind of brightness that dissolved all shadows with the intent of hiding in the corners or lingering about the ceiling. It was almost unsettling the lack of shadows, as at the same time it was comforting. Ichigo’s fingers danced along his thigh as he stood at the head of the room behind the Soutaicho studying the pale walls, the lights cast into the floor and ceiling, as well as the doors at the end of the hallway; closed but only for a short time.

Ichigo couldn’t remember the last time he had been this nervous. Had it been the night before the White Battle, or maybe the night before he confronted Central 46 to demand they release Aizen? Regardless, there was a nervous energy pillaging his system and circling his thoughts as he watched the empty room, his eyes occasionally straying to the broad shoulders of Yamamoto who watched the doors from beneath heavy brows and had allowed Ichigo to lead the meeting.

The doors shuddered open slowly and quietly as if an exhale of air, almost too quiet for the pleasant afternoon lingering outside of the isolated room. One by one the captains and lieutenants of the Gotei 13 entered gathering around the long table and the folders placed there without words but accompanied by curious and concerned gazes; most directed towards the Soutaicho, but some towards Ichigo.

The orange-haired lieutenant had debated waiting for the meeting, prolonging it for his own sense of sanity, but they couldn’t delay any longer. He could feel the Quincy King awakening fully, like a slow burning fire filling his veins in a call that tugged from his stomach and lurched about his heart. The Quincy were coming, and Soul Society needed to plan, needed to prepare.

They had been preparing for years without knowing, training, working on their defence, making allies, but now was the time for revelations for solid plans and strategy. Ichigo shifted on his feet resisting the urge to run a hand through his hair as he regarded the various Shinigami gathered together. The Soutaicho glanced briefly over his shoulder to stare at Ichigo, smouldering eyes warm where they gazed at the young man before the elder nodded and turned to face the Shinigami.

With a slam of his staff against the floor, the already dense silence seemed to thicken, cloying around Ichigo like a summer heat as the attention of the various Shinigami was directed to the front. Sosuke wordlessly stepped out of the rows of captains and pressed a thin seal to the door, a shimmering blue barrier flickering into existence for a brief moment before disappearing.

It felt like there was something stuck in Ichigo’s throat, thick and heavy with the weight of secrets that had been told to only a select few as he went over the words in his mind. The orange-haired Shinigami had debated not telling them all, waiting till after the war to inform them, when it would be safer, and there would be no chance of the Quincy extracting the knowledge. But Ichigo knew that death would extend its hand to any of his friends regardless of the most strategic of plans. Ichigo didn’t want his friends, comrades, allies, to die not knowing the truth.

The lieutenant could feel eyes on him as he stepped in front of the Soutaicho, watchful and questioning, some understanding as he faced people who he had known for two lifetimes, who had fought with him countless times. Taking a deep breath Ichigo began, “About one month from now the Quincy will attack under the leadership of Juha Bach,” Ichigo paused as pandemonium rang out at his statement, disbelief lingering upon the air like a bitter pill to swallow. Once everyone had quieted once more glancing towards Ichigo he continued, “I know this because I am from the future. Or rather a future.”

Again, chaos broke out, this time accompanied by shouts of disbelief, people declaring he was crazy, and others calling him a liar. Ichigo stood there quietly and waited, noting those who studied him under a new lens, piecing together little tidbits and clues that spanned hundreds of years. Some of them shared triumphant glances as if they had known all along or were happy that Ichigo had finally
revealed the truth.

“The Quincy are dead, they haven’t been around since the Thousand Year Blood War! They’re all dead.”

Someone protested and Ichigo was almost certain it was the other Second division lieutenant, who was part of the Onmitsukido and prided themselves on information gathering. Ichigo smiled, or at least it appeared as a smile, but it was something full of teeth as he replied, “I assure you the Quincy are alive and well.”

Whispers of protest rang throughout the room, as people glanced at the shadow-less corners and at Ichigo. With a loud bang, the silence once more swept forth like the tides washing away whispers and mutters as the Soutaicho commanded attention with his presence alone. Ichigo looked into the eyes of his comrades and continued, “The information in those folders, on the Wandenreich, on the Sternritter. It isn’t knowledge available through scouting or other means. When I say I came from the future I speak of my own past one vastly different from this Soul Society.

“In that past, I was Ichigo Kurosaki, a teenager who was given Shinigami powers. Who, when their friend was in danger of execution due to Central 46, invaded Soul Society. There was a war against a megalomaniac claiming to be a god, there were factions seeking vengeance, then there were the Quincy. And all around me, Shinigami who I had fought with, forged bonds with died, until it was only me.

“I am who I have always been, and at the core of that is my desire to protect Soul Society, to protect my comrades. If you want a chance to survive this war you all need to listen very carefully.”

The orange-haired lieutenant finished stepping back to stand behind the Soutaicho for a quiet moment of respite as the others processed his words. Shiro purred like a cat in the back of Ichigo’s mind setting his shoulders at ease even as he spotted the corner of a smile on Byakuya’s lips where the Kuchiki head stared stoically about the room.

“That’s impossible! He can’t be from the future, he’s barely above the power level of Captain Kyroraku.”

Someone in the line yelled, a lieutenant of the Seventh division Ichigo was certain, as he could see Kensei glaring at something beside him, though it likely wasn’t Komamura or Iba. Ichigo sighed faintly, he had known there would be denial, that they wouldn’t believe him; sometimes he hardly believed himself. Ichigo stepped once more into the spotlight and staring at the curious faces turned towards him Ichigo unsealed his reaitsu.

The heavy presence flooded the room forcing near all of the lieutenants and most of the captains to their knees before it reached a level that was too high for them to comprehend. Ichigo shifted at the feeling, like unbinding one’s chest, or tugging off soaked clothes. He ignored the awe and surprise that filled the room in favour of slowly tugging his reaitsu back under control in a gradual manner.

“I assure you what I speak is the truth, whether you choose to believe it or not is your priority. This is a war meeting, we are here to discuss the incoming threat of the Quincy and what measures we can put in place to come out of this alive.”

At Ichigo’s statement, the gathered Shinigami settled slightly, and he nodded in thanks, eyes searching out his family in the crowds before they flickered to the table. Folders coloured for each squad respectively sitting innocently in front of their captains containing all the information Ichigo had managed to gather over a lifetime.
“In front of you is a folder containing known information on the twenty-six Sternritter, Juha Bach’s top fighters. This is a war on three fronts because the Quincy King’s end goal is the destruction of all three realms as we know them, his goal is the death of the Soul King and that of Soul Society. In a minute Aizen-taicho will activate something like a conference call, we will have contact with the mortal realm, and Hueco Mundo.”

While the others reacted with shocked horror that filled the room like the sharp snaps of electricity or shifted at the shifted at the idea of a call to Hueco Mundo, Sosuke activated the call. With a flicker of reaitsu a blue sphere appeared in the air at the end of the room, the feed for it was blurry at first before slowly the resolution cleared and everyone was greeted with Kisuke’s eye before the scientist backed away revealing a living room filled with a few recognizable faces. Beside the first blue bubble a red one appeared, this time the feed cleared in a faster manner and they were greeted with the image of Harribel and the other Espada seated at a long table.

Ichigo inclined his head in greeting even as the other captains and lieutenants stared in surprise, the orange-haired Shinigami could even feel the Soutaicho’s surprise flaring briefly before disappearing under a blanket of calm.

“My quite the gathering Shiba-taicho.”

Kisuke greeted with a tip of his hat nodding to the various captains and lieutenants who knew the man from his occasional captaincy at the Twelfth. Ichigo masked an amused smile at his friend’s antics and nodded, even as he finally realised who was sitting in the room with the scientist. Masaki, Isshin, and Ryūken sat behind Kisuke staring at the various captains and lieutenants with surprise, and underneath that the determination of a parent to protect their child; Ichigo wished he could be surprised.

“Greetings Shiba-san.”

Harribel stated in that cold voice that was like the artic yet somehow a bit fond while the other Espada stared in varying states of intrigue. Ichigo nodded in greeting and studied the Espada, many who he hadn’t seen for months before his gaze flickered to the gathered Shinigami.

Curling his hand over the pommel of Zangetsu Ichigo began, “Now that we are all gathered we can start. As stated the information on the Quincy is in your folders and has been forwarded to our allies. However, I would like to direct your focus to a key aspect of the Quincy’s attack. They have the ability to steal Bankai,” Ichigo paused letting the horror flow and ebb before he continued, “However, we have the ability to neutralize this, thanks to Kisuke, by infusing our Bankai with hollow reaitsu. This is only a temporary measure, so we can only act upon it when the battle commences.

“Moreover, the Quincy are particularly weak to hollows and hence will attempt to take over Hueco Mundo. For this reason, we will be supporting our allies by sending the Tenth division and the Fullbringers to fight alongside the Espada in Hueco Mundo.”

Ichigo paused to let the information sink in, watching his former lieutenant’s eyes widen and land on Ichigo accusing and scared all at once at the weight Ichigo had placed on his still young shoulders. The orange-haired Shinigami knew the youth would be fine, Rangiku would watch over him, and besides Hueco Mundo needed someone to watch over everything considering the natural chaos of the place. Others shared vague dissent at the idea of being infused with hollow reaitsu, even while the Vizard traded knowing looks; they had likely clued in on why Ichigo had encouraged them to voyage to Hell by now.

To instil quiet once more, Ichigo slowly unsheathed Zangetsu in a ringing sound that beckoned
Silence to come forth and drew the attention of the many souls gathered once more. With a nod, Ichigo continued, “Those of you who are of a lieutenant level, when you face a Sternritter, please face them in pairs. Do not underestimate the Quincy, they have been training for the eradication of Soul Society for centuries. If they surrender capture them, but not at risk to yourself.

“Also, do not hold back, we will be evacuating the nearby districts, one to twenty, to spare civilian casualties as much as possible. The Gotei 13 can be rebuilt, lives, however, are not as easy.”

“How will you be protecting Rungokai?”

Ukitake asked softly in that benign manner of his that hid the true cunning of the mind within, Ichigo’s heart did a bit of a summersault at the thought of Ukitake’s fate, something that would not occur if the orange-haired lieutenant had anything to say about it. Ichigo deferred to Kisuke who gave the assembled Shinigami a wide smile and explained, “Tessai, Aizen, and I have developed a few seals. One for the protection of Soul Society’s inhabitants by halting the takeover of the Wandenreich, and another that seals off the mortal world so that any damage that may occur to the three realms might be contained.”

“Damage?”

Unohana questioned where she was studying Ichigo with dark onyx eyes that flickered to Kenpachi and back to Ichigo with something sorrowful. Ichigo nodded and ran a hand through his hair as he explained, “If Yhwach enters the Soul Palace and kills the Soul King he will become omniscient, near unkillable. Not only that, he will begin to tear apart the three realms as we know them.

A hand went up in the audience and Ichigo tracked it to Shinji who was leaning against a pillar with an air of nonchalance that only thinly veiled the wildness snapping at the bridle beneath everything else. Ichigo nodded and with a piano grin, the Vizard asked, “What about the Royal Guard? Ya said Bach’s goal was ta Soul King, right?”

Ichigo nodded to the question, mind briefly flashing to his own training in the Royal Palace before he replied, “Yes, they have been alerted to the incoming war. However, it is unlikely for them to enter Soul Society as they themselves serve as a point of entry. If they were to enter Soul Society, Bach could use one of them to enter the Royal Palace. This reminds me, no one attempt to attack Yhwach, the only people who could handle his power is the Soutaicho and I. Yhwach is beyond powerful and could destroy most of you easily.”

The various souls stared at Ichigo, trepidation lining their features at the thought of the war before them even as others flipped through the folder glancing at the information Ichigo had managed to gather. Ichigo took a breath let the tenseness tightening his chest out, he had done it, he had revealed the truth. Whether his friends believed him was up to their own discretion, but now unlike the past, the thought of their disbelief didn’t hurt as much. Maybe it was the incoming war but Ichigo felt a little more alive then he had in a long while. The orange-haired Shinigami wasn’t sure if it was the prospect of a battle or the end. But regardless there was something thrilling to the nerves parading about his head.

“You all have one month to prepare, one month to train yourselves and your subordinates. The Quincy are coming but Soul Society, Hueco Mundo, and the mortal realm will not fall. We will hold a meeting four days from now, please come prepared to discuss our enemy and strategies.”

Ichigo stated, gentling his voice a bit as he stared into scared eyes of his comrades, people who could die in the incoming war, people who he might never meet again. Kisuke nodded a solemn expression on his features before he waved, and the video feed cut out. He was followed by Harribel nodding, the vicious look of a shark dawning on her features before the second bubble was gone and the
Shinigami began to make their way towards the doors, some in a haze as they processed the information.

The next meeting would have more planning and talk of strategy, but for now, everyone needed to come to terms with the information Ichigo had laid at their feet like a chasm only waiting for one misstep. Ichigo sighed and stepped behind the Soutaicho, allowing the man once more to stand in the spotlight; this was why he had stepped down from being a Captain. As Ichigo passed the old man, Yamamoto turned and placed a wrinkled but well-calloused hand on his shoulder, his strength great but fading from what it once had been.

They both knew that the old man would likely not see the end of the war, he was ancient now and it was time for Soul Society to be governed by the youth. Regardless, there was a pride in his eyes that drew a smile upon Ichigo’s lips and distracted him temporarily from grim thoughts. Chōjirō on the other side of the old man nodded towards Ichigo, respect and the questions in his eyes held at bay for the moment.

“Ichigo why have I been assigned to Hueco Mundo.”

Tōshirō questioned where he had slipped from the general stream of Shinigami slowly walking towards the door to stand before Ichigo. The orange-haired Shinigami quirked a small smile as he ruffled the youth’s hair and replied, “Because I know you can handle it. Hueco Mundo needs someone who is experienced in strategy and can command them. Who else would be better than my former lieutenant.”

The white-haired Captain looked unsure for a moment but eventually nodded, eyes straying to the crowd where Ichigo could spot Momo speaking to Rangiku. Being a Captain suited the young man, it had led to a boost in confidence and Ichigo knew that sending the youth to Hueco Mundo was the right choice in the end, even if it did make him worry a fraction. Tōshirō nodded his gratitude and departed swiftly, the fires of determination licking at his heels.

Unohana appeared next nodding briefly to the Soutaicho before standing beside Ichigo, observing the many captains and lieutenants for a moment of peace. A hand briefly ran over his as the older woman commented, “I suppose Kenpachi will need to learn Bankai? Hanatarō and Isane will also need to be prepared I suppose,” Ichigo nodded a grim expression stealing across his features tightening his throat and burning his eyes. Unohana must have seen it for once again she ran her fingers over his knuckles and continued, “You will take care of yourself Ichigo? Take a vacation after this is all over, right?”

Ichigo quirked a small shallow grin at the comment because they both knew Ichigo was terrible at taking care of himself and that was what Byakuya was for. She smiled, the sort of pleasant smile one rarely saw her without a touch of malice. Ichigo turned and bowed in gratitude to the woman who had listened to him, who had demanded he get better and who had actually respected his body. Unohana quirked a brow in surprise but repeated the motion and murmured in farewell, “Come to see me again before the war starts Ichigo.”

The orange-haired Shinigami nodded and the Captain of the Fourth repeated the motion before sweeping away in a whirl of dark ebony tresses thick enough to harbour shadows. When Ichigo surveyed the room once more he found it was empty, the folders on the table gone, and the Soutaicho was slowly making his way to the exit, the tap of his cane a heavy beat throughout the room. Rolling his shoulders Ichigo followed the old man as Zangetsu-Ossan hummed quietly a melody from his childhood.

As soon as Ichigo exited the room he was engulfed in a large hug by a teary Kaien while Jushiro and Shunsui watched with obvious amusement and Byakuya was grinning at Ichigo’s own expense. The
orange-haired Shinigami shook his head and landed a well-placed but gentle elbow in his brother’s torso freeing himself from the overbearing man.

“Ma Ichigo that was very brave, I think we should get drinks to celebrate.”

Shunsui suggested with a wink even as his eyes searched the room for his lieutenants. Ichigo would have liked to protest that it was early in the afternoon, that they all had work to do but instead the orange-haired lieutenant nodded, a small smile gracing his lips even as he ducked Kaien’s sobbing and slipped over to stand beside Byakuya. The future was coming but they still had a little time.

X

Juha Bach on his throne studied the Sternritter, gathered in neat orderly lines and pressed white uniforms. The day where his revenge would be complete was drawing closer and while he could feel the last dredges of sleep dragging at his shoulders he felt his lost kin and among them the number one War Potential Ichigo Shiba.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed this chapter because it covered a lot!
Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!
*This is in theory if Ichigo had trained his powers from birth allowing them to grow like the twins i.e. reaching his true power faster while alive.
Fir!
Hello everyone, we are here with the new chapter. I hope you enjoy everything that occurs as the Quincy war really begins!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kūkaku finished sounding both exasperated and knowing in the way only an older sibling could manage; even when talking about the potential risk of death. Ichigo sighed and pulled the denreishinki away from his face for a moment as his eyes searched the hall in front of him. He wanted to protect his family, keep them out of harm’s way, but he knew Kūkaku and he knew Ganju. Both were too stubborn to sit the war out and watch from the sidelines, and Ichigo knew if they weren’t in the Twelfth then they sure as hell would find a way onto the battlefield. It still sat uneasily in his chest, the thought of stumbling upon their corpses together, except knowing them for a lifetime, their quirks, their favourite foods, and everything in between.

“Besides Ichigo, Yoruichi’s little brother will be here and I know you don’t want him on the battlefield.”

Kūkaku added likely knowing that Ichigo had only needed another reason, something else to ease his conscience. Ichigo ran a hand through his hair and muffled another sigh thinking fondly for a moment of his siblings; Kūkaku lit up like a firework, Ganju’s gentle nature, and Kaien’s overbearing enthusiasm and responded, “Alright, please stay safe.”

The unspoken words lingered over the line for a moment before Kūkaku chuckled, the sound familiar and comforting. After a second of silence where a thousand words lingered unspoken, she replied, “You as well Ichi.”
Then the line cut out and Ichigo was left alone in the hallway. The orange-haired Shinigami leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment, taking a second to inhale and ignore the way his instincts bristled like a feral feline and the way his reaitsu danced across his skin like an invisible itch. Zangetsu’s presence reached out for Ichigo’s wrapping around him in a silent promise that settled the fear crawling into his throat and reignited some of the warmth that had seemed to drift away as the days drew closer.

Turning from the wall Ichigo entered the Soutaicho’s office once more, the long room familiar to Ichigo with all its scrolls, the wide windows displaying the might of Soul Society, now near a ghost town in the pale afternoon light, and the Soutaicho’s broad desk. The old man was seated there sipping at a cup of tea as he read over the recent reconnaissance reports and the reports detailing the successful evacuation of the Rungokai districts. Chōjirō was standing behind the old man on the left, one hand resting on the pommel of his elegant zanpaktou even as he studied the walls with eyes elsewhere.

With a whisper across the paved floor, Ichigo stood behind the Soutaicho on the right, let his eyes sweep over their surroundings once more lingering on the shadows for only a brief moment. The past few days had been filled with a seeping tension, the kind that buzzed just out of sight but steadily grew louder filling every interaction, every breath, every morning waking up and wondering if this would be the day, saying goodbye to your loved ones as if it would be the last time.

In some ways, it made Ichigo wish the Quincy would attack already even as a thick dread seemed to fill the air around Ichigo as if he was drowning, each breath precariously tipping on his last. They had prepared, countless meetings accompanied by coffee and video calls to two different dimensions, training with fervour to be better to work together, contacting the Royal Guard, and looking to the horizon. But in the end, it felt like nothing could prepare them enough.

Ichigo shifted slightly and glanced over to Chōjirō, the lieutenant’s gaze was on the Soutaicho something hard there, strong like the earth itself in its undivided loyalty and sad in the same mournful sort of way. The elder gentleman as if sensing Ichigo’s gaze looked up and his lips quirked into the shadow of a smile accompanied by a nod and Ichigo repeated the motion. Being a lieutenant under the Soutaicho had been something close to cathartic, even for the short time it lasted, it had allowed Ichigo to step back, to talk with Chōjirō about America, to drink tea with the Soutaicho and debate ideology.

The orange-haired lieutenant shifted out of his musings as his senses caught a wave of reaitsu, building like the moment before a glacier crumbled beneath the icy sea; it held the same catastrophic nature. At the same moment, the denreishinki in Ichigo’s shihakusho began to chime, a quiet sound that was far less obtuse than Kisuke’s jaunty tune; which Ichigo knew the man had chosen to annoy everyone.

Flicking the communication device out, Ichigo opened the screen and a hologram appeared displaying Tōshirō’s youthful features. In the background stood Harribel a fierce frown accompanying both figures even as the video feed wavered and reoriented itself.

“Ichigo, the Quincy have entered Hueco Mundo, I report eight Sternritter and a full force of Quincy. Currently, the hollows are engaging the Quincy, and we are preparing for a full-frontal assault.”

Tōshirō stated in a brisk tone even as he glanced back to Harribel to confirm the information. Ichigo nodded a grim line forming across his features as he furrowed his brow and mentally calculated how many competent fighters they had stationed in Hueco Mundo. Running a hand through his hair Ichigo prayed it was none of the more overpowered Sternritter such as The Miracle and responded, “Copy that. When possible please send detail of each Sternritter to the Twelfth so we can tally them.
off. Also, make sure you activate Kisuke’s invention and don’t get cocky. Best of luck Tōshirō and don’t die.”

The young Captain nodded determination steeling his features, he glanced once at Ichigo something challenging there telling Ichigo the same advice before he clicked the end call button and the holographic disappeared. A second later, the chime began again and Ichigo answered once more, this time Tessai appeared, Uryuu and Jinta stood in the background holding onto their weapons as the kido master said, “Reporting one Sternritter, R, in Karakura. Masaki, Ryūken, and Isshin are confronting him on the outskirts of town. The twins and their friends have set up the stabilizing seals.”

Ichigo ignored the way his heart jolted in his chest as he thought of his family confronting one of the Sternritter, of what could happen to Yuzu and Karin if their parents didn’t make it through the battle, of the destruction one Sternritter could wreak in the mortal realm. He wanted to question why the Sternritter was even in Karakura, but he knew Yhwach would have sensed the Quincy there, and the man left no stones uncovered; if they hadn’t joined him they were against him.

“Copy that, please keep the Twelfth posted on any updates and don’t forget that if Isshin uses his Bankai he needs Kisuke’s infusion.”

The orange-haired Shinigami responded wincing slightly as the reaitsu that seemed to suck the very air dry drew closer. Tessai nodded eyes dark behind the glasses perched on the bridge of his nose before the call disconnected. Straightening Ichigo glanced to the Soutaicho who was still filling out reports, though there was a slowness to the movement that suggested the old man had also recognized the incoming reaitsu.

Opening the denreishinki Ichigo sent out a Soul Society wide message alerting the Shinigami of the incoming attack and to assume their posts. A minute later Unohana sent a message that one of the particularly stupid Sternritter had attacked the Fourth, The Death Dealing if she was correct, and that she was dealing with him. Ichigo replied, wishing the woman luck along with a farewell, and forwarded the message to the Twelfth before he tucked the communication device away.

They appeared suddenly and as if the whisper of a voice long forgotten; masked and silent they stood there at the end of the office even as reaitsu exploded into being around them. Slowly Ichigo began to loosen the seal binding his power as Zangetsu-Ossan’s presence hummed mournfully for a moment before Ichigo could sense Shiro beating some sense into the older spirit.

Yamamoto stood from his chair and addressed the Sternritter, questioning their identity and presence, it was all a cautious game of waiting as the silence between them stretched and stretched like a rope bridge suspected over a chasm. The small contingent of Sternritter parted and Yhwach stepped forward calm and collected, all-knowing eyes studied the Soutaicho and the two lieutenants with a gruesome smile that had haunted many of Ichigo’s nights.

The Quincy King nodded and the Sternritter dispersed in a flicker of Hirenkyaku, blue reishi lighting the air for a sparse moment before flickering out of existence, only Yhwach and Haschwalth remained. The Soutaicho stepped out from behind his desk and without words, the two opposing forces moved in a blur of motion to one of the abandoned areas of Soul Society, one that had been set aside for this battle; there were even seals in place to minimize the damage to nearby lifeforms.

With a hiss of steel, the Quincy king drew his sword, the elegant blade catching on the early afternoon light and the long shadows of the clearing, mirroring the motion the Soutaicho drew his zanpaktou fire crackling into existence. Zangetsu slid silently from its sheath to rest easily in Ichigo’s hand as he studied Haschwalth who stared straight back at him, icy blue eyes cunning and fierce with the same measure of loyalty Chōjirō held for Yamamoto.
With the rustle of a breeze, the Soutaicho and Yhwach clashed in a brilliant screech of steel and flash of sparks. Zangetsu snapped up to block Haschwalth’s blade, the two quickly disengaging before Ichigo stepped forward and they moved in a blur of reaitsu. The orange-haired Shinigami ducked an overhead swing and followed with a jab aiming for the blond’s torso. Haschwalth easily sidestepped the attack and pivoted letting his blade fly towards Ichigo’s neck, the orange-haired Shinigami let Zangetsu snap up to catch the blade and as the two grappled for a moment Ichigo was peripherally aware of the Soutaicho battling Yhwach, Chōjirō fighting beside the old man.

Up, down, over, under, Ichigo settled into the familiar dance concentrating his focus on the battle even as the air whipped from bitingly cool to blisteringly hot and Haschwalth fought with the same measure of skill. The two were forced to pause as the Soutaicho released his Shikai, a wave of heat sweeping through the air at the same moment as that grin decorated the Quincy King’s features once more.

Something tugged at the back of Ichigo’s mind, something vague and screaming and suddenly he needed to get past Haschwalth because if he could he wouldn’t let the old man die by Yhwach’s hands.

As if sensing Ichigo’s resolve Haschwalth turned and the two clashed in a fierce tangle of blades even as fire rent the air sizzling the earth around them and leaving smoke upon the sky. Wordlessly Zangetsu split into its Shikai form, the feeling of the dual blades, the differing weight, comforting in Ichigo’s hands even as Haschwalth materialized his shield and Ichigo resisted the urge to curse because the man’s Balance was annoying.

Gathering his reaitsu Ichigo channelled the crimson-tinged reaitsu along the blade and as Haschwalth spun away from an overhead assault Ichigo released the Getsuga Tensho. Haschwalth turned and caught the force of reaitsu against his shield, crystalline blue eyes widening in surprise as he was forced to sink to his knees to take the weight of the reaitsu bearing down upon him even as he absorbed it into his shield.

Ichigo activated his Hierro, straying from using his Quincy bloodline, as the blond flickered in a flash of Hirenkyaku and reappeared behind Ichigo. A Getsuga Tensho burst from the shield, a cascade of blue and white reaitsu as the orange-haired Shinigami whipped around and caught the force of his own attack on the x formation of Zangetsu.

The two opponents paused as the Soutaicho’s reaitsu rose like the crescendo in a concerto and with a final rise, the old man released his Bankai. At the same moment, Yhwach’s reaitsu also rose, swirling around the man like a thick cloak of night.

The charred corpses of the slain Quincy crawled up from the soil, the very sky seeming to bleed crimson as the inferno raged around them. Haschwalth stared for a moment at the Soutaicho’s Bankai before something like horror eclipsed his eyes, then it was gone under the force of the man’s apathy. Yhwach meanwhile was laughing, the sort of laughter that burrowed itself deep inside of Ichigo’s bones like termites spreading and echoing around his head in a familiar flashback.

The corpses surged towards Yhwach and as Ichigo prayed the old man had activated the fusion the warning bells inside his mind seemed to blare louder. Zangetsu snapped up as the brunt of Haschwalth’s not inconsiderable strength once more bore down on him; it was hard to fight the blond Quincy due to the nature of his power and his immense skill with the blade. If Ichigo cut him, the man could just Balance his misfortune and turn the wound onto Ichigo, the only means to defeat the blond was an attack that fully incapacitated Haschwalth, which with his skill was a bit difficult.

In the hemmed in space Yamamoto’s Bankai had created they moved, even as Ichigo’s eyes darted to the Soutaicho. Yamamoto was old, the Quincy King still appeared in the prime of his life, and it
was showing. Yhwach was cutting through the hordes of bodies with eyes that glowered and glowed with a hate so meticulous it froze; it was likely then the man had tried to steal Yamamoto’s Bankai. While the Soutaicho was slowing slightly, his movements and the strain of his Bankai evident even as the old man’s strength more than combatted any weakness.

Ichigo’s attention was forced to the battle before him as Haschwalth appeared in front of him, icy blue eyes narrowed in thought, likely trying to identify a pattern in Ichigo’s sword technique. The orange-haired Shinigami wished the man luck considering his teachers, all of them were complete and utter tricky bastards who had a wide variety of techniques and styles. The moment of distraction was costly, Ichigo’s attention darted to the Soutaicho as Yhwach closed in, his blade moving for the kill in what felt like slow motion only for Chōjirō to appear.

The elder Shinigami took the blade through his stomach, blood painting the air in an arc of crimson even as the elder gentleman grinned, blood staining his lips. Yhwach scowled and slid his blade out of Chōjirō, regarding the man in the same way someone would regard an ant; utterly insignificant.

Ichigo darted to Chōjirō in a mix of shunpo and Sonido so fast that there was no trace of his movement except for the stirring of the grass. Quickly Ichigo moved Chōjirō out of reach, applying pressure to the wound even though he knew it would likely be fatal. He pressed the alert medic button on his denreishinki and pressed the communication device into Chōjirō’s hands the other hand applying a quick healing kido.

The orange-haired Shinigami smiled sadly at the elder man before he was forced to whip around Zangetsu interlocked in his hands against Haschwalth’s blades even as past the blond he could see Yhwach and Yamamoto fighting in an inferno of fire and reaitsu. Channelling his reaitsu in a desperate need to give Chōjirō space and a chance to reach the Soutaicho Ichigo released a large Getsuga Tensho the crimson-tinged reaitsu seeming to merge with the sky as Haschwalth was unable to grab his shield and was forced back.

Ichigo moved forward to stand beside the Soutaicho, he could bear the heat, but just as he was within throwing distance Haschwalth reappeared a light in his eyes that Ichigo translated as intrigued and determined. They clashed, blades sparking and whipping through the air like liquid as the moved back and force and Ichigo’s eyes tracked the Soutaicho’s slowing movements.

The orange-haired Shinigami knew that the old man was likely grieving as well, for his lieutenant and for the past that had come back to haunt him, even as the old man continued to fight eyes blazing. Yamamoto knew that if he fell Ichigo could carry on the fight, that he wouldn’t let Soul Society fall. But the old man would defeat Yhwach if he was able, and if the blood dripping from the elegant white uniform was any indication, the old man was still powerful.

Ichigo darted around Haschwalth trying to draw closer as he watched Yhwach get nearer and nearer, Chōjirō’s presence steadily fading even as another weak presence drew closer to the clearing; a healer. Clenching his teeth, Ichigo threw himself into the fight against Haschwalth pushing the blond to his limit as they drew closer to the Soutaicho and Yamamoto the very force of their blows stirring the wind.

In one moment, the Soutaicho seemed to stumble and Ichigo’s breath caught. He couldn’t let it happen again damnit, couldn’t appear only at the last minute far too late, Chōjirō dead, Yamamoto dead, and Yhwach grinning that grisly smile. Once more, the orange-haired Shinigami combined Sonido and shunpo moving across the battlefield and releasing a Getsuga Tensho at the same time even as everything seemed to slow, and every inch felt like a kilometre.

In one swift movement, Yhwach stabbed his blade through the Soutaicho’s heart, the other hand halting the force of the Getsuga Tensho, the old man grasped at the blade eyes wide beneath bushy
brows before they flickered to Ichigo. The orange-haired Shinigami muffled a cry, instead of murmuring the old man’s name softly, the words carried by the breeze as the Soutaicho stepped away from the blade and stepped once towards Ichigo before sinking to his knees. Eyes that had burned like a hearth, warm and welcoming, faded and with it the Soutaicho commander of the Gotei 13 died.

Ichigo’s reaitsu snapped for a moment whirling around him like a torrent as his heart stuttered, he had failed the old man. But he would make sure they would have a body to bury, and Chōjirō could still have a chance to live. Resolution burning reminiscent of Yamamoto’s Bankai Ichigo stepped forward reaitsu flowing through his veins and around him, touching the earth and glowing in his eyes he moved out of the clearing to another and in the next moment Yhwach and Haschwalth were there as well.

Yhwach turned to him victory glowing upon his features accompanied by an interest that played upon the man’s features harshly in the afternoon light. The Quincy King regarded Ichigo for a silent moment before his lips curled into a wide grin and he greeted, “Ichigo… Kurosaki well met.”

Ichigo stiffened for a moment at the mention of his old name before he let a broad grin slip onto his own features, challenging and channelling Shiro. He had predicted the likelihood, of Yhwach, omniscient even before devouring the Soul King, knowing of his time travel. But that meant nothing, seeing the future that Ichigo was from, a future, one of many that would never occur, wasn’t going to stop Ichigo. He was going to kill the bastard and end the war because dammit he was not going to lose anyone else.

“It’s Shiba actually.”

He replied because he hadn’t been Kurosaki in a while, he wasn’t that teenager anymore. Ichigo’s reaitsu flared and he gathered it around him like a cloak letting the true weight of it reveal itself as he shifted Zangetsu. Yhwach hummed and in the blink of an eye, he was in front of Ichigo. Zangetsu caught his blade with ease and before the man could move away again Ichigo released a Getsuga Tensho, the reaitsu roared across the space between them and forced Yhwach back.

Even as the Quincy King recovered Ichigo ducked under Haschwalth’s blade and when the man aimed overhead Ichigo released a cero, the red reaitsu glinting in the air as Haschwalth caught the attack on his shield. A small crack splintered the heavy shield and the blond’s eyes widened even as the orange-haired enigma ducked under Bach’s blade and whipped around their blades clashing in a flurry of sparks.

“I had wondered who brought the changes to Soul Society, who seemed to appear in near every timeline. But it was always you I suppose.”

Yhwach stated idly as if they were conversing over wine and not battling to the death. Ichigo grinned revealing a tiny bit in the freedom of fighting with his power unbound even as he responded with a shrug as if to suggest it was all natural. Yhwach’s eye’s narrowed and before the man could prepare, Ichigo released another Getsuga Tensho followed by a cero even as he ducked under Haschwalth’s blade; they were just getting started.

X

Hueco Mundo already smelt like war, the scent of blood lingering and attracting vultures of all species for miles around, explosions shouted in the distance demanding attention and were accompanied by waves of reaitsu so thick they were visible for miles. Two forces of white, one a supposed paragon of order and society, the other wild and free clashed upon the sands before Los Noches under the watchful eyes of the moon above.
Nelliel crossed her arms over her chest as she gazed at the vast sands of Hueco Mundo, a frown tugging at the corners of her lips as in the room behind her Pesche continued to yell about battle and its correlation with death, all the while pleading that Nel stay away from the battle. The centaur Espada muffled something close to a sigh at the fighting before her as she continued to track the battlefield, noting the ebb and flow in the tide of battle and the advancement of the Quincy that was continually halted and driven back.

They had been preparing for war since Harribel had taken over ruling Los Noches after their war with Soul Society and even before that the Espada had been scrambling for power and an army under Barragan. They had a whole fighting force now of trained hollows reaching Arrancar levels, as well as the more common fodder, and had been slowly recruiting Espada level hollows. But it all did little to detract from the force the Quincy had amassed to utterly destroy Hueco Mundo.

Ichigo Shiba had appeared a few times during their war councils, outside of the communications with the Gotei 13, to observe their progress. The orange-haired Shinigami, who Nel had spoken to a few times, both during the war against Soul Society and in preparation for this war, had looked tired and the Espada could only wonder at the man’s actions. Ichigo was a strange Shinigami, likely the strangest she had met; brave, loyal, fierce, talented, sad, grieving, hollow. The list went on and Nel suspected there was far more to him than she would ever know, but she liked Ichigo nonetheless, he was fun and was always available for a game of tag.

It had been his help along with Soul Society that had prepared Hueco Mundo for war. It was likely that if the young Captain, Hitsugaya, hadn’t arrived they would be facing a greater struggled against the Quincy. But the kid was battle smart and had a good head on his shoulders, even if he was a little nervous.

It was hard to comprehend what could have been. If Hueco Mundo and Soul Society had never allied they would likely never have been able to hold off the Quincy, or even prepare for them; they would have been destroyed or enslaved.

A knock on the door pulled Nelliel from her thoughts and she turned to face the plain white door, her hand resting on the pommel of her zanpaktou as she nodded to her Fracción. Dondochakka glanced once to Nelliel with something sad in the lines of his mask before he quickly shuffled over and opened the door. Tier Harribel stood in the entryway a fierce frown decorating her usually stoic features even as an obvious line of tension set her shoulders. Nelliel nodded in greeting studying their leader carefully, observing any faint injuries as the cries of battle continued to waver through the air.

“We have a situation, I would appreciate it if you would accompany me in dealing with the Sternritter V, the Visionary.”

Harribel stated briskly, her eyes, with the same depths of the oceans, flickering to the battlefield for a moment before returning to Nel; she looked tired drawn out and worn by the war. Nelliel resisted the urge to sigh as she recalled the information on Sternritter V, wincing at the extent of the powers gifted to him by the Quincy King; the Sternritter had the literal power of imagination.

Nelliel nodded her acceptance, shifting her hand on the pommel of her zanpaktou she turned to her Fracción and commanded, “Please go and aid the commanders in the battle.”

Pesche startled at her command as if he wanted to protest leaving her alone, even as Dondochakka nodded somberly already accepting that Nelliel wouldn’t risk the lives of her subordinates in facing an opponent of the Visionary’s capability. With the bare edge of a smile curving her lips, Nelliel rested her palm on Pesche’s shoulder smiling in reassurance for a small moment before her features once more shuttered to cool determination.
Without looking back, Nelliel followed Harribel into the hallway, ignoring the cracked walls, and other remnants of the chaos that inhabited the building daily. As they made their way through the building towards the south side Harribel updated Nelliel on the situation.

“The Visionary was spotted moving towards the south wing ten minutes ago, so far no battle casualties have been reported in the area. Captain Hitsugaya is currently handling Sternritter H, and the last report we had from Starrk detailed him fighting Sternritter O.”

“Do we have a battle plan in place for Sternritter V?”

Nelliel questioned as they briskly cut through an open courtyard, Harribel paused to bark orders to one of the medical hollows who were stationed under Szayel before they continued on. As they passed through an open arch the female Espada responded, “His weakness is limited to his own imagination. If we can keep him thoroughly distracted he shouldn’t be able to focus on one of us in particular, moreover, if we convince him to imagine his own death he will die. Otherwise, we will need to be versatile.”

The other Espada nodded a frown marring her brow as she considered the loose plan they had. The Visionary was listed as one of the stronger Sternritter for a reason and they would need to approach the situation carefully.

As they neared the exit to the south wing, a woman stepped out of the shadows; she wore leather boots, her skin was dark, and her reaitsu was a strange mix of hollow and human. There was a deadly smile curved over her lips and it took Nelliel a moment to place the woman as one of the Fullbringers who had accompanied the young Captain.

The Fullbringer were all powerful enough in their own right but would best serve as support fighters in the battle against the Sternritter unless they combined forces. If Nelliel remembered correctly this one was Jackie, and her power allowed her great physical strength depending on her surroundings.

“Need some help? Hitsugaya-san reported that you were tackling the Visionary and sent me to help. If Yukio or Tsukishima aren’t still fighting Cang they’ll also join considering their powers.”

Jackie offered, dark eyes flickering to the west where her comrades were likely fighting, before returning to them with something hard there. Harribel studied Jackie for a moment of silence that was disrupted continually by the sounds of battle as if a war drum keeping the time of every wasted second. Something like approval shined in Harribel’s eyes and Nelliel quietly acknowledged that it took courage for the humans with hollow powers to be here fighting against monsters.

It also occurred to Nelliel, that Jackie and Harribel’s different powers would be well suited to each other in battle. Harribel smiled the sharp toothy smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes a little bit in a way that reminded Nelliel of the sun she had seen in the mortal world and nodded.

Jackie pushed off the wall and as one group they exited the south wing and stepped onto the ever-shifting sands of Hueco Mundo. There wasn’t much left of the battlefield, Quincy and hollow alike, covered the sand staining it a deep crimson as it seemed to spill into one another like a shifting mirage in the moonlight. Nelliel frowned at the field of death before them, wishing that the battle wasn’t inevitable for a sparse moment before she glanced up determination written across her face.

Sternritter V stood in the middle of the carnage, abstract creations and methods of destruction scattered around the battlefield as the Quincy observed everything with something pleased. He appeared young, blond and with a childish sort of face but his reaitsu belayed such an appearance, seeped in threads of something older and darker.
The Sternritter turned to face the three of them, a smile that was a very horrid imitation of pleasant settling there as he greeted, “I am Gremmy The Visionary. I turn fantasy into reality. You should think yourself lucky to be able to fight me. After all, I think I must be the strongest of all the Sternritter.”

Well, that wasn’t arrogant at all Nelliel supposed with a frown, the bravado reminding her briefly of Nnoitra during their many battles and the treachery that had almost occurred. Harribel remained impassive only raising one brow at the Quincy even as Jackie gave the Sternritter a disbelieving glance.

Sternritter V tipped his head back and began to laugh for a moment, the sound echoing and jostling in the silence in a way that seemed to disturb the unnatural stillness, even as the bodies around them were swallowed by the crimson sand. In one smooth motion, there was suddenly a meteor hurtling towards the three of them and three clones of the Sternritter standing before them all parading about declaring how they wouldn’t be able to defeat the power of imagination.

Frowning, Nelliel tilted her head and gathered her reaitsu releasing a cero that collided with the meteor and scattered it in a brilliant shatter of hot rock. Harribel unsheathed her zanpaktou with the clear ring of steel and charged forward, the air about them whipping with sand as she charged towards the Quincy. Jackie at the same moment released her Fullbring, her boots extending to her thighs along with a complete ensemble as the crimson-soaked sand decorated her boots. Nelliel unsheathed her zanpaktou and watched as Gremmy caught Harribel’s zanpaktou before she used a burst of Sonido and appeared behind the Quincy.

Her blade never reached his neck, but it distracted him and at that moment a swarm of locusts materialized from the sky diving towards her. Nelliel ducked under the swarm and as Harribel distanced herself from the Sternritter’s hold she released a cero, vaporizing the insects. Nelliel moved forward before the cero even reached the insects her blade cutting a path through the air as she moved towards the Quincy and Jackie mirrored the motion on the man’s twin.

Before they could get close a hail of bullets rained from the sky and their surroundings as canons of sand materialized out of the ground. Jackie kicked away the bullets directing them towards Gremmy who dematerialized himself and allowed the bullets to harmlessly pass through both himself and his clone. Once the Quincy had rematerialized, Nelliel appeared in front of him in a burst of Sonido while Harribel appeared behind the man, her sword swinging towards his neck with a song of death whistling on the air.

The two Espada were forced away by the gust of wind that literally picked them off their feet and tossed them away. When they landed, a wide chasm appeared between the two Espada and the Sternritter V. Trading a short glance, Nelliel brought her zanpaktou in front of her reaitsu circling her form in arcs of green that glowed ethereally and called out, “Declare Gamuza.”

Harribel repeated the motion releasing her own Resurrección as Nelliel was engulfed in a cloud of smoke and the familiar form of her Resurrección took hold. When the smoke cleared Sternritter V stared at the two female Espada in shocked surprise, likely because the Quincy’s imagination couldn’t handle the sight before him. Nelliel smiled as the chasm disappeared and before the Sternritter could garner her intent Nelliel lifted her lance swirling with vivid viridian reaitsu and sent it sailing through the air.

Sternritter V dodged the lance, the air around them crackling with electricity even as Jackie appeared behind the Quincy a kick aiming for his head. Hoping to keep his attention distracted, Nelliel charged forward summoning her lance once more as she gathered energy about the blade. Before she could reach the Quincy, the sand beneath her shifted until it was no longer sand, and she stood
amongst a pit of vipers.

The part of her that held the body of a horse shied away from the serpents even as she continued to move forward coating her lower flanks in a thick layer of Hierro to protect against poison. While she had been distracted, Gremmy had launched Jackie across the battlefield only for her to land in Harribel’s water, which was tinted crimson with the blood of their allies and enemies and turned the sand beneath them into a thick mud.

A roar shook the sand and Nelliel stared for a moment in partial shock at the large reptilian creature charging towards her before with a scowl she levelled her spear and channelled her reaitsu. With a thrust, she sent her lance sailing through the reptilian beast shredding it apart from the inside in a brilliant crackle of reaitsu.

In the meantime, Harribel and Jackie had launched a joint attack against Gremmy and his clones. Water doused the air swirling into existence in fierce tidal waves, and the mere force of Jackie’s kicks now sent the wind whipping about her as she attempted to attack the Quincy only to be halted by a hoard of bees.

Galloping forward Nelliel levelled her lance pointing towards Sternritter V’s childish features the Espada closed in and let the long blade fly only for it to be halted by a wall that sprung out of the sand. Nelliel leapt over the sand and rematerialized her lance continuing towards the Quincy as Harribel wielded her large blade against Sternritter V, water and reaitsu clashing in mid-air while Jackie dealt with the man’s clone.

While the Quincy was distracted with Harribel, Nelliel released her lance, the spear hurtling through the air and crackling silently with reaitsu. The Quincy noticed the blade only at the last moment but before it could pierce his skin it began to glitter like diamond and the lance bounced forcefully off of the Quincy but did not cut him. As soon as the diamond-like defence had dropped Harribel swung her blade the tip of it catching on Gremmy’s torso.

Sternritter V screamed at the cut his eyes wide and hateful he turned on Harribel and with a slash of his arm a wave of silver, boiling and steaming as if freshly forged, was sent towards Harribel. The shark Espada only narrowly dodged the brunt of the attack but was sent flying backwards, missing her left arm accompanied the screams of rage as the very sky seemed to churn with the Visionary’s disquiet.

Nelliel darted to the other Espada’s side quickly, observing the wound and the burns surrounding it, which had a bubble of water over it to stem the bleeding and halt any chance of bacterial infections. Harribel was grimacing in pain but her expression remained determined and cold as she regarded the Quincy before them. Nelliel said nothing, there was nothing she could offer to aid with, and bringing a healer at the moment was tantamount to murder.

Harribel shoved her way to her feet as Jackie appeared beside them, studying the lack of the shark Espada’s left arm with hard eyes that flickered to the Quincy with an anger that snapped in the woman’s reaitsu. A wave of magma rose out of the sand before them and in a flash, the three split up, Nelliel appeared behind the Sternritter V, and with a tilt of her horns she summoned her reaitsu and launched a cero.

Gremmy dodged the cero and the one Harribel had launched in front of him at the same moment. The golden reaitsu shot towards Nelliel in a brilliant spiral that rendered the sand like a tidal wave as she kept her horns bent and let the slip of a smile grace her features before she was focusing once more on the battle as she swallowed Harribel’s cero and added her own reaitsu into the mix. While Harribel kept Gremmy distracted with materialized water sharks, Nelliel zoomed in closer using Sonido.
When she was within point-blank range, reiatsu tucked close to her body as her horns practically vibrated with the reiatsu Nelliel released the charged cero. Sternritter V turned in surprise at the attack as it left a shallow cut on his left arm diverted only by the grace of a sudden stone giant who lumbered towards the centaur Espada with a roar. Nel scowled and with a flicker of reiatsu launched a cero through the stone guardian’s torso destroying the creation.

When she glimpsed the Quincy once more he was pale, the two cuts pale against his uniform for the moment until the Quincy remembered he could imagine himself healing, he was screaming about invincibility even as his eyes darted fearfully around him. Jackie paused by Nelliel the breath leaving her in large gasps as blood trickled from a head wound and she had wrapped the long scarf she wore around her calf to bind a wound there. They shared a tired smile and with a nod, the two launched forward to aid Harribel in dealing with Gremmy.

Ceaselessly, they surged forward cutting through all manner of strange creatures and inventions to attempt to wound Sternritter V, as they drew closer and became successful regardless of the invention thrown at them the Quincy began to pale sweat beading upon his brow. Nelliel hardly notice the wound on her back as she summoned her lance, she ignored the way it ached to breathe in a way that sunk deeper than her bones as she sent her lance hurtling forward only to be intercepted by a wall of cannons that fired back at her while Harribel surged forward Jackie beside her as crimson water mounted the skies.

Summoning her lance forward once more, Nelliel channelled her reiatsu this time adding the new technique she had trained during the preparation for the war. While the Sternritter was distracted by Harribel and Jackie’s dual assault, the centaur Espada released the spear. It landed in the ground before Gremmy’s feet and he let out a nervous laugh and took a breath to begin patronizing her before identical spears rose in a circle around the Quincy and with a crackle of green reiatsu surged inwards.

The Sternritter blanched as one of the spears lodged itself in his torso, the others passing through the incorporeal parts of his body. Harribel took advantage of his weakness and shot forward, sharks composed of water glistening in the moonlight above their heads as they joined the charge lusting for blood. As the sharks descended on the Quincy, Jackie took advantage by sending kick after kick towards the Quincy, whose skin glimmered like fractured glass as he screamed.

Sternritter V began to whisper about death in the cracked tones of one who stands before death and only realises it when death itself greets you. His form began to flicker as assault after assault was launched blood staining the sand in copious amounts even as creations that towered over the skies and machines, the like of which should never have existed, snapped into being only to disable in a mess of screws and metal a moment later.

Nelliel once more launched her attack but paused as she saw what looked to be a planet composed of fire hurtling towards Hueco Mundo, her eyes flickered to the Sternritter who was laughing with a desperate sort of madness. Stealing herself Nelliel summoned all of her reiatsu reserves and traded a glance with Harribel who did something of the same. A golden cero hurtled towards Nelliel screeching through the sand and turning it to glass before it was absorbed by Nelliel’s horns.

The centaur Espada staggered under the power of the cero even as she added her reiatsu and turned the attack buzzing through her veins and pounding her head towards the planet hurtling towards Hueco Mundo. With a fierce cry, Nelliel released the cero, the green and gold reiatsu twining around each other before colliding with the planet and destroying it in a brilliant blaze of light, spreading a fine layer of red dust upon the planes of Hueco Mundo.

Nelliel turned her attention to the Quincy, ignoring the blood pouring from a wound to her abdomen
as she watched the Sternritter’s form flicker one final time before finally revealing itself as a brain in a protective casing. The three of them shared a glance in the echoing silence before Harribel with narrowed eyes stabbed her blade through the protective casing destroying Sternritter V.

With an exhale that seemed unbearably loud in the sudden silence, Nelliel turned to face her companions. Harribel’s arm was still missing, and the burns pulsed an angry red though the bleeding was minimal due to the water surrounding the stump, there was a large gash dragging itself from her chin to her brow, and her right calf was a mess of scars, but she was alive. Jackie’s thigh was still bandaged, and the head wound was still bleeding, she also appeared to have injured her foot as she dragged it behind her, but there was a curl of fire flickering in her eyes.

Nelliel sagged as the own weight of her injuries made themselves apparent and the adrenaline faded. Her back ached from the shards of glass likely still embedded there, and she knew it would be a very delicate procedure to remove them. Her flanks were mostly undamaged but there was a large gash in her abdomen and the world sounded fuzzy, as if she was hearing it through a funnel.

Before they could relax a large tremor shook the sand they were standing on, rocking out beneath their feet before disappearing and slowly fading. Nelliel shivered at the accompanying waves of reaitsu that had followed the earthquakes. Harribel stared disconcertedly at the sand for a moment while Jackie stared into the distance eyes hazed with a sort blankness that spoke of a concussion.

Harribel opened her mouth to speak and she mouthed words but Nelliel heard nothing, only the dull scratchy murmur of static. The centaur Espada stared for a moment in confusion and partial shock before she shook her head and focused on Harribel’s mouth. The blond Espada frowned but began again slowly mouthing over the words; instructions to take Jackie to the med bay as well as herself.

“What about you?”

Nelliel asked but did not hear herself ask, which was extremely disconcerting, but the shock was relatively numbed by everything else. Harribel shook her head directing her eyes to the north where the pound of reaitsu could be felt even here. Nelliel frowned but nodded, knowing that Harribel would likely not rest until she was unconscious or until the war was finished, instead, the centaur silently promised to send her a healer.

Grabbing a hold of Jackie, Nelliel ignored the lingering tremors shaking the crimson-stained sands of Hueco Mundo and with a final nod to Harribel departed to the med bay. The war wasn’t over and as soon as she was healed she would be on the battlefield again. Hueco Mundo would not fall.

X

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, a lot of revelations and events occurred. Below is a list of all the battles that will occur during the war because I am not writing every single battle. However, some are already scheduled to be written, but if you guys would like to see any battles in particular, maybe because you think it would be really interesting, just leave a comment/review requesting such. I’ll only include one or two requested battles in any case. Thank you all for reading, reviews/comments are always super appreciated, till next time!

Jackie, Harribel, Nelliel vs. Gremmy | Stark vs. Drisco | Yukio vs. Bernice | Ulquiorra

Salamander!
Atelophobia

Chapter Notes

Atelophobia

The fear of not being good enough.

Hello everyone, we are here with the new chapter. There will likely only be about 4-5 more chapters before this fic is over. Also, just forewarning that I might not update next week due to a busy schedule, apologies. I hope you enjoy and read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The afternoon sunlight seemed a poor reflection of the shadows sweeping over Soul Society, swallowing the Gotei 13 and in its place rose the Quincy fortress. Those pale white walls had quickly become battle shelters, hiding soldiers from the unwary or serving as a shield. Rubble littered the streets and the recent graduates who had volunteered to aid in collecting the bodies darted throughout the streets clothed in pale grey.

It was fortunate the seals held at the boundary of the Twentieth district of Rungokai, preventing the battle from spreading to where the many citizens of Soul Society had been evacuated. As Senbonzakura swept through a wave of Quincy soldiers, pouring through the streets in a blinding white that matched the walls around them, Byakuya’s eyes tracked the position of his comrades and subordinates.

Around him, the Sixth division was defending the fourth quadrant, one of the areas of battle that had been designated to his division, it overlapped a slight bit with the Fifth’s division but Aizen’s subordinates were more than competent enough. The whole idea of separating the battle by quadrants had been suggested by Yoruichi, who had argued that it would provide a better sense of organization and morale while also allowing for each Captain to know the location of their subordinates.

Byakuya liked the plan well enough as it allowed him to fight with his subordinates while waiting for a potential Sternritter to appear. So far, the Twelfth had detailed eight Sternritter in Hueco Mundo, and one in the mortal world which left seventeen Sternritter in Soul Society. As Byakuya ducked under a hail of arrows Senbonzakura swept through the air in a curtain of glimmering pink blades, and the Kuchiki Captain darted forward in a whisper of shunpo to intercept a potentially fatal blow meant for his fourth seat.

Lieutenant Abarai was across the battlefield, aiding the Fourth division medics in their area in setting
up the med tent while also setting up a small contingent to protect the injured. Byakuya’s other lieutenant, a young woman named Harukono was a short distance away, the crackle of her Shikai, one that was electricity-based sparking through the air as she dealt with the surrounding Quincy.

“Kuchiki-taicho!”

A voice called out among the cacophony of battle rising around them, an all-consuming drowning noise that seemed to whisper over his own thoughts. Byakuya turned and greeted the short Shinigami with a nod, one of his communication officers who oversaw updating him and his lieutenants on the current status of the rest of the battle throughout Soul Society. The Shinigami bowed, breath heaving from their lungs in gasping lungful’s as Senbonzakura elegantly cut through the air blocking an arrow aiming for the messenger and retaliating in a hail of sakura blossoms.

The messenger straightened and Byakuya was finally able to see their features, there were lines of distress tugging at their eyes and a watery frown pulling at their lips as they announced steadily regardless of their own emotions, “Reporting the death of the Soutaicho at the hands of the Quincy King. Lieutenant Sasakibe is currently in the Fourth, condition critical, and lieutenant Shiba, of the First division, is engaging Yhwach at the moment. Furthermore, Unohana-taicho has retreated from the battle along with Kenpachi. There are also reports of sightings of Sternritter F in the area.”

Byakuya sucked in a shocked breath at the report, struggling to comprehend the words that seemed to toll like a bell; the Soutaicho was dead. They had all known that the death of the old man was a distinct possibility in the coming battle, it had haunted Ichigo’s eyes at night as they sat on the veranda together. But that did little to subtract from the shock of the man’s loss, a mentor to all of the upper hierarchy, the man who had built Soul Society from the ground up.

There was also the likelihood of Unohana’s passing drawing near if she had retreated to teach Kenpachi. Ichigo had spoken softly with distant eyes of the actions the Captain of the Fourth had done to prepare Kenpachi for the true extent of the Quincies’ power. The thought of the Captain, one who had treated him since he was a child and under his grandfather’s care, and later his partner allowing Ichigo to flourish once more, dying only so that another Captain could fight struck a chord.

The Captain of the Sixth tilted his head down in a silent moment of mourning, praying fervently for lieutenant Sasakibe’s survival before Senbonzakura snapped to attention. The Captain couldn’t focus on his own emotions now, he couldn’t grieve, he needed to be able to lead his subordinates and at the moment, the Kuchiki mask was a welcome interference as his eyes drifted to the messenger patiently waiting before him. Byakuya nodded once and commanded, “Please withhold the information concerning the Soutaicho’s death for the moment, it will only lower morale. The news will be revealed along with the other dead at a later time. Please return to your post after informing lieutenant Abarai and Harukono of the other relevant information.”

The Shinigami nodded and departed in a blur of shunpo, leaving Byakuya to return to the battle around him. As Senbonzakura flashed through the air around him leaving in its path trails of crimson the Captain’s thoughts darted to Ichigo, who was facing the might of both the Quincy King and his second in command alone. Byakuya would never doubt Ichigo, he had experienced the fraction of power he had released in the council room and knew that Ichigo had conquered a monster of far greater standing in his own past. But it still brushed at his senses that he wasn’t fighting side by side with Ichigo watching his back and halting any idiotically heroic ideas.

Ichigo would be fine, more than that he would win. The orange-haired Shinigami would not let Yhwach conquer and destroy Soul Society once more; even if it took his own life to halt it. And maybe that was the thought that scared Byakuya the most. He understood Ichigo, perhaps more than anyone but Kaien and knew that to Ichigo, the rest of them living didn’t measure up to his own life.
The noble only hoped that his zanpaktou would beat him senseless if he decided to follow that path.

Byakuya shivered as a chill swept through the air, the kind that wasn’t brought about by the coming winter but by something darker a presence rooted in something ill. Sharp silver eyes swept across the battlefield, noting the stiff movements of his subordinates as if they also sensed the cold presence drawing closer.

The Captain of the Sixth furrowed his brow as he recalled the information they had received on Sternritter F, The Fear, and he cursed quietly but furiously under his breath. The Quincy’s ability to induce fear simply through his presence alone was dangerous and had the ability to render many of his subordinates’ incapable of moving depending on their willpower alone. Not to mention there was the man’s Vollständig which was beyond dangerous if it was released in a populated area.

If the Sternritter decided to attack the fourth quadrant Byakuya would need to move the battle to one of the locations set aside for high casualty solo battles and leave the responsibility of leading the division on Renji’s shoulders. He wasn’t worried about Renji leading the Sixth, the man was already ready to be a Captain, had been for a long while. The lieutenant was brash and headstrong, but he had a strong moral code and worked well with his subordinates. It was likely that after the war there would be a few positions open.

Shaking away his thoughts Byakuya observed the battlefield once more noting the fear that was beginning to permeate the air, affecting Quincy and Shinigami alike in pale skin and wide eyes. Byakuya frowned and flared his reıatsu ignoring the dredges of fear that were stirring in his own chest, pulling at his lungs and making his palms sweat where they grasped Senbonzakura’s hilt.

A flash of crimson out of the corner of his eye caught Byakuya’s attention and he turned to face Lieutenant Abarai whose Shikai was already released and sweeping through the air even as the man waited to be addressed. Byakuya nodded once in greeting and Renji repeated the gesture a frown furling across his features and highlighting the tattoos decorating his skin as the lieutenant responded, “The temporary med bay has been set up, so far ten wounded, one critical injury. Sir… there were reports of a Sternritter nearby and with the reıatsu…”

“Thank you, lieutenant. I will be dealing with the Sternritter in a separate location if they choose to reveal themselves. In that situation, please take command of the division.”

Byakuya instructed to the hesitant words, muffling a smile under icy control at the temporarily flabbergasted expression the lieutenant displayed before he nodded familiar determination settling into place. The red-haired Shinigami bowed before he departed in a burst of shunpo even as Senbonzakura snapped into the air and coalesced around a thorn that had been flying through the air towards his chest.

In archway of a ruined building stood Sternritter F, he was dressed in the Quincy uniform consisting of overbearingly white, had long dark hair, and eyes that watched everything with the interest of a predator observing its prey. Byakuya did not meet the Quincy’s eyes even as he stared at the man Senbonzakura hovering protectively around Byakuya as a fierce aura of pure fear seemed to seep into the air.

“Byakuya Kuchiki, a man famed for displaying no emotion, not even fear. I wonder what fear will look like upon your features. After all, no one can resist fear, it is everywhere in every aspect of our lives. Some fear can be overcome through experience. Those who know battle often come to believe this. 'Fear that comes from reason’ is kind. It can be conquered. But true fear is without reason. It is not an emotion, but an instinct. True fear occurs without reason, without bounds. We cannot escape from our instincts.”
As Nödt stated, his voice, the kind like the rustle of dead leaves across the pavement, drifted out from behind his mask slow and like a poison in the way it burned as the Sternritter studied Byakuya. The Captain of the Sixth silently stared at the Quincy an expression of bland apathy on his features pulling tightly on his control. Byakuya experienced emotions as keenly as anyone else he simply had an excellent poker face as Ichigo liked to declare when he was feeling particularly humorous; it was a necessary mask to maintain.

“Just because fear exists does not mean it conquers all, that is what bravery and courage are for.”

Byakuya responded politely, slipping sideways in a burst of shunpo as a thorn settled itself in the wall where his head might have been. As Nödt stared at Byakuya for a moment with squinted eyes before the Quincy shook his head the battle continuing to rage and clatter around them.

“Fear is prevalent always, it is part of the very basic human nature. Fight or flight, a fear of the unknown, the unseen. Humans are weak with fear, they stop moving, their hearts beat faster, they begin to sweat but they stand still and await fear. All humans succumb to fear eventually.”

Sternritter F lectured with the curves of something like a smile visible in the planes of his mask. Idly, the man pulled out a Quincy cross, black as onyx, that glinted sharply in the afternoon sunlight. Byakuya quirked a brow, pretending at curiosity even as he pressed the small button attached to the hilt of katana. It was the measure that allowed for the release of hollow reaitsu within the Captain and lieutenant’s who had Bankai, it was the measure that would prevent the Quincy in front of him from stealing Senbonzakura’s Bankai.

Byakuya disappeared in a flash of shunpo appearing in one of the abandoned fields, knowing As Nödt would follow after he had laid an interesting enough bait for the Quincy. A moment later, with a whisper of Hirenkyaku, the Quincy in question appeared, observing the fields with a furrow of his brow even as Senbonzakura swirled around the Captain of the Sixth. With a flicker of reaitsu, six thorns shot through the air towards Byakuya.

The Captain of the Sixth narrowly dodged the thorns, using shunpo to scatter himself across the battlefield even while Senbonzakura halted any thorn that drew to close to his body. As the pink blades shimmered in the air, Byakuya used shunpo to appear behind As Nödt Senbonzakura swirling around its hilt. Sternritter F turned at the last moment, his mask creased in some semblance of a smile as he revealed the thorn in his hand.

Byakuya darted away using shunpo to enhance his movements even as Senbonzakura narrowly blocked yet another one of the thorns. Byakuya knew that if he was hit with one of the thorns it would spread the Quincy’s gifted power of fear like a poison to his veins, Byakuya couldn’t afford that. Standing a short distance away, Byakuya gathered his reaitsu and while As Nödt was watching cast a byakurai.

The Sternritter blocked the attack with a few of his thorns, bright sparks of blue clashing against pink before they were once more following Byakuya. Scowling the Captain of the Sixth gathered Senbonzakura about himself forming a shield as he surged forward moving towards the thorns and consequently As Nödt. The Quincy reared back for a moment before he let Senbonzakura cut into his skin, the tiny blades bounced harmlessly off of the man’s blut vein and Byakuya quickly used shunpo to appear a short distance away.

Before the Captain of the Sixth could regain his footing, he felt the prick of one of the thorns. With a building sort of horror, Byakuya glanced to his ankle where the threads of fear spread across his ankle in thick black.

The fear that swallowed Byakuya was like the sea, unfathomable and inescapable, it was the fear of
the end of this battle, of the war. What the dead would look like, cold corpses laid out never to walk
again or smile. The kind of fear that burrowed into one’s veins so that he could see as he sunk to his
knees in his own arms that of his sister, Rukia, crystal eyes lifelessly blank with the quiet somberness
of death. Blood staining his hands staining his veins filling his mouth and the taste on his tongue as
Rukia crumbled to ash in his hands the bodies of the Gotei 13 scattered around him calling his name
tugging at his shihakusho demanding he joins them.

Then Ichigo was in front of him, brown eyes that were always warm burning with a determination
and life that had never dulled in all the years he had known him, were gone, lifeless and empty in a
way that reminded Byakuya of their first meeting. The haunted look in Ichigo’s eyes when they had
stumbled upon each other in the garden and the orange-haired Shinigami had relived Byakuya’s
death. Kami, he was afraid of death because of what it would do to Ichigo. Ichigo whose hair was
dull not the brilliant orange, who would never accuse him of death, who fear couldn’t touch.

Byakuya grabbed onto Ichigo, the colour of the sunset, his smile, the fire in his eyes and the warmth
of his hands when they cupped his cheeks and rose to his feet, breathing away the fear attempting to
craw and sink into his mind like maggots. Byakuya was afraid of losing Ichigo, but he wasn’t afraid
of death and he wouldn’t let it claim him today. Grasping the hilt of Senbonzakura Byakuya gathered
his reaitsu and lifting his eyes from beneath his bangs Byakuya dropped the blade and said,
“Senbonzakura Kageyoshi.”

Reaitsu exploded outwards and the Sternritter stopped where he had been closing in on the Captain
and stared in what Byakuya presumed to be shock as the glowing pink blades magnified by a
thousand and coalesced into a hurricane of gleaming blades around Byakuya. The shock quickly
faded from Äs Nödt’s features and he pulled out his Quincy medallion spinning it once more and
attempting to activate it’s Bankai stealing ability.

The Captain of the Sixth smirked faintly, the feel of the hollow reaitsu simmering beneath his skin,
Ichigo’s reaitsu. Äs Nödt stared once more as nothing occurred before his eyes narrowed studying
Byakuya who pulled the hollow reaitsu to the surface where it intermingled with his own and let his
eyes flash acrid gold before Senbonzakura dissolved into a storm swirling towards Sternritter F.

Most of the blades did little to pierce the Quincy’s blut vein, but more than a few blades cut the
man’s skin leaving shallow cuts. When Senbonzakura retreated, Äs Nödt stared at Byakuya with a
flicker of something drawn in his eyes before the Quincy’s reaitsu began to gather like a pestilence
on the horizon, the Quincy rolled back his eye and with a final burst of reiatsu released his
Vollständig.

The Captain of the Sixth’s eyes had been closed the moment the man had begun to gather the reaitsu
for his Vollständig as Senbonzakura fluttered around him a few of the blades resting against his skin
as the presence of the Sternritter grew. Before the Quincy could enact the dome that contained his
eyes Byakuya activated Senkei, allowing Senbonzakura to cut him as the tiny blades coalesced and
surrounded them forcing the two opponents into a closed space.

“I will not kill you. Under no circumstances will I bring about your death! I will not allow you to
lose consciousness or even your sanity! I will submerge you in an ocean of pain and fear and cause
you to live out an eternity wishing for the bliss of death!”

Äs Nödt intoned in front of Byakuya his voice booming but still crackling with the rustles of dead
leaves. Byakuya narrowed his eyes but kept them closed trusting in Senbonzakura and his reaitsu
sensing abilities; it made him recall the days at the academy where he and Ichigo had trained like this.
Grasping one of his blades, Byakuya darted forward in a bloom of shunpo and let Senbonzakura
guide his hands as the blade sliced cleanly through the Quincy’s blut vein.
A shout of pain reached Byakuya’s ears, but he gave the Quincy no time to react as he darted forward once more in a rapid burst of shunpo that would make Yoruichi proud; not that that was a concern of Byakuya’s. Senbonzakura sliced cleanly through the air only to encounter Ås Nödt’s hand, Byakuya dropped the blade and disappeared in a burst of shunpo. The Captain of the Sixth studied his opponent without eyes, using his reaitsu to observe the wound even as Senbonzakura hissed angrily in his mind at the damage their opponent had wrought.

Gathering his reaitsu, Byakuya released Ikka Senjinka, the Senkei swords lining the air around them swirled together before reforming and diving towards the Sternritter F. The Captain remained alert, his reaitsu following the blades as they slid past Ås Nödt’s defences and attacked him in unison, the feel of crimson in the air accompanying the motion.

Silence lingered for only a moment before there was the horrible sound of skin splitting apart, it was accompanied by a torrent of reaitsu that whipped around Byakuya and tore at Senbonzakura crying out in fear as Ås Nödt transformed. The Senkei shattered around Byakuya, Senbonzakura surging forth to coat Byakuya in its blades as Sternritter F’s large hand crashed towards Byakuya.

The pink blades surged forward blocking the assault even as Byakuya darted out of the way of the attack only to pause as a familiar reaitsu made itself known standing beside him. For a moment a desperate fear flickered in his veins, primal and all-consuming as his hand reached out to tangle with the Shinigami next to him. A familiar cool reaitsu washed over Byakuya’s senses, sweeping the fear away with it and his eyes flickered open to glimpse Rukia’s features knowing that the Sternritter’s fear was powerless.

The young lieutenant was staring at Byakuya in obvious concern, that familiar furrow to her brow that had always endeared itself to Byakuya on Hisana, present on youthful features highlighting fierce determination in crystal blue eyes. Byakuya nodded once to show he was okay, though Rukia’s expression of disbelief belayed the fact that he likely appeared far from okay.

A roar drew the two siblings’ attention to Ås Nödt whose large form, something out of the horrifying tales Ichigo had brought from the mortal world, turned eyeballs melting from their sockets onto the two Kuchiki siblings. Rukia winced for a moment, fear flickering across her features before her expression hardened into a determination as solid as ice, she turned to Byakuya a question in her eyes.

Staring at the Sternritter before them Byakuya nodded, he was reluctant to put his sister in danger; he did not want to live the terrifying nightmares he had seen. But the sooner they dealt with the Sternritter F, the sooner he could return to his division or be available to help other captains, the sooner the war would end, and less would die.

As the Quincy turned its attention towards the two and raised one large arm, Rukia released her Bankai, the field around them slipping into ice as a chill ghosted over Byakuya before disappearing. Rukia’s Bankai was beautiful, and Byakuya would never not be amazed by it as ice crawled up Ås Nödt’s torso and engulfed the Quincy in a layer of ice so thick that the Quincy would be hard pressed to break it in a thousand years.

Byakuya allowed his zanpaktou to return to its Shikai before he returned his attention to Rukia who was slowly releasing her Bankai, the delicate process leaving steam upon the air as the older brother carefully stood in front of his sibling. As Rukia continued to inhale and exhale her reaitsu flowing
like the first thaw of spring Byakuya’s eyes darted to Soul Society and he prayed that Ichigo was alive; fear could be all-consuming, but life was just the same and he sure as hell wasn’t done living.

X

Yuzu frowned at the seal as it finally settled into place, a wave of kido gentle and hardly noticeable settling over Karakura partially completing the barrier. Karin was standing beside Yuzu staring at the seal with a frown that tugged at the corner of her lips and furrowed her brow in worry. The blond couldn’t help but feel the same emotions thrumming beneath the surface of her mind as she focused on completing the kido as Urahara had instructed her.

The blond scientist had sat down with the twins before he had left, Athena grey eyes dark and tired in a way that the man’s insomniac tendencies couldn’t hope to achieve, as he surveyed the two of them. Karin and Yuzu weren’t ignorant, they had heard the whispered mutters their mother spoke to herself when she thought no one but Isshin was listening, the way her eyes glanced to the two of them with something like fear.

They felt it as well. As much as the twins were now trained in the Shinigami arts, they had been trained first in the Quincy arts alongside Uryū. The first time the Quincy King had awoken in the early depths of January Yuzu had shot awake, her blut vein glowing faintly in the darkness as Karin grasped at her chest. They had known then that war was coming because their mother had told them the stories when they had been small, about the war between the Quincy and the Shinigami, the quest for balance, and then revenge.

Urahara had known this, he had studied the two of them for a quiet moment, something like pride there at what he saw before he placed a thick manila folder on the table. The scientist had then proceeded to explain everything, from Soul Society’s battle plans to the potential cataclysmic event on the horizon, to their parents’ place in everything.

Karin had been near furious when Urahara had revealed that their parents along with Ryūken wanted to take on whatever Sternritter entered Karakura (and there would be one with the amount of Quincy in the town who were not loyal to the Quincy King) alone. Yuzu had wondered what their parents thought they would be doing during the battle. Sitting at home playing video games?

Urahara must have suspected that the twins, even without the information he had given them, would join the battle in the end regardless of anything else. Both Yuzu and Karin had known that Urahara wouldn’t let them anywhere near the Sternritter regardless. Instead, the scientist had given them the important task of setting up the seals that would prevent the destruction of the mortal world or an influx of reaitsu, in case of emergencies.

The man had also known that their friends wouldn’t sit idly by during the war and had offered that if any lower level Quincy accompanied a Sternritter into the mortal world they were to handle it. The peace offering had satisfied neither of the twins when they considered the fact that their parents were risking their lives to protect their children against a foe who was likely far stronger than them.

Yuzu would also readily admit that the thought of returning to an empty home, of burying both her mother and father scared her in a way that reminded her of the night by the riverbank. Karin felt the same way, though she had hidden it behind a fierce challenging glower. Urahara had laughed, the mirthful sound that always rung a touch too hollow as he flapped a fan in front of his features in that demeaning and distracting way.

Eventually, under the force of their twin unimpressed gazes, the man had conceded and allowed that if Tessai reported in that aid was needed they would be able to join the fight. The answer had placated Karin, even though they both knew that if they thought their parents needed them they
would be there regardless of Tessai radioing in.

Urahara had nodded his eyes straying to the manila folder for a long moment before he had glanced up once more, seriousness carved in grim lines on his features the scientist had sighed and added, “This a war that will take many lives and change many things. If Ichigo doesn’t return, he asked me to give this to you.”

The scientist had handed over a package bound in brown paper with their names on the top before ushering them out the doorway, promising to say goodbye before he left for Soul Society the next day. The package was still sitting unopen in their room, plain and simple yet seeming to hold the world in its hands.

Yuzu turned from the pole where they had stuck the seal and glanced to Karin whose eyes surveyed the surrounding streets carefully. Letting her reaitsu reach out, Yuzu found Chad and Nozomi fighting against a few of the Quincy that had accompanied the Sternritter R into the mortal world. Uryū and the Bount twins were fighting in another part of town near the abandoned warehouses. Beyond that, in the woods bordering Karakura Yuzu could feel their parents and the Sternritter fighting, reaitsu scaling across the sky like fire consuming oxygen.

Karin glanced to Yuzu, deferring as always in the matter of reaitsu detection, her hand resting on the pommel of her zanpaktou. The blond Kurosaki nodded once in a reassuring manner confirming everything was okay, earning a small slip of a smile.

The walkie-talkie attached to Yuzu’s hip buzzed and crackled before she pulled the device out and pressed the button and replied, “Karin and Yuzu reporting in.”

“This is Tessai, are all the seals set in place?”

The kido master asked, and Yuzu could hear a dull thud in the background accompany the man’s voice. Karin held up the final seal, the flimsy piece of paper rippling lazily in the evening wind earning a small grin as the raven-haired twin shook the paper indicatively.

“We are on the final seal, it will be up in five minutes.”

Yuzu responded, earning a quick reply before Tessai returned to whatever important task held his attention; likely setting up the seals. Sharing a quick nod with Karin, one that had the older twin’s eyes lighting up the blond twin kept a careful eye on her parents’ reaitsu as they raced over the rooftops towards the final location for the seal.

Yuzu stepped away from the seal, her reaitsu swirling around her as she pressed the centre another wave of reaitsu rippling with the feel of Kisuke’s cool presence and Tessai’s calm swept over the area. Her hand paused where it was outstretched as she detected a sudden burst of reaitsu from where their parents were fighting, it wavered something like a distress single in her mind and her eyes flickered to the battle in sudden worry.

Chad and Nozomi were finishing their battle, Uryū and the Bount twins were delivering their captives to the Shōten so, Yuzu didn’t hesitate to toss the walkie-talkie to her sister and silently command, “Contact Tessai, tell him the seals are up and that we’re going to help against R.”

Karin blanched for a moment her own gaze darting towards the forest bordering Karakura before she nodded, her lips settling into a thin line as she clenched her hand against the walkie-talkie before opening the channel. Yuzu directed her focus towards the area where Ryūken, Isshin, and Masaki were fighting, wondering sullenly if during the process of activating the seal she had missed something potentially life-threatening.
Yuzu scowled when she could only faintly sense the condition of the battle even as Karin stepped up beside her and passed the walkie-talkie, her expression suggesting that Tessai had disagreed with their decision; but the man wasn’t there, and they didn’t need the twins elsewhere. Yuzu took the walkie-talkie back and with a nod, they appeared on the nearby roof in a flash of shunpo before continuing towards the battlefield.

The smell of smoke grew stronger as they drew closer, and Yuzu could spot the flicker of flames on the horizon though it seemed to be contained to the area that had been sealed for the battle which was a relief. Karin crouched in a nearby tree just outside of the seal and Yuzu landed beside her studying the seal for a moment before she pressed her hand to it and whispered the incantation that would allow them to slip through without disturbing the seal.

It was one that was likely complex enough for most Shinigami to be unable to bypass it, but Kisuke had left his notes out for a reason and Yuzu was a quick study. Together the twins slipped through the barrier, a thin blue membrane appearing along with the feel of water sliding down her spine before they were clear. Instantly, the sounds of battle became louder and the twins followed the sound darting through the forest as if they were playing tag with Yoruichi again.

The closer they drew to the fight, the more their surroundings began to show obvious signs of battle, there were whole trees felled and lying on the ground, bullet holes that tore through earth and plant alike, and a thick scent of fire. As they reached a clearing in the forest, Yuzu could see a flash of her mother’s hair, the same colour of her own as a Quincy arrow materialized and disappeared.

It looked bad as they moved closer. Their mother was leaning against a tree, her bow shimmering in the pale evening light even as blood trickled from a head wound and she gasped for breath as her eyes tracked their opponent. Ryūken stood still half cloaked in shadows at the end of the clearing even as the twins could see the man’s exhaustion like a physical burden as their uncle launched arrow after arrow.

Isshin was fighting in close combat with the Sternritter R, Engetsu sending waves of fire that slammed harmlessly against the man’s blut vein as the Quincy disappeared in a burst of Hirenkyaku only for his gun to be caught on Engetsu broad edge. Their father was also clearly injured, blood dripping from his torso in a way that was evident as he shielded that side, even though Yuzu concluded it was likely he had cauterized the wound with his zanpaktou to prevent blood loss.

Sternritter R on the other hand, hardly looked winded, there was a cut on his cheek, and perhaps underneath the folds of his uniform, but overall the man clearly held the upper hand. The twins traded a glance looking at each for a moment in inaudible conversation, questioning whether they intervened or allowed the battle to play out until their parents needed them.

In the second, they had looked away from the battle, the Sternritter had fired a Heilig Pfeil at their mother. Masaki who was standing only with the aid of the tree obviously wouldn’t have been able to move in time, in her place stood Isshin, a hole in his lower abdomen, likely in an area that wouldn’t do critical damage; that is if Isshin was using the knowledge he had gained as a doctor.

Immediately, the twins dropped from their perch in the trees to land in front of the Sternritter. They knew that their family behind them could keep fighting, but Yuzu and Karin were fresh, and it was far more important that Isshin received healing. Yuzu glanced once over her shoulder once to Ryūken who was staring at the twins with narrow eyes that darted around as if expecting his son to appear from the foliage, before landing on Masaki who was hunched over Isshin. The older Quincy nodded once in understanding moving to transport their parents away and Yuzu returned her attention to their opponent.

Sternritter R studied the two of them with eyes narrowed behind the lens of his glasses before he
questioned in general curiosity, “Is Soul Society sending children to fight their battles now?”

Karin bristled at the perceived insult to her person even as Yuzu only shook her head and with a smile summoned her Quincy bow, the blue reiatsu luminescent in the dawning dusk. The Quincy’s eyes widened at the sight of her Quincy bow even as Karin drew her zanpaktou. The blond twin shared a quick glance with her sister as the Sternritter studied the two in silence before he lifted his guns and in a flicker of reiatsu a hailstorm of bullets shot forward biting into the earth.

Yuzu darted away using Hirenkyaku to pause in the air as she gathered her reiatsu and released a string of arrows. Karin meanwhile, had shot underneath the storm of bullets bringing her zanpaktou in front of her to deflect any bullets that circled towards her. The Sternritter ducked away from the older sibling’s overhead strike and in a flicker of Hirenkyaku appeared behind Yuzu, who had already gathered her reiatsu and turned to the man with her hands glowing and cast Shakkahō.

The Quincy flew backwards, the attack hardly scoring his skin as his blut vein became apparent, the blue veins tracing his neck and arms. Karin and Yuzu shared a quick glance, knowing they couldn’t afford to prolong the battle. Isshin, Masaki, and Ryūken had likely struggled against the Sternritter because they were out of practice, it had been years since they had fought anything other than hollows, but that still did little to detract from the strength of their opponent in front of them.

Karin brought her zanpaktou in front of her as Sternritter R watched on impassively while reiatsu swept through the air in heavy currents. Silently, Karin called out her release phrase the sword in her hands disappearing and reappearing in the form of familiar gauntlets, Yuzu also felt the shift of her zanpaktou, the familiar weight of the Gunbai against her hip. Before the Sternritter could prepare himself, Karin launched forward ducking under a hasty shot and letting her fist connect with the elder gentleman’s torso.

The Sternritter flew back only to land on his feet, his guns whipping out reiatsu discharging and gathering on the air like lightning before two bullets shot forward. Karin caught one of the bullets on her gauntlets, the strength of it pushing her heels into the earth and dragging her back even as another bullet shot towards Yuzu.

The blond twin ducked underneath the bullet and allowed it to connect with the tree behind her as she gathered her own reiatsu and released a volley of arrows. The Sternritter dodged each arrow with a light fluid grace that belayed his elderly appearance. The Quincy adjusted the glasses perched on the bridge of his nose and slid out of the way of Karin’s kick responding with a jab of his gun towards her torso that she only narrowly dodged.

Yuzu gathered her reiatsu and cast a byakurai followed by another volley of arrows as Karin shot forwards once more. The Sternritter dodged from underneath Karin’s attack, narrowly escaping the byakurai, only to have one of Yuzu’s arrows pin the man to a nearby tree. The Sternritter struggled against his bonds for a moment, attempting to pull the arrow from his shoulder only to hiss at the feel of the foreign reiatsu.

The man turned his eyes to the twins, quietly assessing beneath a cold façade as if seeing that while they were indeed children they were powerful. Yuzu wondered if the man had made the connection between his previous opponents and the twins; it wasn’t hard.

With a grimace, the Sternritter pulled the arrow from his shoulder, crimson staining his uniform before his blut vein halted the bleeding. Sternritter R gathered his reiatsu around himself in a motion that rustled the trees and shifted through the stalks of grass before he intoned, “Grimaniel.”

Reiatsu rushed over the man forming large azure wings that hovered ethereally behind his back, and over his head, a halo appeared like a crown. This was the Quincy Vollständig, a technique that Yuzu
and Karin had only begun to practice with Uryū under the careful guidance of their parents and on occasion Ichigo. The twins shared a glance, knowing that in Shikai they wouldn’t stand a chance against their opponent.

Yuzu appeared beside Karin with a flicker of reaitsu and delicately crossed her blade over Karin’s gauntlets reaitsu whipping around the twins in a fierce wave of crimson and azure that seemed to fill the sky as the older sibling called out, “Bankai, Baransu no tentai Senkōgetsu (Celestial bodies of balance piercing moon).”

A thick fog rolled through the forest accompanied by a humidity that seemed to wrap itself around everything it touched. Yuzu tilted her head as their Bankai washed over them, fire and ice perfectly balanced swirling about the atmosphere coating the ground in a thin layer of frost even as humidity and steam filled the air. With a forceful gust of reaitsu, the fog around their opponent cleared and he stared at the twins with narrowed eyes, his glasses tucked away.

When they released their Bankai they held no visible weapons, and their shihakusho faded from ebony to a cloth that shimmered between red and blue. Yuzu exhaled, her breath appearing in a misty cloud before her even as smoke curled around Karin’s shoulders. With a flicker of reaitsu, Karin dissolved into the steam drifting about the forest and appeared behind the Sternritter a blade of pure fire appearing in her hands.

The Sternritter’s eyes widened in surprise even as he flew back, his wings lifting him into the air, and fired his guns. Karin stood still and let the bullets pass through her, fire flickering about the non-existent wounds where the bullets had entered her torso. While the Sternritter was distracted Yuzu sunk into the ice beneath her feet and appeared a short distance from the Quincy, a Gunbai materializing in her hands she sent the bladed fan towards the man.

The Sternritter disappeared in a flicker of Hirenkyaku so fast it appeared as if the frost covered grass had merely shifted in a light breeze. The Gunbai circled back to Yuzu’s hands even as she ducked an overhead sweep of the man’s wings and sunk into the frost beneath her feet.

Frowning, the Quincy pulled out a medallion with a Quincy cross emblazoned on the front, something like an apology in cynical eyes as he activated the device that Kisuke had spoken of, one that was meant to steal Bankai. Yuzu felt the strange draining pull tugging at the icy core of her being, the tundra of the arctic north as if something even colder from outside the atmosphere pulled at her own ice.

Suddenly, the draining sensation stopped, something jarring welling up inside Yuzu forcing away the foreign reaitsu. The Sternritter stared for a moment in shock at the twins before Karin merely grinned bright and feral and disappeared into the steam. The Sternritter shook away his shock and launched into a quick Hirenkyaku.

The man reappeared where Yuzu had disappeared, but she simply ducked as Karin appeared from the steam fire curling around her features as she brought her blade overhead. Two bullets exploded from Karin’s back, azure reaitsu filling the air even as Karin landed and continued to move forward prompting Sternritter R to use his wings to appear underneath a copse of trees further away.

Their Bankai allowed the twins to remain immaterial as long as they touched their designated element, for Yuzu that meant the ice coating the earth, and for Karin the steam swirling around the atmosphere. Their very beings were composed of ice and fire, allowing them to utilize the element whenever necessary at the touch of their fingers.

The battle moved back and forth in a strange game of outlasting as the Sternritter continued to try to defeat the twins and they in kind tried to knock the man out. In a burst of reaitsu, Karin appeared in
front of the Quincy while Yuzu appeared behind the man and knocked the blunt end of a katana formed of ice into the man’s skull in a location that would not cause a concussion but would ensure unconsciousness.

The Quincy crumpled to the ice-covered earth and Yuzu exhaled shakily as they slowly released their Bankai, her nails turning a pale blue while across from Yuzu a high flush dusted Karin’s cheeks. Gasping quietly Yuzu fumbled with shaking hands, exhaustion dragging its weighty claws through her veins as she pulled out the walkie-talkie and called Tessai.

“Reporting the defeat of Sternritter R, aid is needed for clean up.”

Yuzu stated before she slumped to the thawing earth keeping a careful eye on their downed opponent as Karin sidled up beside Yuzu and rested her head on the blond’s shoulder. Silently, the young Kurosaki entangled her fingers with Karin’s and stared at the forest wondering how Soul Society was doing, if their brother was still okay if he would return. She had to hope Ichigo would return, that everything would be okay.

Exhaling softly as the chill seeped into her skin began to fade slightly Yuzu squeezed Karin’s fingers and muffled the grin playing across her lips. They had defeated one of the Sternritter when their parents hadn’t been able to. Kisuke was right, they had grown stronger, and they would continue to grow stronger so that they would be able to protect everyone no matter what came their way.

X

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. Regarding the twins Bankai, there are a few things that weren’t really explained, for example, the twins are still young so like Tōshirō the full extent of their Bankai isn’t available to them yet. Furthermore, I see it that they’re also able to switch their elements but only once in battle. I also kind of followed the thought process of the twins’ separate natures i.e. Yuzu is calm and grounded, whereas Karin is very furious and free. Anyways, I hope you enjoyed reading both battles, reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Pluto!
Hey everyone, welcome back. I apologize for the short break, the last week was super crazy busy, but we are back now for the final stretch. In this chapter, there are two reader requested battles that were interesting to write. I hope you enjoy!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

X

Sosuke’s gaze flickered around his surroundings with a cynical observation of the ruined buildings crumbling around the scientist and serving as shelters for the platoon of Shinigami scattered about the rubble. For the moment there was a respite, a short breath of pause where the air was hung with a stillness that beckoned death closer. Kyoka Suigetsu’s presence rippled in his mind like the gentle waves of the broad and never-ending ocean as he tracked the various reaitsu presences scattered around him.

A pale grey wisp of fabric caught Sosuke’s eyes and he watched as one of the recent graduates stood up, a body clad in a white stained to grey by their surroundings in the Shinigami’s arms before they darted towards the med barracks. With a minute sigh, he ran a hand through his hair pushing back the curls threatening to fall into his eyes as he adjusted his glasses and wondered how the barriers they had created would hold.

The scientist wondered how they were doing in the middle of the Kami forsaken war. All those he had come to cherish once he had allowed himself to make connections, he could feel some of them only faintly in the mass cacophony of reaitsu that filled Soul Society, and of others, he could feel nothing. Ichigo was like the sun in the midst of it all, forced against the might of the Quincy King like a beacon of warning to all living.

Sosuke almost desired to be there, to see if their theories had been true, to see Ichigo’s Bankai and the power Yhwach possessed. But even for all the power Sosuke had amassed, it was a drop in the ocean compared to the might of those two; it was something he had struggled to acknowledge before Kisuke had given him that particularly unimpressed glance.

A clatter of rubble caught the Captain’s attention and he watched in stillness as a white-clad figure appeared from the shadows of a building, a Quincy bow glimmering and zapping about like electricity. The Quincy lilted to the side for a moment before with a sudden snap of reaitsu there was
an arrow hurtling forward, cutting the air in half and screaming its intent. Sosuke squinted and let his katana glide through the air as effortlessly as water, cutting the arrow in half.

In a flicker of reaitsu, the Captain of the Twelfth appeared behind the Shinigami and pressed the hilt of Kyoka Suigetsu to his opponent’s head in a quick stroke and a burst of kido. The Quincy slumped and Sosuke stared for a moment at the limp body in his arms then flared his reaitsu and passed the body onto one of his subordinates.

As the body was carried away the Captain of the Twelfth observed his subordinates scattered around the area, checking the perimeter or huddled in small groups, there was an element of fear to the air around them, the sort of dread that festers in a battlefield. But beneath that, there was still the determination and will Sosuke expected of the Shinigami beneath his command.

A split second and bare whisper of reaitsu was the only warning Sosuke had before he threw up a kido shield covering the broken courtyard as a rain of Quincy arrows, with all the density and mass of a fireball, collided against his shield; it would have destroyed them without it. The Captain quirked his lips into a frown at the pull on his reaitsu and furrowed his brow as he maintained the kido, a pale green against a field of blue reaitsu exploding like mini supernovas while the Shinigami scattered for a moment like headless chickens before forming into small squadrons.

One Shinigami dashed out of the command base, clutching a radio to his chest and sprinting with a speed that belayed important news. The messenger halted in front of Sosuke and saluted once before waiting silently to be addressed. The Captain of the Twelfth grimaced as the force of the attack from above was increased by something his reaitsu reserves rushing to shore up his defence even as he nodded with strain at the messenger.

“Taicho, we’re receiving reports of Sternritter C at the front line of the Quincy Attack. It is presumed he is trying to take the Second quadrant on orders of the Quincy King.”

The Shinigami reported in a blur of words that Sosuke nearly toned out as he focused on the reaitsu he could now clearly sense as the Sternritter while maintaining the kido; the force of the attack finally began to dissipate. Sosuke nodded calculating for a split second considering the geography before he instructed, “Please inform the Third division of the attempted attack. Additionally, please repeat my orders to the Twelfth division Shinigami. They are to maintain a battle line starting at point twenty, advancement of Quincy forces is not an option, permission to use battle plans three and sixteen is active.”

With a nod and a grimace, the messenger darted away in a blur of reaitsu his command echoing in the kido communicators Sosuke had created when a fit of boredom had struck. The Shinigami around Sosuke sprung into action at his words and as the last of the attack faded away. Sosuke dropped the kido and watched with mild interest as a large force of Quincy, all in a once-pristine but now stained white marched forward in a heavy rhythm that cracked against the pavement below their feet.

A large figure cloaked in white lingered behind the soldiers marching forward in uniform similarity, its appearance hidden beneath a white cloak but unmistakable nonetheless. Sosuke arched a brow and supposed it was for the best that he was dealing with one of the more intricate and challenging Sternritter, as supposed to a Captain who was unsuited towards the Sternritter C’s nature.

Of course, it was only chance and luck that this had happened, and not some masterminded overly complicated plan; though there were a few of those in place. One of the captains during the meeting had suggested trying to lead combatants towards those with similar or evenly matched power bases, but the idea had been quickly vetoed on the base of impracticality. Though Ichigo had looked considering, they hadn’t known enough of their opponents to even try and predict which Sternritter
would be in Hueco Mundo and Soul Society.

The Sternritter turned from its subordinates and fixed an invisible gaze upon Sosuke, challengingly for all of its lack of substance. The Captain of the Twelfth surveyed the division Shinigami scattered around him, those who were capable of fighting, staring at the Quincy with a fire in their eyes that Aizen had hardly inspired before landing on his Third seat, the young woman was standing with a collection of the soldiers at the front and without prompting Sosuke knew she would take control of their forces with ease.

The scientist unsheathed Kyoka Suigetsu with the clean glide of metal through the air and in a flicker of shunpo appeared behind the mass of white soldiers and behind the Sternritter. The cloaked Quincy turned around and as the two forces clashed behind the Sternritter, it dropped its cloak. Sosuke stared with his features carved into the blank expression of a marble statue even as internally he did the mental equivalent of a scream because Ichigo’s descriptions of the Left Hand of the Soul King left some things to be desired.

Two pupils centered on Sosuke with a sort of calculating intelligence that the Captain only recognized because he had seen the same kind of look in the eyes of Mayuri Kurotsuchi, who they had released from Muken for the sole purpose of his insanity and ability to likely defeat one of the Sternritter; regardless of many of the captains’ protest. Sosuke was in agreement that science in of itself was an art, and Mayuri was a deformed fallacy in all aspects when it came to such.

“Ah, the Left Hand of the Soul King, a Quincy serving to kill its own creator how interesting.”

Sosuke commented moderately, observing the Quincy in front of him as he felt Kyoka Suigetsu hum in the back of his mind as they recalled the information Ichigo had given them on the Sternritter. The large hand stiffened, likely in offence, and two beady eyes centred on the Captain with a touch more loathing as the Sternritter replied, “I am a Quincy above all else and I serve Yhwach.”

“Naturally, or perhaps unnaturally.”

Sosuke replied as he settled his glasses more firmly on the bridge of his nose, feigning disinterest and boredom with the opponent in front of him to spurn fury. It was far more likely that an opponent like Pernida would lack rather than gain skill in their anger which would only serve as an advantage to Sosuke; Ichigo, on the other hand, was not someone you wanted to anger in battle.

The Sternritter stiffened, likely taking the comment to refer to its appearance, and reaitsu gathered about its fingers, a blue bow appearing at the peak of each etched alongside an arrow as Pernida turned its attention on Sosuke. The Captain of the Twelfth smiled blandly, in what would likely communicate itself as taunting, even as Kyoka Suigetsu seemed to vibrate in his grasp.

The arrows surged towards him like screamers, reaitsu twirling about them and piercing the air. Kyoka Suigetsu snapped into the air bisecting one of the arrows and using a gust of wind to throw the other arrows off track, forcing a few to stick out of the nearby buildings like a pin cushion. Pernida frowned, the expression strange on the large hand’s features, reaitsu gathered in the air and a large bow materialized between the thumb and forefinger of the Sternritter.

The Heilig Pfeil shot through the air in a tower of reaitsu that collapsed towards Sosuke with all the force and power of a hurricane. Kyoka Suigetsu snapped up even as Sosuke studied the oncoming attack with a blank expression tinted with a bare hint of amusement. The force of the Heilig Pfeil clashed against Kyoka Suigetsu forcing Sosuke back a few feet, dust swirling around the area as blue reaitsu furled around the Captain like the waves of the sea crashing upon a shore.

With a final swirl of azure, the Heilig Pfeil faded away and Pernida stared with wide eyes at Sosuke,
who stood untouched as the dust billowed around him. Curving his lips into the semblance of a smile, Sosuke let go of the tight reins on his reaitsu allowing it to flow around him like a heavy curtain and fill the air. The Sternritter squinted at Sosuke, one of its fingers twitching for a second.

In a movement that would have been subtle if the Sternritter hadn’t been facing Sosuke. A line, one that looked like a cable dressed in black, shot through the air towards Sosuke reaitsu vibrating around it as Kyoka Suigetsu tensed in his mind. In a burst of shunpo, the Captain of the Twelfth darted out of the way of the nerve, one that Ichigo had detailed in his report; a nerve that had the potential to destroy limbs and the rest of the person attached.

The nerve attached itself to a building and in a crash of reaitsu ivory rubble flew through the air, colliding with the street in a burst of tile that shattered and cracked around Sosuke. When the dust had cleared Pernida hovered over the battlefield, his two pupils focused on the Captain who stood a short distance away unscathed.

Sosuke studied Pernida where it hovered over the battlefield, contemplating how to deal with his opponent. There were multiple avenues the scientist could explore in dealing with Pernida whose powers were difficult if dealt with physically as supposed to utilizing Kyoka Suigetsu’s Shikai. The Captain already knew the answer as Kyoka Suigetsu called out in his mind and with the jagged edges of a smile, in front of Pernida’s sight with a surge of reaitsu Sosuke called out, “Scatter Kyoka Suigetsu.”

Reaitsu washed over the area and Pernida blinked as Sosuke stepped back from the illusion of himself he had created, watching as the clone smiled simply and hefted Kyoka Suigetsu dripping with water droplets that reflected the evening light. As the Sternritter created another large bow, Sosuke moved in a burst of shunpo and appeared behind the large hand watching and waiting for the attack to be released before making his move.

In a second, the arrow was sent flying towards the clone Sosuke, who raised Kyoka Suigetsu and let the energy disperse against the blade, or at least appear to do so. In the same moment, the Captain of the Twelfth stepped into the air and lacing his blade with reaitsu he bisected his opponent. Pernida had one second of realisation, pupils widening in surprise before with a spray of blood that coated the shattered tile crimson, the hand fell in two pieces.

Sosuke remained in the air unimpressed even as the illusion of himself studied the corpse with a light of victory upon its features. With a bubble of flesh and reaitsu, the hand knit itself back together, as expected, and studied the illusion in front of it with cautious eyes before it intoned, “A clone? Or a mirror?”

The Captain of the Twelfth didn’t give the Sternritter the chance to figure it out, as he moved the clone forward as if to attack. In the same moment, Kyoka Suigetsu cut through the air and through the flesh of the Left Hand of the Soul King’s pinkie and ring finger.

A screech of pain and rage shot through the air as Pernida shot a Heilig Pfeil at the illusion of Sosuke, fury coiling itself through the being’s reaitsu even as the served fingers grew eyes and floated in the air beside the large hand. With a surge of reaitsu, the Sternritter C’s special technique once more made an appearance as a nerve shot towards the illusion of himself. For a moment, the scientist contemplated whether the being’s evolutionary governed abilities would be able to absorb anything from an illusion that was technically intangible.

The nerves were forced away by the illusion Kyoka Suigetsu even as another nerve appeared from behind the illusion of Sosuke and pierced his arm. Pernida frowned as the arm began to compress in onto itself in a gory show of the Sternritter’s powers. Sosuke acknowledged that if the being was unable to gain any evolutionary knowledge from the attack than that was likely more than a clue to
the discreet nature of Sosuke’s Shikai.

Moving swiftly, Sosuke channelled his reaitsu watching as the illusion of himself was left as nothing but blood on the pavement he intoned a whisper on the air, “Bakudō 99 Bankin.”

Familiar grey cloth surrounded Pernida’s large form, cocooning it like the Egyptian dead, before iron bolts pierced the fabric driving themselves into the Sternritter finally, a heavy stone block dropped onto the Left Hand of the Soul King crushing it beneath the boulder’s weight. Sosuke watched idly for a moment as blood trickled across the cobblestone and a clone of the Sternritter formed rising from the blood.

In a flicker of reaitsu, the kido was shattered by a Quincy arrow and Pernida rose, nails white and clenched with anger as the eyes, pupils overly dilated glanced furiously around the area. The pupils stopped first on the puddle of blood that had been the illusion of Sosuke before flickering to the general area where the scientist was standing.

Sosuke flickered out of the way as one of the clones of Sternritter C shot through the air in the near direction where he had been standing, a flicker of wind marking the movement. The Captain paused as he felt a cool liquid on his cheek, raising one hand to feel the thin cut that dragged itself over his lip and close to his eye. The scientist resisted the urge to curse, the Sternritter now had his biomatter and it was apparent as Pernida’s pupils widened and it murmured, “An illusion perhaps? None that I cannot see through.”

Aizen arched a brow at the cocky words and watched in half-hidden amusement knowing that even the skill of the Left Hand of the Soul King would not be able to emulate the Captain’s intellect. What worried him, and was well-hidden, was a fear of the Sternritter’s potential ability to utilize abilities through his evolution, though Sosuke doubted the hand was able to copy Shikai abilities without touching the blade itself. No, it was far more likely that the hand would obtain a mimicry of Sosuke’s intellect.

“I see you!”

Pernida called out gleefully and suddenly, nerves like bungee cords appearing as if from mid-air on a path of vengeance towards Sosuke. The Captain of the Twelfth moved quickly allowing multiple illusions of himself to appear and intercept the nerves, all dying gruesome deaths, while kido sparked about his hands and he cast a high-level explosive kido at the clone beside Pernida.

Landing on the pavement, Sosuke frowned at his opponent and let himself become visible as his reaitsu coiled around him. Sosuke could keep toying with Pernida, see to what extent he was able to absorb the abilities of a person, see how far his cloning and body modification extended. And perhaps the Captain of the Twelfth would have once long ago in the middle of a war, but at the moment he had subordinates to protect, had the weight of Soul Society Ichigo had entrusted in his hand, and he wouldn’t allow himself to be defeated and or to prolong a battle.

Tilting Kyoka Suigetsu towards the ground, Sosuke masked a smile at his spirit’s joy, and glancing into the pupils of the Left Hand of the Soul King, the Captain dropped the blade into the still waters beneath their feet and intoned, “Endoresumirā no Kami Kyoka Suigetsu (God of Endless Mirrors Moon Flower).”

The world around the two opponents shattered like glass and filled itself in with reflections of each other stretching on endlessly around them into an infinity far beyond the horizon. They were utterly alone in the encompassing, no one would be able to touch the two till Sosuke sealed his Bankai. It was a reflection of how he had often felt before he had met Ichigo, met someone who was capable of challenging him, of standing akin to an equal.
"What is this? Another illusion?"

Sternritter C questioned pupils centred on Sosuke who stood without a katana in the centre of the mirrors even as reflections of himself moved through the glass around them. The Captain of the Twelfth smiled, something sharper than he showed to near anyone else and answered, “This is me, every aspect, every reflection of myself. And this is very real.”

A facsimile of Sosuke stepped out of the glass behind Pernida and sliced a blade of shattered glass through the Sternritter. The blade exploded when it touched the hand’s skin, but blood welled up from where the cut would have struck and Sosuke watched as the Sternritter’s abilities tried to heal itself only to fail. In this world of endless mirrors, one could only gain power by seeing and accepting your true nature in all it’s reflections.; the Sternritter had yet to notice his own reflections lurking in the mirror, staring at their self with cruel and traitorous eyes.

Reflections of Sosuke stepped out of the glass, Kyoka Suigetsu humming in his mind as they watched the blades cut into the Sternritter, they could see each aspect of Sosuke’s personality reflected around them as one by one they appeared; his cruelness, kindness, devotion to science, isolation, megalomania. All a part of him.

The Sternritter struggled one last time glancing at the mirrors shattered and cracked around it as they stretched and disappeared into the horizon. Pernida recoiled at what it saw in the reflection, pupils wide and nails white as it murmured in a sort of madness and Sosuke allowed the last reflection to step forward and kill the Left Hand of the Soul King. For a moment, he had hesitated, wanting to experiment on the Quincy and its nature, but then Sosuke knew himself and knew better.

The Captain of the Twelfth brushed away the shards of glass threaded through his haori and filling the cracks in his skin as he summoned Kyoka Suigetsu and with an exhale of breath and reaitsu sealed the blade away once more. The familiar surroundings of the pale broken street shattered back into existence and on the ground before him laid the form of Sternritter C, crimson decorating the pavement around it.

Sosuke stepped forward to dispose of the body when a tremor rocked the earth, the white buildings of Soul Society shuddering around him before a pillar of reaitsu appeared in the sky, black, all-consuming stark against the setting sun and bringing with it the force of a thousand tidal waves sweeping through the streets. The Captain stared for a moment in the direction where he knew Ichigo was fighting before he cracked a small genuine smile and returned his attention to the deceased Sternritter in front of him.

X

Unohana felt the tremble beneath her feet, the way the air seemed to suddenly spike with electricity in a way that struck at the well-contained bloodlust simmering beneath the surface of her control. In the midst of supervising her subordinates organizing the cots and preparing various medical apparatuses, the Captain of the Fourth paused and cocked her head. Hanatarō, standing nearby, noticed his Captain’s actions and wordlessly stepped forward waiting to be addressed.

She knew what this meant, this rush of reaitsu that hadn’t been felt in Soul Society for over a thousand years. The war was beginning. Turning slightly, Unohana spotted Hanatarō, standing still and patient even though his nails were white where they were clenched into fists. Running a finger over the hilt of Minazuki the Captain collected herself and ordered, “Please inform Zaraki-taicho that his presence at the First division is required as soon as possible for plan B. Additionally, please pass along the information to the division that the war has started and squads are to move to their different sectors as soon as possible.”
The lieutenant nodded at her words, determination coiling onto the often-timid man’s features. For all the lieutenant lacked on the surface, underneath he had a spine of iron and a willingness to heal that had helped him to earn his position as lieutenant. Features softening slightly, Unohana smiled gently and continued, “Thank you Hanatarō, you are dismissed. Please stay safe.”

With a bow and a faint curve of his lips, the lieutenant departed disappearing in a burst of shunpo that left only a whisper of air. Turning away from where the lieutenant had stood, Unohana surveyed the Shinigami bustling back and forth, many of them equipping themselves with the emergency first aid bags as they prepared to head out. Isane stood in the midst of the chaos coordinating everything with an even hand, directing the Shinigami to their various posts all the while maintaining order within the Fourth; she would do well as a Captain.

The division would survive without Unohana’s presence, she had trained them well and they were all more than competent. It felt strange to approach the idea of her death with such serenity, masking the instinctual fear that pulled at her chest and dug into the marrow of her bones. She could tell herself a thousand times over that it was part of the natural cycle, that she had lived many years in comparison to the various Shinigami who had died during her long lifespan. But, it did little to quell the fact that the nature of death was terrifying even to those who were intimate with death.

But Unohana couldn’t focus on that at the moment; not even her doubts of Kenpachi’s ability to surpass her. The war was beginning, and she needed to be competent so she was calm as she surveyed the Fourth and acknowledged that without her guidance they would continue. Without many of the captains who might die during the war, life would change, perhaps drastically, but it would continue.

A crackle rang out from the com attached to her obi and Unohana listened with a small frown as Ichigo’s voice rang out stating the beginning of the war, directing the various Shinigami to their posts. Unohana listened to the words in Ichigo’s familiar tone even as a mountain of reaitsu seemed to collide with the paved street outside of the Fourth. The female Captain pursed her lips for a moment in displeasure knowing there was an appointment with Zaraki that she was due to.

It occurred to her then, as she stepped towards the doors leading to the exit, surveying the Fourth division in all its clinical sterility, that she couldn’t leave the Sternritter alone to pursue whatever destruction it sought to wrought. Not when the Fourth and the medical care it could provide would be at stake; it was cunning to go after the medical facilities and the Captain wondered if it was on purpose. In any case, Unohana acknowledged it was highly likely that Zaraki-taicho would be halted on his way to the First by his lust for battle and the various Sternritter.

The doors slid open with a fluid ease that belayed the mechanics behind it as Unohana stepped out into the early afternoon sunlight. The streets were empty as if long abandoned, but the sounds of fighting were already cascading over the air however faint. Following the brilliant trail of reaitsu lit up like neon, Unohana entered a courtyard near to the Fourth pale walls rising up around her. At the other end of the courtyard stood a Quincy in a white cloak, the pale fabric near camouflaging with the building surrounding him, beneath the cloak the Captain of the Fourth could identify the features of Sternritter D, the Deathdealing, Askin Nakk Le Vaar.

Sliding the com from her obi Unohana quietly reported the presence of the Sternritter before returning attention to the Quincy who had now noted her presence. A smile that was more of a leer was quirked upon the Quincy’s lips as he dropped the white cloak shrouding his appearance and allowing the tart reaitsu to fill the air.

“Ah, I suppose you’re here to fight me, Unohana-taicho Captain of the Fourth division.”

Askin stated with a grin studying his opponent underneath a casual appearance of weakness.
Unohana allowed a smile, one that crept along her features and chilled the air around them. The Sternritter blanched slightly before he straightened and materialized his Quincy bow, the blue energy crackling and reflecting off the pale white walls. Minazuki was drawn from its sheath with a hiss as Unohana allowed her reaitsu to flow around her and drench the air.

Two Heilig Pfeil shot into the air hurtling towards the Captain of the Fourth with blinding intensity and a whirlwind of reaitsu. With a clean sweep of Minazuki, the arrows were cut in two as their reaitsu exploding into the air around her and demolishing the buildings surrounding her. With a flicker of shunpo, Unohana appeared behind the Sternritter the blade of Minazuki slicing fluidly through the air and cutting into Askin’s back.

Crimson soaked the air even as Unohana flickered away watching with narrowed eyes as the Quincy reversed the damage to his spine using his immunity a flicker of surprise colouring his eyes. In a moment, a hail of arrows flew through the air directing themselves towards Unohana in a sea of blue. The Captain of the Fourth allowed Minazuki to cut through the arrows even as she healed any minor wounds that the arrows caused.

When the siege of arrows finally halted, Unohana noted a gleam in the Sternritter’s eyes and let her reaitsu reach out sensing the pool of reaitsu beginning to seep into the concrete beneath her feet. Quickly moving in a burst of shunpo the Captain of the Fourth disappeared just as the paved stone turned a deep ebony reaitsu sucking at the air around it. Askin quirked a brow and pouted for a moment before another hail of arrows appeared. Unohana frowned sensing a gathering a reaitsu beneath the flow of arrows even as Minazuki cut through the reaitsu.

As the Captain of the Fourth touched down her instincts guided her movements as she twisted out of the way of an arrow only to fall into the path of a ball of reaitsu that glowed with a sickly taint. Minazuki attempted to whip up to cut the ball, which was likely the Sternritter’s Gift Ball, in half only to have it collide with her arm. Unohana bit down on her lip at the fiery pain that raced through her veins as she collapsed to her knees Minazuki still held tightly in her hands.

There was a multitude of different substances Askin could have affected using his power, but it would need to be something he had consumed so her blood was out of the question. It was far more likely he had consumed the oxygen and turned that into a poison. As Unohana attempted to breathe through the pain surging through her lungs, thinking of a way to change the content of the air and affect its molecular shape, Askin spoke.

"You took me lightly, didn't you? The way I speak, the way I act... I seem like a worthless underling, even I know it. But you know, I don't think I really mind. It used to bug me something awful, but lately, I've come around to thinking that it's actually one of my good points. That's what I tell myself, anyway."

Unohana glanced up through the heavy curtain of her bangs as she began to flare her reaitsu, she had heard some of the theories from the Twelfth division about reaitsu affecting organisms and perhaps atmosphere. In any case, she maintained a healing kido as Unohana shouldered herself to her feet swaying for a moment before drawing on her reserves of reaitsu.

"Ma Sternritter-san you’ll need to try harder if you want to defeat Unohana-taicho. After all, she is the best healer in Soul Society and her rate of healing exceeds your rate of consumption."

A familiar voice called out and Unohana muffled an unsettling grin as she glanced to the left where a familiar Shinigami was standing ensconced in the shadows. Sternritter D paused where he had been studying the scene with triumph in his eyes and glanced around the courtyard before landing on the Shinigami hiding in the shadows. The Quincy quirked a brow and said in a plaintive tone, “Why don’t you come out? It doesn’t become you to hide in the shadows.”
With a flicker of a fan, Urahara Kisuke stepped into the light, Athena grey eyes tracking the Sternritter with an intensity the man usually masked behind a façade of jovial ignorance. Unohana tilted her head in greeting even as the man continued to stroll towards her swinging his cane nonchalantly, acting willfully ignorant of Askin’s shock and suspicion.

“Hello, Unohana-taicho. I understand you have an appointment, so we shall try to finish this battle as quick as possible no?”

Kisuke stated with a grin and a flicker of steel as he handed her a pill that was a pale lavender in colour. The Captain of the Fourth ignored the way her instincts screamed at taking the dubious pill and swallowed it, knowing it was likely the former captain's immunity to Askin’s power Ichigo had talked about in one of their meetings. A minute later Unohana was able to stand once more as the effects of the Deathdealing faded reaitsu swirling around her as Minazuki growled in her mind, feral and famine in a way they hadn’t allowed themselves to feel for a long while.

The scientist smiled from beneath his hat as the Sternritter turned to face the two and a tense silence engulfed the area for a moment before with a flicker of Hirenkyaku Askin appeared behind Kisuke and a volley of arrows cut the air apart. Minazuki slashed through the arrows with ease even as the tiles beneath their feet stained itself a thick black and the air suddenly felt tight as if the reaitsu was sucking at her like a vortex.

But Urahara’s pills halted the Dealthdealing’s effects by instantly changing the chemical composition of whatever substance or element was targeted within the body. Kisuke however hunched over for a moment eyes screwed up in pain as he fumbled for one of the pills, likely hidden in his voluminous sleeves. Unohana stepped in front of the downed scientist and flew forward at the Sternritter who was watching everything with calculating eyes.

A crackling bow of energy intercepted Minazuki as she pushed the Sternritter back against the tiles, splintered and cracked around Askin from the force of their collision. Reaitsu gathered around the man and with a burst like a lightning bold an arrow attempted to bisect the Captain of the Fourth. Whirling to the side Unohana directed the arrow away from Kisuke who was rising to his feet, his katana unsheathed and his reaitsu filling the air like the waves of the sea as he released his Shikai.

Unohana disappeared in a burst of shunpo as Benihime released a burst of crimson energy that sliced through the air and hurtled towards Askin. The Quincy stood still allowing the bright energy to cut into his body in a fierce display of crimson even as the wound began to heal itself near instantaneously. The Sternritter grinned for a moment at the two Shinigami before he stated.

“It’s true that loyalty isn’t everything to me. I just have a personal interest in His Majesty. Does that make it sound like I’m looking down on him? That’s not my intention, of course. The Human World. Hueco Mundo. Soul Society. The guy’s trying to destroy three whole worlds and create something new in their wake. Is there any other man who can claim that? If I were to let His Majesty get away, do you think I’d ever find another man like that again? Kisuke Urahara. You’re a knowledgeable guy. You look like you’ve seen everything this world has to offer. Unohana-taicho you’re pretty keen, you’ve been alive since the beginning. So, I ask you: don’t you feel it too? Aren’t you curious to see what His Majesty is going to create once he’s destroyed three entire worlds?”

“If you wanted to see someone who changes the world you’ve certainly picked an interesting side.”

Kisuke commented slyly as reiatsu began to build in the courtyard swelling so thickly it seemed to cling to the skin and suffocate one’s lungs. Unohana muffled a smile behind her hair as she knew who the scientist was speaking of with ease even as the Sternritter tilted his head in a display of curiosity. Urahara flapped the fan in front of his features for a moment, delaying the inevitable and building tension like the dramatic man he was before he answered.
“Surely you know of the number one War Potential Ichigo Shiba?” The Sternritter nodded and Kisuke grinned bright and scary before he continued, “Ichigo has changed the world in ways your King couldn’t hope to accomplish. Then again Juha Bach is a destroyer, a conqueror, and will only create when all who opposes him is destroyed. But Ichigo, he’s created an entirely new world without violence, without conquering. Then again as one scientist to the next, I’m sure you understand.”

Askin frowned something like anger curling upon his lips as he shook his head before he could reply Unohana interjected, “In the end, who truly changes the world will be decided by the victor of their battle.”

“Well said Unohana-san.”

Kisuke replied with a grin that curled along his features and highlighted the manic glint in his eyes. The Sternritter studied the two Shinigami for a moment before he nodded and his reaitsu reached a catalyst around him as he intoned, “Hasshein”

With a whiplash of power that swept through the streets and whirled in their ears, the Quincy released his Vollständig. Wings made of circles appeared along the Sternritter’s back, the light seemed to shine through the circles as if miniature halos of light as a wide smile settled on Askin’s features. Unohana and Kisuke traded a short glance one that communicated well enough their shared thoughts.

They both knew that without the power of their respective Bankai they would not be able to win against the Sternritter. Kisuke’s form of immunity only worked within the parameters of the man’s unreleased power, but in Vollständig the Deathdealing would adapt in a millisecond to any minute changes in the composition of any substance, rendering that weakness useless.

But their Bankai both had abilities that would allow them to combat their opponent’s powers. Frowning slightly, Unohana turned to Kisuke who seemed to already know her question as he replied, “A barrier has been set up, nothing is getting in or out till I release it.”

Unohana nodded a feral grin slipping onto her features as Minazuki roared happily in her mind bloodlust clawing its way through her veins like a heady intoxicating drug. Kisuke returned the smile and stepped a small distance away from the Captain of the Fourth before his blade cut the air in front of him like paper and called out, “Kannonbiraki Benihime Aratame.”

The appearance of the former Captain of the Twelfth’s Bankai was always awe-inspiring, the large woman towering over the battlefield as she regarded Askin with near translucent eyes. Unohana grinned the smile stretching across her teeth with blatant hunger as she whispered, “Minazuki.”

Crimson seeped from the blade in her hands and into the paved stones beneath her feet sweeping around the area and tugging at the hem of the Sternritter’s pants. The former Captain on her left grinned bright and feral in a manner that matched the intensity of Unohana’s bloodlust. Askin studied the two Shinigami for a quiet moment the tension that had filled the air along with the storm of reaitsu returning once more.

Unohana whipped across the paved stones blood flowing around her feet and dripping from her blade as she swung it overhead. Askin narrowed his eyes and gathered the rings formed around his body into a staff blocking the overhead attack even as he began to generate a large sphere around himself. They exchanged blows in a rapid flash of movement, Unohana forcing the man back with fierce strength and wild eyes, blood pulling at every movement searing beneath her skin as the thick liquid soaked her shihakusho and turned the Sternritter in front of her into a pillar of crimson.
In a flicker of Hirenkyaku, the Sternritter darted away from Unohana only to appear near Kisuke where one of the rings growing slightly larger in his hand began to swirl with an uneven taint to its reaitsu. The Gift Ring was released in a split second of action as Unohana turned her attention once more on her opponent, for the most part ignoring her ally; Kisuke was more than competent enough to take care of himself.

It was only duly in the background as her sword clashed against Askin’s staff that she observed the ring connect with Kisuke’s arm withering it with all the same effect as the hollow Barragan even as Benihime’s Bankai ability sutured the limb to life. The Sternritter frowned something like fear flickering in his eyes in a way that satisfied Unohana as she closed in on her opponent blood continuing to fill the area around them.

Suddenly, orbs of a pale yellow filled the air surrounding the Captain of the Fourth in what appeared to be an impenetrable wall. Pursing her lips, the female Captain watched as Askin turned his attention to Kisuke who stood beneath Benihime’s Bankai form. They collided in a clash of blades as the Deathdealing took effect within the scientist and was countered by his Bankai’s nature.

As the poison around her drew closer, Unohana raised Minazuki and let the blade slash through the bars, the blood pooling and coalescing over the orbs before with a final swing of her zanpaktou the poison shattered, and she disappeared in a burst of shunpo only to reappear behind the Sternritter. Askin turned at the last moment dodging a swing from Kisuke only to turn to Unohana’s blade where it hovered at his neck, a hairsbreadth away.

The Sternritter’s eyes seemed to glisten in prompting reflecting the blood around them as it dripped off her blade and collected around them. It would be so easy to kill the man in front of her, to allow the blood pooling around her to consume the body, the different chemicals hiding in wait to spring forth and swallow its victim. But Unohana waited, still in control enough to know that killing the man might only bring danger on their heads.

Kisuke stepped cautiously to the side where he could regard Askin’s face yet still keep an eye on his back. With a tilt of the hat still perched on the man’s wheat-blond hair, the scientist asked, “Are you willing to surrender? If so you might glimpse what changes your king or ours might make,” Kisuke pulled out a small box that hummed with the feel of kido and added, “Oh, and if you surrender on the thought of being able to escape. It’s very unlikely to happen unless your side wins.”

Askin grinned something sharp and sorrowful at the same measure as he replied, “As much as I’d like to see this new world of yours or mine, I think it’s hardly possible now, not with what I suspect is dripping from your blade, and better to die now then later.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong. Ichigo’s been muttering about allowing the Quincy to live, those that defect at least. And maybe even those who survive.”

Kisuke responded as the Sternritter blanched in surprise at the words as if he had expected the iron fist of Central 46 that the Captain of the Fourth had long become familiar with. Unohana tugged on her control as her reaitsu burned beneath her skin and the weight of the blood around her became ever present upon her mind. Silence lingered in the courtyard interrupted only by the sluggish drip, drip of blood from her blade.

After a moment, the Quincy slumped and nodded defeat curled throughout his posture. Kisuke didn’t smile but his eyes did seem to glow beneath the shadows of his hat as he attached the handcuffs to the Sternritter. With an exhale, Unohana sealed her Bankai and with it the bloodlust. The thick crimson liquid drained away into the cracks and crevices of Soul Society as her blade returned to normal.
“Ma I can handle it from here Unohana-taicho, you have an appointment after all.’

The scientist stated in a jovial tone even as Unohana could detect the traces of sorrow and grief lingering behind the words. Unohana nodded and stepped closer to the scientist, regarding his features in silent contemplation before her gaze drifted to his own and the words passed between them unsaid. Turning away, the Captain of the Fourth swept long ebony locks over her shoulder and strode towards her death with the same calm and serenity she approached a medical emergency.

For the future of Soul Society and for the lives of those she had come to regard with fondness, like Ichigo, Unohana did not fear death.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, the two battles were very interesting to write as both Unohana and Aizen are such interesting characters. I hope you enjoyed their battles, this chapter is the last of the battles except for one as we approach the end. Reviews/comments are always appreciated, till next time!

Zucchini
Disenthral

Chapter Notes

Disenthral
(v) Set free.

Hello everyone, we are here with one of the final chapters, where a few things are finally revealed and explored. I hope you all enjoy, read on!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

The air screamed in Ichigo’s ears as he whirled around reaitsu, cloaking his movement in shadows as he ducked away from the blade of the Quincy King. In a flash, he brought Zangetsu-Shiro’s large blade overhead while Zangetsu-Ossan’s smaller trench knife directed itself towards the King’s torso. Juha Bach simply stepped to the left allowing the trench knife to pass through the edge of his billowing cloak even as his sword snapped up to block Zangetsu Shiro’s broad blade.

Flipping around as Bach was pushed back a pace, Ichigo tilted his head gathering reaitsu a cero began to form along the horns of Zangetsu Shiro’s mask where it tilted over his head. The fierce crimson beam screamed through the air towards Haschwalth, who had taken the brunt of a Getsuga Tensho, forcing the blond away once more. In an instant, Ichigo’s attention was on the Quincy King again as he ducked under a fury of strikes that seemed to render the air in two and jar every bone in the Shinigami’s body.

Moving back in a flicker of shunpo, Ichigo gathered his reaitsu ignoring the way his breathing came out in harsh pants as he crossed his Shikai blades and released a Getsuga Tensho. The Quincy King smiled, wide and full of teeth as his blade snapped up to block the ocean of power hurtling towards him, parting it like the red sea around himself even as the force of it pushed his tall form back a few paces.

Ichigo had known before he entered the battle that he was out of practice. Was he completely untrained and stood little chance against the Quincy King? No. But that did little to disregard the fact that no matter how much training Ichigo had crammed with his zanpaktou spirits and the various captains throughout the years, it didn’t compare to fighting upon the battlefield. And Yhwach was a powerful opponent even without the boost from eating the Soul King.

The orange-haired Shinigami wasn’t scared though. Ichigo knew that in the end, regardless of all else he would not allow Juha Bach to destroy Soul Society once more.
“Why do you fight so ceaselessly Ichigo Kurosaki? And without the use of the Quincy blood that runs through your veins? You could join us; we could create a better world, one without all the suffering and imbalance, and the fear the Gotei 13 had wrought upon the three worlds.”

The Quincy King questioned, his deep baritone resounding through the air shaking its vibrations deep into the marrow of Ichigo’s bones. Exhaling faintly Ichigo’s hands clenched into white-knuckled fists as he repressed the deep instinctual fear and hatred along with a surge of memories that attempted to sweep him beneath a tide. Instead, Ichigo glanced into the eyes of Bach, deep and fathomless and replied,

“I fight for Soul Society and for my family. The world isn’t like you recall it a thousand years ago, Central 46 has been dismantled, the state of the various Rungokai districts have improved immensely. Where there once might have been aggression and submission, we have found diplomacy and alliance. I don’t want a world where the only thing in it is those who obey and are your image of perfect. I’ve already seen a world without my family, I won’t see that again.”

The Quincy King frowned at Ichigo’s refute, the expression twisting his features grim and hard unlike the appearance of Zangetsu-Ossan, Haschwalth masking a faint expression of shock behind the King. With a nod and a curious lilt to the man’s voice, Yhwach spoke aloud, “I wonder what you saw in that future of yours; perhaps the Soul King itself, or the death of everything, your worst nightmares becoming reality?”

Ichigo frowned at the Quincy’s words tightening his grasp around Zangetsu’s hilt as his spirits hummed a wordless support surrounding him. The orange-haired Shinigami tilted his head down for a moment, recalling the death, the destruction, the loss that had seemed to seep every memory in tones of grey. Inhaling, reaitsu rising like a curtain around Ichigo the orange-haired Shinigami glanced up at the Quincy King, brown eyes glowing.

“There was loss, hell it was the end. But amidst all the chaos and destruction there were moments of happiness, moments where everything else didn’t matter. My past existed for a reason, and the future will exist as well.”

The orange-haired Shinigami responded reaitsu roaring around his body and coalescing visibly upon the air. The Quincy King grinned at the response, laughter bellowing from his lungs as his reaitsu rose in response, a thick inky substance that seemed to drown the world around them. Haschwalth on the other side of the King frowned, long blond hair tugging at the sunlight. The translucent barrier surrounding the area shuddered, cracks appearing like splinters of glass; Kisuke had designed it to hold the greatest amounts of reaitsu he could think of.

They clashed in a shriek of steel, sparks flew through the air. Ichigo ducked underneath Bach’s thrust and whipped around sweeping one leg out as Zangetsu’s smaller knife rose to block Haschwalth’s blade. Reaitsu collided and sparked as Ichigo moved back and forth using techniques like the Getsuga Tensho and cero to create space between his opponents. He ducked and manoeuvred in a rhythm that reminded him of being on the battlefield; where every turn there was a new enemy.

It was a familiar and ferocious dance, one that made Ichigo’s lungs burn and his instincts scream as a thin line of red appeared on his cheek and he scored a gash on the Second in Command’s leg only to have it reflected back due to Haschwalth’s Balance. Yhwach remained untouched, the unsettling grin replaced by narrow eyes and an expression of deep concentration; the very air around them seemed to vibrate and blur.

With a ripple of reaitsu, Ichigo released a Getsuga Tensho, the catalyst of power consuming the air as it hurtled towards Yhwach. Turning a second later, Zangetsu snapped up to block an overhead strike from Haschwalth the two exchanging a rapid flurry of blows that demonstrated the immense skill the
blond Quincy held with a blade; it almost made Ichigo regret having to fight him. Ichigo whirled away his senses split between the Quincy King shouldering off the blow; Ichigo raised Zangetsu and caught Haschwalth’s blade on his own.

Twirling around at the last moment as he slipped underneath an overhead swing, Ichigo released a cero in the King’s direction. Instantly, he whipped around the broad blade of Zangetsu-Shiro catching the light as it caught Haschwalth’s sword. Before Ichigo could continue the exchange, his instincts screamed in warning reaitsu tightening around his body as if in shock as the orange-haired Shinigami whirled to the side.

Ichigo gasped as the blade clipped his side, the Quincy King appearing beside Ichigo as crimson fell from where his fingers were grasping at his side. There was a pleased grin dancing across Bach’s features only for it to fade. White began to bubble with the faint traces of hollow reaitsu beneath the Shinigami’s fingers and the wound healed. Ichigo grinned up at Juha Bach from beneath his bangs as he disappeared in a flash and reappeared behind Haschwalth.

The blond Quincy whipped around at the last moment, catching Ichigo’s blade on his own before in the blink of an eye he disappeared in a burst of Hirenkyaku. The Quincy King appeared in Haschwalth’s place his sword driving its way through the orange-haired Shinigami’s gut. Ichigo grasped at the blade for a moment, blood pooling in his mouth as his accelerated healing attempted to work with the blade still lodged in his stomach.

“A future that will exist you say? I will create a world without fear, without pain. What has your world created?”

Bach stated staring into Ichigo’s eyes with his blade edging ever upwards towards Ichigo’s heart. Spitting out the blood pooling in his mouth and lungs Ichigo ignored the pain flooding his system and let his reaitsu flare beneath his eyes colouring them golden. He responded, “A world full of emotion and differences.”

Repressing a growl from Shiro, Ichigo channelled his reaitsu and staring into the eyes of the King he raised Zangetsu and released a Getsuga Tensho point blank. Juha Bach flew back, his feet skidding upon the air as blood dripped from his blade and from a gash across Bach’s chest. Ichigo breathed through the pain engulfing his systems and watched as the barrier around them trembled once more; he only hoped the barrier would hold through what was to come.

Across from Ichigo, the Quincy King’s reaitsu rose to skyrocket around them as a frown that curled Bach’s lips stretched across the man’s angular features. Taking a breath and submerging himself in Zangetsu’s presence, Ichigo allowed his reaitsu to rise in response. Moving in a manner that almost felt unfamiliar and yet oddly nostalgic Ichigo slid the smaller blade of Zangetsu-Ossan into the hole in Zangetsu-Shiro’s blade. The air vibrated and in one move Ichigo thrust the blade through his still healing wound and through his heart.

Ichigo saw the shock on the Quincy King’s features before his reaitsu pillared around him a cloak of ebony as dark and endless as the night and he intoned, “Bankai Tensa Zangetsu.”

Reaitsu roared and coalesced breaking free from Ichigo’s skin as it began to glow, his eyes becoming two pillars of light, a light that seemed to consume rather than provide. Zangetsu-Shiro’s mask settled over Ichigo’s features, his blut vein running through his veins where they glowed like pure energy. Zangetsu became two blades of darkness whispering at the air as the column began to fade.

Before the Quincy King could prepare himself Ichigo flew forward, appearing in a millisecond in front of Bach. The Quincy King’s blade sliced through Ichigo only to pass through pure reaitsu. Ichigo crossed his blades and reaitsu gathered around them in a brilliant torrent of pitch black before
swallowing the entire sky with ease. Haschwalth appeared behind Ichigo and he whirled around one hand reaching out to grasp the blond Quincy’s throat, reaitsu pulsing in his fingers as blue eyes stared into two yawning pits of power.

The Quincy thrashed for a moment in Ichigo’s grip before the Shinigami stated in a voice distorted with the weight of three, “Do you want to die in service to your King? Or seek forgiveness with Bazz-B?”

Haschwalth’s eyes widened, flickering to the Quincy King who was only beginning to appear from the veil of darkness. Indecision warred behind the blonde’s eyes and Ichigo nodded once in understanding before dropping Haschwalth to the ground unconscious and returning his attention to Yhwach.

They collided in a blow of power as Yhwach’s reaitsu surged forth, instead of the inky black he paraded around with, white began to emanate from his skin glowing from his eyes in a similar manner to Ichigo as he growled, “I dislike using this power, this side of me that comes from him. But I will not lose, the Quincy will rise.”

Their reaitsu raged against one another, Yhwach’s shattering the earth beneath their feet even as Ichigo’s put it back together again. With a final crack, the barrier broke apart reaitsu leaking out only to encounter the second barrier; which was only a temporary stop gap.

Blades formed of power clashed and flickered, extending and become intangible before colliding with enough force to pull at the edges of Ichigo’s form. Gathering his reaitsu once more, Ichigo crossed his blades in front of his chest and tilted the horns of his mask towards Yhwach, blue reaitsu coiling along his arms and forming an arrow in the centre of it all. Ichigo grinned once, visible beneath the energy of his form before reaitsu exploded devouring all in its path and leaving it unscathed as it forced its way towards the Quincy King.

Yhwach raised his blades and caught the brunt of the attack; even as the blades began to crack white reaitsu attempting to fight off the sheer indomitable surge of black that raced forward with the cries of all those Ichigo had lost echoing on the air.

On the floor beneath them, Haschwalth rose to consciousness studying the battle with distraught eyes. If he moved now, he could aid the Quincy King and potentially save his life. Or he could wait and attempt to reconcile with Bazz, see the world this Shinigami who possessed Quincy blood, who chose to save not kill, would create. Haschwalth turned his head and closed his eyes.

With a shatter like a gunshot, the swords in the Quincy King’s hands broke apart. Reaitsu whirled and sucked at the air like a black hole even as Ichigo appeared, Zangetsu resting at the man’s neck. Silence lingered in the clearing disturbed only by the roar of the winds caused by their power as Ichigo stared into Bach’s eyes, his own two yawning pits of reaitsu that swirled with emotion.

Sorrow tightened Ichigo features for a moment and his hands shook around the hilt of Tensa Zangetsu. The orange-haired time traveller exhaled once and stated, “Fear is a natural part of life just as much as love.”

Then Zangetsu passed through the Quincy King’s neck and an explosion of reaitsu raced around them. Ichigo extended his reaitsu forming a contained shield as Juha Bach’s laughter echoed in his ears and a jarring smile appeared in front of his eyes before reaitsu erupted with all the terrifying force of Mother Nature.

When the storm was over, Ichigo touched down on the grass, long green strands winding their way around his ankles and reaching up to curl around Zangetsu as the power emanating from the orange-
haired Shinigami slowly retreated deep inside himself. Slumping to his knees, Ichigo breathed deeply struggling for consciousness at the exhaustion that coursed through his veins even as tears began to well up in his eyes. They slid down his cheeks cold as ice and achingly unfamiliar as Ichigo bent over and sobbed into his knees, great heaving sobs that shook his body and tore themselves from his throat.

Zangetsu hummed warm and sure as Ichigo finally acknowledged that it was over. There were no great threats that sought to destroy the lives of his family; no longer would he need to plan for every contingency. He was free of the weight that had settled itself on his shoulders since he was fifteen. There would be the dead from this war, but never again would Ichigo have to stare at row after row of cloth covered bodies.

Over.

It was over.

Ichigo continued to cry, salty tears tracing his cheeks and staining his hands. It overwhelmed him leaving him defenceless in the moment as he panted for breath, his chest aching as if a heart attack. Zangetsu remained silent all the while; their presence confirmation that it was real, not a dream or an illusion, his family was safe.

A small twirl of reaitsu caught at Ichigo’s weakened senses and he glanced up from the shelter of his arms blinking at the sunlight filtering through the air. All around Ichigo, reaitsu hummed familiar in a way that ached, they were almost visible, faint silhouettes glowing at the beginning of the evening twilight. Ichigo wiped away the tears clinging to his eyelids and let a watery smile cross his lips at the sight of them. They faded away slowly before his eyes, with smiles and peace resting on their features as the grass continued to curl along his legs and the sun began its slow descent.

X

Ichigo stared at the door for a long moment before he opened it and stared at the emptiness silently letting the door swing shut with a click once more. If a healer saw him they would throw a fit, but it would be nothing compared to Unohana’s terrifying aura. The orange-haired Shinigami sucked in a breath at the thought; fingers tightening around Zangetsu’s hilt, the spirits’ presence remained a low hum. Some part of Ichigo didn’t want to leave the confinement of the room he had been placed in amid the rush that the end of the war had brought.

When it had ended, it had done so with a flourish and a bang. Ichigo had been carted to the Fourth, diagnosed with exhaustion and shock, and shoved in an empty room. There wasn’t time to celebrate yet. They needed to find the dead, prepare the ceremonies, clean up in the aftermath, reintroduce the displaced Rungokai citizens, organize their war prisoners, and contact Hueco Mundo and the mortal world. The list seemed to go on and Ichigo was ecstatic he wasn’t organizing everything; that duty fell to the new Soutaicho.

Exhaling with a shuddery breath Ichigo, leaned his head against the cool surface of the doorway in front of him and resisted the urge to silently scream. Instead, he tamed his reaitsu where it bristled beneath his skin and submerged himself in Zangetsu’s presence. With an exhale, Ichigo straightened and acknowledged that he needed to go out there, to see it for himself.

The door slipped open with a gentle push, revealing familiar white hallways as a Shinigami bustled past Ichigo carrying bandages and a general aura of urgency. Shaking his head with the fracture of a smile, Ichigo continued down the hallway swaying every few steps with exhaustion. The orange-haired Shinigami paused at the room he had been in only three times; all equally unpleasant. Pushing past the lump in his throat Ichigo entered the room.
It was cold, in a way that instantly chilled the skin and everything underneath as Ichigo observed the gurneys laid out in rows and the pale walls. Ichigo didn’t step forward, didn’t peer under the cloth covering the bodies, he already knew the casualty list as if it was seared into his mind. Kisuke had delivered it while Ichigo was still in a haze, the blonde’s voice pounding to the beat of his heart and wrenching sorrow with its grim parade.

Yamamoto, who would never again govern the Gotei 13, or drink tea with Ichigo and discuss the future and nature of justice, who would never smile when he gazed at Soul Society standing proud and mighty with all its captains and lieutenants.

Unohana, he would never again be able to speak to her about what he had seen. Feel the way her healing kido sunk beneath the skin, see her real smile or hear tales of the Gotei 13 in its youth.

Love and Rose, who had been found together hands clasped. Ichigo wouldn’t get to listen to Love tease him or Rose’s music. Two of the Vizard were gone and something inside Ichigo ached at the thought of it.

Komamura, who had sacrificed himself to fight for Soul Society with the same honour and sense of duty he had possessed in the original timeline.

Gin and Rangiku, who had died in two separate worlds. Some part of Ichigo was happy in a dull distant way that they had had the chance to be together, to live together and reconcile with one another. Their loss still ached, Rangiku who had always teased and snuck in sake with a grin; Gin cunning and hiding a dry humour.

Mayuri, his loss wasn’t particularly mourned.

Hundreds of divisions of Shinigami, many of the academy students who had volunteered to clear the battlefield and recover the bodies, countless Quincy still lay buried beneath the rubble.

Ichigo leaned against the doorway and let his heart shudder in his chest as he surveyed the bodies, sheets cloaking their features so that in death everyone was equal. The orange-haired Shinigami closed his eyes and whispered an apology, for those who he couldn’t save, for those who had met the same fate regardless of his changes and plans, for those that would not see the future Soul Society would create until they rejoined the reincarnation cycle.

Turning away from the cool air, Ichigo exited the morgue and continued walking down the hallway. A Shinigami with a tray hurried past, taking little note of Ichigo except for a cursory glance before continuing. Ichigo followed the medic towards the large med bay that served as the centre of the Fourth division. Something like dread but what was probably exhaustion, dragging at his feet.

The sound of beeping and the rustle of breathing and shifting cloth made itself known before the sight of the med bay as Ichigo lingered in the doorway. He watched for a moment as the medics scurried between the gurneys pausing every so often to check a patient’s dressing or administer another round of healing kido. The room was silent in a way that didn’t hang over one’s head but simply lingered with the stillness of those slumbering; Isane and Hanatarō were handling the division well.

Entering the room, Ichigo cast a discrete kido that required little reaitsu but a lot of detail; it was one that masked Ichigo in semi-plain sight. It had been invented by Kisuke of course. Ichigo walked through the aisles, his eyes sweeping over familiar and unfamiliar features. So many of the Shinigami had been gravely or permanently injured; hanging to life with only the thread of determination tying them there.
Shunsui had lost an eye again and was already wearing an eyepatch even as he worked in the First to try and sort Soul Society out. Jushiro was likely beside the Soutaicho even though he had been injured during the war as well and after everything was sorted out wouldn’t be on active service.

As Ichigo paced down the aisle he could see Kira who had lost an arm, the lieutenant was hunched over with a stack of paperwork attempting to finish reports. Sosuke no longer had both his ears but he was somewhere in the Twelfth division so the chances of seeing the scientist make an appearance in the Fourth was slim.

Shinji was still in critical condition, Hiyori sitting like a statue beside the blond as an oxygen mask obscured his features. Soi-fon had gained intense facial scarring (which would make her look badass in the years to come). Yoruichi was sitting by the lieutenant their hands linked even as Second division members reported to her. Yumichika was in a coma, Ikkaku wouldn’t be moving for a few weeks even as they rested in beds beside each other.

In Hueco Mundo, Harribel was under the careful eyes of their healer holding onto life by a thread even as her Fracción crowded around her. Starrk and Lilynette had made it through the battle, and the news eased something heavy on Ichigo’s chest, even if the Coyote Espada only had one leg left. Nelliel was deaf, but her ability to read lips and communicate through actions meant she would survive.

Byakuya had lost his left hand. Ichigo had only seen a glimpse of him, stolen in the early hours, just to reassure himself that Byakuya was still alive. Seeing him alive, even without a hand had left relief bubbling up in Ichigo’s chest and he couldn’t help the way he had peppered Byakuya’s face with kisses. Renji with his head wrapped up and Rukia, walking with a limp; had both been in the room and had made disgusted faces at each other.

The injuries went on, from minor to critical, so many of them requiring intense rehabilitation or physical therapy not to mention the PTSD the war would leave behind. It felt like a disaster and a new beginning all at once.

Ichigo paused by Shūhei, lying still on the cot each breath shuddering from his lungs, and bandages wrapped from shoulder to torso. Kensei was sitting in the chair beside the lieutenant, eyes dark even as Mashiro next to Kensei held his hand. Ichigo turned away and continued towards the doors.

They would recover. Soul Society would recover.

The air outside smelt like ash, but the sun was in the sky, dappled rays alighting on pale walls. Ichigo inhaled quietly for a moment, letting his eyes sweep over his surroundings with a hunger as if to satisfy some primal thought that the inside of the Fourth was all that was left standing. Searching through the remnants of his impressive reserves the orange-haired Shinigami let a small smile slide across his lips before he disappeared in a burst of shunpo; slower than normal but still equally fast.

Sokyoku Hill was still pockmarked from the multiple battles that had occurred on its plateau, it echoed with an isolated stillness as Ichigo settled on the edge letting his eyes sweep out across Soul Society. Ichigo didn’t know how long he sat there, running his fingers through the dust and simply watching the city alive beneath his feet, feeling the gentle presence of his friends’ reaitsu. Zangetsu hummed in reassurance the two spirits’ emotions wrapping and mixing with his own.

He wondered how everything would change now. In his timeline, Ichigo had never seen the fulfilled potential of Soul Society and all its Shinigami. He never saw Karin or Yuzu grow up, or Orihime fulfill her dreams of being a cyborg chef, Uryū entering the medical field, Tatsuki going professional, or Chad’s band becoming famous. Brushing a hand through his hair Ichigo wondered what his own future would be, he almost felt adrift. No longer was there some defining battle on the horizon, or the
next enemy to plot for.

Oh, there would always be someone with a vengeance seeking to destroy Soul Society. But there wouldn’t be something on such a catastrophic scale as Aizen or Yhwach for another thousand years or so. What was he supposed to do now?

Return to try and decode the tome he had found and all its mysteries? Help Rungokai flourish, maybe set up medical practices? Mentor a few Shinigami or teach at the academy?

The idea of peace felt so strange to Ichigo’s mind as he surveyed Soul Society. In the end though the orange-haired Shinigami knew he would have to get used to it and that life would continue.

A surge of reaitsu appeared suddenly on the horizon, blaring bright and loud on Ichigo’s senses before disappearing. The orange-haired Shinigami quirked a brow, squinting his eyes as he allowed his senses to reach out searching for the sudden presence. In another split second, the presence blared again and Ichigo shot to his feet as he focused on it. The presence was familiar in a vague and faded way, vague and powerful like a beacon calling Ichigo’s attention.

Distantly, the orange-haired Shinigami wondered if anyone else had noticed the strange presence even as his hand tightened around Zangetsu’s hilt and he departed from Sokyoku hill in a burst of shunpo. As Ichigo moved through the air, he followed the flashing presence, tracking it ever farther, past the Gotei 13 and into the deeper districts of Rungokai. In some moments, the reaitsu would disappear and the orange-haired Shinigami would be forced to pause, waiting for it to appear again.

When Ichigo finally landed he was in one of the outer districts, one the time-traveller had visited many times before in his past and a few times in the current timeline. The area was shrouded with forests, the foliage so thick and heavy that the verdant leaves left little sun to pierce the canopy and reach the ground below. Ichigo landed with a whisper of sandals against a floor of dead leaves as he glanced around.

There was someone standing at the other end of the clearing, coveted in the shadows, the only thing visible was the faint strips of white from a Shinigami shihakusho. A shiver ran down Ichigo’s spine and trailed into his limbs as he stared at the figure who stepped slowly out of the darkness. Their hair was long and faded in a way that made the original colour near unidentifiable, they had a katana strapped to their waist; plain and unadorned and their eyes were brown. (I would put brown eyes first – deal with personal characteristics then sword)

The figure stepped further into the sunlight and spoke, its voice like the rustle of the leaves beneath them and aching with an age-old pain, “So, you’ve finally come. It’s been so long, but I suppose it was worth it if this is the end result. Come now, you know who I am, don’t look at me like that, after all, we’re one in the same.”

Ichigo stared at the figure silently even as Zangetsu bristled in his mind; the orange-haired Shinigami knew who was standing across from him, loath as he was to admit it. The figure nodded its head in agreement and stated, “How do you think everything worked out so perfectly? The hollow that escaped to attack Masaki Kurosaki, the labs, Rungokai, the Sternritter not having equal information on Soul Society, the book containing all my secrets, every timeline that went wrong. It was all to achieve this.”

The silence in the clearing felt deathly and stifling, choking Ichigo’s lungs as he regarded the person across from him. The broken figure tipped back its head and laughed, shaking their long hair with the movement. It made sense in a twisted sort of way, one that wrapped itself around Ichigo’s mind even as he struggled with the reality of it. It wasn’t possible and yet… Ichigo himself had done it, who was to say…
Zangetsu snapped up to block the katana. The two suddenly screaming together with a clash of sparks that seemed to whisper in the dense clearing. The figure’s blade wasn’t a zanpaktou but nonetheless, the intense feeling of loneliness and grief seemed to swamp the blade. Back and forth they moved in a clash so blinding that the earth at their feet trembled. Ichigo wanted to yell for the figure to stop, to try and talk but there was no time in the furious dance.

Colliding heavily with the earth, Ichigo rolled to his feet as the Shinigami hovered a few feet away. At that moment, something like ice and the tundra flared in Ichigo’s right sleeve and his eyes widened in realisation. Reaching subtly into his sleeve, Ichigo pulled out the thin needle the Soul King had gifted Ichigo what felt as if a thousand years ago. Suddenly its purpose made sense and Ichigo struggled to his feet and in a burst of Hirenkyaku appeared in front of the figure.

Brown eyes widened in surprise and acceptance as pale fingers wrapped around Ichigo’s own and allowed the needle to pass through the figure's chest and into their heart. With a bloody grin the figure coughed and stated, “Take care of the future don’t waste it,” and shattered in a burst of blue reaitsu. The particles drifted through the air before floating upwards through the thick foliage and disappearing against the endless sky.

The needle in Ichigo’s hand shattered into dust before blowing away in the wind and Ichigo slumped to his knees wondering if it had all been real or a strange dream.

X

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter it was really fun to write about everything including Ichigo Bankai and I would love to hear your thoughts on his Bankai and everything else that occurred in the chapter. For Ichigo’s Bankai try to imagine something close to Mugetsu except everything is black reaitsu and you can only make out a vague shape. Also, do you guys believe what happened at the end of the chapter was a dream? Are you satisfied with this being the answer to many of the unanswered hints? Your thoughts are always appreciated. There is one more chapter after this which will be the epilogue, and then this giant story will be finished. Till next time!

Spore!
**Quietus**

Chapter Notes

Quietus

(n.) An end, death
(And a beginning)

*Cries incoherently* Hey everyone, writing this chapter was difficult, and part of me didn’t want to do it but I hope it provides a good resolution to this fic. I would love to hear your thoughts and if you have any questions. For now, enjoy the last chapter of this fic!

Bleach belongs to Tite Kubo

X = Used to indicate change in perspective or timing/scenery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X

Ichigo let his eyes drift over the white walls surrounding him as he strolled through the Gotei 13 at an idle pace. Shinigami passing by bowed briefly before continuing on with whatever assignment their vindictive captains had assigned them. It was funny how things changed and yet stayed the same. It was all so different now, Soul Society, the mortal world, Hueco Mundo, the future. And yet some things were still the same as a thousand years ago. Shunsui from the moment they started to resurrect Soul Society from the ashes had implemented changes, allowing for Soul Society to flourish and prosper in a way it hadn’t for years; stuck in a period of endless stagnation. He had opened Soul Society’s eyes to the mortal world and the multitude of advancements humanity had made while also allowing tradition to remain.

Soul Society wasn’t some utopia of the future. For the most part, it still appeared they were stuck in the Edo period, but, every now and again you could see some modern architecture creeping in, and the houses were definitely built better. Hospitals had opened to provide new medicine (more than a few in Unohana’s honour), restaurants adapted to new sanitary policies, and there was even a small form of inner district politics and democracy happening.

The changes to Soul Society weren’t just related to Rungokai, the Gotei 13 after the war had seen a shuffle, lieutenants moving around, some being promoted, some captains retiring. Jushiro had retired from active service and now served as an advisor to Shunsui, which basically meant the white-haired man stopped all of the drunk Soutaicho’s more ridiculous plans.

Rukia had stepped into the position as Captain of the Thirteen officially, though it was generally agreed by everyone that Kaien served more as a co-Captain than a lieutenant. Everyone also
conveniently ignored when the smaller Captain disappeared for a week on a visit to the mortal world. Kaien was happy enough that he was technically still serving under Jushiro.

Chōjirō had retired after aiding in the cleanup and for the most part, spent his time at the academy teaching the students the art of chivalry and kendo.

Isane was doing well as Captain of the Fourth with Hanatarō as her lieutenant. Yuzu was usually there along with Uryū at least once a week updating the sometimes-timid woman on the various medical updates so they could improve the Fourth. Lisa and Nano had happily taken over the Eighth and turned it into a squad dedicated to female empowerment and representation in Soul Society which always made Ichigo grin.

Yumichika of all people had taken over Rose’s division, continuing the trend of focusing on embracing the beauty in music, art, fashion and all forms of expression; it made sense in a strange sort of way. Love’s division still needed a Captain, but for the moment Renji, Kira, and Shūhei rotated the position every few months which led to some very different tactics and experience for the three likely candidates.

Hueco Mundo, for the most part, had sorted itself out. Shunsui still kept correspondence with Harribel for the simple reason of diplomacy, but both sides were content to leave each other alone. Or at least that was the façade. In truth, the Espada liked to pop into Soul Society whenever to say hello or challenge someone to a duel that would blow up half the street and they would laugh about it afterwards.

Ichigo wasn’t really sure where he fit into the system as he no longer was a Captain or a lieutenant but was treated with the same respect. As Ichigo continued to walk the streets of Soul Society he supposed he was more like an advisor, he floated around and aided people when necessary. It was who he was, past, present, and future.

X

“So, you see class the Greeks were divided in a sense much like one might consider the different division. Each city had its own identity, culture, and religion, which was woven and interconnected with the Greek culture. This divide was part of the problem in the civil war between Athens and Sparta. Think about divide and differences, how do they affect Soul Society as well as the three worlds. We have differences in culture and tradition, but also in development. Mortals have less time, so they live life vibrantly, they live life to the fullest. Shinigami take their time to mature and are often set in their ways. Hollows often live their lives feeling empty and searching. Think about your own differences and look around. It’s from the differences of others that we find a greater whole.”

Ichigo finished with a shine to his eyes and a smile as he studied the bright eyes staring back at him and around them. Something about providing knowledge and seeing it comprehended was inherently amazing. The Shinigami began to chatter softly in the warm sunshine comparing differences between the Shinigami but also other branches.

“Shiba-sensei?”

A voice cautiously asked interrupting the teacher’s peace where he leaned against the tree nonchalantly an English text held in his hand. Ichigo’s students were gathered around him settled on the grass in comfortable positions, but their focus resettled on the orange-haired Shinigami at the question. Ichigo nodded at the student, one from the class that he taught every Wednesday, whose name the orange-haired Shinigami was pretty sure was Shimura.

“You promised you would tell us about your experiences in America with their mythology after our
lesson today.”

Shimura stated with a pleading tone, and suddenly twenty hopeful eyes swung his way with all the blinding force of the sun. Ichigo pretended to think for a long moment grinning evilly internally all the while.

His class was listed as open and generally didn’t follow a curriculum but those who took Ichigo’s class were bound to learn strategy, the art of planning and manipulation, the occasional sword technique, how to prevent the world from ending through the use of diplomacy, and a hell of an interesting perspective. They also learned more about the Famous Saviour of Soul Society, though he preferred Ichigo.

Ichigo waited a moment more enjoying the anguish on their features before he finally relented with a laugh and begin, “At one point in the war we were worried about Yhwach’s influences spreading around the world and we were in a bit of a lull then…”

X

The stones were well polished, they almost gleamed in the early morning light. Ichigo sipped at the tea he had brought in a thermos and remembered the Soutaicho’s smile, Unohana’s kind eyes. He recalled Love and Rose’s acceptance, the way they seemed to move together to some invisible rhythm. Ichigo remembered and smiled.

X

“No throwing dinner! That means you Kaien, and I see you Isshin-jii put the rice down this instant. Ichigo and Yuzu worked hard on this dinner and no one is throwing anything, not even shade! We are having a nice family dinner and this decision is final.”

Kūkaku lectured from her rightful position at the head of the table slamming her wooden hand down for good measure and adding a gunmetal glare for potency. Kaien pouted like the man-child he was but put the bowl he was holding down even as Isshin shot an evil glare at the Head of the Shiba clan.

Masaki beside her husband muffled her smile in the palm of her hand, her features glowing with happiness even as small wrinkles made themselves visible in a stunning way. She winked quietly at Ichigo in that knowing way that suggested tolerance on both their parts even as she comforted her husband with a light pat on his arm.

Karin was studying the two Shiba men with shifty eyes even as she listened to Yuzu continue her tale of how she had met her new girlfriend; it was certainly interesting. Ganju on the other side of Yuzu was listening with bright eyes even as he shifted waiting to tell his story about the Rungokai brats he was mentoring.

Ichigo nodded his thanks to his older sister, earning a cocky wink and a smile that was all love. Taking another bite of the delicious meal Ichigo glanced at his sisters, he couldn’t believe how they were so grown up. Tall and with maturity shaping their features, he had been able to watch their passions flourish, and learn their new favourite songs and food. Karin was entering the pro soccer field soon, and Yuzu was entering college for nursing in a year. They were so bright and happy it made his chest hurt a bit at the weight of the emotions, it was a good sort of pain though.

Kaien on Ichigo’s right gently tapped his elbow against Ichigo’s and when he had gathered the orange-haired Shinigami’s attention he nodded once in understanding, silver eyes serious. Ichigo smiled faintly and pointedly said, “I see the katsudon in your hands Kaien.”
The eldest Shiba sibling pouted and the table erupted into laughter once more. Light chatter filled the night as they traded stories and continued to yell at certain ridiculous Shiba men.

X

The bar was dim and smoky, but Shinji looked in his element squished in the booth with Hiyori frowning beside him, and Kisuke on the other side. Ichigo shook his head and slid into the booth beside Lisa. Yoruichi winked at the orange-haired Shinigami over her drink where she was curled beside Kisuke and Mashiro bounced and waved while Kensei sighed in resignation. Ichigo muffled a smile at the sight of the Vizard together.

The missing presences of Rose and Love were sharp and painful hanging over all their heads unspoken, just like the record tucked in the corner of the booth. But they were celebrating the lives Rose and Love had lived, they had laughed with them for years and while they were mourning, it wasn’t as heavy as that first time meeting as a group again after the war.

Lisa curled an arm around his shoulder and slid a drink his way, steam curled in gentle spirals from the mug and Ichigo rolled his eyes but took a sip of the sake. Lisa grinned bright and real in the moment in a way that was hard to pull apart. The orange-haired man felt Shinji’s concerned eyes before he saw them, the way the blond was locked onto Ichigo even as he bickered idly with Hiyori.

The Captain of the Fifth raised one brow in question, concern lacing his features like a well-greased motor. Ichigo smiled in a reassuring manner and the blond’s shoulders untensed before he returned his attention to the smaller blond batting at his shoulder.

“Ne Ichi!”

Mashiro called over the table in a yell that was probably too loud for the small restaurant. Ichigo turned his head and nodded at the childish Vizard who beamed and stated, “Kensei agreed to let me be co-Captain!”

“I did not!”

Kensei retaliated a moment later and the table descended into chaos over whether Mashiro or the division would ever actually survive as a Captain. Ichigo smiled and leaned against the booth absorbing the warmth of his chosen family, even if they were different from what they all started as.

X

Ichigo slipped out from underneath Byakuya’s arm and the warm comforter that prevented the chill of the night from seeping into their skin. The orange-haired Shinigami sat on the edge of the futon for a moment, watching the way the moonlight caught at Byakuya’s hair and highlighted the peace of his expression. Shaking fingers clenched the blankets for a moment as Ichigo exhaled shakily drawing on Zangetsu’s presence to relax tightly coiled muscles.

Stepping onto the cool floor, Ichigo muffled a curse into his sleeve and opened the shoji door stepping onto the veranda with the lightest whisper of movement. The sky spread out before him in blossoming shades of fiery orange and deep blue that danced together to form a thousand shades. Puffy clouds still lingering with the darkness of night floated gracefully and on the horizon the sun began to crest the hill, golden rays spilling across the land.

Ichigo exhaled and knew it would be alright.

X
The End.

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Chapter End Notes

Wow, I can’t believe I finished this monster of a fic. There were points where I just wanted to abandon it and give up, but I promised I would finish it and here we are. I want to thank everyone who commented/reviewed this fic or left kudos or followed it. You guys were what kept me going and I am so thankful to all of you for taking the time to read this fic.

In a little while, I am planning to release an OVA series for this fic that will include any ‘missing scenes’ or anything you guys really want to see like Ichigo battling the Soutaicho. I also eventually will edit the whole fic to fix continuity errors, early chapters, and grammar so I’ll post an update chapter when that happens.

Otherwise, for now, this is the end. Thank you all so much for sticking with this fic and for all the love!

Finale!

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