First Contact, or: The Four Body Problem

by Tozette

Summary

"Time and space are..." Ishida pauses. "Delicate." Another pause. "Which means that we should not be handing them over to your care," he adds, looking really pointedly at Ichigo.

"Ah!" Orihime smacks her fist into her palm as the realisation comes to her. "Because Ichigo-kun will break them!"

“Yes. Exactly,” says Ishida, nodding. Chad makes a rumble of agreement.

“I’m not going to break space and time,” hisses Ichigo, red-faced and aggrieved. Then he stops and thinks about it for a second. “...why did we let Urahara mess around with them?” he asks incredulously.

Notes

PLEASE NOTE that this story IGNORES THE SECOND ARC completely. What’s a fullbring? Sounds kinky. Quincy? Sounds pretty much extinct. Etc., etc.,

See the end of the work for more notes
It’s the working conditions, all right?

Hueco Mundo is mostly desert, and always night. When the moon is fat and swollen, it radiates light which makes it marginally warmer even if the glare from the white sands makes it hard to judge distances. Most of the time, though, it hovers around zero degrees Celsius.

There’s also a lot of sand in Hueco Mundo. It gets into everything. *Everything*. There’s nothing that’s safe. It’s grinding and obstructive and it makes everything wear that much faster, from clothing to machinery to Kurosaki-kun’s temper.

And everything has to be *portable*. If they can’t pick it up and run with it, it gets left behind. And they run away a lot.

Ironically, the hollows aren’t actually the biggest problem in Hueco Mundo. All the smaller and stupider hollows avoid the thick, dangerous blanket of Starrk’s reiatsu. And even the sentient, powerful ones fall more or less under the control of Tier Harribel, who -- well. She’s not a friend or an ally, but she at least seems to view outright hostility as too costly.

No, the problem is the shinigami. As fugitives from both the living world and Soul Society, they still have to make occasional supply runs. There are a lot of things that don’t exist in Hueco Mundo -- there’s water in places but there’s no real food, unless you’re willing to eat hollows, and they also need things like textiles (for Ishida-kun to turn into things that protect them from merciless winds and sandstorms), medications (because some of them do get sick, and those that don’t can at least get injured) and chemically softened toilet paper (for -- well, anyway, they all agree that toilet paper is very important). The shinigami aren’t great at tracking their comings and goings in Hueco Mundo -- too much interference -- but they keep a really close eye on the living world, and that’s the vulnerable point.

When they make supply runs, they get tracked. More than once, somebody has unknowingly brought back some kind of bug or tracker. The first ones are mechanical, if tiny, and easy enough to short out. But later Kurosaki starts using ones that are organic -- there are any number of things that leave oddly specific chemical trails, and Kurosaki Mayuri seems to study them all.

None of them are sound sleepers anymore. They set a watch. Always. They also keep in physical contact while they doze. Every one of them jolts awake at the slightest sound.

So even aside from freezing temperatures, endless sand, mobility issues and the ongoing threat of shinigami appearing out of nowhere with a kill order, Kisuke has to contend with insomnia and paranoia. Not to mention the downright awful food.

“Mmm... Do you regret it?” Yoruichi asks him once, curled in cat form on his shoulder and watching the huge moon above them. It’s a sliver of a crescent, and the atmosphere is freezing to match. Sometimes he’s envious of her fur coat.

It’s a weird, hard question. Kisuke tips his hat to cover his eyes and wishes he still had his fan.

It’s been months since Aizen’s fall, following the hard-fought twelve years of war to take him down.

The end of that war looks like this: Ichigo and Orihime pull out all the stops. Ichigo's massive attacks and sheer unstoppable power is what defeats Aizen. But Orihime is the one who destroys
the hōgyoku, rejects its existence until it's nothing but slivers and dust. Its power is greatly diluted and the winds spread it across the sands of Hueco Mundo. Urahara thinks there will be a greater number of natural arrancar occurring over the next few years, maybe even decades, but all in all the threat has been dealt with.

Ichigo is seriously wounded by the fight, and Orihime is exhausted by the effort.

The celebration of their victory shakes all three worlds, spilling from the sands of Hueco Mundo to the outer reaches of Rukongai. Even the living world sees news reports of parades of strange, old-fashioned looking people celebrating in the streets. The dead are numerous and the injured are legion, but the fighting is over and that's worth celebrating.

They get to do it for about a fortnight, which is when C46 begins deliberating. With the soutaichou dead and his replacement in a coma, there's no check or balance for C46's power. Those who could take up the position are sick, comatose or they're those who are soon to be judged. The judgements handed down are the result of C46's deliberation and there is no process for appeal.

The Vizards are pardoned to exile - they're never to enter soul society because it's no place for hollows. They're given the choice between the living world and Hueco Mundo -- which isn't much choice at all.

Ichigo's judgement falls in line with theirs. Chad is of minimal interest, and while there are some dissenters who think Ishida should be killed on principle, C46 delivers the injunction that he is no longer allowed to hunt or kill hollows instead.

Orihime gets a death sentence. She's too dangerous and too strange and her power is virtually limitless, constrained only by her will.

The people who have been grudgingly complying with the decrees handed down by C46 are now split.

Obviously, Ichigo does not submit. Kisuke could definitely have predicted that for them, but nobody asked him.

This is considered a terrible idea by some and an excellent idea by others. Some shinigami defect -- Rukia, perhaps obviously, with Renji trailing after her like a lost dog. Of those who remain in Soul Society, a much larger proportion become conscientious objectors in this particular war -- the Kuchiki elders disown Rukia, presumably for appearances’ sake, but the whole clan refuses to admit there is in fact any such war. Squad Ten refuses to engage at all. When ordered to become involved, many shinigami of the Fourth develop a tendency to “forget” who is on which side and heal whomever they encounter

Several of the vizards throw their lot in with them, and the others at least view this new conflict with Soul Society with a kind of jaded neutrality. Starrk and Lilynnette simply show up one day, prowling around the edges of their camp in the dunes of Hueco Mundo. Orihime invites them in for tea, which she makes out of cocoa and pickled onions. Starrk sips it politely while Lilynnette gags and shrieks, and in the end they just don’t leave. War once again makes for strange bedfellows.

There are those among the shinigami who do follow their orders, though. The Onmitsukido and the Kido Corps are problematic enough, and there are far more shinigami who fight than who choose not to. To the surprise of no one, the Eleventh division is committed to whichever course of action encourages the most mayhem.

They’re barely a week out from the end of the first war before they start the second one. This time
the enemy is too familiar. It hurts more. Seeing who defects and who doesn’t is just the beginning.

Fast forward to now, months later, and the casualties are beginning to pile up.

They know each other’s strengths and weaknesses. They fought on the same side against Aizen for too long. The winner of any battle between given factions is whoever is willing to be most ruthless. Kurotsuchi-taichou thrives.

Does Kisuke regret it?

He barely knows.

“Too soon to tell yet,” says Kisuke, and Yoruichi makes a low, amused noise, but not like she disagrees.

He’s working on half a dozen projects at once: hiding chemical traces, new kido barriers to give them more warning before attack (wouldn’t it be nice, if Tessai hadn’t been killed in the Onmitsukido attack on the Shoten? Kisuke misses him for more than just his expertise, of course, but right now the expertise would be sort of handy), new decoy mod souls to lay false trails...

It’s taxing, but he’s the entirety of their research and development department, and all he has is what they salvaged from the wreck of his shop (which is not much) and what he can scrap together. Occasionally they risk an excursion to the wreck of Las Noches and he can fiddle around with the equipment left over from Szayelaporro’s laboratory there, but it’s strange and unwieldy -- a research lab, sure, but everything is designed as filtered through the mind of a soul-eating monster with delusions of godlike perfection.

If Kisuke truly needs something badly enough, he can add it to the supply run list, but that’s -- risky. Especially since, while Renji will sometimes cut their losses to pick up food and medicine and discard the rest of the list, the others will bring whatever else is on there back come hell or high water. In this case, those are not even metaphorical dangers. There’s also a strong potential for kido fire, poison, ice or blunt force trauma.

In this case, the project that causes the problem is his attempt to bend space-time -- essentially creating a time-tight storage facility in a bag -- one with more space than it outwardly appears to have. It requires a stable sub-dimension all of its own, which is quite a bit more difficult than just compressing space so as to access stored things in caches around the desert. The caches, unfortunately, have a habit of being discovered -- by hollows, if not by shinigami. Harribel’s disinterest in their group doesn’t extend to stopping her people from devouring whatever they find.

“What,” says Kurosaki-kun. Ishida just as obviously doesn’t understand either. He adjusts his glasses and squints.

Chad’s examining his diagram too. “Is it...” He leans over, mountainous and darkly tanned, looking like a deeper shadow under Hueco Mundo’s moon. “...bigger on the inside?”

“Bingo,” says Kisuke, smiling. Honestly, he’s relieved. He hates it when nobody understands his ideas at all. Yoruichi says this is perverse for somebody who is gratingly mysterious on purpose, but she’s doing a perimeter check and cannot judge him right now.

“Ohhh,” says Orihime.

“Huh,” says Ichigo.

Ishida looks like he is counting the uses for such a thing in his head even as he stares critically at
the diagram.
Renji is still scratching his head, which makes Kisuke want to sigh in despair. That one’s just not very bright.

“It would mean making way fewer supply runs,” says Ichigo, which is what they’re all basically thinking. They’ll be better provisioned and put themselves in danger less frequently. Fewer attacks can come after them when they’re spending less time in the living world, which means more time shore up their defences and less time running like headless birds through Hueco Mundo while they try to shake off pursuit.

“...Can you actually do that?” Ichigo asks dubiously.

Kisuke touches his chest and tries to look affronted. “Kurosaki-kun!”

He rolls his eyes, but in the end, well, their collective faith in him is both heady and daunting. Still, he can do it.

Of course, he makes it sound a lot easier than it proves to be.

There are plenty of problems caused by the working conditions, you see. Reagents that need to be liquid which are frozen at the ambient temperature here, for one. Sand where sand has no place being. Components left behind when they have to pack up and flee in a rush. Bits and pieces that really ought not to be duct taped together from scrap metal!

Bending space time is... finicky, even in ideal circumstances.

And dangerous, of course, which in the history of experiments Urahara Kisuke has worked into his inventions barely rates a footnote. But it is dangerous.

And prone to accidents, as it turns out.

The biggest and worst accident, though, is... well. Kisuke will blame the working conditions.

“...Oops,” says Kisuke, after the smoke clears and four of them are missing. That’s... awkward.

“Ahaha... well... I suppose it’s still experimental...”

“Oops?” thunders Hiyori, going from zero to incandescent fury in half a second. Her temper’s only gotten worse without Shinji to take it out on. “OOPS?”

“They’re ...gone,” says Renji slowly, like it’s just dawning on him that if he’s calm and everyone else is freaking out, he probably doesn’t understand what’s going on -- and that panicked is a good place to be right now.

“Oh... dear,” Kisuke manages, tugging his hat forward to shadow his eyes. Sand flies at Hiyori’s approach, but he barely notices. “That’s not good.”

The working conditions here are terrible.
There's a bang and a flash, and suddenly Ichigo's consciousness arrives in a supine body sprawled in a bed softer than anything he's felt in years.

Ichigo goes still, eyes wide in the dark and heart pounding.

It's a shock, is all. He knows geta-bōshi's testing his new space-bending storage system, so he's probably just been shoved to a different place.

That's easy enough. Ichigo will just go back.

That requires knowing where he is to start with, of course. It feels like the living world, as it happens, like breathing real air instead of reishi. It feels like he's wearing a real body, too - or at least a really well synchronised gigai. If it is the living world, the shinigami will be sure to find him. Soon.

They're probably on their way.

So Ichigo gets up. There's no need to turn the light on because the too-soft bed is right under a window. The moon outside is smaller than in Hueco Mundo, but it's almost full. There's enough light to see by, even if moonlight bleeds the colour from everything and paints it in shades of black and silver.

Practice and experience tell him there's no suppressing his reiatsu. He sucks at it, and even sufficient control to seal his zanpakutou hasn't given him the means to hide in the traditional sense. There's a work-around for that, though, one of Urahara's more brilliant outside-the-box ideas. He lets it go instead, and spreads his reiatsu so far as to make the sensors useless - accurate to within a twelve mile radius.

Sure, they'll know which city he's in. But if they want to pinpoint him, they'll have to do it the old fashioned way: with deployment and legwork.

That, in turn, means agents in small groups scouring the area, ready to alert each other when they turn up something. He feels weird in this gigai, but not injured. If they get too close he'll be able to pick them off before they can report. Simple, if not easy.

Something buzzes to his right.

Ichigo jumps.

A phone, he realises, after a heart-pounding second in the dark.

It's in a bag - which, weirdly, looks just like a school bag, and isn't that a nostalgic thought? - so he flips it open and grabs the buzzing phone and frowns.

It looks like his old phone. The one he had before the first war, back when he was a teenager. Even the scratches on it seem oddly familiar, scars of a life of beating up street thugs and (other) delinquents.

The screen says 'Unknown Number', bright in the dark room.

It stops buzzing as he's holding it, and then it begins immediately again.
Ichigo hesitates. Then he selects 'Answer'.

"Ichigo-kun," says Orihime's familiar voice. It sounds a little weird, actually, lighter and a bit softer, but the intonation's perfect. "I think we've time travelled."

Yeah, definitely Orihime.

He makes an uncertain noise. "Is this like the time you thought we were being attacked by an army of robots with laser eyes?" he asks.

"We were being attacked!"

"Sure," Ichigo agrees. By a single menos grande, in the middle of Hueco Mundo. It's not exactly unusual for them, but Orihime is weird when she's recently woken up. And at all other times, actually. "Can you tell me where you are? I'll come get you."

Between them, it's Ichigo, Chad, Lilynette and Starrk who can open the gargantas. There's a theory that Orihime might be able to reject herself from one reality to another, but given the sheer scope of her powers and the relative fragility of reality they've declined to try it. So far.

"I'm at my old apartment," Orihime says.

Ichigo frowns. Orihime's old apartment - the one she'd lived in during their school days - is long gone. It was destroyed with most of the rest of Karakura in the initial throw-down with the Onmitsukido. "What?"

"Ichigo-kun," she says gently, "where are you?"

And Ichigo looks around, properly, with mounting horror. He recognises that too-soft bed. He knows the book bag, the sliding closet door, the wheeled chair and the homework neatly piled on his desk.

He goes still again.

Orihime is taking is silence badly. Now she's babbling about calendars and her shrine to Sora, about notes from Tatsuki in her fridge about what she's allowed to eat (and what doesn't go together, on pain of food poisoning, and now she's saying something about strawberries and fish stew), about -

"Chad," says Ichigo, swallowing hard with a throat that's too tight. "Let me call Chad. And -" Ishida, damn it, that's who else was right there when the flash and the bang went off. He remembers Hiyori yelling at them, so she can't have been close enough, and nobody else -

"I think Uryū-kun's number is in the phone book," Orihime says. Her voice is rising in pitch, which is also familiar. "I'll -"

"Yes. Yeah."

He hangs up even as he hears the clattering and rustling from her end. Ichigo doesn't have Ishida's number, but Chad's is saved to his phone. He glances at the date and feels an awful, swooping sensation in his guts.

"Ichigo," says Chad, deep and steady. He answers on the first ring, and just the tone of his voice lets Ichigo know it's the one he remembers from five minutes ago, not the one who probably would have been asleep this time twelve years ago.
He tells him to meet at Orihime's place, then shoves his phone in the bag and clenches and unclenches his hands tightly for a few bewildered seconds.

Space makes sense. He can travel through space. On his feet, or via garganta, with sonido or shunpo - doesn't matter. Time... Ichigo is only really aware of how to travel through time one day at a time. If Urahara's sent them careening back through time...

He swallows. How the hell are they supposed to fix that?

This place... even the cracks in the walls are familiar. He feels haunted. He dresses quickly, shoves his phone away in a pocket, and takes the window to avoid waking the sleeping household.

Then Ichigo gets distracted halfway down and falls on his face with the sudden realisation that there is a household to wake. He wonders if Karin and Yuzu and Isshin will all be there if he goes back to the house and looks into the other rooms.

Maybe it's an illusion. Maybe it's an elaborate hallucination.

Maybe Urahara's test has knocked Ichigo out and he's dreaming a particularly cruel dream. Maybe he'll wake up back in Hueco Mundo and the reality of his sisters' death will strike him again, touch him properly, the way a dream could never emulate.

He stumbles unsteadily to his feet and turns and looks back at the house. In the dark it looks right, familiar. The sign for the clinic is right there, pale writing just discernable in the moonlight. Yuzu planted the flower boxes outside the clinic's doors, pink and white and yellow.

He swallows hard.

If they're real, if any of this is real, they'll still be here when he gets back.

If they're not...

Ichigo's really going to kill Urahara.

The streets of Karakura are deserted at this time of night. The air feels strangely warm next to the chill of Hueco Mundo. It's like walking in a dream: the buildings, neat gardens tucked away behind their fences, street numbers glinting brassy beneath pools of street lighting. It's both very familiar and very unsettling.

Ichigo pauses for too long outside a bakery. Orihime got tossed through it when the Onmitsukido came for her that first time, but it's here now, whole and... here. There are a lot of places like this one in Karakura.

Orihime's as good as her word, because Ichigo catches up with Ishida on his way to her apartment.

He looks terrible. The healthy teenaged body he's wearing - or inhabiting, or being, because Ishida is all Quincy and unlike Ichigo he really ought to hold on to his physical body - hides a multitude of sins, but his expression is that same flat-blank-walking-wounded one he wears when casualty reports come in.

Ichigo looks sideways at him when they fall into step. It's completely quiet out. Of course, it's one o'clock, and in a nice residential neighbourhood that means everybody's safely in bed.

Ishida moves like someone who's been badly wounded: careful, testing, like any wrong step might break him.
"What Orihime said," says Ichigo uncertainly. "You think?"

Ishida gives him a bleak look. "It's possible." Then he pauses and gets to the point. "Ryūken's alive. I - saw him before Inoue-san's phone call came."

Ichigo winces. That... would not have been a good surprise.

Ishida's relationship with his dad's always been complicated - way more complicated than the one between Ichigo and Isshin (a perfectly functional if distant one of shrieking, abject humiliation and comic relief). Ichigo's never quite sure how to address it. He still feels like, when Ryūken died, Ishida mourned more out of a sense of shock rather than grief: it was a pillar of his world removed, not a close bond suddenly missing.

If Ichigo absolutely has to categorise the expression that's on his friend' face right now, he might call it 'constipated'. And while he bets there's no study on how time travel affects bowel movements, he's sure that's not entirely what's going through Ishida's head right now.

"Did you talk to him?" he asks, taking an awkward stab in the dark.

There's a short pause.

"No," says Ishida.

Well.

Okay then.

He can see Orihime's apartment building looming up ahead, and he's glad for it, because conversations with Ishida are hard enough when they're not about feelings.

The apartment complex where Orihime lives is a cheaper one, and Ichigo's never quite gotten around to asking her about the bars on the windows of every window here - not when she lived there, and after the whole 'shinigami hunting you every time you show your face in the living world' thing, it seemed kind of insensitive. But he's looking properly now, and if he remembers right Orihime's income is from some distant relative who pays her relative to her school marks.

Neither of them need to ask which one's her door. They've both been here before, and they've both seen it in ruins.

"This is so weird," Ichigo complains, raising his fist to knock.

Someone's sensed them coming - the door opens before the first noise has time to echo. Chad puts his huge hand on Ichigo's biceps. He doesn't really exert any pressure, but Ichigo finds himself drawn in anyway, kicking off his shoes and heading deeper inside. He feels calmer with Chad's heavy hand on him.

Even Sora's shrine's still there, now left with a tiny offering. Offerings for the dead seem so strange now. Half the people Ichigo knows are dead.

Orihime looks a little dishevelled, and there's the remains of something ceramic in pieces on the kitchen floor, where everybody pretends they can't see into that part of the apartment.

There's a calendar on the table, a pile of homework spread on the floor, a phone book thrown down next to that. Orihime's spirits are all out, fluttering and nervous and ready for something terrible: Hinakigu and Lily seem to be spinning wildly around the lights, and even docile Ayame's
inspecting the shrine like it could bust out in hollows at any second.

Once the four of them are all in the same room, Ichigo comes to the abrupt realisation that nobody is going to talk properly until the room is secured - and Ishida, who is usually their go-to guy for spells, hasn't got the equipment he needs.

So it's Ichigo who gets up and starts trying to do kido, which - well, it's not the spectacular failure that it was when he was first learning, but he's hardly an expert. He runs his hands over the wall, squinting to see the flickering markings that come up with the application of his reiatsu. Yoruichi could do better in her sleep, to say nothing of Tessai or Hachi.

He does it three times. Orihime bites her lip after the second one fails, and he can just see her opening her mouth to offer to make a barrier instead. Ishida rolls his eyes, haughty and critical. The third time he tries he gets a sort of wonky barrier that coats the walls. It's not perfect, but it'll work for now.

"Where do you even go to get those ginto things?" Ichigo wonders, thinking about the weird little silver containers that Ishida uses for spells. He's not quite sure how Quincy spellcasting works, but he knows they're necessary somehow.

"I'll take some from the hospital," says Ishida, in a nonchalant way where 'take' definitely means 'steal' and 'from the hospital' is code for 'from Ryûken'.

Orihime and Chad relax a little once the barrier's up, wonky though it might be, and when Ichigo sits down his knee knocks against Chad's. Chad, in turn, has one of Orihime's hands in his, and her socked foot is in contact with Ishida's leg. It feels a lot safer that way.

There's a tiny, old-looking television in one corner of Orihime's living room, and on it the eleven o'clock news is replaying.

Pretty much everybody's attention's drawn immediately to the date in the corner, right under the "1:28 AM".

"It could be a group hallucination," Orihime offers. "Maybe there was something in dinner-"

Chad untangles his hand from hers and puts it instead heavily upon her head. Orihime stops talking and rolls her eyes up, inspecting the sudden weight on her scalp.

"A...ano..." She prods Chad's hand gently. He does not remove it.

"A hallucination would affect each of us differently. A spell or technique that drew all our minds into one pre-created 'reality' is theoretically possible - Kyouka Suigetsu could have done it when Aizen was alive. But usually that kind of technique would prompt us to 'forget' about the important details outside, as a failsafe so we wouldn't attempt to break out. Additionally, we had no indication that any part of our camp was under attack. And the available data suggests otherwise. No. Time travel," says Ishida, frowning. "It seems impossible, but Urahara-san was definitely working on something that dealt with the principles of space and time."

Ichigo scrubs his hands through his hair. Because, yeah, this is the conclusion he's been steadily coming to as well. It's not a conclusion he really likes.

Ishida's still talking like he loves the sound of his own voice, checking and dissecting possibilities aloud as he taps his fingertips on Orihime's table. She's tapping her foot nervously against his leg. Next to Ichigo, Chad is steady.
He's talking about, uh, time lines and parallel universes now, and Ichigo is pretty much ready to
tune him out because there's just one blaring thought that keeps recurring, so-

"Okay," Ichigo says, interrupting the long-winded explanation. He's not really that invested in
knowing how it happened, he just wants it fixed. "How do we get back?"

"Have you been listening to a word I've said?" Ishida sighs. He adjusts the angle of his glasses
again and they catch the light, reflecting the television screen back at Ichigo for a second from
across the table. "If we were to travel through time - other than in the normal way - to get back,
we'd be creating yet another time line, branching off."

Ichigo squints, because, no, he has not been listening.

"We can't get back to a time line we've already left," says Ishida, sounding very strained and tense
indeed, "because we'd cause a paradox."

Orihime murmurs something about lightning and primordial soup, and then flails one arm wildly
in emphasis of... something that's no doubt taking place in the frightening reaches and underpasses
of her imagination. Chad catches her hand before it can collide with Ishida's glasses.

"Eh?" she blinks.

"...As I was saying," says Ishida, in the tone of somebody who isn't touching that with a barge pole,
"even if we could find out how to do such a thing, it's very likely that we'd do more harm than
good. Time and space are..." he pauses. "Delicate." Another pause. "Which means that we should
not be handing them over to your care," he adds, looking really pointedly at Ichigo.

“Ah!” Orihime smacks her fist into her palm as the realisation comes to her. "Because Ichigo-kun
will break them!"

“Yes. Exactly,” says Ishida, nodding. Chad makes a rumble of agreement.

“I'm not going to break space and time,” hisses Ichigo, red-face and aggrieved. Then he stops and
thinks about it for a second. “…why did we let Urahara mess around with them?” he asks
incredulously.

Next to him, Chad crosses his arms and nods, seconding the question.

It turns out that there's no good answer to this question, unless one counts 'it seemed like a good
idea at the time'.

But from what Ishida's saying, they're... stuck.

"So we can only go forward." Orihime, though prone to flights of fancy, never really loses touch
entirely.

"Aa," agrees Ishida. "You could argue that Soul Society got what they wanted," he adds. "We
certainly won't be bothering them anymore. And as far as that time line is concerned... we're worse
than dead."

Worse than dead. Ishida has a flair for the dramatic, as always.

Ichigo runs his hands through his hair. He's not sure how closely anybody else has been comparing
the date now to what it was back in their time line, but... "How similar do you think it is?"
Orihime holds up a sheaf of papers from the pile of homework. "It's close, Ichigo-kun. We're studying the same things, and we're in class with Tatsuki-chan still. Uryū-kun's still in the handicrafts club with me and my marks look similar-

Ishida's expression blanks for a second at the reminder. Ichigo frowns at the thought that he was ever involved in extracurricular clubs. It seems strange and very distant. He's unsettled by all these strange and familiar things - he feels like the holes inside his head have changed shape, and none of the comfortable puzzle pieces quite fill them anymore.

"Then... Rukia will be coming to Karakura soon."

There's a long, unhappy pause.

"Oh," says Orihime in a small voice. Then she jolts: "Ah! Um, um, it'll be good to see Rukia-chan, but-"

"She won't recognise you," Ishida cuts in. "Are you prepared for that, Kurosaki?"

Ichigo is pretty sure he doesn't flinch outwardly, but he can feel the tightness of his own facial expression when he thinks about it. Rukia's death still hurts, even this many months later. She was one of the earliest casualties of the second war. She'd probably still be alive if he'd been there.

And... she's probably alive here. Ryüken is, if he trusts Ishida's judgement - which he does. He knows that with the mounting evidence, it would be more accurate to say she's definitely alive (or, well, dead and working as a shinigami) here, not just 'probably alive'. But he can't quite wrap his head around it. Maybe when he's seen Karin and Yuzu he'll come to terms with it, but for now...

For now his heart is beating too fast and he feels like there's an attack coming.

His throat is tight when he thinks about all the people he'll have to face again, all unknowing of how badly he's failed them. The clarity of hindsight is cruel to Ichigo.

Chad knocks his mountainous shoulder against Ichigo's. "We could think of it as a chance," he says.

"We could do better this time," Orihime says slowly. She tilts her head, and Ichigo can almost see the thoughts running quickly behind her wide eyes. "Ah! I won't get kidnapped this time," she says, smiling brightly.

Ichigo snorts.

Even Ishida cracks a narrow smile, but it fades quickly. "It's true that we have, essentially, a second chance. It's not our time line, but it should be similar - virtually identical, barring changes we make to it. We can start again, from this time going forward."

A second chance...

Ichigo thinks about it - about starting again, from fifteen years old, and going forward as though those twelve years never happened.

At first, he rebels against the idea that all his history, all the people he's known and the friends he's made, are expendable under these strange circumstances. He doesn't want replacements for them, not even the ones who've died and moved on in the reincarnation cycle - he wants them. The very thought is enough to make him angry, make him want to - to, to **bash down the walls between time lines**!
Ichigo clenches his fists. And why shouldn't he?

"Ichigo-kun has a very scary aura right now," says Orihime anxiously.

That snaps him out of it, at least temporarily. "Huh?" he looks up.

Ishida is watching him with narrowed eyes. "I'm going to say it again," he says slowly and clearly. "If we try to cross back into the timeline we've already left, we could cause a lot of damage. We don't know what form that might take, but the worst case scenario is..." he pauses, partially to find the words but mostly because he's just that dramatic, "Everyone dies."

Ichigo flinches. "But -"

"Everyone dies," Ishida repeats, giving the syllables equal weight, like gunshots.

"Ichigo-kun-?"

"All right, all right," he mutters.

Fine. No going back. No breaking space-time. He's got it.

The risk to everyone else... well, probably better if they stay away. Probably. Okay. Ichigo scowls thunderously. It feels wrong, like he's abandoning the others. Ichigo has left enough people behind already. "So - a second chance?" he repeats. His voice sounds like it's been pushed through a meat grinder. "That means we still have the whole war to fight."

Orihime goes still, unblinking, and Ichigo wonders if she's off in her own world again.

"That's true," Ishida grants, "but we can finish it a lot faster this time, and with a lot fewer casualties. Remember how we were when we were fifteen? There are a lot of advancements Aizen won't have made yet - types of hollows, at least, that he hasn't even conceptualised."

Ichigo nods, because, yeah. He remembers. Vaguely, he remembers running around with Karakura doing Rukia's dirty work while Urahara's gigai sucked away all her power.

In the end, Ichigo fought Aizen and killed him, and Orihime was able to destroy the hōgyoku. It took years, but if they were to face him at this time, in the new time line... He glances sideways at her. She seems too small and delicate and pretty to be as powerful as she is.

"We could kill him now," Ichigo says flatly.

She blinks. There's a trembling second where Ichigo thinks he can see her second thoughts. Maybe he's redeemable, maybe they could prevent any deaths at all, maybe this, maybe that - and then her eyes harden. Her face is grim with the understanding - Aizen has to be taken out, and doing so early will prevent greater losses.

"Yes," she says, unhappy but firm. "But... it would be better," she says cautiously, "if we don't... if the shinigami don't see us fight. Or me, at least."
Ichigo scowls murderously.

"I agree," says Ishida. "The shinigami must not find out the real extent of your power - otherwise we'll be right back where we started, at war with all of them. And frankly, it's better for me if they don't pay any attention to us at all." It's about as delicate as Ishida gets.

It would be better. If they can defeat Aizen without revealing quite how powerful they are, or the oddly limitless nature of Orihime's power, there's less chance of Soul Society declaring them too dangerous to live. Less chance of a second war if they don't seem like a threat.

"Yeah," agrees Ichigo and Orihime is nodding right next to him.

They don't want that again.

"So how do we take down Aizen without revealing that we're stronger than he is?"

"We could blow him up," Orihime suggests brightly. "You don't need to be 'strong' to make explosives work." That's true. Of that, they have terrible proof. Squad Twelve has been the bane of their existence for the past few months.

"Or poison," Ishida says, more sedate but with his glasses gleaming in the light. "There are several compounds we salvaged from Szayelaparoro's laboratory that would work. I'm certain we could replicate them."

"Do we... tell Urahara-san?" Orihime asks uncertainly.

"Why wouldn't we?" Ichigo wonders.

There's a pause. Usually there'd be no doubt about telling him - Urahara Kisuke already knows all of their secrets, so they have no choice but to trust him. In the beginning perhaps it was different, but for the last decade or so he's repaid them by being mostly trustworthy.

If you have to share a secret with somebody, Urahara Kisuke's not the worst.

But then Ichigo remembers again: this Urahara isn't their Urahara. He's Urahara twelve years ago, sharp and withdrawn, whose secrets have secrets. Give him an inch and he'll take a mile, and no matter how much trust they show in him, there's almost no chance of Urahara trusting them.

"...never mind."

"We won't tell him," decides Chad.

"This future-past stuff is depressing," Ichigo complains.

Nobody disagrees.

"That brings us to another problem," says Ishida. "The hōgyoku."

"That's not a problem," says Orihime, sounding upbeat again. She flexes dramatically, showing off her virtually nonexistent biceps. "I can destroy it again, no problem. Just let me at it!"

"Yeah," says Ichigo, "that's the problem. Geta-bōshi's got it, and he's been hiding it for ages. There's no way he'll tell us where it is, or let us try to destroy it. He's too paranoid. Even if we did tell him about the -" he waves one hand at Ishida, "-time line stuff," and here Ishida makes a low scoffing sound, probably in lieu of insulting Ichigo's intelligence, "it's too big a gamble to hope he'll believe us and let us have the hōgyoku so we can try to break it. We'd be showing him everything
Ichigo twitches, and the only reason he doesn't lunge across the table and grind his knuckles into Ishida's head until he changes colours is because Orihime begins laughing. It's a sweet, helpless laugh, and it's rare enough that he subsides without violence. Ishida looks smug as hell, though, so he'll probably have to get him back later.

"The phrase you're looking for is to 'tip one's hand'," he adds, smirking a little.

"Oh? I thought it was tip your cards short of a deck."

"...I'm... not sure that's quite right, Orihime-chan..."

"If we really need to, I'm not saying we couldn't overpower geta-bōshi," Ichigo starts, scowling at the thought. He doesn't like fighting against his friends, and even if Urahara doesn't know who they are here, he'll always be Ichigo's friend. He feels twisted up and queasy just contemplating it. But he'll do it, if he has to.

"I'm sure he has it well hidden. Overpowering him would be pointless - it's not like we could just search him for it. We'd be engaging in, essentially, a battle of wits."

Which is a fight every one of them would lose. Even if they tease Ichigo about being bull-headed and thinking with his sword instead of his brain, none of them is stupid. Hell, if you accept class rankings as a viable means of measuring intelligence, they're all well above average. But Urahara is an actual, genuine genius. He's been playing cat and mouse with the shinigami for centuries.

"Well, that's that then!" Orihime says. Her smile shows a kind of nervous relief. Of course there's no point starting a losing battle, so they won't have to touch Urahara. His own genius protects him - for a change. Ichigo, too, feels something unknot in his chest.

"We still have to get our hands on the hōgyoku before Aizen," Ishida points out. "And we can't let Urahara-san hide it inside Rukia again."

There's a long silence, punctuated only by the discordant hum of Ichigo's kido. The television is muted but its light changes the tone of the room as the colours change upon the pale walls.

"Can't we?" Orihime wonders aloud. "At least if it's sealed inside her, we'll know where it is. If Aizen got it out of her even after Ichigo-kun stopped her from being executed, there must be some way. Couldn't we just... do that?"

"We don't know how he did it, though," Ichigo points out. His memory that far back is hazy and all he can really recall is the blind panic he'd felt watching Aizen stalk toward Rukia and being unable to act. Helplessness sits badly on Ichigo.

Everyone looks toward Ishida.

There's a reason he deals with most of the spellcasting they require - he has the finest control and the best mental aptitude for it of them all. He's also better at applying it on the fly than most of
them - even better than a great many shinigami, although Quincy spellcasting isn't quite the same.

"I'm not sure how he did it to start with," he says uncomfortably. "And I'd have to study her body, presumably without her knowledge." There's a faint flush high on his cheekbones, which is the only indication that the idea is completely mortifying to him.

"When you say 'study her body'," says Ichigo slowly.

The flush expands. Rapidly. "Not like that!" Snaps Ishida. He lunges across the table for Ichigo, fingers twitching.

Ichigo leans back out of the way and Ishida's fingers just scrape through his hair instead. "How am I meant to know?" He yells back. "It's your stupid face, it's bright red!"

"Of course it is! Anybody would be uncomfortable-!"

Both of them know Urahara wouldn't be the slightest bit uncomfortable, actually. But Urahara is a giant pervert with no respect for anyone so it's no surprise Ishida doesn't consider him part of 'anybody'.

Ishida takes a deep breath and sits back. "I have some ideas as to how you could remove something contained inside a human soul," he says, still ruffled but gathering his calm. "I'm not sure I could do it without damaging Kuchiki-san," he admits, "but if we sedated her and Orihime was on hand to return her to her previous state of health, it should be possible."

"And," says Orihime brightly, "It was Urahara-san's technique to start with. There must be a reference to it somewhere in Soul Society - otherwise Aizen would never have known either. If we can't figure it out on our own, we can go there and find it!"

Her optimism is nice but that... sounds like a really terrible idea. Even getting inside Seireitei undetected is difficult. Getting in and out and locating and stealing obscure kido techniques in between...? Well, Ichigo's not saying they can't do all of those things, but he's not sure they could do them undetected.

Ishida doesn't sound as sure as Ichigo would like, but he at least seems to think it's possible. And once Rukia's in the gigai she'll be weak enough that it shouldn't be that hard to catch her sleeping and let Ishida look her over.

"So we just... let things progress as they did last time?"

"Not exactly as they did," Ichigo shakes his head. "I can't let her give me her powers this time."

There's a second's silence while they all contemplate what might happen if a shinigami injects all her power into Ichigo's soul as it is now - a weird and precariously balanced blend of hollow, Quincy and shinigami. Overpowerning any one part of the balance there could be catastrophic.

"She won't have any need for Urahara-san's help if she doesn't," Chad points out.

Damn, that's right. Ichigo scowls. "Come on, he can't have been relying on that specific turn of events. It wasn't that probable. The timing alone would be a nightmare to prepare for!"

"That's true." Ishida frowns quietly for a moment. "I think in this instance we'll have to rely upon Urahara-san to... be Urahara-san. I'm certain he had a backup plan."

"Six backup plans, probably," sighs Ichigo. Then, "I won't interfere with her fight this time. I met
her before all that happened anyway." He still remembers the strange sight of the slight woman ducking in through his bedroom window and confusing the crap out of him.

"That's the hōgyoku," says Chad. "What about Aizen?"

"If Aizen doesn't have the hōgyoku there won't be any arrancar, will there? And no hollow hybrids."

"Ano... I think there will be some," Orihime says. "Some of the ones he made earlier, like Neliel-san. He made them before he combined his hōgyoku with Urahara-san's..." She plays thoughtfully with a strand of hair. "But I think many of the experiments he did later wouldn't work without the complete hōgyoku..."

Aizen's endless army of hollows - high-powered, strong hollows, frequently with tricks that made first contact horribly costly - had been one of the more difficult aspects of the war. Without them... If it's Aizen all on his own, with Tousen and the ever-dubious Gin at his back? Before he merged with the hōgyoku?

"I can take him," says Ichigo confidently.

"We're trying to avoid tipping our hand to Soul Society, remember?"

"...I can take him and we'll blame it on someone else. Geta-bōshi? He's already exiled, it's not like they can kick him out again."

Ishida adjusts his glasses again. "I was thinking we'd go to Soul Society and stab him in the kidney while he's sleeping," he admits.

"Wouldn't work," predicts Chad. "Too slow."

"It would work if we poisoned him."

"So, what, they blame us for poisoning him instead? Wouldn't that be just as bad? Some humans snuck into Soul Society and poisoned a captain? They'd-" Have collective hysterics, but that's not quite right either. Ichigo isn't sure how to classify the sheer chaos that would cause. Soul Society is a very old, very stagnant place; murdering a captain would be like murdering a god. It could do with some shaking up, probably, but not at the expense of Ichigo's friends. "Unless you want to try to reveal what he's been up to, but--"

"Kyouka Suigetsu," says Chad.

Which, yeah. Pretty much. Ichigo leans forward, rubs his hands through his hair. This makes him lose contact with Chad's heavy warmth, and the bigger man shifts to press their knees together instead.

"I'll admit it could use some refinement," Ishida allows, "but it does avoid the problem of a one-on-one battle. We could still blame it on somebody else somehow - Kurotsuchi, maybe."

Absolutely none of them like Kurotsuchi Mayuri, mostly because he's survived twelve years of all-out war just to invent new ways to hound them even in the freezing depths of Hueco Mundo.

"No," says Orihime suddenly, smacking Ishida's leg with her toes for extra emphasis, "Ichimaru."

Ichigo frowns, trying to think of who she's talking about. It takes him a moment, but he recalls that obnoxious fox-faced bastard who betrayed Soul Society just for the chance to betray Aizen, like
some kind of stupid traitor pinball.

"...that guy's still alive now, huh?" He'd died near the beginning of the war, but Ichigo can still remember Matsumoto getting very drunk in his honour. Granted, Matsumoto's kind of a lush, but her friends are mostly Ichigo's friends.

So maybe Ichimaru isn't so bad, but mostly Ichigo remembers feeling colossally unsurprised to learn that he was a traitor - more surprised that anybody trusted him in the first place, actually.

"It wouldn't be that hard to pin it on him," Ichigo agrees. "He's ...basically the most suspicious person in the world." Which, considering the existence of Urahara, means he is pretty damn suspect.

"So... that's it? We let Urahara put the hōgyoku inside Rukia-" which sounds way dirtier than Ichigo intends, "- and then we get it out and destroy it. And then we go to Soul Society, kill Aizen and blame Ichimaru? Right?"

It sounds simple when he says it, but they all know that no plan survives first contact with the enemy and there are a lot of ways this one could go wrong.

Everybody else must think so, too, because Ishida takes his glasses off to pinch the bridge of his nose against an encroaching headache and says: "Let's call that plan A."

"...Ne, do you remember when we thought invading Soul Society to rescue Kuchiki-san was the most difficult thing we'd ever do?" Orihime wonders, tilting her head.

"Yeah," says Ichigo, feeling every inch his age and about a hundred years older to boot. "I remember that."
TRAVEL

Chapter Summary

Adjusting is weird. Seven thousand words of weird.

Chapter Notes

I've been asked about the title! The reason for this fic's title is as follows:
YourIdiotWriter and thriceandonce (mostly thriceandonce) (both AO3 users) told me
to when I couldn't think of a name, and I thought it was funny, so now we have The
Four Body Problem to go with my other fics The Two Body Problem and The One-
and-a-Half Body Problem. This one references the four people knocked out of their
own timeline, of course! (ノ◕ヮ◕)ﾉ*/

Trivia: My first title for this fic was “These Shit Children Who Can’t Plan Anything”,
but it turns out it’s considered poor form when your synopsis and title are literally
identical. Who knew?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After that they exchange numbers properly and put each other on speed dial. Ichigo’s not sure how
he ended up with Ishida's number the first time around, actually, but now he feels weird typing in
the characters for his name, like his phone should already know all this information.

He leaves shortly after. Chad doesn't look like he's going anywhere, which is fine for someone who
lives alone and is unlikely to be missed. Ichigo and Ishida, on the other hand, are headed home - as
much as Ishida doesn't get on with Ryuken, at fifteen years old he is generally expected to be in his
his own home for breakfast, and Ichigo dreads to think what kind of hysteria will take hold of
Isshin if he's not home to be kicked awake at six thirty. He knows that'll happen eventually, but...

Okay. He doesn't have that many excuses. He's never that concerned about flouting goat-face's
curfews and rules. Maybe some of the reason he's going back there is because there's someone to
go back to. It just won't be real until he actually sees them.

He leaves the kido up when he goes. It's not stable enough to stay for long, but no doubt Ishida will
be back within a few days at the most to do a much better job.

Ichigo and Ishida walk together in silence as far as their different routes allow. Ichigo can see he's
looking at their surroundings uncertainly too.

"It's weird, right?" he says to Ishida quietly just before they reach the corner where they'll part
ways. Ishida looks white as a sheet under the street lights.

He gives Ichigo an annoyed look, but it fades after a second. Then he looks around again, and
there's more depth to his expression than before. Ichigo can see when he clenches his jaw. "Yes," is
all he says, though, short and hard with the sibilant too soft in the quiet.
Ichigo knocks his shoulder against his, and he knows he's unsettled because instead of yelling at him Ishida just walks a little closer.

"It's a school night," Ichigo reminds him. "I'll see you in the morning, you know?"

That's clearly beyond the pale, even for the night they've had. Ishida adjusts his glasses, tilting his head so they catch the light and render his expression completely unreadable. "Don't be maudlin, Kurosaki," he chides, and then turns on his heel.

He takes his leave and Ichigo rolls his eyes. He shoves his hands in his pockets and continues on his way.

Even tucked safely inside his healthy teenaged body, one leap gets Ichigo up to his window and he hauls himself inside with a minimum of noise. The room is eerily familiar: Ichigo's clothes, Ichigo's books, Ichigo's scent and desk and things.

He hasn't seen this place in ages. Orihime's place was wrecked during the war with the shinigami, but his - that was all Aizen. It was Aizen who came for his home and his family while Ichigo was away fighting Espada. He called it 'psychological warfare'. (Ichigo called Aizen dead meat. In the end, it's turned out they're both right.)

Ichigo remembers finding pieces of books, an old shoe, one of Yuzu's stuffed animals. An examination table from the clinic, padding ripped up. A cast iron pan, dented on one side.


He remembers Aizen telling him, in that soft condescending way of his, murmuring 'psychological warfare' like Ichigo might be unfamiliar with the term.

The house is standing. The room's intact.

Ichigo kicks off his outdoor shoes again and silently creeps through the rest of the house. He opens his sisters' doors just enough to see them, to watch their small sleeping forms breathing in the nocturnal half-light from the streetlights outside.

He feels like a pervert, like a strange, creeping intruder, staring at them when they don't know him - not really, not like this - and they don't know he's there. There's no help for it, though. He feels powerless against the pull, and he has no particular desire to stop it.

They're alive.

They sleep, they murmur, they shift. They breathe.

He closes his eyes just to listen to it. In and out, soft childish murmurs and sleepy sighs.

Enough, he thinks, and pulls away. He can hear his old man snoring like a chainsaw, which is more comforting now than it's ever been before. He pauses outside his door and smiles in the dark.

Okay. Time travel.

It... maybe it could be worse. He thought he'd never have this again.

He knows he should probably go to sleep. He goes back to the too-soft bed, wondering when he got so used to sleeping on a blanket atop hard-packed sand, and he stares at the ceiling. The street lights are a strange colour compared to the moon in Hueco Mundo. The world smells different,
bright and alive in his senses. It takes him a long few moments to realise he hasn't changed out of his clothing before crawling back to bed.

Undressing seems unnecessarily vulnerable. Maybe he should sleep with his shoes on.

Ichigo is awake and restless, and he feels like his mattress is swallowing him. He can't feel the others.

Unlike the other three, he's never gotten good at sensing people unless they have genuinely monstrous levels - like, Starrk-level monstrous - of reiryoku. Even if they had that kind of power, none of Ichigo's friends has control as poor as his own. He can't sense them. He just left them and he knows they're probably fine, but he can't help the itch that develops once they're outside his senses.

He tries being logical bout it. What is it that his brain thinks is going to happen, realistically? Chad and Orihime are together, behind locked doors and wonky but effective privacy kido, so that's not an issue, surely. So, what? Is Ishida going to get mugged on his way home? Ichigo would pay to watch someone try that.

...And then he'd beat what's left of them them into the ground on principle. It's funny, but it's also really not, because it means somebody wanted to hurt him and Ichigo will wring their goddamn neck.

Now he's thinking about all of the things that could have gone wrong. Hollows. Shinigami. Maybe it really is a hallucination and all three of them have actually been taken by Kurosaki, god knows what he'll do to them -

The tension is coiling up inside him. Ichigo is never going to sleep.

He grabs his phone.

He hesitates over what to write for a second, but then when he turns on the screen there's already a message there.

[Ishida U] 3:22 AM: Don't forget to set an alarm. I won't wait for you if you sleep in.

It's only a few minutes later now. Ichigo grinds his teeth and exhales slowly. Of course he's fine.

Dutifully, Ichigo sets his alarm, even though goat-face will definitely wake him up at the crack of dawn with his unique brand of enthusiastic affection. And then, because Ichigo isn't entirely stupid and it does seem possible that this is Ishida's way of checking up on him for very similar reasons, Ichigo fires a text back.


Ichigo doesn't follow his own advice, though. He tries, but he can't. He closes his eyes and no winds scream. No distant hollows roar. He can hear a car a few streets away, hear a small animal rustle in the grass and short trees of the tiny garden below his window.

He stays awake, stiff and prone on his too-soft bed, and while his anxiety is distant he can't quite bring himself to relax.

"GOOD MORNING ICHIGO!" Isshin commences his wakeup ritual the next morning by screaming in English and making a valiant effort to punt his teenage son out of bed.
Ichigo still hasn't managed to sleep yet. He's wide awake and actually expecting it, so when he leans down to pick up a textbook that's fallen from his book bag to the floor (probably in his initial scrambling rush for the buzzing phone last night), Isshin conveniently goes sailing right over his stooped back and out the open window.

From downstairs - probably watching out the ground floor window while Isshin crashes into the trees - Karin bellows: "Stop frightening the neighbours, goat-face!" Her tone of voice hovers somewhere between rage and mortification.

Ichigo smiles and heads downstairs. He's up and dressed earlier than he might have been back at this time in his original time line.

Getting up early gives him the time to slip downstairs and scoop Yuzu up. She's the only one who'll hug him without asking too many questions, and she takes the unexpected onslaught of physical affection like a champ: there's a moment of pinwheeling arms and a startled noise, and then she just hugs him back.

"Ichii-nii..." she murmurs, letting him tuck her head into him somewhere around his chest, politely ignoring how tightly he's clinging to her, "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," he assures her, reluctantly releasing her. It'd be weird to hug her for too long, even though he feels like if he lets her go she might disappear.

She's trying to cook breakfast, anyway, and needs to turn back to the stove. If he wraps himself around her and doesn't let her go for so long the eggs burn he's pretty sure somebody will say something.

"Mm," she says, giving him a look that's too calculating by far for her young face. "There's leftovers in the fridge you can take for lunch if you like."

Ichigo blinks, and then abruptly turns right around and makes for the fridge. It feels like forever since he's had Yuzu's cooking. It's not that it's good exactly - although it is good. It's more that the taste and texture of Yuzu's cooking has so many thoughts and feelings attached to it. Sure, a lot of them are of his dad being a crazy person, but a lot of them are good too.

"Thanks," is all he says. He rests a hand on Karin's head for a second as he passes her. She's nowhere near as tolerant and shrugs him off with a sideways look.

"What," she says, flat and suspicious.

Ichigo shrugs. He flexes his fingers, feeling strange and unsettled. Then he shakes it off and heads for the door with a piece of toast in his mouth. Yuzu's cooking something with green onions and rice and eggs, but Ichigo's never been able to stomach a lot of food in the mornings and Isshin can always be relied upon to eat any extra. As it is, he takes two bites of the toast on his way, feels his stomach churn uncomfortably, and dumps it in the rubbish.

A particularly aggressive pigeon dives right after it. Nature is weird.

"You're late," says Ishida just as soon as Ichigo is within earshot. Ichigo is approximately two minutes late. That's late for a rescue (Ichigo is, at this point, a connoisseur), and it's late to block a sword stroke. But it's really not late for meeting a melodramatic friend on a weekday morning. On the other hand, Ishida isn't happy unless he's being relentlessly, unhelpfully critical.

"Yeah, yeah." Ichigo waves it off. "Let's just go."
It's not until he sees Orihime and Chad leaning against the tall wall outside Orihime's apartment building that Ichigo's insides relax again. They come to a stop together. Orihime clasps her hands behind her back and smiles brightly, and Ichigo can feel the body heat from Chad at his left and Ishida is a spiky cynical presence haunting his right. It's... Okay.

They walk the rest of the way to school like that, avoiding the short cut under the bridge where all of the delinquents - the other delinquents, obviously, since Chad and Ichigo are right here - hang out.

"Ah, it's Tatsuki," says Orihime, lighting up at the sight of the figure at the school gates. Arisawa Tatsuki is exactly as Ichigo remembers her: average height, spiky dark hair, lean and fit with long legs and scuffed knuckles.

She gives Ichigo a curious look. "I didn't know you and Orihime were friends," she admits, eyeing him.

"Ah, well. We know each other," he says.

"I can see that," she responds slowly, tucking Orihime's arm around hers. She shifts her gaze from Ichigo to Orihime, and then apparently decides Orihime's the worst liar of the two. "How did that happen?"

Orihime is already sweating. She opens her mouth and starts to explain, beginning with an apparently innocuous outside-school meeting.

Ichigo tunes out for all of three seconds and when he returns his attention Orihime is waving her hands and trying to explain that she and Ichigo had to team up to save the world from an alien with a death ray.

Ichigo squints at her.

"Hai, hai," sighs Tatsuki, ruffling Orihime's long hair. "I'm sure. Well, he's all right, even if he is a bit of a crybaby. And you. You're... Ishida, right?"

"Aa," says Ishida, glancing at her once.

"He's in the handicrafts club with me," Orihime interjects.

This is actually true, and that seems to throw Tatsuki a little. "Oh. He is, isn't he? He's the one Ogawa..."

"O...gawa?" Orihime repeats slowly.

Tatsuki seems ready to shake this off, when a pair of hands with long, tapered fingers appear out of nowhere from behind Orihime, reaching around her torso.

One of them squeezes Orihime's breast, fingers digging in, and Ichigo is lunging before he even thinks about it, bellowing "Hey!" at the top of his lungs -

He's too late, anyway. It's clear Orihime moves without thinking - one of her hands snaps up around the offending wrist, and then with a reflexive application of torque and leverage, Chizuru goes stumbling forward with an "Eeek!"

The only thing that stops her meeting the wall of the school building face-first is Chad catching her by the back of the hair before it can happen.
Ichigo jerks to a stop, one foot skidding on the concrete. His heart's drumming rapidly in his throat and in his head, and he exhales once, slowly, hard.

"Oh," squeaks Orihime, horrified, even as Chizuru pinwheels her arms and shrieks indignantly in Chad's grip. She looks down at her own hand like she's not quite sure what happened. "I-"

"Good," snaps Ichigo.

Ishida makes a disapproving noise between his teeth. "Sneaking up on somebody like that. What a lowly thing," he says with a sniff. "Clearly she's a reprobate-"

His teeth flash for a second in a very ugly expression. Ichigo is abruptly reminded that he's not the only one who might be a little... overprotective, these days. And... also that Ishida was the one who suggested stabbing Aizen in the kidney in his sleep. With poison.

"A...aa," mumbles Orihime, but her eyes are darting between Chizuru and her hand like there's something wrong with it.

Slowly, Chad reels Chizuru back in, settling her back on her feet again. Ichigo remembers her, sort of. She's short, with red hair and angular glasses, wearing the same uniform. He has only vague recollections of Honshō Chiziru, a girl who used to... well, do exactly that, actually: sneak up behind Orihime and grab her breasts.

He knows he thought it was weird and kind of perverted when he was a teenager, but it actually feels a bit more threatening now than it ever did then. It's not so much the breast-grabbing, which, while pretty inappropriate is not actually dangerous - it's the suddenness of it, the sneaking up from behind. It's... not good.

Orihime's expression is mostly horrified guilt, though, so it's possible she doesn't feel the same.

"You've been practicing," beams Tatsuki, though, and she shoots Orihime a cheesy thumbs up. "Nice!" Then: "Serves her right," she adds in a totally different tone, giving Chizuru a fierce look and a completely unsubtle kick in the shins.

"Hime," whines Chizuru, "they're just so nice."

Orihime's expression is at best unsettled.

Ichigo's pretty sure it's only he and Ishida who are in the right spots to see the way one of Chad's hands twitches. Ishida's expression doesn't even change from one of mild interest, so he's clearly not going to interrupt if Chad does something unexpected and violent about it. *Because of course.*

It's weird being the person advocating nonviolence. Ichigo doesn't like it. It's not the natural order of things. On the other hand, Honshō's a teenager with no context for the actual impact of her behaviour. Ichigo feels suddenly very old.

"Ah, Chad," he interjects awkwardly. "I bet Mizuiro's around somewhere." There's a name he hasn't thought in a long time.

"...Aa," Chad agrees, although it takes him a moment longer to withdraw his stare from Chizuru's face. Or, potentially, her throat. Best not to ask.

They don't get to see Mizuiro or Keigo before class begins, although both of them are in class.

Going to class itself is a very strange feeling. Ichigo hasn't done it in years. The chair feels spindly
and his desk is small. The wood is chipped around the edges. The classroom smells like dry-erase markers and dust, and his classmates are loud and restless.

He can tell from the weary way Chad's looking around that he's not the only one who feels out of place. Orihime hides it better, but then she's just sitting there with her hands folded on her desk - she's not taking notes or anything, so Ichigo assumes she has spaced out completely and is probably thinking about dinosaurs doing algebra or something. From the exasperated sideways look she's getting from Tatsuki, this hasn't escaped notice.

She'll probably score better than Ichigo and Chad come exam time anyway. Orihime's a space cadet but she's clever.

"Kurosaki!" bellows his second-period teacher, making him jump. "What have I told you about that hair?"

Ichigo looks blankly at him. He doesn't know. He doesn't even know the guy's name. He's a big man, balding on top, a fit figure with a slight paunch as he gets into middle age. What has his second-period teacher told him about his hair?

...Probably nothing important enough to last through a decade's memory.

"I can't remember," he says.

More than one student giggles.

He shoves one finger into Ichigo's chest, which seems a little aggressive, and Ichigo shifts back in his seat to avoid the pressure of it. "Listen to your teachers, Kurosaki! Do you want to be a delinquent forever? I am trying to mould you into a productive citizen-"

The teacher goes on in this vein for some time, and eventually it transpires that what he's told Ichigo about his hair before is to dye it brown.

Ichigo should probably remember this stuff, but it's been a while since he's had that criticism levelled at him. The last several years have seen him surrounded by vizards and shinigami, most of whom don't really have a leg to stand on as far as looking weird goes.

There's some melodrama at lunch, Keigo pointing at Ishida and hysterically shrieking that Ichigo and Chad are traitors.

"-ABANDONING US, MIZUIRO," is probably the tamest and least stupid thing he says about it. Mizuiro covers his mouth with one hand and gives Ishida a smile that doesn't at all reach his eyes.

"Why is he here?" Keigo finally demands.

"Because I asked him to come," Ichigo says flatly.

"Because I asked him to come," Ichigo says flatly.

"As though I'm in the habit of doing what you'd say," Ishida scoffs, producing a lunchbox that's full of leftovers, like Ichigo's. Ichigo looks over at where Tatsuki has dragged Orihime and wonders what horrors she's made for herself today.

As Ichigo is watching, Orihime produces an entire ear of corn.

...Okay.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asks Ishida, almost on rote.
"Your ideas are usually stupid," he says, shifting his glasses further up the bridge of his nose with one finger.

Ichigo twitches. "Better than yours."

"No," drawls Ishida, "they're not."

He twitches again. Then he remembers last night, too, and all of the aggravating things Ishida's done in the last several hours, and he reaches over and thumps him on the back of the skull.

Ishida nearly takes his eye out with a chopstick, and then it's "You're overbearing and smug!" and "You're a moron!" and they're bellowing at each other loudly enough for half the school to hear.

Chad is, of course, way too clever to get drawn in.

"Ah," says Mizuiro after a few seconds of this. "I see."

Ichigo and Ishida both pause mid-complaint. "What," says Ishida flatly.

Mizuiro tilts his head, giving a distant smile. "Ichigo and Ishida get on because they are actually very much alike, aren't they?" he asks mildly.

Both of them twitch.

"I'm nothing -"

"-like this guy!"

There's a low noise from Chad, which sounds like a soft throat-clearing or a cough, but Ichigo is about eighty per cent sure he's actually laughing at them.

All in all, school isn't as bad as Ichigo thinks it should be: his school friends are more distant memories so they don't hurt nearly as much as seeing his sisters or his dad does. And while it's weird to hang around with a bunch of fifteen year olds, Chad and Orihime are there, as well as the mixed blessing that is Ishida's company.

He imagines it'll be a lot worse when he sees people he's fought alongside, who he's lost before - or worst, people he's fought alongside who don't remember him at all.

That... yeah. That'll hurt. That'll hurt like family hurts.

It's not that Ichigo expects being around his family to be easy. Being around HIS family isn't even easy without all the weight of his history upon him. But he just... he doesn't expect it to be as hard as it is.

Because it is hard. They've been dead long enough for him to begin to heal, and then suddenly they're not. They're right there, in person, and he can't even tell them about it because they don't remember.

Ichigo knows he's not the reason they're dead. He knows it. Aizen is the reason they died - even the hollow who killed Yuzu is ultimately attributable to Aizen, because lower-order hollows like that are mostly just instinct and hunger. Intellectually there's no doubt in Ichigo's mind that Aizen's the killer, Aizen's responsible.

Unfortunately, Ichigo isn't a really intellectual person. He makes intuitive leaps and snap judgments and frequently runs with his guts and instincts over traditional logic. And while
intellectually he blames Aizen, there's a small and quite natural part of Ichigo that questions that. Could he have been there? Could he have arrived in time? Could he have by some past action prevented it?

Ichigo suspects, deep down, that it isn't just Aizen - that he's complicit in some way. He wants to apologise to Karin and Yuzu, wants to explain himself to Isshin, but he can't. Neither of his sisters here is dead - it's not them he wants to apologise to, or them from whom he must beg forgiveness.

He takes up walking them to school, and occasionally picking them up as well. His sisters are usually a bit confused but at least happy enough to see him, and neither of them minds walking home with him instead of just alone together. Sometimes Karin has extra-curricular sports after school, so Ichigo and Yuzu wait for her. Yuzu needs no help whatsoever getting her homework done, but sometimes she asks him questions anyway.

Ichigo isn't sure if that means she wants his attention, or if it means she thinks he wants hers. Yuzu's always more perceptive than people give her credit for. There's a reason she rules their household with a gentle fist.

The first time he arrives home with the girls there's a sedate old-model sedan idling outside the clinic attached to one side of the house, which isn't necessarily that uncommon. However, Ichigo almost runs into Isshin, who is pretending to be a responsible citizen and helping one of his elderly patients to the door so her family can get her back into their car.

There's a pause while Isshin says good bye to his patient, and then as soon as the car vanishes around the corner he lunges for Ichigo. "MY SON HAS BEGUN PROTECTING HIS SISTERS FROM PERVERTS ON THEIR DANGEROUS WALK HO-"

"WHAT THE HELL," yells Ichigo back, "WHEN DID THIS BECOME ABOUT PERVERTS?"

He lets Karin take that one, and isn't really disappointed when she exhibits the ability to launch their father a really unlikely distance with her small feet.

Ichigo tries to settle into a pattern of attending school, keeping an eye on his friends and spending time with his family - by which he means Yuzu and Karin, obviously. He avoids Isshin as much as he can, but that's really not even all that often. The big poster of Masaki in the Kurosaki house gets a lot of bellowing attention.

For the most part he's successful in settling... Or at least he thinks he's outwardly successful.

He doesn't really need that much sleep anyway, so it's fine. He just needs to teach himself to sleep a little, instead of staring at the ceiling wondering what's going on while everybody is out of his sight.

The others are a lot more obvious about it. Orihime seems like she's developing some bizarre nesting behaviour. She's stockpiling nonperishable food and bottled water, and every time Ichigo goes to her apartment it looks like more equipment shows up - six ultra-compact sleeping bags, cooking equipment for camping, an unreasonably large canister of bug spray, fire starting kits. Ichigo isn't sure what's in her bag day to day, but she's replaced her regular one with something a lot larger.

Ichigo and Chad find themselves helping her break into their school at four in the morning one morning, armed with a giant bag she wants to hide in the roof of their classroom.

"This is a little weird," he tells her, watching Chad boost her into the roof.
"We spend eight hours a day here, Ichigo-kun!" she calls back. She reappears and he shares a glance with Chad before he passes the bag up.

The flimsy looking ceiling tiles give an ominous creak when Orihime hauls on the bag. Ichigo twitches, but it holds and she's able to store her bag up there somewhere.

"Still clear?" Ichigo asks his phone.

"As clear as it was three minutes ago when you last asked," says Ishida. His voice comes out tinny but still snide.

Orihime sighs in relief and Chad puts the ceiling tiles they displaced back.

There's dust on the floor of the classroom now, and scattered over the tops of two desks. There's enough mild day to day craziness going on that he doubts anybody who notices will suspect them, and even if somebody did it's really not much of a crime, but-

Ichigo grabs the broom from the classroom's cupboard. It's the students' job to clean it after classes anyway. No point getting someone in trouble about it.

The cache in the ceiling is the biggest one Orihime is keeping in the school, and it only has enough for about twenty four hours between four people, assuming they want to drink a couple litres a day, wash up in the water and eat every meal.

If only one of them is here and has to escape with it, it could last a bit longer. But that thought brings on another and another. The bag is obviously geared for survival in Hueco Mundo but Ichigo starts thinking about if he's not there to open a garganta, so-

"That's a good idea," Orihime says brightly, and they add things like maps and a small emergency supply of cash to them.

There are other locations around the town where Orihime seems to be keeping things in case of emergency - on the roofs of buildings nobody seems to maintain, in trees, in the basement of Karakura hospital, in Ichigo's closet-

"I have my own bag," he objects, which only prompts Orihime to dig through his things until she finds it. His is much more minimalist than hers, because he knows if he needs it for leaving on his own he'll be moving fast and packing light. A change of clothes, a spare blanket, water for a few days, soul candy, flashlight, knife, first aid kit.

It definitely doesn't stop her from leaving her supplies there too.

Ichigo's going to have a lot of explaining to do if his old man finds it, because when he actually does inventory later there's also ginto, tampons and seele schneider in it. The ginto could be missed, being duct-taped to the inside of the bag, and maybe he could explain the tampons, but nothing is going to explain the big bladed arrow...things... except "weird Quincy shit".

Ichigo packs it all back up and keeps it. It's stupid, but if they do need something like this... it's probably worth the risk.

Chad's marginally less obvious than Orihime, except for the part where it's obvious to Ichigo that he's living in her apartment. His own is further away from both the high school and Ichigo and Ishida, and he's also an orphan - none of the adults around them seem to have recognised it at all, although Tatsuki has started giving Chad black looks.
It makes sense to Ichigo. He prefers it when they're together. And between Chad's fists and Orihime's healing skills, his anxiety over both of them drops sharply when he realises it. Whatever happens, they've definitely got each other's backs.

Aside from almost never being alone, Chad shows up one morning with big, serious business head phones and from that point on he seems to never not be listening to music. Ichigo thinks he's begun to write his own again - he starts carrying the bass guitar like a security blanket.

He carries it to class and props it against his desk. Any one of the teachers might have said something to Ichigo about that if it had been him, but Chad is a huge, foreign-looking giant. He's mostly quiet and polite as long as he's not upset, and his grades are good - Ichigo feels like he can almost see the decision-making process the teachers go through when they notice. And then Ishida asks pointedly if it's for lessons right after class, and Chad nods, and with an appropriate explanation nobody seems to think about it again, even if Chad carries it everywhere like it's a newborn that needs constant watching. How many lessons can they all possibly think he's taking?

He plays it sometimes, though, usually in the late afternoons when they all head back to Orihime's place. He's good. Ichigo is surprised to know he remembers that - as soon as Chad starts playing again for the first time, he remembers that he was always pretty good.

It's also kind of a surprise to Ichigo how much homework gets done when they retreat to Orihime's apartment together like that.

After the first time, Ishida does something with his hands trailing over the walls and the drop of reishi-rich liquid from a ginto in the centre of the small apartment, which results in privacy seals that are actually stable. Ichigo can only feel them if he's standing really close and paying attention, but he still wonders if any passing shinigami can feel them.

With that seal in place, it seems likely that they'll spend a lot of time hashing and rehashing the events in their past and this world's future - but they don't. Initially they just sit there together, each of them tired and unsettled and feeling the strain of seeing old friends again and trying to look normal.

(Chad's probably the only one who succeeds in seeming 'normal' but that, Ichigo thinks, is because Chad's normal looks a lot like just... saying nothing. It's a pretty easy cover.)

But then Ichigo pulls out his maths homework to go through it because teachers do check and if he doesn't do at least a little of it, they'll probably end up calling his old man. It's not so much Isshin's disapproval that motivates him - Isshin's disapproval is something he gets every morning when he finds a new creative way to 'accidentally' dodge his flying kicks - as it is the inevitable questions and scrutiny. They might get pretty obstructive.

And then, because he's going through it, Orihime remembers that her financial security is tied to getting good grades, and even if she already knows most of the stuff she might not remember all of it. So she does hers, too, and then Ishida seems to suffer from a bout of academic guilt - and an urge to tell Ichigo what he's doing wrong - and that just leaves Chad. He watches them do it for a couple afternoons and when he joins in it's obvious he hasn't forgotten much anyway.

So while they do talk about some stuff - for example, Orihime's survival kits and whether or not it's appropriate to leave one up a tree next to the sports equipment shed at the local junior school, which none of them even attend, or why people aren't more concerned that Chad's hauling a bass guitar literally everywhere he goes - they don't actually cover that much about the war they can all feel hanging over them.
Maybe that is because it *is* looming. None of them came out unscathed in their own lifetimes, and despite the plan they have this time, Ichigo is pretty sure each of them can feel that terrible sense of encroaching doom.

Sometimes one of them comes out with something like, "Do you think Hiyori actually killed Urahara-san when we all vanished?" and all of them sort of regret it.

This question in particular however, leads Ishida to speculating that there might still be a "them" in the previous timeline - that they might have been shunted sideways into this one as copies of their original selves. It's a thought that Ichigo finds comforting. He wants to protect *everyone* he cares about.

Ishida, of all of them, seems initially to be the one who is coping with the massive changes best -- or at least as well as Ichigo. He's probably not sleeping all that well, considering how he's always available to text Ichigo back at stupid-o-clock in the morning, but otherwise he seems fine.

Then Ichigo goes through his own closet and finds that pockets with sturdy zips have been sewn into pretty much everything he owns. Half of them are on the inside. More than half of them have really familiar stars and crosses stitched into them.

"...what the *hell?*" he says slowly.

And then, "WHAT THE HELL?" he bellows into his phone.

"I anticipated you'd notice eventually," says Ishida coolly, utterly unsurprised by the yelling.

"You've been going through my closet," Ichigo snarls, and then he thinks about it for a second longer and adds: "WHEN DID YOU EVEN DO THIS?"

Ishida sighs like Ichigo is a disappointing, dim-witted child and proceeds to be not even a little bit helpful.

And this? *This* is one of those times he can believe he's distantly related to Ishida because this is exactly the sort of shit he should know to expect from his family. And from that thought, it's not even surprising when Yuzu does the laundry and tells him they're "really nice". Then next week he comes home and realises she's stolen half of Karin's clothing for the exact same reason.

Isshin arrives home from the clinic just in time to wail to the poster of Masaki that none of his children love him enough to abscond with his clothing and sew new secret compartments into it.

But Yuzu's using Ichigo's shirt as a model, and Ichigo can see his dad's eyes pause over the marking stitched into it: a circle, intersected by a five pointed cross.

"It's pretty, right?" says Yuzu. Of all of them, she looks the most like Masaki, and Ichigo's not surprised when his dad just tells her it is.

Next time he goes to Orihime's place, he digs through Chad's stuff to check... but it's pretty much the same.

And then when they're supposed to be doing English homework, he looks up and discovers Ishida is sewing yet another pocket into the inside of one of Orihime's skirts, right near the waist.

He watches for a second. Ishida's really good at things that require attention to detail and a great deal of dexterity, but they still take time.
Ishida looks up and raises his eyebrows at Ichigo.

Ichigo is pretty sure he knows what Ishida has been doing instead of sleeping, but he lets it go. Sort of. "Stop stealing stuff from my closet," he grates out instead of calling him on it.

Ishida pauses. His lips thin. "Very well. I'll need your pants," he adds, and holds out a hand like he's expecting Ichigo just to take them off and provide them to him on the spot.

"What the hell?" Ichigo snaps. "I'm not giving you my pants! I'm wearing my pants!"

He takes it back: Ishida is actually the weirdest and most maladapted.

Although the extra pockets are kind of handy.

It's about two weeks later that Ichigo starts waiting until his family's asleep and climbing out the window to go to Orihime's place. She only has the one bed, and it's way too small - and, like his, too soft for any of them. He's not surprised to see that she and Chad have been sleeping in a pile on the floor.

Ichigo sleeps for about four hours that night, and when he wakes up in the dark with Chad a huge soft-rumbling shadow exuding heat to one side and Orihime mumbling softly about the polar bear revolution on the other, he feels almost normal.

He leans over to get his phone.

[Kurosaki I] 2:31 AM: At Orihime's. Coming?

[Ishida U] 2:32 AM: Twenty minutes.

He lets Ishida in at the door and Chad only cracks an eye open when he curls up to sleep on the other side of the pile.

Ichigo doesn't go back to sleep again, but four hours is so much more than none, and everybody is right where he can find them. He can hear them breathing in the dark, right there, and this is definitely real.

Ichigo stays there in the dark for hours, semi-alert and thinking of nothing amid the warm soothing sounds of his sleepy friends, but eventually he must get up. He has to get back to his house in time for goat-face's wake up call. Ishida decides to come with him for reasons Ichigo chooses not to analyse too hard - but which he hopes don't have to do with his closet.

"Not that I care, but won't Ryuken notice if you're not home?" Ichigo asks, pulling on his shoes at the door. He can use his regular voice out here. Orihime and Chad are still dozing but they're on the other side of the apartment.

It's still dark when he looks out the barred window next to the door, still lit by street lights and cool and silent. The sky is lightening to a deep bluish colour around the horizon, a hint of dawn like a promise.

Ishida frowns. "He'll already be up by now to go to work. If I go back now, I'll be coming in while he's getting ready. It'll be easier if he thinks I got up and left early."

Ichigo privately thinks that Ishida isn't going home because he doesn't want to accidentally encounter his dad and somehow end up having to speak to him. From what Ichigo knows of them, that's pretty unlikely - Ryuken is roughly as engaged in that relationship as Ishida. Ichigo doesn't
They head home in the predawn darkness, and the sky's just getting pale around the edges when they climb in through Ichigo's window. Ishida makes a distressing but probably predictable beeline for Ichigo's closet. He doesn't seem to take anything from it that Ichigo can see: he's just inspecting his work.

"I hope you've done something just as stupid to your own clothes," Ichigo mutters darkly.

"I've added pockets to everything," says Ishida shortly, and so grimly that Ichigo has visions of heavily-pocketed underpants dancing in his mind's eye.

He's pretty sure he's making a face, but he couldn't explain what kind.

Isshin's wake up call is encountered in the form of a flying kick that sends the door rebounding into the opposite wall. Ichigo, already up - he hasn't been asleep in this house for more than about ten minutes in a row since he got back - sidesteps it and lets his dad go crashing into the opposite wall.

"And that's goat-face," he says to Ishida, like he's continuing a conversation they were already having.

Ishida's actually peering at the limited collection of novels available on the shelf above Ichigo's desk, and he straightens in time for Isshin to wheel around dizzily.

"Ah," he says, suddenly all straight-laced upright model student, even though his glasses are reflecting the light like some kind of spine-crawling pre-disaster warning system. "Pleased to meet you. Thank you for having me."

All that Isshin takes from the presence of a strange teenager in his house at six thirty in the morning is that Ichigo has made a friend, and he expounds upon it to everybody else in the house. At length. And breadth. And **volume.**

"He's not a friend," says Ichigo flatly, when Yuzu chides him for not letting her know he had a friend over. "We have a project together. He can eat whatever, don't bother."

"Nii-san!" hisses Yuzu, appalled. "He's a guest."

"**Ishida?**" Ichigo echoes incredulously.

"Technically," Ishida shifts his glasses on his nose, and they glint again, gleaming and warning and so very ominous, seriously, "I am a guest in your house, Kurosaki."

Ichigo cranes his head around to get a good look at him. His eyebrow twitches.

"Don't mind Ichi-nii," says Karin breezily when she arrives to this particular tension, "he was raised by wolves."

In the end, Yuzu seems to genuinely like Ishida, and even Karin seems baffled as to how Ichigo made a friend who's 'polite' and 'normal', and Ishida eats the breakfast Yuzu prepares for them - salted salmon, eggs, lightly seasoned rice and miso soup - and compliments her on it and generally makes himself likeable. Which is to say: **nothing like himself.** He smiles at Ichigo. Smug bastard.

He helps clean up while Ichigo grabs him a spare school uniform and they walk Karin and Yuzu to school before heading off to meet with Orihime and Chad again.
"I'd forgotten how lively your family could be," Ishida says. If he sounds a bit shell-shocked, Ichigo figures it serves him right.

"Wait until goat-face has actually had his coffee," mutters Ichigo darkly.

Life settles into that pattern for a week. The days blur together, strangely idyllic: late nights and early mornings, stolen hours of sleep at Orihime's place, the contemplative sounds of Chad picking out new sounds on his guitar, walking the distance back to his place in silence with Ishida. Karin and Yuzu, sour and sweet, with brief but absurd interjections from Isshin (which feel a little like turning around and finding that his life has turned into surrealist art while he wasn't paying attention). There are classes and tests, classmates who look at him with confusion or concern - more things than just school work that he's forgotten and must relearn.

Once, briefly, by the river where Ichigo once lost his mother, he sees a black cat watching him a little too intently. He doesn't wave, although it's at least a little bit tempting.

And then, quite as expected, into this relatively peaceful holding pattern crashes Kuchiki Rukia.

Chapter End Notes

I think I got all of the typos (thanks, Nanowrimo, for encouraging me to do zero editing as I go) but I'm not 100% sure.

I'm well aware this fic won't be to everyone's taste, and if it's not to yours I encourage you to go read something else! There are good fics out there that aren't self-indulgent time-travel trash. Otherwise, as ever: let me know if there was something you liked in particular. :)
RUKIA

Chapter Summary

Rukia arrives and plans begin to derail themselves almost immediately.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There’s an unusually strong hollow causing problems in Tokyo, which is what draws Rukia to begin with. It’s nowhere near ascending to a gillian, but it’s still a problem -- albeit one that doesn’t seem to have come for Ichigo just yet. He’s not sure why it waits so long, because there’s definitely symptoms of its presence for a few days beforehand: mostly just property damage blamed on gas leaks or hooliganism and a few traumatised ghosts.

Ichigo’s sorry to let some of them get eaten, but Rukia’s sword will purify the hollow and send them all back into the cycle of death and rebirth. As Ishida put it, coldly but practically, a few already-dead people he doesn’t even know aren’t worth potentially preventing her arrival.

He doesn’t know the night Rukia will arrive by its date, but he knows it by the feel in the air. It’s the sort of feeling that makes his inner hollow sit up and pay attention. He can feel it uncoiling in his guts, restless and hungry, whispering to him in a voice only his hindbrain can hear: something’s going to happen tonight. And Ichigo trusts his instincts.

He lays back on his bed, exhausted but still tense and wary. That is when he feels a breath of air from the window.

A hell butterfly flutters in, heedless of the cold evening air, and crosses right over his field of vision. It is glossy and dark and almost as big as his hand.

Ichigo sits up.

There’s a soft tap as Rukia’s sandal hits the windowsill, and then her head appears through his window and she steps lightly upon his desk.

Ichigo stares at her.

Her eyes are big and violet, and her hair’s in her face again, and Ichigo feels like somebody just stabbed him in the back.

Rukia tilts her head, squinting a little like that will help her feel the hollow she’s looking for past the steady leak of Ichigo’s spiritual pressure. Confusion crosses her face and her hand hovers over the hilt of Sode no Shirayuki, as though her zanpakuto might tell her what her own senses can’t.

She mumbles to herself when she’s thinking.

She doesn’t seem to notice Ichigo at all, which puzzles him for a second -- right up until he remembers this, remembers the first time, when he kicked her in the back and sent her flying and yelled at her for being a shitty burglar.
He scratches his head, watching Rukia ignore him completely as she struggles to sense anything, and wonders how it should play out this time.

It would be much, much easier if he could just reel in all of his spiritual energy and have her actually able to do her job, but that’s not likely to happen. He has too much of it to suppress properly, which is one of the reasons his kido still sucks.

Still, it might be easier if he doesn’t kick her this time...

“Hey,” he tries.

Rukia ignores him.

He gets that. When you run around in spirit form you do get pretty used to ignoring humans who can’t see you. They can’t be talking to you, so you learn to ignore them. It makes sense, although... It’s still kind of annoying. Ichigo does not like being ignored.

“Hey,” he tries again, getting up and heading toward her.

Rukia doesn’t seem to realise he’s heading for her instead of just crossing his bedroom.

Then when he plants himself right in her path, Rukia tilts her head to see past him like he’s a really annoying obstruction.

“Are you serious?” he mutters.

“I can’t believe I lost track of it. It’s as though some great power is interfering...” she mumbles to herself thoughtfully, looking around as though she will see the ‘great power’ somewhere in the room.

One of Ichigo’s eyebrows twitches.

He closes his eyes to try to regain some equilibrium.

Rukia moves to walk around him, like he’s some kind of inconvenient furniture, rather than somebody who’s trying to talk to her.

So Ichigo he reaches out, snags her collar and yells: “HEY,” at the top of his lungs, right in her ear. “I’M TALKING TO YOU."

Rukia lets out a short, startled yelp, clutching her chest, and jerks away from him. She scrambles to press herself flat against the wall. Her eyes are wide and her hand’s resting on her hilt.

“You can see me?” she demands. One hand shoots up to grab at her uniform where he’d tugged on it. “You can touch me?”

“Obviously,” says Ichigo. And then, “You’re in my house.”

It comes out strange, flat and awkward. It is awkward. This is the most awkward introduction he’s ever been part of, even compared to their original one. He knows Rukia and he knows why she’s there and there’s no real reason for him to need to ask the implied question -- she’s in his house because she’s looking for the energy signature of the biggest hollow she can find, and honestly, the biggest hollow she can find is probably buried inside Ichigo. He’s just too big for her senses.

“Humans can’t usually see us,” she says stiffly.
Ichigo gives her a dubious look. He can’t remember what he said to her once upon a time. “You don’t seem like a ghost,” he prompts restlessly.

He’s aware that the hollow is on the hunt even now, and Karin or Yuzu could be in danger pretty shortly. He won’t let either of them get hurt. If it really comes down to it, he’ll kill the hollow himself and their plan can go hang.

“I’m not a plus -- what you call a 'ghost’, ” Rukia says, eyes narrowing. “No, I’m not a regular spirit. I am a shinigami.”

Ichigo squinted at her. “And that means...?” Might as well get it out there.

What follows is a stiff but technically accurate description of the difference between plus souls and hollows and the extremely short version of what a shinigami’s duties entail.

Rukia resorts, frowning, to drawn aids once or twice, scribbling away with on a note pad with an expression of extreme concentration.

Ichigo knows Rukia’s not exactly an expert at realist art but he’s forgotten quite how terrifically bad she actually is at it. “…is that meant to be a spirit?” he asks, leaning in close and squinting.

She smacks him in the face with the flat of the note pad.

“Hey!”

“Silence, human child,” she says haughtily. “I’m trying to educate you--”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t try to draw it if you have less than zero skill at drawing --”

“Excuse me?! Your unwillingness to learn isn’t --”

“The only thing you’d learn from those pictures is bad taste!”

WHAM. The second smack is a lot harder.

“Ouch.”

“Hmph,” says Rukia, crossing her arms.

There’s a moment’s silence.

“What are you doing in my house, shinigami?” sighs Ichigo.

“Hunting a hollow,” she admits, “Although I haven’t been able to keep track of it very easily.”

In another lifetime, he’d make fun of her for that, but since it’s basically his fault Ichigo just nods.

She looks at him contemplatively. “You can see spirits? All the time?” she nods to a weak spirit nearby, a middle-aged businessman who’s been hovering in the general area for days.

Ichigo’s been ignoring him. Karin’s right in her approach: sometimes it’s better to pretend you can’t see them. There are a lot of dead people in the greater Tokyo area, even just as a function of the population density.

“Most of my family can.”
Her eyebrows rise, more concern than shock. “Your whole family? Then that means --”

And that’s when the hollow’s howl shears through the air.

The lower-order hollows have a very distinctive roar. Ichigo has almost forgotten -- the ones that pop up in Karakura usually get mysteriously taken care of (until Rukia, at least) and by the time Ichigo was taking up permanent residence in Hueco Mundo he had sort of a reputation there. Hollows respect certain hierarchies, and vasto lorde and arrancar are right near the top.

This howl, though. It’s the first one Ichigo’s heard in this new timeline. It’s the first one this body’s ever felt. It roars through him and over him, making his ears ring and sending shivers right down his spine. His nerves vibrate.

He swings around to follow the source of the noise, heart rate kicking up automatically. “Can you hear that?” he demands sharply.

Rukia just looks puzzled for another few moments. Ichigo tries to rein in his energy, but it’s a losing battle. It only takes a moment or two anyway before appalled recognition flashes across her face.

A second roar comes hot on the heels of the first, and then the house trembles. There's the sound of breaking glass and Ichigo hears Karin curse loudly.

Ichigo's sister's in danger, but compared to Ichigo's own inner hollow, this hollow is roughly equivalent to a yappy dog - he can be down there and take it out between it opening its mouth and closing it. He won't let anything happen.

He won’t let anything happen, but he has to try his best not to 'tip their hand', as Ishida said. He doesn’t like it. The pretence of helplessness feels stifling and... well, a little threatening. What if something goes wrong?

Rukia isn't privy to his thought process, of course, so she's gone in a flash, darting around him and skidding into the corridor. She dodges Yuzu, who can't quite see her yet anyway, and hurtles down the stairs toward the damaged front of the house.

Ichigo follows, but he stops in the corridor with Yuzu. She's swaying and frightened, but she's not actually hurt -- just panicking. Her eyes tear up when she looks at him. It's heartbreaking. And it makes him angry. He hopes Rukia puts the hollow out of its misery quickly this time, or he might not be able to hold back.

"Karin," she says.

Ichigo puts one hand on top of her head and tucks her into his chest. His fingers curl in her hair. "I'll take care of it," he promises.

He isn't lying to her: if Rukia doesn't take care of it, Ichigo will. She makes a noise of assent, and he lets her go and heads downstairs to follow Rukia.

He hits the street outside at a run. The sight of Karin caught in the hollow's grip still makes Ichigo go cold from his stomach out, a kind of icy anxiety that makes his hands shake. He knows they'd steady, were they gripping a sword. It's a lot harder to do nothing.

The hollow's hand is bigger than she is.

"Ichigo!" She screams when she sees him. It's one of those raw, ragged, panicked screams, pulled
from deep in the chest.

Ichigo feels like his every nerve is alight, his whole body primed for motion and violence. He wants to shed his living body, leap forward and slice her free. And then, worse, the instincts of a life of war simmer in him: he wants to rend, to howl and crush and --

And that's the hollow inside his mind talking. He breathes out.

Anyway. The point is: it's a hell of a struggle to hold back.

Rukia hesitates for a split second. The consideration is, of course, that in response to her attack the hollow will tense up, will clench its fists and flail around itself in the second's before being purified. If that happens, Karin's ribcage is still inside its hand, and she will be crushed.

(She won't. Ichigo will step in. She won't. She won't. He knows he won't let it happen. He can feel a muscle ticking in his neck already.)

That would be the most practical solution - attack to kill, send Karin's soul into Soul Society later if necessary. It poses the least risk to the shinigami and resolves the mission objective satisfactorily. The Gotei 13 won't thank her for getting injured for the sake of a human, even if Ukitake-taichou might respect her compassion. (Respect, in this case, probably means shoving her mission report under a pile of others and not drawing attention to it.)

Ichigo knows now how shinigami operate. Taking the kill shot makes sense, from a shinigami's point of view.

He waits. Because he knows Rukia. Her character has not changed, even if she doesn't know him.

And Ichigo sees the moment she decides -- her eyes harden and her mouth goes grim, and she abandons her advantage of surprise and her position in the hollow's blind spot.

Rukia trades the certainty of her kill to make sure the hollow will drop Karin, rather than crushing her.

And this is why Ichigo will always, always trust her, will always believe in her, will defend her to the death and take her side against nearly anyone even when he's pretty sure every argument is like at least sixty per cent her fault: Even now, even when she doesn't know Ichigo, hasn't even seen Karin properly, Rukia never hesitates. It doesn't matter to her. She never hesitates to do what's right, rather than what's easy.

She hurtles forward, swift and decisive. She aims for the hollow's arm rather than its masked skull.

Sode no Shirayuki whispers with the sound of steel on leather when she unsheathes it, and it sings through the air, and it rends with the crunch of flesh and bone when she shears right through the hollow's thick skin.

Red blood splashes across the pavement with a foul wet slap, too dark and thick to be human. The hollow howls its rage, flinches and retreats into the space between worlds.

Karin screams as she falls.

Ichigo can no longer hold back -- he races forward and hooks his arm around her, snagging her roughly from the air. She's lighter than he expects. Karin always makes herself seem bigger, but she's the same size Yuzu is. Too small. Too delicate.
Ichigo scoops her up and races back to the barrier made by their ruined fence. He's slow. He can't manage shunpo in his human body, and it's certainly inadvisable to try anyway with Rukia right there. He grinds his teeth, but wheels around to make sure Rukia's got it covered.

She hasn't.

The hollow re-emerges with no warning and uses its good arm like a mallet to send her flying. She hits the fence of the house opposite Ichigo's and disappears in a mess of wood splinters.

There's a reason shinigami are meant to kill hollows fast, preferably in one strike, and from behind. The average hollow is several times the size of most shinigami, and they're just as strong as that implies. They're smarter than animals -- they eat human souls and, in tiny pieces, also absorb their attributes: their cunning, their analytical skills. And a hollow like this one is pretty much always hungry for something -- and therefore always hunting.

"Ahhh," sighs the hollow, soft and happy, and this time when it sniffs its huge masked head swings toward Ichigo. It's quick and uncanny, the way a compass needle swings inevitably toward magnetic north. He kind of wonders what he smells like.

"There you are," it says.

Ichigo's arms clench involuntarily around Karin. He knows he can't let her go and hope the hollow will chase him, because if it's smart enough to talk it's smart enough to know she's important. Rukia's sure to be all right -- she has to have landed awfully badly to be taken out by a surprising swipe like that one. He can hear movement from her direction.

This would be a really good time to know how to perform hirenkyaku. That, at least, would let him dodge in his own human body while Rukia's not looking.

As it is, Ichigo clings harder to Karin, hefts her up so he can get the heavy muscles in his thighs braced under both of them, and then he -- well. He guesses.

It's the only way he can do it: he's not going to be fast enough, so he has to predict where the hollow will strike, has to watch for the tension and movement and the twitch of its reflexes. Experience is on his side, but he's not Ishida or even Orihime -- that kind of critical analysis isn't his strong suit.

He starts sprinting at the second the hollow's properly committed to the blow, and he still has to perform a last-second leap to avoid the impact of its fist.

The horrible crack of breaking concrete booms right behind him. Rubble sprays, chunks of footpath that pelt the backs of his legs as he moves. Dust rises from the hole made by the hollow's huge fist.

He hears Rukia swear before he sees her - when she's pissed off she's still more Rukongai gutter rat than Seireitei noble, in some ways - but then she rises from the debris, wood and fibreglass streaming from her hair and uniform.

He glances at her for a split second, and that time is just long enough to see her eyes widen. "Human--!" her voice cracks on the word.

Then the hollow is right there, no time for dodging and no time to run. Its clawed hand is racing toward him, right for his face: five feet, three feet, seven inches--

Thoughts race through his head: *can't leave my body* and *can't let her see* and *oh, shit, hollow!* and
He raises his reiatsu, first thinking maybe he can project it into something a little like hierro and then he keeps going because it's working. He sucks at suppressing it, but he can raise and expel it better than nearly anyone. And now he's thinking of Starrk and Lilynette and the moving mountain of bones, of young hollows killed by accident --

He raises it higher. He sees Rukia sway from the corner of his eye, her knees suddenly weak. That's not good.

The hollow's arm starts to disintegrate. Crushed against his chest, Karin makes a weak noise.

The hollow falters, flinching, and Rukia shakes off the effects of Ichigo's energy and takes advantage -- she screams an attention-grabbing war-cry and advances upon it at a dead run. It doesn't finish turning around before she coils, leaps and cleaves clean through it, mask and head in one.

She executes a textbook landing with bent knees and a raspy breath. The hollow disintegrates right behind her, and she straightens to stare at Ichigo.

Their breathing seems loud in the night's quiet. Above, a street light buzzes and flickers fitfully. Somebody's television is on too loud in another house.

There's a thin trail of blood from where Rukia's teeth have cut the inside of her mouth. She shakes her hair back from her eyes. "I've never even heard of a human with spiritual power like that. What," she says slowly, "did you say your name was again?"

And. Well. Shit.

Happily, Karin takes this opportunity to haul back and slam her fist into his shoulder. It hurts, despite her lack of leverage. "Let me down!"

"Alright, alright," he sighs, letting her fall to her feet.

She wobbles a little, but her knees and ankles hold her. He's pretty sure she'd punish them for mutiny. "Yuzu?" She asks.

There are tears in her eyes when she looks up at him -- tears in her eyes and a scratch on her chin, a bruise on her jaw. Unlike Yuzu's though, Karin's glittering eyes aren't heartbreaking. They're angry.

And... Ichigo really, really loves his sisters.

"Safe," he reports. "I left her in my room-" he points, as though Karin doesn't know where he's talking about. "Scared, though," he adds, because Karin is a lot like him, and taking care of Yuzu will make her feel better faster than anything.

"Of course she's scared," says Karin. She rubs at her face, hides her tears, and stalks back toward the house with shaking hands and her shoulders tense around her ears.

Rukia watches her with a curious expression. "She wasn't harmed at all," she marvels.

Of course not. Karin lives with Ichigo, deals with the fall out from his temper tantrums and freak outs -- she's practically immune to his reiatsu, just like Yuzu and Ishhin (and Chad, and Orihime).

He affects the appearance of obliviousness. "You cut it down before it could really hurt her," he
assures her.

"Not by the hollow," she clarifies impatiently. "By your spiritual energy. I've never felt anything like it -- I had to shield myself with my own reiatsu to compensate, and it wasn't even aimed at me..!"

He gives her his best bewildered look. "What?"

Rukia gives him a narrow-eyed look. "You don't know..." She says, although he's not entirely sure she's buying it. "What's your name, human?"

He hesitates, but there's nothing for it. It's a stupid thing to lie about. Too easy to disprove. "Kurosaki Ichigo."

"Kurosaki Ichigo," she repeats slowly. Then she inclines her head. "Kuchiki Rukia -- shinigami."

Reflex kicks in and Ichigo finds himself saying, "Pleased to meet you," and ducking into a half-bow. It's not like he was raised in a barn, after all. (Technically, his dad's even nobility. What a thought.)

"I need to modify the memories of your sisters and neighbours," Rukia says, "and I also need medical treatment. However, you need to learn to contain your spiritual energy -- or you'll be a beacon for hollows all across the country. It seems like I'll have to put off returning to Soul Society to teach you."

Ichigo makes a face. He's had more expert people than Rukia try to teach him control before, and he doesn't look forward to learning anything from Rukia -- she's shit at explaining things, her diagrams are awful and she yells at him when he doesn't succeed immediately. (Just because he loves and respects Rukia does not mean he is blind to her many, MANY failings.)

"What's that look for?!" she demands, correctly interpreting his expression.

He's lucky that several neighbours show up shortly to gawk. This requires Rukia get back to doing her actual job, and she whips out her fancy memory-erasure device and gets started implanting the idea that there was a car accident instead of a monster attack.

Ichigo gets away in the confusion, retreating to make sure Karin and Yuzu are really okay (and to kick his old man's shitty head in for not showing up when they were in trouble -- Ichigo doesn't care if he has no powers yet, Karin and Yuzu deserve to know he'll step up for them), but not before he hears Rukia mention that there's a shop around here where shinigami like her can get medical supplies.

That would be the Urahara Shoten, Ichigo assumes.

Well, that's that taken care of.

Once Urahara gets his paws on her, there's no way she's walking out without that gigai.

Ichigo feels kind of bad about not warning her. He knows he can’t, but watching her walk away still feels a bit like failing.

He gets back upstairs in time to kick Isshin in the face, but when he sees how his dad’s clinging to Yuzu like an idiot he doesn’t have the heart for it.

It’s true that there’s not a lot Isshin could do to defeat a hollow right now. Ichigo’s not entirely
clear on what went down between his parents before his birth, but he knows that Isshin’s tapped out, and will continue to be just about useless in terms of spiritual power for some time to come.

...Still. He should have been there.

Ichigo leans in Yuzu’s doorway and watches Isshin flutter about like a maniac and Karen scold him while Yuzu smiles uncertainly. They’re okay. They’re --

Yuzu looks straight at him, right over Karin’s shoulder. “Thanks, Ichi-nii!” she says brightly.

Karin turns back toward the door and then pulls him in by one arm. “Don’t be stupid,” she tells him firmly, and shoves him toward Yuzu for a hug. Yuzu is the hub of physical affection in their family. Isshin, Karin and Ichigo pretty much all show their affection for one another with their low-key wholesome family violence.

When he escapes the inevitable melee, he heads to his room and digs out his phone. The enormous release of his spiritual power will have caused his friends to worry -- not because he can’t take care of himself, but because it’s a habit and they can’t help themselves anymore.

The room looks empty when he enters, but he hears the soft swish of fabric and the gentle tap of shoes (which they should really take off since they’re inside) while he’s looking for the phone.

Ichigo has two missed calls from Orihime’s number, which is probably Orihime and Chad both since he seems to have moved in, and four text messages from Ishida waiting for him.

[Ishida U] 9:42PM - *What are you doing? I can feel you getting mad from my house*

[Ishida U] 9:42PM - *Ryūken can feel you getting mad from my house.*

[Ishida U] 9:56PM - *Is this what you call sticking to the plan?!*

[Ishida U] 10:05PM - *answer me, kurosaki*

There’s no text to say ‘I’m coming over,’ but he’s not that surprised to look up and see Chad sitting cross legged on his bed and Orihime leaning against the closet doors with her arms wrapped around her. Ishida is perusing his biology homework, making inappropriately dubious sounds as he goes.

"You’d think, having seen the inside of so many people, you’d be less terrible at anatomy," he says. Gross. "I don’t stop to inspect them!"

"Obviously."

"Are you all right?" Chad asks, which is obviously the question they came to answer.

“Yeah. I’m sorry if I worried you.”

“You didn’t.” Ishida sniffs.

Sure. That’s what those four texts are about: Ishida’s total lack of worry. Ichigo shoves him off his seat and lets him sputter.

Ichigo isn't sure why Ishida's so invested in pretending otherwise. If he had to guess, he'd go for 'something something Ryūken something something don't let kids watch their mums' autopsies', but it doesn't pay to question Ishida's emotional state. That’s just a quick way of getting an arrow in the face.
He rubs his face tiredly.

“I was trying not to do anything, but--” he pauses and then just gives up and explains the whole series of events. He knows there’s a privacy seal on his room, one of Ishida’s specials, and equally he knows that anybody sensitive to that sort of thing will struggle to feel it over the sheer weight of Ichigo’s spiritual energy saturating the space.

Ishida adjusts his glasses on his nose. “So when we said ‘let’s not alert them to how powerful we are’,” he begins.

Although Ichigo twitches, it’s actually Chad who leans over and thumps him gently but firmly over the head. “Stop,” he says. For a wonder, Ishida listens.

“It’s not that bad,” Orihime says finally, quiet and a bit tense but otherwise optimistic as ever. “There was no real way to hide how big Ichigo-kun’s spirit power is. “Rukia-chan would have noticed later anyway.”

Probably, Ichigo is willing to concede, but he’s not sure Rukia would have decided he was capable of weaponising his reiatsu to disintegrate hollows without a fair bit of prompting. But now he’s done it right in front of her face and there’s nothing he can do about it.

And he’s damn sure Urahara’s somewhere off to the west there, probably still paying attention to his energy -- which is actually a lot more alarming in the short term. Urahara’s not going to sell them out (by accident or otherwise) to the Central 46 because he’s not on speaking terms with them, but he’s a lot more likely to perform experiments upon them without their consent or knowledge.

In the end, Ichigo elects to remain in his own home that night. He doesn’t want to leave with both of his sisters so upset -- not with Ichigo’s dad being somehow more clueless and useless at emotional support than Ichigo. He’s not really surprised to find that none of his friends end up leaving.

They don’t really sleep, either. Instead the night’s spent hashing and rehashing their plan, because it’s evidently going to be a lot harder to execute than they actually considered to start with. They discuss alternative plans, but in the end they just talk until they’re sick of it.

Then, Chad pulls his guitar from where it’s resting next to the foot of Ichigo’s bed and begins picking out a slow soft tune and they all sit in silence until the sun starts to rise again.

It is a long, frustrating night.

Ichigo kicks them out in the morning, pointing out that he can’t tell his father he had a teenage girl in his room all night without answering a lot of loud and inappropriate questions nobody but Isshin wants to discuss. Nobody wants to be privy to that, so the three of them wait lazily around the corner for him.

He’s not surprised to learn that Rukia must have gotten to his sisters at some point, because both of them seem to think that a vehicle of some kind struck their house -- just like the rest of the street. That, at least, will make getting witnesses for the insurance an easy task.

Yuzu is obviously pretty well convinced, but every so often Ichigo catches Karin looking at the damage with a furrowed brow. Her dark eyes sweep to him every time. She knows when to keep her mouth shut, but Ichigo definitely thinks she has two different series of events to explain last night’s damage warring in her mind.
“Was it a car?” she asks quietly as he’s pulling on his school jacket.

“Mm?” he grunts around a piece of toast. He’s holding it by one corner between his teeth. He’s hungry, but also running out of time.

Karin’s looking outside through their front window, fingers keeping the slats of their blinds far enough apart to see through. There are three people outside, neighbourhood housewives, all peering at the broken window of the clinic with some concern.

“Ichigo?” she prompts.

He hesitates. He doesn’t want to force her to remember it if she’s forgetting, but he’s not going to lie to her about it. “What do you think?” he asks.

She doesn’t answer, and he messes up her hair before he leaves. It’s really the least he can do, and the distraction makes her yell at him instead of worrying.

Rukia shows up at school the next morning, surprising nobody except perhaps Tatsuki, who just seems confused. She threatens to murder Ichigo if he makes a scene about how obviously she doesn't belong, and she turns into a simpering saccharine princess in front of his other class mates. It gives him a strange sense of nostalgia. This is familiar.

She is wearing a gigai, which also surprises none of them. All four of the time travelers try and fail not to gawk at her artificial form, trying to see past the projected image of 'Rukia' that it shows. They're lucky because she helpfully interprets their attention as interest in a new student, or in Ichigo's case, surprise at seeing her.

"It's a gigai," she explains quietly to him, once she's sure he's not going to out her by making a scene. "An artificial body used by shinigami on certain types of missions. You're my responsibility for now, and because I'm staying in the human world I need one to blend in."

Well, she does if she wants to talk to him without making him look like a total lunatic, or if she wants access to most human resources like food or water. He goes along with her explanation, even though he's truly not looking forward to his 'lessons' with her.

It won't pay to rock the boat. He knows it. And any time he looks like might be about to say something...

...he can feel the uncanny glares of three sets of laser eyes honing in upon him. He never catches them at it, but he can feel their collective gaze like a burning brand on the back of his neck. It makes him sweat and, no doubt exactly as they intend, changes his mind pretty fast.

Despite the laser eye phenomenon, Rukia doesn't seem to notice anything at all out of the ordinary about Ichigo's friends, except for the normal weird stuff like Orihime's eating habits. Today she's got mashed up miso and banana on half an entire loaf of bread, which makes Ichigo feel kind of queasy just thinking about it. Even though Orihime seems disappointed, he's kind of pleased to see Tatsuki take it off her and replace it with a sensible red bean bun.

Keigo seems to think that the 'lovely Kuchiki-san' has been put on the planet to torment his lonely dreams or something. Rukia does her level best to feign total sickly-sweet obliviousness in the face of his excitement.

This time, instead of dragging Ichigo off and forcing him to start learning to use his stolen shinigami powers, Rukia dedicates herself to teaching him to stop leaking spiritual energy all over the place.
It’s a weird change, because in the previous time line Rukia made it her business to herd him around and make sure he was purifying hollows to a satisfactory standard.

Usually he knows when a hollow shows up because of the way Ishida gives an aggravated little twitch. He, Chad and Orihime are both better at sensing hollows than Ichigo will ever be because Ichigo’s own power blocks out a lot of his senses. He could probably sense if, say, an arrancar showed up in Karakura? But a regular hollow is virtually undetectable to him until it’s right in front of him or it starts howling. Of the three others, Ishida’s the only one who sits right in front of Ichigo. He twitches, and his left shoulder tenses when one appears, and then his attention is drawn away from their class for the duration -- sometimes he even moves his head, as though he’s trying to track the hollow with his eyes right through the walls.

Now, however, any time a hollow shows up, he knows because Rukia confidently dashes off without him, leaving a pleasant but empty-headed mod soul in her gigai. It answers teachers’ questions with uncertain pauses and has perfected the act of wide eyes and a gently-bitten lower lip. It is terrifying.

After class is finally over, Rukia drags him back to his house to teach him some basic control exercises. Ichigo has learnt most of these before, but it’s not hard to give the impression that he hasn’t -- because he can’t actually do most of them. He’s sure he gives the impression that he picks up on the theory surprisingly swiftly, but he’s pretty incompetent when it comes to actually practising them.

“No,” she says, over and over, smacking him in the shoulder with one fist. The bruise he’ll have tomorrow is more from the repetition than the actual force behind it. “No, no, no. What are you doing? This is absolutely basic!”

“I’m doing exactly what you said - I’m focusing on the reiatsu output and trying to limit it to --”

“You’re putting out more, not less!” she complains, striking his arm again out of frustration.

This, he decides, is probably because his resting output is the smallest he’s capable of. It’s still enough to obscure somebody’s senses if they’re not aware of it, and for that he’s kind of sorry.

Eventually they take a break, primarily because Rukia’s soul phone goes beep and she hurls herself out of her gigai and thunders away to put down another hollow.

He takes the opportunity to check his phone, since he’s heard the buzzing vibration of it but hasn’t actually looked to see if anybody’s messaged him. He’s halfway attached to the dumb thing these days.

There’s a reason for it, but Ichigo really dislikes the feeling that he’s using it as a crutch.

Since coming back, he feels weird and unsettled if he doesn’t have some way to be in close contact with his friends. He has to make sure they’re -- not just all right, but actually real.

There are still really long nights, particularly ones where he doesn’t sleep over at Orihime’s, where he can’t help himself and he gnaws endlessly on the idea that none of this is real. His brain isn’t ready to confront the idea of an unfixed reality, and the implications of separate timelines up set his nerves, yes -- but it’s also that he might still be hallucinating, might be caught in a spell of some kind.

If he doesn’t stay with them, he sits up at night, alone in the dark, wondering if anything he touches actually exists. It might all be a trick of nerves and reiatsu. It might be something brought to life by
any number of techniques, and Ichigo has no shortage of enemies.

He can’t ever really chase away the nagging fear that nothing is real, that he’s alone in an endless black void and his senses are lying to him. He can’t trust them. It doesn’t go away. But... being in contact with the others helps make the terror shallower, less important.

So the phone is a crutch, but at the moment it’s a necessary one. It makes him marginally less strung out when he’s out of contact with his friends for more than about ten minutes.

There’s a missed call flashing, because Orihime does prefer to call and then run at the mouth, waving one hand in the air and walking into things while she tries to explain everything all at once, but he can also see that she’s left no message -- there are texts instead. And they’re timestamped after the phone call, and they’re not urgent, so he doesn’t immediately call her back in a panic.

[Inoue O] 7:37PM - if you have time you should come by tonight! Uryū-kun seems to have a plan.

If he has time, Ichigo thinks, snorting softly. Because he has so many more important things to do, right?

He flicks open a new message and quickly responds.

[Kurosaki I] 8:12PM - I’ll be there soon. Rukia’s a slave-driver.

[Inoue O] 8:12PM - I’m sure she means well! :)

The worst part is, Ichigo thinks she does too. Doesn’t stop her from being both a singularly awful teacher and extremely obstructive. It’s hours past when he wants to have shown up at Orihime’s place.

He climbs out the window, trying his damnedest to sense where Rukia is so he can avoid her. He gets nothing, but hopes she’s not somewhere between his place and Orihime’s anyway. That’ll be weird to explain.

He tries to be quick and discreet.

Chapter End Notes

There was a mention made of canon compliance, so I'm just reminding you: this isn't. It ignores the second arc entirely and takes ungentlemanly liberties with what it actually does use.

Anyway, thanks for your comments and kudos, I appreciate them. If you see something you particularly like in this chapter, please feel free to leave a comment! :)
Ishida’s ‘idea’ turns out to be creepy and invasive. Not creepy and invasive like breaking into Ichigo’s closet and stealing all of his clothing to stitch new pockets into everything (which is, let’s be clear, pretty creepy and invasive), but the other kind of creepy and invasive. Like, Urahara-level creepy and invasive, which is usually something Ichigo would balk at just on principle. Just because the man’s a mad genius and Ichigo likes him and even trusts him in some ways does not mean he’s a good person.

Asking oneself “what would Urahara do?” and then not doing that thing is a pretty legitimate way of navigating ethical dilemmas, if you ask Ichigo. (Also if you ask half of Soul Society, as it happens. Yoruichi disagrees, but Yoruichi used to be the queen of the assassins so she doesn’t get a vote. Ever.)

Ichigo arrives at Orihime’s apartment and Chad’s there to let him in. He kicks off his shoes in the doorway, slips inside and drops to his knees next to the low table that’s strewn with study materials, scribbled-on sheet music and a pin cushion that looks suspiciously like a handmade shinigami voodoo doll.

“I’m making tea,” Orihime says brightly, coming over to put one hand on his arm for just a second. She used to be shy about touching, but now she touches him a lot more often -- he thinks it might be her version of the phone. Maybe she’s just reassuring herself that other people still exist according to all of her senses.

“Ah,” he says, sniffing the air. It smells faintly but unmistakably of both cabbage and honey. That’s... certainly a combination. He means ‘why would you even, please, no,’ but all he says is: “I’m good.”

Once he’s settled and Orihime is happily sipping from a cup full of horror, Ishida puts down his -- is that an embroidery frame? Yes, Ichigo decides, that’s an embroidery frame. One of those little wooden hoops that holds the fabric taut so Ishida can perfect the detailed sakura blossoms he’s sewing into... a pocket.

Because he’s sewing a pocket into one of Orihime’s dresses.

But he puts it down and nobody mentions it so Ichigo pretends that he, too, hasn’t noticed.
And then Ishida pulls out a tiny silver canister. It’s not quite the same as the ginto Ichigo has seen before: it’s got a black X marked on one end, and it’s a bit smaller than the others. Ishida holds the tiny container up to the light. The silver glints ominously in unison with his own glasses, bright and cold in the dim illumination of Orihime’s apartment. The expression he makes is sort of like a smile -- except smiles usually mean something good, and Ichigo has a wealth of experience with that expression, none of which means anything good. Helpful, certainly; appropriate for guerilla war, definitely; good? No.

“Poison?” Chad prompts, which suggests to Ichigo that they’re on the same page regarding Ishida’s expression there.

There’s no particular inflection in Chad’s voice, either -- and when Ichigo looks over at her, Orihime seems more concerned with the steam pattern rising from her cup than the news that they’re going to poison somebody.

That’s how he knows it’s real. His memories see them, especially Orihime, as sweet and pure and ever-peaceful.

“And, see, a real fifteen year old Orihime would not listen to this with perfect equanimity. She wouldn’t notice him looking, glance up to meet his eyes, and give him a small smile. Real fifteen year old Orihime probably would have blushed furiously at meeting his gaze, which is a problem Ichigo is glad not to think about now. “If we have to,” she says quietly. There’s something soft and sad about her, but determined all the same.

“This is actually one of the compounds we salvaged from Szayelapporo’s laboratory in Las Noches when we recovered it. I borrowed some of the hospital facilities to recreate it, but it’s inert unless infused with reishi.”

So other than sewing a million embroidered pockets into everything everyone owns, Ishida’s also been: a) breaking and entering, b) trespassing, c) stealing components, and then d) misusing hospital resources to recreate a poison that will work on shinigami.

Ichigo’s eyes drift inevitably to the shinigami shaped pincushion. Actually... Yeah, actually, all of that sounds remarkably like Ishida. He’s not sure why he feels even a little surprised about it. He probably does it when he should be sleeping, which may be why he's awake to answer all Ichigo's texts.

“It’s for subduing individuals with high natural reiryoku levels,” says Ishida. “It can be delivered through skin contact but it’s much less effective that way. Ideally, we’d have Rukia-san imbibe it.”

Ichigo’s confused suspicion clears. That’s right, they do have to sedate Rukia if Ishida’s going to get the hogyoku out of her.

He eyes the little canister. “It’s not going to hurt her, is it?” he asks. He feels like he already knows the answer to that just because of the poison’s creator. By the time Ichigo met Szayel, that arrancar had already fought with, and lost to, Kurosucci Mayuri. Nobody had expected him to free himself from Kurosucci’s drug and heal himself, but he had, and by the time Ichigo met him Szayel was mad mad mad. Crazy in a way Ichigo's never seen before and certainly hasn’t seen since. But despite being certifiable, he’d still been pretty invested in taking his research subjects back to his lab alive and in ‘working condition’ for whatever horror awaited them there. Ichigo doubts that this poison, by extension, will do permanent damage.
Ishida shakes his head. “That’s very unlikely.”

Ichigo frowns anyway, because unlikely sounds... not very definite.

“Unlikely?” Chad prompts.

Ishida tilts his head. “The drug itself has a very generous leeway between the dose at which it’s effective and the dose at which it’s dangerous. However, it’s still possible that Rukia-san might already be allergic to something in it, or that she might have an adverse reaction of some kind. I don’t think I’ve ever encountered a shinigami with allergies,” he adds, regarding the canister between his fingers thoughtfully.

Ichigo has a brief and intensely strange mental image of Kyouraku with hay fever. He thinks that most of the shinigami he knows would turn into whiny bastards as soon as they felt ill. Not Ukitake, obviously, but the others are all terrible patients.

That’s a funny thought, and it takes his mind off his guilt and anxiety for a second, but... he hesitates.

Ishida sighs. “Can I guarantee that it won’t hurt her? No, of course not. There is always the possibility of an adverse reaction. But there’s no greater likelihood than there is of any human responding poorly to a sleeping pill prescribed by your father. Now take the damn drug.”

He does but not without another suspicious look. Still, he knows what Ishida’s saying is right; people can react badly to almost anything, and immune systems are especially weird. At least all the practice he and Rukia have had living in each others’ pockets assures Ichigo that Rukia’s not taking any other kind of medication that could make this more dangerous.

“Fine,” he says with bad grace, and he accepts the little silver phial of poison from Ishida and pockets it. At least he can be reasonably sure it won’t break like glass might.

Poisoning a friend is much, much easier than it has any right to be. Ichigo doesn’t even need to confirm for sure that Rukia’s living in his closet (although he is pretty sure she is, even if he hasn’t caught her yet - because he knows she can’t put up with Urahara for this long, and one of Yuzu’s dresses is ‘missing’) because he does it when they’re at school.

And it’s easy. He rolls his eyes and takes her packaged juice from her to open it just like he’s been doing all week -- it’s one where twisting the cap off punctures the seal, and Rukia’s hilariously bad at them, even for somebody who’s new to them. He dumps the contents of the phial in when he opens it. It disappears into the drink without a trace.

He doesn’t realise that he expects Rukia to notice until she doesn’t. He’s ready for it. He’s waiting for some long-ago street rat instinct to kick in, for her to thump him in the head and shout at him. He’s waiting for her to leap up and accuse him, but she doesn’t.

None of that happens. She takes her juice from him, scowling about the trick to the lid (which is not that tricky, except apparently if you were born in the nineteenth century), and she drinks.

Rukia trusts him. He feels like his stomach is trying to eat its way out through his throat. It must show on his face, at least a little, because Mizuiro asks if he feels alright, and Keigo asks him not to vomit on them. Keigo has a long list of people upon whom he’d prefer Ichigo to vomit, and he rattles it off with slightly concerning ease.

Ichigo’s actually not entirely sure he’s not going to vomit. He doesn’t feel well. He shakes his head anyway and pastes on a scowl, which isn’t hard.
Their lunch break is an hour long, and it only takes twenty minutes before Rukia pillows her dark head on his shoulder -- which will mortify and enrage her in equal measure when she wakes up -- and promptly goes to sleep. He gives her a minute and then shakes her shoulder.

“Oi,” he says, shaking her harder. “Get off.”

“Shut up,” she murmurs. She curls closer, slumping her left side against his right.

Ichigo sighs and lets her sleep. He’s not sure what he expected. Keigo and Chizuru make a fuss about how intimate it is, but Tatsuki looks uncertain.

“Is she sick?” she asks, leaning past Chizuru to gently brush the hair away from Rukia’s forehead.

Rukia’s still lucid enough to respond, but not very coordinated. She bats her hand clumsily away and nearly takes out her own nose in the process. “Tired,” she growls, sounding much more like her violently direct self than she usually does at school.

“You can sleep on me,” Keigo offers brightly. “There’s no need for Ichigo to get all of the hot--mmmph!” he yelps into Mizuiro’s palm where it’s clamped suddenly over his mouth.

Rukia doesn’t even crack an eye open in response. Their position here isn’t really inappropriate in the scheme of things - her head’s against Ichigo’s shoulder and their bodies are only touching in socially-sanctioned locations. But it’s still much more contact than it’s polite to have with a member of the opposite sex in public, especially since they’re just friends.

“If she hasn’t woken up by the end of the break we’ll take her to the nurse’s office,” Ishida suggests.

Tatsuki thinks about this for a moment, and then she nods and sits back.

By the end of the lunch period, though, Rukia can nearly not be roused. Ichigo shakes her and he gets the slimmest crack of an eye, big and violet behind her fluttering lashes. “...ke me if a hollow tries to eat you,” she mumbles, almost too low to hear, and then she’s insensible again.

“Aww,” coos Chizuru. “She’s adorable when she’s sleeping.”

“Maybe she is sick,” says Orihime, tapping her chin. Tatsuki and Chad look toward her and she begins rambling about sickness as a cover up for government conspiracies.

Tatsuki pats her shoulder patronisingly. “Okay, Orihime,” she sighs. But it’s clear to Ichigo that she’s only halfway paying attention to what Orihime’s saying. Her face is dark and her eyes drift from Rukia to Keigo and back to Ichigo over and over.

“Can you lift her, Kurosaki?” Ishida prompts, getting up as the bell rings. “We should get her to the nurse’s office. It doesn’t seem normal.”

Ichigo nods. “Yeah, I can--”

“I think I should take her,” says Tatsuki flatly, with a hard sound in her voice. She’s not quiet, either. Everybody looks toward her.

When Ichigo meets her gaze her eyes are flinty.

Ichigo pauses. He really didn’t think this through. If he’d been smart, he’d have invited her to Orihime’s place and they’d all have drunk the vile tea and Rukia’s would have been drugged. But
no. He went with drugging her while they were all together at school -- which is smart because they’re all there, but dumb because there’s more than one witness.

There’s absolutely no good reason to tell Tatsuki no, either. Tatsuki’s more than strong enough to carry Rukia.

“But Tatsuki-chaaan,” says Chizuru. “Don’t you have class with Tanaka-sensei now? You’ll end up with a detention if you’re late! He hates you.”

Tatsuki’s obviously annoyed by this reminder, but even though she glares at Chizuru, she doesn’t seem quite willing to say it aloud.

“I’ll go with them,” says Orihime cheerfully, shouldering her bag and dusting off her skirt.

Tatsuki hesitates, so Orihime keeps talking: “Ichigo-kun can stay here. It’s all right if it’s another girl, right?”

Ichigo frowns, but then -- it’s not like he needs to be there for what they’re doing, and Ishida and Orihime won’t let anything bad happen to Rukia while she’s like this.

Chizuru takes a breath. “Ooh, I can--!”

Tatsuki elbows her in the head, because no, obviously no. “Yeah,” she decides, scowling around at them. “That’s fine. Stay with her,” she adds.

“Of course,” says Orihime. “Ishida-kun, come on.”

Once she’s declined Ichigo’s help, there’s nobody else to carry Rukia. Ishida looks distinctly annoyed to be the one lifting up her sleeping body, but it’s not as though Orihime has the upper body strength for it.

There’s a pause as they watch Orihime and Ishida head in the opposite direction, with Rukia’s pale legs dangling lifelessly over the crook of Ishida’s elbow.

“Ichigo,” says Tatsuki in a voice he can only characterise as a growl. “Did you do something...?”

He frowns. “Do something?” he repeats. He’s not sure if he’s a good enough actor for this conversation.

“It doesn’t seem like you,” says Tatsuki, “but you’ve been different lately. You all have. And Kuchiki... that’s not normal. It was you who had her drink,” she points out. There’s a thread of uncertainty in her voice, like she doesn’t want to think the worst of him but she’s prepared to do it anyway.

Ichigo shifts on his heels. “I’ve been opening her drink for the past week,” he points out. “Because she’s hopeless.”

This, at least, is true. Tatsuki considers it for a second and then seems to relax a little. “Aa. Maybe she’s just sick,” she allows, although she still gives him a suspicious sideways glance.

They really do have to get to class or else Tanaka-sensei will strangle them. At least if it’s Ishida and Orihime who are late, well, nobody gets mad at their year’s top student and Orihime’s wide-eyed and cute and pretty hard to stay mad at anyway.

The upshot is, this means Tatsuki can’t ask any uncomfortable questions while they hurry down
the corridors. On the other hand, Ichigo is also pretty determined not to do anything too suspect in front of her any time soon. She’s too clever by half.

Tatsuki’s good people, though, and powerfully protective of her friends. They could do a lot worse.

All in all, though, this whole business has gone off without a hitch: Ishida and Orihime are alone with their sedated shinigami and her all-important gigai, and hopefully by the end of the day the hogyoku will be so much dust on the wind.

Ichigo returns to class with Chad a huge silent warmth at his side. Tatsuki seems out of sorts and pissed off, and Keigo keeps asking her loudly if she really doesn't trust them, and yells at Mizuiro to encourage him to be upset too, which --

Ichigo feels for her a little. Especially since he does think it's better if she's suspicious. Frankly he hopes like hell his own sisters look out for each other like Tatsuki does for her friends.

He keeps his mouth shut though. Her suspicion and concern is inconvenient for them right now.

He’s really unsurprised when she kicks Keiko in the back of the knees and sends him careening into their history classroom with a wail and a crash. Tanaka-sensei is distracted with yelling at him, and Tatsuki, Ichigo, Chad, Chizuru and Mizuiro all slide in without much comment. They're only four minutes late.

"That Ishida," murmurs Tatsuki uncertainly, leaning closer from the seat right next to Ichigo. There's an empty one at her side for Orihime, just as there's an empty one ahead of Ichigo for Ishida. "He's..."

Ichigo waits. He’s been asked this question before, but less often than one might expect. Shinigami, with their long lives and very low birth rate, aren't as hung up about it, and arrancar are way more interested in figuring out if a potential mate has enough spiritual power to survive the whole business... which is a factoid Ichigo kind of wishes he could erase from his memory.

"Erm, like Chizuru?" says Tatsuki.

Ichigo guesses that means 'interested in people of the same sex' and she's just trying to be delicate. The first thought that actually comes to mind when Ichigo thinks of Honshō Chizuru is 'very creepily very into girls'. And, no, Ishida is not as interested in girls as Chizuru is -- Ichigo has never met anybody as interested in girls as Chizuru is. Also Ishida's creepiness is way less 'sexual predator' and way more 'plotting to psychologically destroy you', so there's that. Ichigo is about ninety two per cent sure his glasses do that on purpose.

"No idea." He's actually pretty sure Ishida is interested in things about people that are irrelevant to their anatomy, but it's not really anyone else's business so he just shrugs. Which is what he always does. He's not sure why people think he knows this.


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"-need to pay attention when I'm speaking to you, A-RI-SA-WA," snaps Tanaka-sensei, and
Tatsuki twitches.

Ishida and Orihime show up almost forty minutes later with a report that the nurse was absent and they didn't want to leave Rukia alone.

They lay it on thick, too. Orihime waves her arms, wide-eyed with her bottom lip caught and reddening between her teeth.

When she's done with her breathy, rambling explanation -- which is nearly incomprehensible, as always -- Ishida adjusts his glasses meaningfully. "It's our duty as fellow students," he says in such a grave and serious tone that Tanaka-sensei just mumbles and tells them to get to their seats.

Ichigo doesn't need to ask them how it went. Ishida's face isn't easy to read but it is absolutely white, and Orihime has a familiar furrow between her eyebrows. Something isn't good.

Ichigo is betting they're not hiding the hogyoku in one of Ishida's ten million pockets right now.

Rukia wakes up in time to join them for last period. While she seems annoyed, she doesn't seem that shocked. "My integration with this body's been poor lately," she says to Ichigo, glowering down at her hands. She looks human. It's weird to think of her body as something made in Urahara's basement. "Sometimes there are... side effects like that."

That, Ichigo hadn't known, but it's a very convenient explanation. "You're sure you're not sick?"

"Of course," she says dismissively. "Sickness is rare among shinigami."

And they nod and then Rukia follows him to pick up his sisters from school, following which she drills him relentlessly on reiatsu control exercises he can't do.

"It's more complicated than we thought," says Orihime as soon as her apartment door closes behind Chad's broad shoulders later that evening. God knows where Rukia is now -- either patrolling, hiding out in Ichigo's closet, or making nice with Urahara -- but if she follows Ichigo she won't be able to hear what they're talking about any better than Aizen can from behind the seals.

"More complicated how?" Ichigo asks.

"It's not so much hidden in her soul as grafted to it," says Ishida, sitting next to the low table where they usually do their homework. After a second he flops back, arms spread on the carpet and eyes closed against the bright overhead lights. He doesn't look good. None of them really do -- the stress of this whole situation is taking its toll, perhaps worse than it had when they were on the run.

At least when they were in Hueco Mundo they knew what to do, everybody knew what was going on, and their cards had long since been laid on the table.

Here... Well.

Ichigo scrunches his face up. "Which means what?"

"It's bad," Orihime says, gnawing anxiously at her lip. "It's... stuck."

"Can't you..." He looks between Ishida and Orihime, both of who look a little perturbed and a lot tired.

"Cut it out?" Chad finishes, sitting cross-legged next to Ishida so their legs bump together. Orihime joins them, her socked feet tangling between theirs under the table.
Ishida reaches up and shifts his glasses up over his nose until they're braced against his forehead, rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes like he can jar a headache loose.

"Not right now. It'd be like cutting out a brain tumour with a pickaxe. My control's not fine enough. I think nobody's control is fine enough--"

Ichigo winces, even as he sags down to the carpet with them. His shoulder bumps Orihime's. She doesn't move away.

"Although," Orihime says, weary but optimistic, "at least it would be almost impossible to use without detaching it properly. If you pulled it out the wrong way, half her soul would probably come with it. You'd never get control over it."

"Which is good," Ishida concedes. "...Sort of."

Yeah, nothing that has the potential to see Rukia ripped in half is actually 'good' in Ichigo's books.

"We think Uryū-kun and I might be able to come up with something," Orihime says after a long, unhappy silence. "If we work together, we might be able to reinforce the soul while we do it."

That sounds more promising, at least. Chad grunts like he agrees, but there's a suspicion in it too. She'd sound more cheerful if her 'idea' wasn't potentially disastrous. A lot of Orihime's ideas are potentially disastrous.

Ishida sighs, but slips his glasses back on properly and levers himself up like an adult. "It's delicate and dangerous and I want to test it on something else first."

What? Like a regular plus?" Ichigo asks, wrinkling his nose.

"Not exactly. It's too dangerous for that." Ishida turns to look between Chad and Ichigo.

There's a pause. He licks his lips. Then he shifts his glasses on the bridge of his nose and they reflect the light like something unholy. "We're definitely going to need your help."

This is how Ichigo is out of his body at 2 AM on a Tuesday morning with Zangetsu still strapped to his back, physically wrestling with a hollow about four times his size.

"I think this is a bad idea!" Orihime says in a high voice, only about ten minutes too late.

Even as she says it, the hollow shakes Ichigo loose again, sending him tumbling. The air whistles past him and he slams into a street sign, toppling the pole and sending the metal head of it spinning at speed. Orihime swiftly shields herself and Ishida under a glowing golden barrier.

The sign rebounds from her shield with force, and Ichigo sees the midday parking fees go flying an inch from his nose.

She's right. It's a terrible idea.

It sounds like such a good one in theory.

Ichigo bounces back from the blow like a misaimed rubber band, hauling on the hollow's arm. He's strong enough - and Chad's even stronger. Either of them could easily kill the stupid hollow, but in terms of tackling it and wrestling it to the ground to perform experimental open-soul surgery, they just don't have the leverage.

Maybe a smaller hollow, Ichigo thinks. Instinct keeps insisting that he draw his zanpakuto and cut
the bastard's face in half, which isn't helping. Ichigo has never fought to subdue in his life.

"Shit!" This time it's Chad who goes sailing past his face.

Chad lands on his feet, still sliding with the force of the throw. He digs the fingers of one huge armoured hand into the highway below to slow himself. The bitumen gives before Chad's hand does, sending up a cloud of sparks and dust. A chip of the blacktop bites into Ichigo's ankle.

"Cut it up!" Ishida calls from the safety of Orihime's shield.

Ichigo blows out a puff of air and shakes the sweat out of his eyes. "You said not to kill it!" He bellows back.

"So don't kill it!" Ishida snaps.

Ichigo throws him a thunderous look because Ishida’s not exactly helping do any of the work here, and the hollow’s not exactly dainty either: its legs are as thick as Ichigo is. Definitely a smaller hollow next time.

Then there's a deep rumbling "Got it!" from Chad.

It's just close enough for Ichigo to turn and say, “Huh?”

--and then Chad goes hurtling past again, fist glowing, half-shadowed and looking positively demonic in the harsh street lighting.

The hollow's leg disappears in a bloody mist and a wash of power, and its howl rends the air. The ground shudders with the vibration of its screams.

"Oh," says Ichigo, wiping the spray of dark hollow blood from his face with the back of his wrist. "Yeah, okay."

It's a night for firsts because Ichigo has never deliberately sliced the limbs off a hollow like this before, either. When he and Chad are done, it's a shrieking torso and they're both hot, sweating and covered in blood. It’s cooling quickly and as it does it gets tackier. They’ll be glued to their clothes by the time they’re done.

Ishida and Orihime are perfectly clean. It couldn't be more obvious because she's dressed in sunshine yellow and Ishida's all in a please-stab-me shade of Quincy white. They look faintly angelic as they come to stand next to Ichigo and Chad.

Once the hollow is down comes the hard part -- ironic, because subduing it in the first place was plenty hard. Aizen's a surveillance-happy bastard though, to say nothing of the Gotei 13 in general, so they can't experiment out on the street. It's better that any surveillance that might exist see them dragging half a hollow around instead of so obviously trying to figure out how to safely get something out of its chest.

They're obviously up to something, but there's absolutely no call to broadcast what they're up to.

Ishida can't seal up an entire highway - there aren't the right physical barriers to support whatever he's doing. He does, however, manage to run his spells up the walls of an alley, which is where they take their experimental subject.

And now Ichigo is thinking things like 'experimental subject' which reminds him of Urahara, or worse, Kurotsuchi.
It's a hollow, he reminds himself. Not even a clever hollow. He's killed some of these in less than a second: run, leap, strike. Dead.

Just because they can work their way up and become something like a vasto lorde or an arrancar doesn't mean they're people.

In fact, they eat people. No sympathy.

They pick their way through the rubble. The hollow's legs are already dissolving into reishi and dissipating into the atmosphere. Unfortunately, the blood's unlikely to do the same.

"Okay," says Orihime, casting a shield of some sort. It's a weird combination of her powers -- Ichigo's not sure he's ever seen her use Ayame, Shun'ou and Lily in the same technique like this -- and it doesn't look quite right. It wobbles for a second before she takes a deep breath and stabilises it. Then it's a soft orange-gold glow over the hollow's chest, right above its hole. The light reflects on the under-parts of its mask, deepening the shadows and throwing the highlights into ghastly relief.

When the shield looks right to the pair of them - although what they're actually looking for, Ichigo has no idea - Ishida steps up and sheaths his arm in pale blue power. It streams cool and eerie from his skin in a trail of blue sparks that drift up into the night sky.

Carefully, he reaches right through the shield with his glowing fingertips. They just... dip right through, breaching the hollow's skin like it's water.

Nothing happens, unless you count the distressed wriggling of a limbless hollow.

"Huh," says Ishida, slowly.

The hollow gives another howl, and then abruptly it explodes.

Chad catches Orihime around the shoulders so she's not knocked over by the sheer force of it.

There's a second of stunned silence.

The only part of any of them that's still clean is Ishida's arm where he had it buried in the hollow's chest. Despite the gory mess covering the rest of them, his right glove is pristine. Slowly, he reaches up and uses it to wipe the mess from his glasses.

"Looks like you were right, Uryū-kun," sighs Orihime.

"In this case, I'd absolutely have preferred not to be," he mutters darkly.

"...I'm glad we didn't test that on a plus," Ichigo admits. It wasn't a good fight - Ichigo's not the kind of person who gets off on ripping limbs off his enemies, for one. Also, it's a hell of a lot harder to subdue something than to kill it, especially when it has no similar constraints.

Still. Ichigo's got a strong stomach, but he's not sure it would have held up against doing that to a harmless plus. He's not even sure he could do it to an arrancar.

...Aizen, though, whispers his hollow speculatively, somewhere in the foggy city within his mind. He sets his jaw against the thought, but --

Yeah. The hollow's the worst of him, but it's still him. It's still Ichigo's soul. And sure he'll never suggest it and he knows he won't go out of his way to do it but...
...if somebody did happen to cut off all of Aizen's limbs and shove their hand through his torso and blow him up from the inside, Ichigo wouldn't stop them, and he sure wouldn't be losing any sleep about it.

He can hear the hollow bastard's shrill cackle, so clearly he looks around to see if anybody else can. They don't seem to, which is a mixed blessing.

"We had a few seconds there," Orihime muses. She looks down, examines her cute sundress and its bloody stains.

"We did, but I wouldn't risk that happening to Rukia," Ishida says repressively.

Ichigo feels sick at the thought. Rukia. He hates how they've deceived her so far, and that's without actually harming her. "I don't want to do that again," he says.

Ishida looks at the mess and raises his eyebrows. "We didn't plan for that to happen," he drawls. "And you fight hollows all the time. This isn't different."

Orihime seems to catch on faster. "I think he means sedating Rukia-chan," she corrects delicately.

Chad makes a low noise of agreement. His armour has gone from his arms now, power tucked away just as neatly as Orihime's in her clips. He rolls one shoulder, rubbing the big muscle on the top as he does.

"It didn't feel good," he agrees. That's interesting, because Chad really isn't even that guilty -- he's only even complicit in that he knew what was going on at the time.

"And Tatsuki-chan nearly caught us," Orihime adds. Everybody looks uncomfortable with that part of the problem, from Ichigo's vantage -- and he thinks all of them are thinking the same thing, too: that it's hard to trust people and there's a lot of value in a friend who'll kick up a fuss if she thinks something isn't quite right.

They're all conflicted about that one, because they know Tatsuki did the right thing, but it was inconvenient for them at the time -- which means they were doing the wrong thing, which...

Ishida rubs the bridge of his nose. "It's not ideal. Now that we've seen what we need to work around, we know we'll only need to do that once more at most. I don't think it would be a good idea to approach Rukia directly about the problem, however. Aizen's a respected captain right now, remember, and we don't have proof."

Ichigo rubs his hands through his hair. It's matted and tacky, which is what you get when you instigate a bloodbath like this one. He's glad he's not in his human body.

Ishida's right, of course. He usually is, except for when he isn't, which is when Ichigo wants to punch him -- which is about thirty per cent of his life. That's with progress.

"I think we might be able to extend the time period before the soul's harmed," Orihime says thoughtfully. "If we can get it up to ten seconds, even--"

"Ten seconds is a lot more than three," Ishida says. He doesn't sound like he shares her optimism.

"Well, it's Karakura. There's no shortage of hollows, ne?" This she directs toward Ichigo of course - - he's by and large the reason so many hollows drop by Karakura to start with.

Ichigo is always happy to prove he's less delicious than advertised to any enterprising hollow. Now
he'll just have to learn how to subdue them first.

The idea's gross, but what choice do they have?

"Aa," he agrees. "So I guess this is plan B?"

"It's still plan A," Ishida corrects. "It just needs some tweaking." He runs the fingers of his slightly cleaner glove along the alley wall, collecting the remaining energy from his spell in a softly glowing ball.

"Plan A would have been halfway resolved by now," Ichigo complains, watching the light trail toward his palm. Ichigo would probably blow something up just trying to do that -- but on the other hand, Ishida's the one who got stuck hiding behind Orihime's shield tonight.

"There were no experiments upon hollows in plan A," Chad points out.

That's a triumph - Chad is quiet so much of the time that as soon as he takes a side, that side usually wins. Ichigo shoots Ishida a superior look.

"Fine, plan B. We should stop talking about it now," he adds as the last of his spell dissipates.

It's a significantly dirtier group who returns home.

Ishida's the only one who really has to worry about people noticing. He still lives with Ryūken, who is perceptive and suspicious and basically the opposite of sentimental, so there's none of that 'my darling boy would never' attitude that another child might rely on.

If Ishida comes home covered in blood, even hollow blood, it will be remarked upon. It's probably one of the few things that could persuade them to talk to each other at all.

Luckily, once they get their bearings, it transpires that they are a block away from one of Orihime's caches. This one is on the roof of local office building, which makes no sense whatsoever to Ichigo.

"Oh, but it's shared between five different businesses," Orihime explains. She jumps to heave herself on top of a bin outside, and then makes an ill-advised grab for the window ledge and pulls herself up. From there she gets to an old sign sticking out of the side of the building -- tax accountants, of all things -- and pinwheels her arms for a second, struggling to balance while everyone cringes below. After a moment of wobbling dangerously, she seems to completely abandon the idea of balance and just jumps for the next window ledge with a horrible squeak of bending metal.

"She is definitely going to fall," says Ishida quietly.

"She got it up there," says Chad, crossing his arms. He does look ready to run to catch her at a moment's notice, though. Ichigo feels kind of the same -- she probably won't fall, but it's Orihime so it's entirely possible she'll not only fall but accidentally rip open a hole in reality and turn into a red bean bun when she does or something.

But she makes it to the roof in one piece, and then she reappears over the edge with a bag almost as big as she is.

"...How did she get that up there?" Ichigo wonders. Nobody answers him, which is about what he expects.
Orihime tosses the bag down to Chad, who rummages through it until he finds a pair of jeans and a long, loose-weave sweater. None of it's actually Ishida's, and it doesn't look like anything he'd buy for himself.

It's dark enough and the street's deserted so nobody bats an eyelash when Ishida pulls off his trousers and shirt. The only one of them who has much modesty anymore is Orihime, and that's mostly just because everybody tries to silently look away if she has to take her clothes off. It was marginally better during the first war, but the second one saw them living in a haphazard camp in the middle of an endless white desert, and frequently on the move. Ichigo's seen more butts than he ever wanted to.

The sweater is presumably Chad's, because it's a bright flashy green and it hangs from one shoulder and spills over Ishida's fingers. He rolls the cuffs up but it still looks like he's a kid playing dress-up. It looks soft, though, and it's not covered in blood.

The jeans... Ichigo recognises the jeans, and eyes Orihime suspiciously.

"What the hell is so fascinating about my closet?" He complains.

He is duly ignored. Orihime scampers back down and shoulders the bag -- ("It's depleted, I have to re-stock it--" "With my jeans??" "Well...") -- and Chad quickly takes it off her.

"Ah... I can carry it," she points out, even as she gives in to Chad's inevitable victory and he tugs it from her hands.

"I can carry it more easily."

"...Un," she agrees after a second. Then, as they begin walking back to her apartment: "Ano... Uryū-kun, do you think you could help me get the stains out of this?" She tugs at the hem of her dress. It was yellow. Once. Before. Now it's... not.

"Leave it to me," he says gravely, because he's a dork. He shifts the collar of his jumper but it just falls off the opposite shoulder instead.

Ichigo finds himself relaxed and smiling for the first time in days.

It's more difficult than they expect to experiment on hollows of a night. Rukia is still staying in Karakura, still trying to teach Ichigo control, and she takes care of a huge majority of hollows as a matter of course. She's very dedicated to her work.

"Something else is killing some of them," she tells Ichigo at one point, worrying her lip between her teeth. They're taking advantage of the sunshine to practice outside in the park, but it's not going any better than usual. In theory Ichigo knows that this kind of consistent practice should be helping him at least a little, but if it is he has sufficiently huge stores of energy that he can't tell the difference. Nobody else can, either, or at least not the ones he's asked. Urahara probably has a quantitative way to measure, and god knows he might be keeping track. Ichigo hasn't seen him.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Ichigo wonders, laying back to stretch out against the grass. He feels out of place amid grass and sunshine, and having Rukia here -- a reflection of her proper self, a shade he can't quite speak to about anything substantial -- isn't helping. His phone's in his bag. He can text someone if he has to. Chad, maybe. That idea doesn't so much calm him as it keeps him on the precipice of panic. They're all in reach.

"Yes and no," Rukia says, watching pensively as a young boy tries to entice his mother into playing with a ball in the sunshine. There's only so much time an adult can spend tossing a ball
back and forth with a small child, though, and it seems like her patience has run out.

"If there's somebody else out here killing hollows, why haven't they introduced themselves to the ranking shinigami in the area? It's suspicious."

"Aa," Ichigo agrees, because yes, they are very suspicious. He hasn't yet found a way to avoid being very suspicious about it, but it's not like they can stop. "But aren't hollows cannibals, too?"

"They are," she nods, "but that might be even worse. If one hollow has been eating several others, it would be a menace on the level of Grand Fisher, or--" she pauses, perhaps realising that Ichigo can't know who that is.

He does though. There's no chance of Ichigo forgetting that hollow, no matter how many years may pass.

He tips his head back, into the sunlight, mostly to hide his expression. The little park smells like grass and clean dirt. He likes it, but he would trust it better if it smelled of dry sand and the biting tang of hollow energy.

"What if it's a human? Somebody with high spiritual pressure. They might not know about you guys."

"Like you? I... That's possible, I suppose, but it's extremely unlikely," Rukia refutes. "Humans like that... supposedly they did exist once, but they're extinct now."

Ichigo supposes that's a diplomatic way to approach the issue of Soul Society annihilating the Quincy. "They're extinct now' doesn't really cover 'yes they did exist until we did our damnedest to murder them all'.

He wonders briefly what Ishida would think about her way of describing it, and decides immediately on the heels of that thought never to tell him. Rukia's too young to have been involved in the actual violence, at least.

"Well, I exist," he says instead. Technically he and both his sisters are Quincy. Not purebloods, but still... Quincy.

"I don't think you're aware of quite how unlikely you are," says Rukia.

He makes a soft laughing sound. She has no idea.

After another second she gets to her feet and dusts the skirt of her dress off. The dress is Yuzu's, pale blue with deep, late-addition pockets around the thighs. One of them has a giant cross on it. "Come on, Ichigo," she says, toeing him in the hip. "I need to see a man about a body. My integration with this one has been shocking lately, and it's hard to even properly feel spiritual pressure from inside it."

"You go do that, then," Ichigo says, because there's no way he wants to come face to face with Urahara Kisuke anytime before he has to.

"We will," says Rukia, implacable and very insistent behind her cool smile, "once you get up."

"Why do I have to come?" he complains. He does not move an inch.

This time she kicks him. "Because he might have something for you. I've decided that even if you can't fight off a hollow, if you can perform konsō with the right equipment, you can at least stop
Ichigo cracks open an eye. That's... Actually not a bad idea. And reading between the lines, Rukia probably knows this won't stop him being a beacon -- but it will stop him from trailing around other souls as easy prey.

He can do konsō on his own, obviously, any shinigami can. But he can't do it in front of Rukia right now. Whipping out Zangetsu would probably cause questions.

It's a good idea from several perspectives. And it'd look weird to refuse -- everybody's heard Ichigo complaining about repetitive exorcisms.

He gets to his feet. He supposes he's going to go see Urahara after all.

The shop is an infrequently-visited, rundown looking place with 'URAHARA SHOTEN' written across the top of it. Very little effort has been made to make it look like a place where any actual business takes place, although Ichigo is aware it's known for weird discount candy among the local middle school students.

Tessai isn't someone Ichigo's given much thought to, but the last thing he remembers of him is the big guy disappearing down the gullet of a vasto lorde in Aizen's employ, so it's good and weird and completely disturbing to see him hale and hearty again. He's the one who greets Rukia though, in a very deep voice with a straw-bristled broom in one hand.

Rukia has a list of things she needs, several of which Ichigo doesn't even recognise, and some of which seems dangerous to him -- the last thing she needs is to be better synchronised with that gigai she's in. He doesn't say anything.

Urahara appears out of nowhere, geta clattering gently and fan snapped open low over his face. He looks Ichigo over and only his eyes are visible from the shadows beneath his ugly hat.

"Aa," he says, in that too-friendly tone he uses just to be obnoxious. He's addressing Rukia but he's looking right at Ichigo. Ichigo tries not to read anything dire and hungry into the expression of those piercing eyes but Urahara isn't making it easy. Was he like this the first time around? "Hai, hai, I have just the item you were looking for--"

The item Rukia apparently ordered for Ichigo looks exactly like a handheld stamp, the kind an office clerk would use to stamp the date on received documents. This one's handle forms the head of an adorable bunny rabbit.

"...Kurosaki-kun, is it?" Urahara asks, handing the stamp directly to him. It doesn't have or need any ink, obviously, but the resemblance is really uncanny.

Once the stamp's in Ichigo's hand, the wild urge comes over him to reach up and stamp Urahara's forehead. He imagines it'd be satisfying. He doesn't, because heaven only knows what that might actually do to him, but the thought passes by.

"Aa," he agrees. "Pleased to meet you," he adds automatically, even if he's not necessarily sure he is.

He doesn't really miss their Urahara Kisuke, exactly. He likes him and he sometimes wishes he was there -- planning is way more his suit than anyone else's. On the other hand, Urahara is always, always trouble. Exhibit A is basically Ichigo's entire life.

They don't actually exchange many more words than that, but Urahara's eyes seldom stray from
Ichigo, and it makes him nervous. The more uneasy he is, the more carefully Urahara watches and the tenser Ichigo gets.

He knows there's no way in hell Urahara is looking at him thinking 'aha, definitely time travel!' or even 'You know, I'm pretty sure this teenager is trying to steal my hogyoku', because how on earth would he even deduce that? But he definitely notices something, and as always with Kisuke, Ichigo is about ninety seven per cent certain it's more than he wants him to know.

"That man is creepy," he tells Rukia flatly when they leave. He ignores the stray cat cleaning her belly on top of a nearby rubbish bin.

Rukia hums thoughtfully. "He tried to dress this gigai in a maid's outfit when I went to collect it," she admits, flushing darkly.

Ichigo's eyebrow twitches. He had not known that, but that sounds so... so... Urahara. "Like I said," he grits out.

"I didn't think his tastes ran that way, though," she adds blithely.

"His ta-- What?" Ichigo trips over exactly nothing, pinwheeling his arms for balance. He loses to gravity and goes stumbling forward.

Rukia doesn't make a move to help him up. "Urahara-san. You're right, he was very... interested in you."

"What? No! He's not -- I'm sure he's --" Ichigo can't think what to say. Ichigo is currently reimagining his life as one in which Urahara isn't just interested in him, but actually interested in him.

"Hm," says Rukia thoughtfully. "Maybe he's merely interested in your high spiritual power?" But then she gives Ichigo a pitying sideways look and pats him gently on the shoulder. "I'm not sure... Don't worry," she decides, "I won't let him do anything perverted."

"That's... That's not..."

The stray cat on the bin sounds like it's trying to cough up a hair ball. Ichigo cannot help himself, and he turns his red face toward her in a glower.
Chapter Summary

If you finish this chapter confused about whether this story is an angsty time-travel fic or a surrealist romcom, #same.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Rukia’s surprised by how quickly Ichigo learns how to perform konsō, she doesn’t mention it to him. Instead she tells him it’s good to know he’s marginally competent at something, even if it’s not controlling the huge mess of his reiatsu.

Despite her evident despair at his progress, she does continue trying to teach him control. This, in turn, continues not to work even a little bit.

There’s almost no progress on the Plan B front, either. Rukia’s stepped up her hollow-hunting. It’s possible that this is in response to Ichigo’s suggestion that some greater and more cunning hollow is eating her regular prey and growing fat and powerful on it. He mostly just wanted to direct her suspicions elsewhere, but now he thinks maybe he’s gone and inconvenienced them all in the attempt, because Rukia? Dedicated.

That would be fine, sort of -- except Ishida is at least as insane as Rukia is dedicated, and he clearly hates feeling one-upped by a shinigami.

“We’ve altered events,” he points out, casually unpacking what looks to Ichigo like quite a lot of hollow bait from one of his many pockets. As in, too much hollow bait. Frankly, any hollow bait is too much of the stuff.

They’re at Orihime’s apartment again. It’s late, dark outside and warm inside. The apartment wall has mysteriously grown an enormous pinboard. Its contents are a mishmash of sheet music with corrections and scribbled arrows everywhere, a number of drawings of cutsey robots firing machine guns, and several print-outs comparing the nutritional efficacy of different brands of energy bars and ration packages. A big sheet on one side reads ‘AIRWAY, BREATHING, CIRCULATION’ and is otherwise packed with Orihime’s tiny, neat script.

“We don’t know when she’ll return to Soul Society. She can’t take the hōgyoku back to Soul Society, that’s --”

“--ano, Uryū-kun, that looks like a lot of --”

“--pletely catastrophic. So,” he holds up one piece of the bait, which is so much less alarming compared to the pile he’s apparently been carrying around -- and what else is in Ishida’s pockets? - - but still pretty alarming.

“Oi, Ishida--” Ichigo starts, trying to stall him.

Ishida snaps it. There’s a flutter in the air, the skin-shivering feeling of power spilling outwards. Something glossy and blue flickers around his fingers.
"We have to be proactive," he says, looking at best slightly unhinged with his hair messed up and a faint flush on his face. "Rukia is good at her job, but she can’t be in more than one place at a time. The more hollows show up, the more we have to test on.”

That makes sense. Sort of. On the other hand, Ichigo does have a few teensy, tiny questions -- "Didn’t you attract a gillian to the world of the living when you did this the last time?"

Ishida adjusts his glasses and once again they gleam ominously in the light. “Yes,” he says flatly. “What, are you saying you can’t defeat a gillian, Kurosaki?” he scoffs.

Just for that, Ichigo has half a mind to leave any menos grande that do show up to Ishida.

The hollow bait works almost exactly as Ichigo remembers. That is to say: too well.

There are plenty of hollows to go around. They show up in a rush of corrosive-smelling air and spiritual pressure and ugly howling and they converge on Karakura like a swarm of insects.

After a brief struggle, Ichigo abandons his body on the floor of Orihime’s apartment while the others jam their shoes on, and then they hurtle outside in response to the howling.

The streetlights are bright but there are large patches of darkness between. The moon above is big, but covered by clouds that diffuse its light. Ichigo’s eyes are taking too long to adjust.

"Dammit, Ishida!" he bellows. He unslings Zangetsu from his shoulder and slices through two hollows in the same practised movement. The sword’s still sealed, and he remains mostly quiet in Ichigo’s mind these days. Despite that, there’s a sense of approval like the rumbling of thunder every time he defeats a new enemy. "How the hell are we meant to catch one?"

“A--ah!” If he listens to her voice, Orihime always sounds like she’s an inch from falling on her face and dying horribly, but Ichigo’s gotten into the habit of ignoring the way she meeps and eeps in a fight. Instead he sees her in his peripheral vision -- she steps nimbly out of the way of a strange projectile from one of the hollows, and then Tsubaki zips right through a looming, grinning mask.

There is the wet slap of vile hollow blood on the concrete, black and messy in the street light, and then the monster behind it turns to glittering reishi, so rich in the air that for a second it feels like being back in Hueco Mundo.

Orihime’s shield blooms behind Ichigo’s shoulder and Chad races forward, using that glowing barrier to protect his flank while he does something complicated with one balled-up fist. Another hollow dissolves in a bloody mess.

"Don't underestimate me," says Ishida very seriously. Ichigo glances toward him and finds that he is seriously using actual arrows -- wooden ones.

Ichigo scowls fiercely. He beheads one hollow and keeps going, putting his back and shoulder muscles into the strike to cleave through the one next to it. He hacks its legs off like that and, given that it can't move very well, leaves it. It feels wrong but they need hollows to test on - that was supposed to be the point, after all.

...although because Ishida has evidently hidden his common sense wherever he keeps his chill, they've got way more hollows than anyone could possibly deal with at once.

Ichigo almost trips over a sluggishly bleeding hollow, which isn't dissolving -- which means it hasn’t been hit with a killing blow, it’s just... not moving.
There are big wooden arrows sticking out of it: three, one splintered and two jutting proudly up, right in the bend of its throat beneath the mask.

Ichigo crouches down, presenting a smaller target without compromising his balance while he’s distracted, and squints. It’s hard to tell from behind the mask, but he thinks it might actually be asleep?

He’s pretty sure.

The hollow’s asleep.

He eyes the arrows.

...okay.

There’s a crash and a yelp, and Ichigo rockets back to his toes and spins. From the corner of his eye, Ichigo sees Ishida dodge out of the way of one huge hollow paw and right into the path of another's huge, bone-spiked tail. There's an awful crunch, and Ishida goes flying.

Orihime's shield is there to catch him, but Ichigo's vision is already washing red at the edges. He can hear his own hollow give a giddy little laugh of anticipation and--

"Ichigo," Chad says repressively. One huge, armoured hand clamps down upon his wrist. The pressure is painful, which is just what he needs.

It takes Ichigo a second to remember himself. He can't unseal his zanpakuto and he definitely can't pull on the mask.

"Don't you dare," snarls Ishida from only a few feet away. His arm is wrapped around his belly protectively, but Orihime is already there, drawing out her power for healing. There's a swelling mark on one side of her jaw, too. It makes Ichigo angry and restless.

He could kill all of these hollows just by releasing his sword. Three seconds, maximum, including his release command. He knows it.

A golden shield appears in the air next to him, unfurling with a soothing hum and lighting up the footpath. A split second later a hollow's huge clawed hand slams into it, claws raking.

Ichigo knows he could reach out and touch the other side, perfectly safe with nothing but that thin shield between them.

"Rukia-chan's coming," says Orihime as she finishes up healing whatever damage has been done to Ishida.

A hollow reaches for Ichigo and he smacks its claws away effortlessly, then cleaves through its mask without thinking.

Once he's healed Ishida straightens. "Get the sedated ones --" he points.

*The sedated ones.*

Right.

Ichigo scowls.
Chad picks up a hollow by its tail and one by the eye socket of its mask. He seems utterly unconcerned with the weight of them. Ichigo gets one of his own and Orihime and Ishida share one, although it looks like Ishida's doing the lion's share of the work there. They retreat to Chad's apartment, which is closest to the location the influx of hollows has drawn them to.

"This was a stupid idea," hisses Ichigo, hauling one huge leathery arm over his shoulder. The hollow doesn't so much as twitch. The fight has taken them some distance away, Ichigo realises, so they're actually heading for Chad's apartment instead of back to Orihime's. He'll have to pick up his body later.

"On the contrary. I got to test the application of the concentrate derived from the drug we used on Rukia-san, and we collected all these specimens for testing."

"Yeah? And did your ribs go through your lung somewhere in the middle there?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Ishida says loftily.

"Not his lung, Ichigo-kun," says Orihime. She doesn't sound thrilled and Ichigo is pretty sure her tone means something dire happened there -- something that would have been really bad news, had she not been right there to fix it.

He feels sick and helpless thinking about it. And he can't even unseal his sword. He growls soundlessly.

The hollow he's dragging makes a wordless noise of pain and he realises he's crushing its arm. Whatever. It won't need it.

Ishida might make it sound like some kind of bullshit wildlife preservation project, but all of these hollows are going to die. If they manage to successfully perform their technique upon one of them, Ichigo is still going to kill it.

Chad's apartment, when they get there, is a dusty testament to how little he's actually there. There's not much in the cramped studio and the pantry is empty. On the table is a homework assignment from three weeks ago. There's a cracked pair of headphones hanging over the back of a chair.

Ishida uncaps a ginto to help with pulling up the seals on the walls, and Ichigo has the disturbing experience of trying to cram five unconscious hollows in a single studio apartment.

It's lucky Chad's on the bottom floor, but it still doesn't quite work.

"Hm," says Orihime, and waves him off.

Ichigo watches her dispatch Tsubaki to cut off a tail, two huge legs and four leathery wings. Of the victims, only one rocks uncomfortably under the assault. The others are all out.

"I hope they don't wake up," she frets quietly.

"If they didn't wake up for that, I don't think they will."

"Probably," she agrees, chewing her lip.

He notices that she still picks the one that seems closest to lucidity to experiment upon first though. It's true that it's a lot less stressful when the hollows don't know what's going on.

They make less of a mess than they might otherwise have done because Orihime throws her hands
wide and constructs a huge glowing barrier to catch the residue of exploding hollows. Chad's walls - and probably his rental bond - survive, but it's still ugly, messy, smelly work.

"Five seconds," Ishida reports when they're done. "That’s longer. Interesting."

Orihime looks thoroughly disheartened with her lower lip caught between her teeth and her eyes downcast, but Ishida seems cautiously optimistic for a change.

"I thought the delay was happenstance, but we might be able to do this, you know. It has to do with the vibration of spirit particles. Orihime, if we can both synchronise the frequency of our techniques with the hollows' spiritual energy-- it changes quickly, but it may not be impossible to predict."

"Great," says Ichigo. "So you just need practice?"

"A lot of practice, Ichigo-kun," says Orihime unhappily. "It could take weeks."

"Or days," Ishida counters. "It all depends on how hard we work at it."

He sounds pretty determined.

They hash it out after that, bringing up plans for hollow-capture duty. Now that Ishida knows his tranquillisers work, he and Orihime can work alone to a certain extent -- they don't need Ichigo and Chad to physically subdue hollows.

That means in turn that they can hunt while Rukia is busy with Ichigo. When she's right next to him and all her attention is on trying to teach Ichigo how to rein in his massive spiritual power, there's no way she'll notice a few hollows going missing in time to do anything about it. And Ichigo will have an alibi for enough of those disappearances to cast suspicion away from himself.

"I guess," he says dubiously.

The issue with this plan is that, while Orihime has her shields and Chad is incredibly durable, Ishida's defensive capacity is basically dodging with hirenkyaku -- and all of them are tied to comparatively fragile human bodies. Ichigo would very much rather be there.

All of them are trying not to draw excessive attention to their power, too, which makes everything so much harder. None of them is really safe, if Soul Society catches on too soon or in the wrong way -- Chad's power is, as far as they can tell, the human manifestation of being exposed to Ichigo’s power for much too long, Orihime's will scare the pants off them, and... well, there's a reason the Quincy are gone.

Ichigo... he doesn't like it.

"I can almost see you thinking something stupid," says Ishida, squinting at him.

"Shut up," says Ichigo, but it's half hearted. It is stupid, too. He knows it. These three have taken on arrancar and shinigami captains on their own. And Orihime can heal pretty much anything -- unless somebody actually gets decapitated or literally eaten, she'll fix them. There's absolutely no call for Ichigo to feel antsy about some run-of-the-mill hollows.

He has a lot of faith in his friends, but... anything can get in a lucky hit.

"...yes," Chad agrees, leaning over Ishida's shoulder like he can see the thoughts turning over in Ichigo's skull.
"Oh, screw you," mutters Ichigo. "Fine, it's not like I can stop you -"

"You certainly can't," Ishida agrees pleasantly.

"- but the plan's not worth it if one of you gets killed," he adds mulishly, crossing his arms.

"Don't worry! If it looks that dangerous, we'll all just say 'what would Ichigo do?' and abandon the plan completely!" Orihime smiles brightly and claps her hands.

Ichigo's friends are all assholes. Even Orihime, which is just -- Ichigo blames Ishida for corrupting her. Did he introduce them? He never should have introduced them.

He scowls powerfully at them all. They might joke about it, but the worry is enough to make him unusually quiet on the trip back to Orihime’s place.

Chad heaves a sigh and lets his shoulder bump into Ichigo’s as they walk. “It’s fine,” he reminds Ichigo.

“Yeah,” Ichigo agrees. He knows it is. Intellectually. His gut isn’t as easily convinced.

When they return to Orihime’s place they all watch Ichigo try to squirm his way back into his human body with rapt attention.

“When you not,” he mutters.

“It looks so uncomfortable,” Ishida says, fascinated.

Ichigo throws a mechanical pencil at him, half-in and half-out of his body. Ishida snatches it out of the air and taps his chin with it, completely undeterred.

There’s nothing weirder than being halfway into his body with his nerves partially connected. It flops around like a dying fish while he tries to reintegrate with it. And then it’s over, and he feels normal again - or, well, as normal as he can feel in his own fifteen year old body.

So yeah, truthfully, it is uncomfortable.

Also, Orihime or Chad needs to vacuum this place. He’s not rude enough to point it out, but he’s been laying on the floor here for a while now and they definitely need to vacuum. He pats his hair down.

By the time he’s settled at the table again, everybody else has rearranged themselves too. Ishida’s bony ankle is jammed against Ichigo’s knee under the table, and Chad’s a huge warm presence pressed against his shoulder. Orihime folds herself down around on Ishida’s other side.

She offers them a biscuit. Chili, orange and peanut butter. Ichigo squints. “That sounds...” almost normal, but not quite. Maybe not bad, though. He eyes them. Cautiously, he reaches for one. Maybe this time--

“Wait... why are they black?” He looks at the biscuit in his hand uncertainly.

“Squid ink,” Orihime says blithely.

Ichigo ponders how rude it would be to put it back.

After a second, he takes a reluctant bite.
Oh, god. He can feel his face change colour. The combination of flavours is insidiously wrong and his taste buds are so confused.

Chad watches Ichigo struggle for a few seconds, then politely declines.

"If a gillian did show up," begins Orihime thoughtfully, apropos of nothing at all.

"I can't catch one," snipes Ichigo. *And you're not allowed to try*, he wants to add, but Ishida would definitely take it as a challenge. From the gleam of his glasses he's plucked the idea out of Ichigo's head and he's already considering it.

"No," she says, shaking her head so her bright hair swings around her shoulders. "I mean-- is Rukia-chan-- we've left a lot of hollows to her. Is she able to defeat one alone?"

Ichigo opens his mouth to scoff, because obviously Rukia can kill a gillian, she's not a complete amateur, she's **badass**-


...not unseated officer Rukia who's been stuck in a power-sapping gigai for weeks.

Ichigo swallows.

There's an appalled pause.

"Ahh," Orihime waves her arms frantically. "I'm sorry! No, don't think about it-- I'm sure she'll be fine! Ah, and, and --" more arm waving, "I'm sure Urahara-san won't let it eat her if one comes."

This, predictably, reassures nobody. Saying 'Urahara-san' in a sentence almost never does.

There’s a slightly longer pause. Everybody except Ichigo is so obviously searching for some kind of reiatsu that he feels twitchy and restless just watching them. Even Chad leans away from Ichigo a little, trying to sense past his enormous pool of power.

“Ah...” says Orihime nervously into the silence.

He doesn’t actually need to be any good at sensing to read their expressions.

“That’s...” Ishida trails off unhappily.

“Definitely,” Chad agrees.

They stay there for a second, all of them thinking similar thoughts, none of them good.

Somewhere a clock ticks.

Ichigo’s nerve breaks first and he dives for the door.

“Dammit,” he hears Ishida hiss behind him, and then there’s the rush of hirenkyaku to keep up with Ichigo’s shunpo - his body is left behind again, slumped and glassy-eyed at Orihime’s table. “She’s going to see you,” he yells, voice almost inaudible over the wind of their momentum.

“So she’ll see me!” he bellows back. “Who cares?”

Ishida catches his arm and hauls him viciously back to a more reasonable pace -- one a shinigami vice-captain might take, rather than one a shinigami captain might struggle with. For Ichigo, it’s
either slow down, attack Ishida, or let his shoulder dislocate. There’s a panicked split-second where he thinks Rukia Rukia Rukia and everything else fades into grey scale and a dislocated shoulder isn’t such an injury, he’s fought with worse --

“Slow down before you draw attention and get someone killed,” hisses Ishida. “Rukia is a grown woman and a shinigami officer. She will be fine.”

Ichigo swallows.

“We will go to see if she actually needs help,” he says in a low, flat voice, soft and reasonable, “and if she doesn’t we can watch, and you will not throw a tantrum like a five year old if she gets a scratch or two.”

Their pace slows further, the difference between a run and a sprint. Ichigo thinks he can feel the gillian at the edge of his senses now, a blip on the radar. He can’t tell who else is there, which is normal for him. It’s not indicative of anybody having died.

Ichigo is not actually sure if he can follow Ishida’s instructions. He’s lost Rukia once already. He’s not ready to do it again.

At the pace Ishida’s forcing, the fight is almost over by the time they arrive -- and maybe, Ichigo thinks sourly, he did that on purpose.

The gillian rises huge and terrible, ponderously stumbling through a huge tear in the sky. Hueco Mundo beckons in the darkness beyond it. For a second Ichigo wants to step through the garganta and take to the sands. He ignores the pull of that place and looks for more important things.

Rukia isn’t alone after all. Urahara’s kids have shown up to join the fray, and Tessai seems to have engaged a barrier that will stop a cero from bringing the city down around their ears.

Rukia herself has thrown off her gigai and she looks battered but not badly hurt -- just tapped out and scratched up, with a long scrape on her face and her shoulders heaving with heavy breaths. Her sword is out, but Sode no Shirayuki seems... a little flimsy, actually, like she’s not stuffed with the spiritual power she usually is.

That, Ichigo assumes uneasily, is the impact of keeping her in that gigai for too long. In the last timeline, once she was in it she didn’t really leave it.

Ichigo and Ishida come out from the mouth of an alley nearby, moving closer to the fight on foot in case they’re seen sprinting around at a swift flash step. Ichigo’s pretty sure the others don’t even realise he’s there, despite how obvious his huge energy signature ought to be -- he’s got it spread out across half the town so it’s practically ubiquitous in Karakura, and they’re much too focused on the gillian.

When the red smoke of its cero clears, leaving only a cracked kido shield in its wake, the gillian begins a confused retreat and bone-white hands grasp for it from the tear in the sky, hooking in its ragged robe and drawing its huge dark body back through the garganta.

In its wake Rukia looks battered, but her sword is up and defensive, steaming and icy in the air. She’s clutching Sode no Shirayuki, which, while pretty, seems like a pale imitation of its usual power. As the gillian retreats, the sword shatters in her hands, and she drops.

Ichigo swears he can hear the noise she makes when her knees hit the concrete.

He flinches and opens his mouth to call out. Ishida slaps one hand over it. “--Mpph!” squawks
Ichigo, and then he elbows Ishida in the guts and stomps on his instep.

“Ow! Kurosaki, the fight is over,” he says, withdrawing his restraining hands. They hover around as though Ishida might need them to grab Ichigo again at the slightest provocation.

Ichigo gives him a black look over his shoulder, but it doesn’t stop him from huffing a peeved breath and going on: “What good would it do to reveal yourself now? You’re out of your body and dressed as a shinigami, and there’s a zanpakuto across your back. She needs no help. Urahara-san will help her recover.”

It’s all true. It’s all true, it’s all sensible.

“Right,” Ichigo agrees.

Ishida eyes him. Then, cautiously, he takes his elbow.

“I don’t need you to lead me,” Ichigo complains, yanking it back from him. “I know how to get back on my own!”

He makes no effort toward moving though -- not until he sees Tessai gather Rukia up in his big arms and head off with her cradled there. Jinta and Ururu trail after him like tiny ducklings in the shadow of his bulk -- if tiny ducklings were also moderately vicious shock troops.

Ichigo almost misses the silhouette of geta-bōshi peering out from a nearby rooftop, but he moves at the last second, drawing Ichigo’s attention. That ugly hat is recognisable from anywhere.

“She lost her powers faster the first time,” Ichigo mutters, watching them all clear out. He thinks probably Urahara, at least, has felt him here by now, but nobody is coming their way. They leave only the cracked concrete behind as evidence of the fight.

Ishida rolls his eyes. “Of course. She gave them to you. This time the gigai has to work on its own.”

He herds Ichigo away from the scene like an attentive mama wolf. It’s symptomatic of how unsettled Ichigo is that he allows it. They meet with Chad and Orihime on the way and both of them are breathless and red-faced from running.

“Is she all right?” Orihime exclaims, coming to a panting stop.

Ichigo hesitates and a moment of complete disconnection overtakes him for a second. She’s dead, he wants to remind them. But no, she’s alive. Rukia’s alive and with Urahara, and her death is in another world. “She’s with geta-bōshi,” he says instead.

Ishida is watching him with too-perceptive, calculating eyes.

Right. Enough of that.

Ichigo turns and kicks him in the shin.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he bellows. “Breaking that bait -- you know what happened last time!” It certainly hadn’t been Rukia who collapsed last time, but the gillian was exactly the same.

He cracks Ishida over the back of the head with his open palm, sending him stumbling forward.

“It was a worthwhile experiment,” Ishida tells him, and Ichigo smacks him again, and then Ishida
goes on to sulk for the rest of the evening. Orihime waves her hands and tries to persuade them to stop being difficult without ever telling them that they’re being difficult.

When they get back to Orihime’s place - again, because of course they’ve spent half the night running around madly again -- Chad unslings his guitar from his back and plays it like a soothing counterpoint to the black mood. Ichigo isn’t sure if it helps.

“We’re making progress, though, aren’t we?” Orihime reminds them, and that does help. A little.

Ichigo watches her cram a squid ink biscuit into her mouth sourly.

‘Progress’, as Orihime terms it, is slow. Following Ishida’s extremely ill-advised use of the hollow bait - which he still won’t admit was ill-advised - the initial influx of hollows dissipates but the overall hollow activity still remains unusually high for some time. This is a mixed blessing.

The poison Ishida has made from the sedative they used on Rukia drops the average lesser hollow in two well-dipped arrows, which makes hunting down experimental subjects safer. Ichigo is no longer there for every encounter. He hears about them post-event, though, once Orihime has deemed that each anecdote can no longer possibly stress him because it’s obviously been resolved successfully. She’s wrong, of course. Ichigo reserves the right to be stressed about his friends being put in danger no matter what logic or common sense might dictate.

Rukia doesn’t exactly tell Ichigo about her waning powers. They never mention it. But she is evidently distracted about something and since Ichigo is privy to more information than she knows, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what that something is. With the additional rise in hollow activity, she has much less time to run around trying to teach him how to control his power. She’s spread thin, losing power, and starting to look pretty on edge.

Ichigo, meanwhile, contents himself with taking his sisters to and from school, keeping Rukia distracted and dodging her in roughly equal measure, and, when he can, spending nights at Orihime’s apartment. The Kurosaki household is definitely home, but it’s a distant home rife with reminders of failure and obligation, and one where he frequently wonders about what’s real and what’s illusion (nothing, and everything). He dreads the day Isshin will decide to make a fuss about where he goes of a night, and hopes the old bastard never finds out.

Orihime’s apartment has become kind of a haven, despite the presence of really appalling culinary experiments. Even Ishida is there most nights, showing up just after midnight and toeing his shoes off at the door. In those frantic days in Hueco Mundo, they all slept together for warmth and safety -- now they do it because it’s comfortable to know where everybody is, comfortable to feel them breathing and shifting around in the dark, and none of them has the energy to think too deeply about it.

While Ichigo and Ishida are forced by circumstance to be at least a little circumspect, there is a decidedly unpleasant moment when Tatsuki realises that Chad is basically living at Orihime’s place. After a few long, awkward moments and a hissed conversation between Orihime and Tatsuki to which Ichigo is not privy (and to which he never wants to be privy, he’s pretty sure), Tatsuki seems to decide that the situation is not as dire as initially supposed.

Ichigo has no idea what Orihime tells her, but it seems strange and miraculous to him that Chad’s still in one piece.

Chad, of course, takes the whole business in stride. Tatsuki stares at him with death in her eyes for a few days after she becomes aware, and then again every so often -- whenever she thinks about it, Ichigo suspects. He is placid as ever.
‘Plan B’, with its many exploding hollow bodies, progresses like a tortoise going uphill. Orihime and Ishida see some advancement and together they manage to make one hollow last seven seconds, but it’s still deemed too dangerous to use on Rukia.

“We’re improving,” Ishida says defensively when asked.

Ichigo can’t really remember how long Rukia was around in the living world for in that first timeline, but he hopes she’s willing to wait a while -- which shouldn’t be too hard, since she’s definitely living rent free.

He gets confirmation that Rukia is definitely living in his closet when he opens it one night and finds her dressed in Yuzu's pyjamas and eating a bowl of seasoned rice.

"Ah," she says awkwardly. "Good evening."

"'Good evening'?" He repeats.

He's been prepared to learn about this for a while, but the nonchalance with which she treats it robs him of all his chill - which, admittedly, isn't a thing he has lots of to begin with. "You're in my closet!"

First Orihime, then Ishida and now Rukia. What is so damned compelling about Ichigo’s closet?

"Well," she says practically, "where else am I supposed to stay?"

Ichigo twitches, because the obvious response is literally anywhere else.

He scrunches his face up for a few seconds, trying to find where he put his calm, even temper. Then he gives up and thumps her over the head. "Tell people before you move into their house!" he bellows.

Rukia flinches and looks toward the door, where any member of his family may or may not be eavesdropping.

"Well," says Rukia, giving him a knowing look, "it's not like you're ever here. Orihime-chan's pretty, Ichigo, but is it really okay to be sneaking out every night?"

Ichigo flushes, less at the implication that he's sneaking out every night to be with somebody and more at the idea that it's Orihime.

"We're not talking about me," he says levelly, glowering down at Rukia.

Orihime is very pretty, and too gentle for her own good, and a bit of a space cadet, and if she ever decides to date somebody Ichigo has one hell of a shovel talk lined up for them. He'll have to line up behind Tatsuki to deliver it, but that's okay, Tatsuki was there first.

"Fine," sighs Rukia, like he's being completely unreasonable here, "Kurosaki Ichigo, I'm sleeping in your closet."

And then she goes back to her rice.

Ichigo splutters. "You can't just--!"

"You said 'tell people before you move into their house','" quotes Rukia, swallowing daintily before she opens her mouth. "You've been told. Are you going to just stand there with the door open?"
Snarling, Ichigo slams it. He can't remember what he was looking for in there anymore. He sleeps the whole night in his own bed entirely out of spite -- and by 'sleeps' he means he stares at the roof and rubs the heels of his hands into his eyes when they get too dry.

Ishida texts him at one, at three, at three-forty and at four-thirty. Each one feels like surfacing for air when you were sure you'd drown, even though they're pretty much all just insults.

He gets through the night without sleeping but also without panicking. He's not surprised that Ishida is waiting around the corner from his house when he leaves, looking pale but completely presentable in his uniform and leaning against somebody's high brick fence.

"You look terrible," Ishida says flatly, by way of greeting.

"Thanks," drawls Ichigo.

They don't say anything else. When they get to school it seems that Tatsuki has walked both Orihime and Chad to school, having picked them up from the apartment. Orihime is a mess of stumbling assurances and fluttering hands, and the tension between Chad and Tatsuki is palpable.

"Ichigo-kun," says Orihime desperately when he shows up.

"Since when is he 'Ichigo-kun', anyway?" Tatsuki demands. She's clearly in fine form because she sounds like the idea genuinely enrages her. "What happened to 'Kurosaki-kun'?"

"Ahh..." Orihime stares at Tatsuki for a long second. "Um." Evidently the strange depths of her imagination are failing her, because all that happens is silence.

"Give it a rest, Tatsuki," growls Ichigo. He's too tired for this. "We're friends. Isn't that a good thing?"

"I... well, yes. But when-?"

"Around."

"Ah, Inoue," says Ishida, butting straight through their conversation, "I wanted to discuss our history assignment with you. I have the notes right here," he adds, whipping out a sheaf of papers that is much too large to be their history notes.

He adjusts his glasses. "I genuinely need your help with this assignment and it's definitely not just me providing a convenient distraction."

Everybody looks at them.

Orihime opens her mouth. Closes it. Stares at Ishida for a bit.

"...right!" She agrees cheerfully. "Excuse me."

"That Ishida," says Tatsuki slowly, "...is he all right?"

Ichigo frowns. "He's fine," he says flatly.

Tatsuki's brow furrows. "You have to admit that was a bit weird."

"Yeah, well. Ishida's a bit weird." In the same way that Aizen is 'a bit' of an asshole. Ishida’s just a giant dork though. He’s not -- yeah. No. "He's a good guy."
"You're very defensive about him," says Tatsuki, turning her attention to Ichigo and raising her eyebrows.

Ichigo frowns harder for a second, and then he realises what Tatsuki means, and his frown morphs into a borderline-murderous scowl.

She smiles. It's not an encouraging smile. It's an anticipatory, satisfied kind of smile. An *I've-been-waiting-a-long-time-for-this-moment* smile.

“So,” she says, sweet and insinuating. On Rukia, that tone is obnoxious. On Tatsuki? A jolt of pure terror sweeps through Ichigo. He can feel it radiating from his spine.

“No,” he growls.

Ishida... probably provides more of a distraction than he intends.

Rukia arrives at school just before the bell, preserving the illusion that she does not live in Ichigo's closet. She fends off Keigo's overwrought greeting and slumps into the seat next to Ichigo.

Three seconds later, during roll call, a balled up paper note smacks him in the temple.

'On the roof,' it says.

Ichigo sighs and raises his hand. "I need to use the bathroom," he grumps at the teacher, who looks like she wants to protest but also looks like she thinks Ichigo might leap up and physically attack her if she asks why he didn't go three minutes ago.

He has no idea how Rukia gets out of class - instinct says she probably swooned or burst into hysterical sobbing or something - but she meets him on the roof in short order.

"There's too many of them," she says seriously. "Our practising might be drawing the hollows closer. They're everywhere. I didn't want to do this, but if you're going to attract hollows like this you need to know how to fight them."

Ichigo gives her a dubious look. She can't mean with a zanpakuto because to her knowledge he has no access to one. Maybe she's brought him a weapon from Urahara's shop?

"I don't like it either," she says, apparently in response to his expression. "But if a hollow eats you, with your spiritual pressure..." she shudders. "It would be almost unstoppable. When a hollow eats sufficient souls, it evolves into a new kind of hollow because of how much power it has absorbed. As a gillian," her eyes unfocus and Ichigo wonders if she's thinking about her fight with one several days ago, "hollows still aren't very smart. But they are huge and powerful, like... You wouldn't believe it." Rukia shakes her head. "Thousands of souls make up a gillan. We hardly ever see gillian come to the living world. If a hollow were to eat you, it would be worse." She looks grim at the prospect.

Ichigo kind of wishes he could tell her not to worry, because from the perspective of a rank-and-file shinigami it is a pretty frightening thought. Eating Ichigo would do a lot more than make a hollow into a Ggillian -- Ichigo's hollow is, on its own, a vasto lorde. Maybe Rukia doesn't know that, but she must be thinking about a strong and aggressive adjuchas running wild in Karakura at least, even if she's sparing Ichigo the gory details. This scenario Rukia's imagining is a grim one, and it makes sense that she'd be willing to risk teaching a human to fight off hollows.

She was willing to do it for a lot less incentive in the first time line.
It turns out that Rukia fully intends to have him master at least one kind of mid-range kido attack, and then, having weakened the hollow, to purify it with his holy office stamp.

Ichigo cannot even express what an awful idea this is.

He tells Chad when they're walking back later. He'll have to wait to tell Orihime and Ishida, because both of them have disappeared into the frilly maw of the handicrafts club.

"Kido?" Repeats Chad, looking extremely dubious. "You're bad at kido."

It's not even an insult; it's too matter-of-fact. Ichigo's kido skills are appalling. He overloads every spell he tries. Trying to control the rush of his reiatsu is like trying to catch a waterfall bare handed.

"I know," he mutters.

Rukia seems confident enough, though, even when she's explaining hado to him in her sternest voice.

They trek out to the middle of nowhere in the forest, where the only people Ichigo can hurt if this goes wrong - and it will go wrong, he's sure of it - are himself and, potentially, Rukia. He's too poor at sensing the others to know if they've followed him to spy, but even if they have they'll be safe behind Orihime's shields.

"You have a lot of spiritual power," she says, crossing her arms, "so we're not going to bother with the academy basics. You'll never get the hang of them. You're like a child with poor motor control trying to draw; there's no point giving you a calligraphy brush. We need to give you a spell that can be drawn in crayon."

It's a surprisingly good metaphor, and Ichigo swallows the comment he desperately wants to make about Rukia's own artistic skills. This is how he knows he's not really fifteen again, not on the inside -- these tiny moments of adult restraint. "Okay," he says slowly.

"This is hado number sixty-three, raikohou," Rukia says then, holding up her palm.

"Sprinkled on the bones of the beast," she begins the incantation, and the air feels different immediately. Ichigo isn't great at sensing stuff, but people casting destructive spells right next to him? He can sense that.

Yellow lightning flickers to life over the pale skin of Rukia's gigai. "It requires a large amount of energy to power it, so you should be all right using it. Like this--"

She slams her crackling fistful of lightning into the tree nearest them, and the yellow light flares brightly for one eyeball-searing moment. When the light fades, the tree is blackened, burnt out completely. Then it shudders and falls to ash.

Rukia points him at the wonky circular target she's drawn on the tree in front of him. "Raise your power, concentrate it, and expel it through the shape of the incantation."

That's kind of complete gibberish unless you understand how kido works. Ichigo has an average theoretical understanding, because everyone from Urahara to freakin' Kyouraku has tried to explain how to lay privacy seals to him at some point. He gets the theory, although it didn't come entirely naturally to him.

"Okay," he says. He's prepared for resistance. He's prepared for the feeling of trying to persuade a
river through the eye of a needle.

He clamps down on his reiatsu as much as he can and pushes, and...

The incantation unfolds, makes room, blooms large and red in his mind. It bends around his power. There's a limit to it, but it's a generous limit, and he might -- Ichigo might actually be able to do this.

He releases it, feeling sure he's got this. The spell feels right, not the weird feeling of something gone totally wonky. It leaves his hand in a rush of reiatsu. The air smells like hot metal and power.

He doesn't realise he's closed his eyes, but he's pretty sure he's hit the target anyway.

He opens his eyes. The forest is gone.

Just... gone.

Rukia is white.

"Uh," says Ichigo. He turns to Rukia. "Will there be anything left to purify if I hit a hollow with that?"

"If you hit a hollow with that," says Rukia, "you'll take out half of Karakura."

Yeah, that's kind of what Ichigo's thinking too.

"Well," says Ishida later, after Ichigo has answered his half-dozen texts about what the hell was that, Kurosaki? "I hadn't thought anybody would be able to teach you kidō."

Ichigo's not sure that pointing him at a target, murmuring an incantation and saying 'go get it' qualifies as teaching, but Rukia's proficiency with kidō has always been borderline absurd for how young a shinigami she is. It's not much of a wonder she would consider a solution like this one.

"What story did you implant in the people nearby?" Ishida wonders.

Ichigo shakes his head. "Freak cyclone."

"One that appeared on no warning systems, touched down once, inland, and dissipated immediately?"

He shrugs. "Not everyone's you. They won't think about it like that."

"You underestimate people."

Ichigo thinks Ishida probably overestimates them -- thinking everybody is like yourself is an easy trap to fall into, and Ishida does tend to expect people to think critically about pretty much everything.

There's no point in telling Ishida that, though; it'll just irritate him.

"It's Karakura," shrugs Ichigo finally.

That, at least, Ishida accepts. Weird shit happens in Karakura and people are used to it.

It takes Ichigo several long days of work to figure out how to tone down the spell Rukia's given him enough that it probably won't completely obliterate the city. The first hollow he tries it on goes
the way of the dinosaurs and ends up so much ash in the wind, but the second one just loses half its body.

He's not actually expecting it to work properly when he approaches, digs through his pocket for his holy office stamp, and stamps the konsō into its mask.

It does work, though. The hollow makes a wet breathing sound like a person whose lungs are collapsing, and then it lights up gold from the inside. The glow pours out from under its mask, lighting up the night to bright midday for a second.

Then it's gone.

"Excellent," says Rukia, sounding so satisfied that Ichigo realises she wasn't sure how this would work out either.

Ichigo peers thoughtfully at the stamp.

And... huh.

Could Soul Society always make something like this? The thing is, Chad and Orihime do pretty much the same damage to hollows as other hollows and shinigami do, but Ishida's arrows truly annihilate them. It's half the reason for the Quincy being killed to begin with. If Soul Society could make stuff like this... why didn't they?

For a second, he hesitates, wondering if it might just make Ishida angrier, but - the benefit's too great not to. He's decided. Just as soon as Rukia stops supervising him with the hollows, he's going to give the stamp to Ishida.

Hopefully they'll learn it's some recent invention of Urahara's later. Otherwise... otherwise it means there was no reason, none at all, for what happened to the Quincy.

Ichigo has plenty of reasons to dislike Soul Society as an institution already, but if that's true...

His fingers tighten on the handle of the stamp.

That would be ...bad.

If that's the case, Ichigo is going to march up there and rearrange upper management in Soul Society a little, if there's even any left over once Aizen’s done with Centre 46.

To be clear, by 'rearrange', Ichigo means he’s going to cut their heads off.

It takes him a while to stop being too angry to think about the possibility, and even longer to start wanting to look at the more reasonable possibilities again. Like, maybe Quincy can’t use it, for one possibility.

When he's finally confident that Rukia is no longer watching his every hollow-hunting move, Ichigo hands the device over to Ishida.

Their test victim is a teenager, someone who died too thin with scars on her arms. She hangs out along the isolated stretch of rail where she died, and it's past sunset and raining when they meet her.

Ishida introduces himself politely, explains his purpose better than Ichigo ever has, and promptly demonstrates a textbook perfect konsō with the thing. It draws from Ishida's power, translates it and
Ichigo swallows. He feels a little sick. He also feels like he can hear the creak of his friend's self-control.

"Shinigami," Ishida says, looking at the stamp in his hand. His voice is quiet, but there's something in it, a low raw catch -- that there, Ichigo thinks, that's the sound that turns human souls into hollows. It makes him shiver.

"Maybe we can make more?" Orihime says cautiously.

Chad says nothing. He just reaches out and takes the device before Ishida can crush its handle in his grip.

Ichigo desperately wants to ask Urahara, but there's no way to broach the topic with him. Maybe an opportunity will come up later, but for now--

For now, they at least have a way for Ishida to purify the hollows he damages, which is really excellent news. It's just kind of hard to be happy about it.

After that, when Ichigo walks his sisters home from school he finds it hard not to think about how they, too, are Quincies through their mother. They have plenty of spiritual power, too.

What if, what if, what if? pounds the refrain in Ichigo's head.

"Hey, Karin," he says one afternoon, thinking about the expression on her face after the hollow attack at his house. Yuzu is busy collecting groceries because honestly she's the only real adult in their house. "Have you ever considered learning archery?"

Karin blinks, confused. "It's not offered at school. It sounds cool though - have you seen the yabasume archers though? They're amazing."

Ichigo nods. "If you're interested, I think I know someone who'll teach you."

Karin's eyebrows go up. "Really? Doesn't it require a lot of expensive equipment?"

Ichigo hesitates.

"...is this about the monsters?" Karin asks after that awkward moment of silence.

"You remember?"

"I didn't for a while. But I can see them now. There's more of them than there used to be. They're..." She swallows.

"They're called hollows," Ichigo tells her. Once he starts, he keeps going. She doesn't seem surprised, which makes him wonder what she's seen.

In the end, she wants to learn. Ichigo expected it. Really, he should have done this ages ago.

There's an old silver bracelet that Ishida digs out of storage, tarnished but still sound. It's small, evidently intended for young arms. They disguise the important charm with half a dozen others, things Ichigo thinks Karin won't mind wearing: a tiny silver rapier, a minute pair of boxing gloves, a wolf and a soccer ball. Chad finds her one shaped like a guitar and, feeling left out, Orihime comes up, somewhere, with a silver charm shaped like a fish.
And on Monday when Ichigo picks the girls up from school, Ishida comes with him.

Karin tells her sister and dad that she's taken up a new sport. If anybody thinks it's weird that she starts wearing a charm bracelet, nobody comments. Ichigo doesn't doubt Isshin knows what's going on, but ignoring it gives him plausible deniability if anybody ever asks. Also, the Kurosakis' collective skill at ignoring really big issues is basically the only reason their family continues to function at all.

Ichigo sits in on Ishida's lessons a lot of the time. He's pretty sure he's never going to need to learn how to take in ambient reishi and expel it in oddly specific ways, but he still learns a lot just listening.

Ishida's an impatient but thorough teacher, which is basically what he expected, but he also takes pains to teach Karin how to keep herself safe. Hirenkyaku is one of the earliest items on the curriculum, which Ichigo knows for a fact isn't the order Ishida learned it in, but--

But Sōken taught Ishida how to be a fighter, how to attack and win. Ishida's teaching Karin how to get herself and her sister out alive - how to flee to safety, how to delay pursuit, how to use her senses to find somebody who can help. How to engage is the last step on a long list.

All of this would have helped Karin and Yuzu a lot before, when -

Ichigo swallows down the rising tide of grief. His sister's here now. She's not the same, but she's here and she's alive.

It was stupid not to teach her the first time around. He'd been absurdly naive to think his sisters wouldn't be drawn in.

"We have to get Yuzu out here," he says finally, watching Karin trying to gather the reishi beneath her for hirenkyaku. She's doing a better job than Ichigo would. Better control already. "I don't have a second cross -- she won't be able to generate her own heilig bogen," Ishida cautions him, lips thinning. He doesn't say it's a bad idea though.

Ichigo shakes his head. "She has to know how to sense them and get away, at least."

Ishida takes a deep breath. "Yes," he says.

It hurts to explain it to Yuzu, even though there's a dawning understanding in her face that tells Ichigo she's nowhere near as oblivious as anyone thinks. In the end, she agrees with them.

Ichigo hugs her tightly and fists his hands in her dress, trying to still the waves of grief and pride and -- huge, terrible, overwhelming feelings. He swallows, licks his lips.

What Ishida can't teach them Ichigo will, because they're shinigami as well, and there's probably something dark and mean and hollow curled up deep within them just like there is in him, too. Ichigo hopes neither of them will ever have to really use what they're learning here, way out in the clearing where Ishida trains.

But he can't guarantee the future. He'll do his level best to keep them safe, but he can't be everywhere. He's learnt that the hard way.

This time, they'll know how to stay alive.

And if Ishida's teaching them that most of the shinigami from Soul Society can't be relied upon, can't ever really be trusted?
Ichigo might want to argue out of sentiment, because he knows several shinigami who aren't bad, but he holds his tongue. In the end, it's not like Ishida's really wrong. They both know that from experience.

Admitting she's living in his closet makes Rukia harder to avoid - she's not pretending she's not there anymore. This, in turn, means Ichigo gets nagged into spending more nights in his own house. He sneaks out once Rukia's finally sleeping once or twice, but she never buys the explanation that he's been there all night, really, he just got up before her.

He never sleeps properly when he stays, though. Ichigo hates the mornings after those nights. Even when Ishida is inevitably standing against the fence around the corner when he gets back from dropping Karin and Yuzu off, like he thinks Ichigo needs a chaperon or something, he still leaves the house feeling groggy and stressed and like nothing is really real. Sometimes, when it's bad, he struggles to even walk Yuzu and Karin to their early sports programs because he's breathing air and not reishi and he panics when he takes a breath. He's not even really sure how he can tell the difference.

He knows he must look like absolute shit when he presses his shoulder into Ishida’s and doesn't get shoved away. It's obvious from the way Orihime looks at him when he arrives. She sidles up to him between classes and asks if he needs healing, but --

He's pretty sure she can't heal whatever's going on in his head. She tries anyway, like she thinks he won't notice her spirits fluttering around him in the middle of class. If this is her idea of subtlety... Well, it's a good thing Rukia is off murdering a hollow when she tries it.

Some nights, Chad comes over and sits on his window ledge once Rukia's fallen asleep. He stays there, huge and silent, just a dark silhouette in the night, for hours. If Ichigo switches the head and foot of his bed around, he can wrap his fingers around Chad's ankle while he tries to sleep. He does better on those days.

Ishida is, as usual, weird and over the top and a little too prepared.

"We have French project," he lies blithely, and muscles his way into a three-night sleepover that, oddly, delights Yuzu and Karin.

"It's a very long, difficult French project," he says when Isshin counts an extra human at the table. Neither of them takes French. Even Ishida, colossal overachiever that he is, takes English and German.

This doesn't seem to faze Isshin in the slightest, either because he doesn't know what subjects Ichigo actually takes (entirely possible) or because he recognises Ishida as Ryūken's kid and is happy enough to let them go do dangerous spirit stuff without the slightest supervision (at least equally possible, and if Ichigo has to bet he'll take this option).

"Why French?" he complains, following Ishida up the stairs. They creak gently underfoot. The house is repaired but sometimes Ichigo does kind of wonder if that hollow attack did more structural damage than they thought.

"Because your father doesn't speak French. And neither does mine." And he pulls out what looks very much like a lot of French writing and drops it on Ichigo's desk.
Huh. That's... thorough. He has no idea what it says, but it's thorough.

Ichigo's too tired to complain much.

Ishida is an absolutely appalling sleep snuggler. It's usually something that affects Orihime or, more commonly, Chad, but now it's all Ichigo's problem.

It seems like it should be weird. Despite all the slightly post-apocalyptic flavoured camping together they've done, Ichigo's never actually gotten into a bed with Ishida alone and slept with him there. It feels different with just two people, and it's definitely different to the feeling of Chad sitting with him on the windowsill for a few hours.

Ichigo... doesn't mind it, actually. He's not even that upset about the sleep snuggling. It's a pretty good problem to have -- certainly compared to all their other problems right now. Ishida is warm and clean and he smells like safety, like home, like someone who will watch Ichigo’s back. It's relaxing.

Ishida is astonishingly willing about it, too. It’s all: “Shut up, Kurosaki,” and “Nobody is going to unroll the spare futon, Kurosaki,” and “Move over, Kurosaki, there would be plenty of space if you weren’t sprawled everywhere.”

He sounds all sharp and tense and barks at him with his shoulders hiked up around his ears, like he expects Ichigo to argue about it with him. Ichigo doesn’t. They both know that it’s Ishida who is definitely getting the shittier deal here. Ichigo gets to curl up against somebody who's safe and good-smelling and sleep -- in a proper bed, even, unlike their sleepy pile-ups on Orihime’s floor -- and Ishida gets to crawl into bed with a twitchy lunatic.

And Ichigo is twitchy. He wakes up over and over, glances at the clock to learn that only fifteen minutes have passed. He starts in his sleep and wakes immediately, eyes searching, nerves screaming. That first night, he gets an elbow in the ribs for his trouble every single time. After the sixth, he’s pretty sure it’s going to bruise spectacularly. Ishida is pointy.

“Sleep,” growls Ishida every time, sounding exasperated.

So, yeah. Ichigo’s definitely getting the better deal here.

But when he wakes up, Ishida is right there, and he says it’s safe, it’s fine, go back to sleep. So Ichigo does.

It’s in fits and starts, but he sleeps for longer than he’s slept inside one night in ages.

Honestly, Ichigo resents it on the first day, primarily as a function of his frustration with himself. Because apparently he can sleep for five whole hours if Ishida is wrapped around him like a fucking blanket, but not at all if he’s on his own. How is that reasonable?

It makes him angry to think about relying on that, about needing that. And it annoys him that the experience of actually waking up in the morning -- not just laying there with scratchy eyes and an exhausted mind, waiting for the sun -- is so novel and good and relieving.

In Ichigo’s own mind, he shouldn’t be this -- this needy. It’s horrifying. It makes him feel strange and vulnerable and squirmiy on the inside in a distinctly unsettling way.

On the second day, Ichigo wakes up because his blanket rolls over. He cracks his eyes open to the sight of a pair of glasses folded on the bedside table and the first thing he smells is Ishida’s stupid sweet-chemical-smelling shampoo. He feels melty, loose and sleepy like a cat in a ray of sunshine.
It’s too good to get stressed about. He's half tempted to roll over and go back to sleep.

In the end he does not do that, because Ishida apparently gets zero diplomatic immunity to Isshin's version of paternal affection. The wake up call will be coming in about five minutes.

It does, and Ichigo is oddly proud to see Ishida leap up out of a sound sleep with a startled yelp and punch his dad in the chin.

“"I punched your dad,” he says numbly, once they’ve packed up and gotten the girls to school and finally made it to class.

“Stop saying that,” sighs Ichigo. “He deserves it.”

“I punched your dad,” Ishida says again, like emphasis will change either the fact of the event or how much Isshin deserves it.

“He’s probably crying on the phone to your dad about what a good child you are,” mutters Ichigo.

Ishida gives him an unreadable look, but then the teacher comes into the classroom. He adjusts his glasses and shifts in his seat, diverting his attention to the front of the room. Ichigo’s not sure why; it’s not like he has anything to learn here.

Of course, Ishida’s not the only person sleeping in Ichigo’s house. Just because she’s been at pains not to be obvious to Ichigo’s friend does not mean Rukia isn’t still using his cupboard.

"Ichigo, is it normal for teenaged boys to sleep in the same bed?” she asks archly.

This would be cause for little more than rolling his eyes except Rukia’s favourite hobby is stirring shit in other people’s social lives, primarily his. So of course she says it at school during the lunch period. And of course she’s sitting right next to Tatsuki, right across from Chizuru, and next to Mizuiro and Keigo.

Chad, Ishida and Orihime are all there, and all of them look kind of amused. Orihime is biting her lower lip and Ishida is hiding his expression behind the reflection off his glasses. It’s harder to tell with Chad, whose expressions can be opaque unless he’s angry, but there’s a tension to his shoulders that Ichigo reads as amusement anyway. Of course they all know exactly what’s going on here.

And none of them are going to try to pull him out of the extremely humiliating conversation - the reasonably humiliating week - that ensues.

"Depends on the teenaged boy," Ichigo says in the most level, steadiest voice he can manage.

"Ah. Do you think so, Ishida-kun?” Rukia asks in the most honeyed voice. It's kind of gross.

Ishida looks between Ichigo and Rukia and Tatsuki. His eyes flick over to Orihime’s half-unwilling smile, past Chizuru’s huge, intent eyes and over Keigo where he’s clutching his face in horror and staring at Ichigo.

Ichigo can see him thinking awful thoughts. Don’t you dare, he thinks. Ishida, no.

It’s no use at all.

"Hmm. It's certainly warmer that way," he says mildly, tilting his head in a way that makes his glasses catch the light. He looks absolutely unholy, which in that moment Ichigo feels is very
fitting.

Dammit.

Tatsuki blinks, and then shoots Ichigo wide eyes.

Ichigo sighs and shoves another bite of rice between his teeth.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she hisses to Ichigo upon their return to class.

"Tell you what?" Ichigo demands, and he disentangles himself from her clutches and leaves her behind.

The next three classes are taken up by Keigo crying - crying, big, fat, horrifyingly genuine tears - about how he should have known it when Ichigo invited a man from the handicrafts club to join them at lunch.

Ichigo isn't sure why everybody seems to think sexuality and handicrafts are inextricably linked, but he's starting to wonder if maybe he's the weird one. Does normal sex involve a bunch of needles and thread? If that's the case, Ichigo’s just as happy to stay kinky.

"Well," Mizuiro comforts Keigo in that distant polite way he's perfected, "at least you can be assured that he represents no competition."

"Eh?" Keigo looks up. The tears miraculously stop. "Ah! That's right!"

Three seconds later he's presenting Ichigo with a tiny rainbow flag that looks like it might have come from an ice cream sundae somewhere. Ichigo does not stab Keigo with the pointy end, but it's not an easy thing to hold himself back from.

Ishida actually has it harder - no puns, please - because although he is absolutely laughing at Ichigo's discomfort, he doesn't have Ichigo's reputation for violence and delinquency.

It makes people much more likely to hiss rude things at him in the corridors between classes. Ichigo counts several elbows to the ribs, a shove to the shoulder, a nimbly-dodged foot stuck out in his path. There’s a couple of suggestions as to his relative sexual availability that would be hair-curling if they weren’t hurled by -- essentially -- children who probably don’t even fully understand their implications.

“Serves you right,” he says darkly.

“How rude,” says Ishida, who appears completely unfazed by the attention.

Ichigo knows him well enough to decide that he’s probably not unfazed, though. Ishida hates being looked down upon, and he responds very poorly indeed to anybody who thinks they can push him around.

Tatsuki is very clearly keeping a list of names. At the end of the day she presents it to Ichigo. Then she settles back on her hips and crosses her arms. "Either you fix this, or I will."

Ichigo squints at her. "Has it occurred to you," he says carefully, "that Ishida will fix it on his own?"

"Him?" She sounds incredulous and she looks extremely dubious.

“Yeah, him.”
She looks over to where Ishida is earnestly discussing something with Orihime. From the way he's waving his arm, Ichigo suspects it has to do with the pockets.

"Are you sure?"

"If he hasn't, they just haven't pissed him off enough yet." Or, and this is much more likely, Ishida doesn't want to get caught kicking the shit out of someone between classes.

Ichigo's not absolutely certain what happens, but it's definitely true that there are a few temporary unexplained absences and nobody says anything at all to Ishida by the end of the week. It abruptly seems like the whole school is giving him all the room he could possibly want.

In the end Tatsuki gives her list to Ishida. "Just in case you missed somebody."

"That's very considerate of you, Arisawa," Ishida says, inclining his head. He unfolds the list. "Thank you."

And then he goes right back to silently laughing at Ichigo, who is still so much less comfortable with this whole situation than he is.

Ichigo would be uncomfortable with any speculation on who he might be romantically involved with. He’s a private person with a small circle of close friends. He doesn’t enjoy having that sort of thing make him the centre of attention. He doesn’t even really enjoy it when he’s the centre of attention because he’s achieved something noteworthy. He wants recognition from the people he cares about, and everybody else can pretty much go hang.

He thinks Ishida’s the same... except that he enjoys making Ichigo squirm to such an extent that it overshadows his own discomfort.

That, and... well, maybe because it’s distracting Ichigo from a lot of other things.

"I can't believe I thought you were sleeping over at Orihime's," Rukia says in the evening, shaking her head from her perch in his closet. “This makes a lot more sense.”

Does it? Ichigo is on his bed, and he takes the opportunity to cover his face with a nearby pillow and groans. "Shut up."

The thing is this: Ichigo doesn't have a really high sex drive - twelve years of relentless war will do that to you - but now everybody is pointedly telling him that he's attracted to Ishida and now, upon contemplating it, he realises he kind of is.

It's not a burning, overwhelming attraction. Ichigo's not sure he's capable of that anymore, if he ever was. But it's like Ishida is safe enough that part of his psyche thinks it's okay to unfurl hopefully, to think about touching, about wanting. That part of him isn’t wrong, either -- it’s true that of all the people he might be attracted to, Ishida is among the safest. There’s a tiny voice, too small and benign and easily dismissed to be the hollow, that tells him it might be nice to explore that feeling.

Ichigo is not dealing with that right now. He's not. He has way too much on his plate to deal with it. He suspects it'll figure itself out in due time, anyway.

...and in the meantime, Ichigo has his own problems.

Mostly it feels like his problems are Isshin.
Ichigo’s not sure whether Rukia told him (if she did, she’s dead -- or, well, deader than usual) or if he decides something on his own, but goat-face is pretty much convinced that Ichigo and Ishida are having sex.

The first thing Ichigo knows about that assumption is that his dad arrives to breakfast with all systems set to maximum humiliation.

Usually, Ichigo isn’t even here for breakfast -- he grabs a piece of toast and gets going, despite Yuzu’s determination to cook a proper meal for their dad. But when Ishida’s there in the mornings, Yuzu puts her foot down. He hasn’t been teaching her and Karin long, and it seems to upset some delicate social training in her head if she doesn’t get to ply him with food and tea every time he comes over.

Ichigo’s protests are half-hearted, because Ishida really does get on surprisingly well with Yuzu. They bond over the pockets. As far as Ichigo can tell, they are both genuinely interested in sewing things. He’s been teaching her how to use a specific kind of reinforced stitch to make the seams stronger or something.

Karin seems oddly charmed by him, too. Ichigo thinks she gets a secret delight out of the idea that the same guy who’s teaching her the mystical art of turning hollows into pincushions is politely chatting about the proper method for tatting lace with her sister over tea.

Ichigo is old enough, and used to Ishida enough, not to question it.

What Ichigo does question is the series of events that leads to Isshin solemnly shaking his hand over breakfast and then bursting into manly tears. “OUR SON’S BECOME A MAN,” he wails helplessly, flinging himself toward the poster of Masaki on the wall.

“What?” Yuzu says, looking with huge eyes between Ichigo and Isshin. “Ichi-nii! What did you do?”

Isshin takes a deep breath. “Yuzu, on the day when a boy becomes a man--”

“Nothing,” says Karin grimly, rolling up her sleeves. “He did nothing.”

For a second, Ichigo genuinely isn’t sure what Isshin’s talking about. It probably says something about his life that he takes the phrase ‘a boy becomes a man’ and immediately starts thinking about learning his zanpakutou’s name, or maybe achieving bankai.

“It’s such a delicate time, these teenaged years,” Isshin says, flinging one arm wide and then using his deceptive strength to heave Ichigo into his arms halfway across the table. “And now, with the inclusion of Ishida-kun into our family--” He pauses meaningfully.

And then Ichigo supposes he knows very well what’s going on here.

A second later a box of condoms is thrust, not into Ichigo’s hands, but into Ishida’s. “TAKE GOOD CARE OF MY CHILD, URYŪ-KUN,” yells Isshin. “AND MAKE SURE THERE’S NO TEARING--”

Nope.

Ichigo punches him. He goes flying, and there’s a moment of dreadful calm.

“Tearing?” Yuzu asks, blinking around the table. “Ishida-san, what’s he talking about? Is he talking about sewing, too?”
Ishida just looks at her for a long second.

Whatever strange comfort level Ishida has developed with Ichigo’s sisters clearly doesn’t extend to having extremely awkward conversations with them about how to avoid injury during all the anal sex they’re not having.

Ichigo is almost pleased at seeing him so wrong-footed about the whole business for a change, but then the light glints menacingly from his glasses and Ishida says:

“No. Kurosaki-san is offering advice on a personal matter.” And then he casually stuffs the box of condoms into his bag and resumes eating rice without further delay.

“Whoa....” says Karin, leaning away from Ishida in surprise. “So cold.”

When Isshin resurfaces, he tries three times to get Ichigo to listen to another lecture on safe sex.

“He...may actually be trying to be responsible,” Ishida says uncertainly. It is later that day, and Ichigo is pulling a history text from his locker. Ishida has the magical gift of always being organised for class on time.

Ichigo’s face is such a picture of scowling rage that not even Keigo has tried to mock him yet. “Directly in proportion to how embarrassing he can be.”

He slams the locker door so hard the metal dents.

“Have you considered telling him we’re not together?”

“I tried,” Ichigo admits. His tone is so defeated that Ishida doesn’t press for more details.

Instead, they both just endure the spectacle that is Isshin leaping out at random and howling encouragement like ‘DO YOUR BEST, ISHIDA-KUN!’ and ‘ICHIGO, FIGHT!’

There’s at least one occasion that sees him standing outside Ichigo’s locked bedroom door at one in the morning, shrieking: ‘BE GENTLE WITH MY FIRSTBORN’ and ‘REMEMBER TO USE LOTS OF LUBRICANT!’

Ishida has got to be traumatised by this, Ichigo is pretty sure. It certainly makes it extremely unlikely - less likely, even, than Rukia living in his closet - that anything of a nature to require either condoms or lubricant will ever occur.

Despite how uncomfortable it must be, Ishida keeps coming over. Somehow this endears him more to Karin than anything else.

“Do you know how serious he has to be to put up with that?” she asks frankly when Ichigo tries to figure out why.

Yuzu nods seriously. “Nii-san, marry him.”

Which... well, yeah. Sort of. Ishida is definitely serious about something. Whatever it is, though, it’s certainly not the wild athletic sex Isshin seems to expect of them.

Rukia, on the other hand, seems to find the whole business hilarious.

Although Ichigo’s fairly certain none of his family members know she’s squatting in his closet, Isshin rarely holds a conversation at anything below a bellow and Karin has zero problems with escalation. She listens in like it’s her favourite radio drama.
They all treat it as though Ishida’s there every night, too, which he certainly isn’t. After the first, ill-advised stint for their ‘French project’, he is there maybe twice a week. Other nights, Ichigo climbs out his window and heads over to Orihime’s place.

All up, this is a system that has him both slightly unsettled about his relationship with Ishida and sleeping at least four nights out of seven.

“Really, though,” Rukia says cheerfully, spinning on his desk chair late one night while Ichigo packs his stuff for the following school day, “this isn’t what my sources lead me to expect human teenaged males to be like at all--”

“Those kinds of magazines are really not--”

His face is swiftly smooshed with a pillow. “‘THOSE KINDS’?” Rukia demands, flushing bright red. “It’s not-- it’s *shôjo* manga, you --”

“What, really?” Ichigo thinks on some of the scenes he’s seen from Rukia’s... questionable reading materials... and then wonders what his sisters are reading. After a second he concludes that it probably doesn’t matter, since Yuzu has more common sense in her left foot than Rukia has in her whole body.

Ichigo detaches the pillow from his face. “Well, that’s not accurate either.”

“Or,” Rukia says, and he internally braces himself for her alternative interpretation, “you two are already just grumpy old men.”

There’s a pause, and Ichigo reflects that she might actually be more right than she knows. Both he and Ishida are nearly thirty, and it’s possible that they’re not... well, not developmentally quite the same as their peers. *It was a long war.*

Rukia, however, is still going, needling relentlessly now that she has his attention but hasn’t pulled a reaction from him yet. “How tragic,” she intones, deep and portentous, “that the sweet bloom of youth has already passed you--”

Ichigo shoves the pillow back in her face, cutting her off with a squawk. “Go to *bed,*” he grumbles.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is nearly double length. Merry Christmas?
Chapter Summary

Unfortunately, your opponents do not have to be stronger than you if you can't keep your shit together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite how everybody (who matters, anyway) seems to accept the novelty of Ishida sleeping in Ichigo’s bed without question, Ichigo still heads over to Orihime's apartment as often as possible. Rukia seems to think he's sneaking out to see Ishida anyway. Technically this is true in that he’s usually there, but it’s not quite the panting sweaty scandal she is doubtless imagining.

She still gives him shit about it, all fluttering lashes and hand pressed to her chest and melodrama. He rolls his eyes at her, but telling her she’s wrong would either make her suspicious or just make her more adamant. He rolls with it. Grumpily.

Mostly when he slips out to Orihime’s place, the four of them do their homework, talk about the ongoing hollow experiments and sleep. Riveting stuff, obviously.

Once or twice Tatsuki even shows up. Ichigo assumes that this is Orihime trying to prove to her how completely innocent her living conditions with Chad are so she doesn’t find some way to murder him with her bare hands.

Unfortunately, as with most of Orihime’s plans, this one backfires spectacularly. She’s too clever by half, so none of them wants to slip up around her, and Orihime’s apartment is their usual meeting spot. So every single time Tatsuki arrives they do their homework in a strained, tense silence, and nobody talks -- except Orihime, who waves her hands a lot and stutters through extremely unlikely explanations for things that seem out of place.

There’s a lot in her apartment that seems out of place because it's beginning to look like a military surplus depot.

Tatsuki eyes her stockpiled water purification tablets dubiously. Ishida tries to distract her by haughtily correcting her mathematics homework, which...

...goes about as well as you’d expect. That is to say: violently.

Ichigo laughs at him, but since he’s not a complete moron, he laughs silently.

On the other hand, it’s Orihime’s house, so when she pulls out a giant blue ice pack from her freezer to help with the swelling, nobody thinks that part's weird.

All in all, though, Tatsuki only comes over twice that Ichigo sees. Orihime’s disappointment is quiet but heavy.

Unfortunately, it’s safe to say that when she’s gone they all breathe a sigh of relief.
"We're up to seven seconds now," Orihime offers, once their actual language homework - in English - is done. "It's not quite enough. I think we need to get it to at least ten seconds before we try it on Rukia-chan. The hōgyoku is almost grafted in, so we might need extra time to, um, get it out."

It sounds like excising a tumour, honestly. The hōgyoku is a weird little thing and Ichigo doesn't like it.

From across the table, Chad sits up straight. "Is that--?"

Ichigo blinks over at him. "Hollow?"

"No," says Orihime, at the same time as Ishida says, "Shinigami."

"I think it's -- is it Renji?" Orihime says uncertainly after a second. "It feels too small, but--"

Yeah, twelve years ago Renji wasn't the same kind of powerhouse. Ichigo frowns. What the hell would Renji--

"Ichigo," says Chad, low and urgent, shoving away from the table and up to his feet. "They're here for Rukia!"

They can't be, though. Last time they came for her because she'd given Ichigo her powers. "But she hasn't--"

Across the table, Orihime makes a face and flinches away. On the other side, Ishida winces too. Even Chad goes still. It's small and it's not easily perceptible, but the sudden tension around his eyes is enough to cut Ichigo off.

Obviously, they don't have time to argue about this.

Suddenly everybody is on their feet. "If they take her back to Soul Society," Orihime says in a tight voice.

Yeah. That's -- if the hōgyoku goes back to Soul Society, it goes to Aizen.

"We'll catch up," Chad says, and then Ichigo is racing out the door, leaving his human body behind in a rush of shunpo. He moves faster than he should, and he can feel how Ishida struggles to keep up with him -- not a problem in the high-reishi environment of Hueco Mundo, but hard work in the living world.

They hurtle onto the scene: late night, a path through an isolated area, a heavy growth of trees on either side. There’s some chain link fencing, a smooth bitumen bicycle path, a flickering street lamp. A huge black butterfly flits past Ichigo’s nose. He doesn’t touch it.

In the dark Rukia looks white as snow, and her blood gleams black.

For a second he remembers she’s dead and everything is stark and confusing, because she’s dead, he wasn’t at the scene but he saw her body before it dissolved into reishi. The wounds are all wrong. The blood’s still leaking, sluggish but flowing.

He blinks the thought away.

Rukia is still small, tiny despite her years, and dressed in one of his little sister’s dresses, bleeding from the face and getting unsteadily to her feet. It trips all of the protective instincts Ichigo has, and
he feels his pulse kick up at the sight of it. His guts clench up into a hard, sick knot.

Even then, it becomes immediately apparent that Ichigo is dealing better than Ishida. It’s apparent even to Ichigo.

It’s obvious from the set of his shoulders that the scene's not what Ishida expects. It stands to reason - if Ichigo remembers, then Ishida was bleeding on the ground and nearly unconscious at this point during the first time line. He probably doesn't recall much from before Renji defeated him back then, either.

Traumatic injuries are like that sometimes -- everything around them becomes... fuzzy.

In any case, when they arrive on the scene, it's to Rukia bleeding on the ground, looking up at Renji with an expression that's steadily shifting from wariness to outright alarm. Her skin's white, even for her, and her big eyes are shadowed, pupils too small for the low lighting.

"I didn't," she protests, although what exactly she did not do is not clear to Ichigo.

Renji is...

Diminished, compared to Ichigo's memory of him. But he’s very -- very Renji, all the same. He's tall, broad, loud. Right now he’s bristling with outrage and stress. He’s flushed across the cheekbones, lips peeled back from his teeth, shoulders high, hands clenched on his zanpakuto’s grip.

"Stop it," he bellows, sounding sharper and angrier by the second. "That's bullshit and you know it. Rukia, what else are they supposed to think when there's a human kid running around killing hollows, and you're stuck in a gigai with no powers?"

"They're supposed to take my report as the truth!" Rukia says, shaking that persistent lock of hair out of her eyes. She gets back to her feet, because of course she does.

"Idiot!" Renji snaps, "who would believe that you just happened to lose all your powers when he started showing his?!"

It takes Ichigo a second to realise that this conversation means Soul Society thinks Rukia has given him her powers -- just like what happened the first time around. And why not? From their perspective it must look pretty much the same: shinigami loses power, human starts showing power.

He wonders if that means that Soul Society has just not noticed the other three yet. It's true that he's the one with the stupidly high spiritual power. If that's how they're measuring, they'd probably miss a whole army next to him.

They have to interrupt, but he's not sure how they can do that without causing a fight -- and Ishida's only getting more tense and twitchy as the seconds pass. He hasn't been doing well since Ichigo gave him the holy office stamp of konso.

"You fool. Whether or not you believe it doesn't make it less true!" Rukia yells back.

"We will see," murmurs Byakuya's voice out of the inky darkness between the street lamps. "The human is here, after all."

He's looking straight at Ichigo, presumably having felt his approach better than the other two. Even with years and years to try to figure out his expressions, Byakuya is difficult to read --
intentionally difficult, Ichigo thinks, because he's raised the 'I'm staring right through you' facial expression to an art form.

It occurs to Ichigo that he, Orihime, Chad and Ishida could have thought this through a bit better. Ichigo used shunpo to get here, after all. So he... isn't in his human body.

And he looks like a shinigami, which is a pretty poor way to convince them he's not using Rukia's stolen powers.

The expression of blank shock on her face might do it, though. "Ichigo! You--" she stops. She stares.

"Hey, Rukia," says Ichigo uncertainly, scratching the back of his head.

She looks at him with huge, shadowed eyes. Her lips thin. She says nothing.

"So you're the bastard who stole Rukia's powers," says Renji. There's a grim light in his eyes and a mean smile on his mouth. Ichigo knows the look, but it's been years since he's been on the receiving end of it.

Ichigo looks sideways at Ishida, hoping he'll pull something out of his butt to salvage this. Yes, they had to interrupt -- but this is maybe the worst kind of interruption they could have arranged. Ishida is blinking at Renji though, and his face is white as a sheet.

Ichigo's not sure what's going on inside Ishida's head but it's definitely not a plan to get them out of this. His reiatsu is coiled up so tightly Ichigo's not even sure if he's been noticed yet.

"He didn't," Rukia insists doggedly, although the glance she shoots Ichigo is full of anger and -- oh, maybe a little betrayal. She probably doesn't even know what really happened to her powers yet, Ichigo realises. There's a weird squirming in his gut, hot and ugly.

"He's standing right there!" Renji bellows, swinging is sword wildly when he gestures. "He has a goddamned zanpakuto! Rukia, I couldn't believe you even if I wanted to--" he pauses and takes a deep, shaky breath. Then he sweeps his arm around until his sword is levelled at Rukia again. Ichigo feels his guts clench. "You need to come back with us," he says tightly, and then he jerks his head at Ichigo, "and he needs to die so you can get your powers back. You're only adding more time to your sentence arguing like this."

"He doesn't have my powers!"

"Don't bullshit me. You're standing there, powerless, with that stupid human expression --" another pause where he tries to rein in his temper. Watching Renji try to be cool and reasonable about pretty much anything is an experience, but this is almost physically painful to view.

"Abarai," says Byakuya with that same frozen expression on his face.

Renji must read something into his tone that Ichigo can't, though, because he straightens. "There's nothing you can do. Centre 46 sent us to make sure he dies and you get brought back to be - to be executed. Sending us... was probably them being kind."

He stares at her. "You understand, don't you, Rukia? I didn't miss last time." Renji takes another deep breath. "You dodged because I let you."

He lunges.
Rukia twitches back.

And... Ichigo moves.

What, like he’s going to let her get hit?

He's faster than both of them, and there's not even enough intent in Renji's blow to cut his skin -- it's shamefully obvious how little he wants to be here, striking at Rukia with Zabimaru. But Ichigo blocks it with his own sword because blocking it with his hands would raise a great many questions.

Renji's eyes go wide at the sound of steel sliding on steel, and then Ichigo is just -- right there. Between them. He can feel Byakuya’s attention narrow. Damn.

"Don't do that," says Ichigo, shoving the edge of Renji's blade outward, away from both of them.

Renji's surprise quickly morphs into fury. "You," he hisses. It hurts more than it should - he's a friend, even if he doesn't know it, and it hurts some deeply-buried, still-soft part of Ichigo to have a friend look at him with such a broken, seething rage. It’s not because he's angry, exactly, but because he has to be hurt to be that angry.

"You're... you're really damn stupid, aren't you?" Renji growls. "You could have just stayed home, you know. She's only out here because she's trying to keep you out of this. This is your fault, and now you're not even smart enough to stay out of it?"

Ichigo should be expecting the blow, but it catches him off guard. He throws himself back just fast enough to lose only a chunk of hair. His shoe scrapes loudly on the concrete.

Renji snarls.

Ichigo tries to lock his hurt, vulnerable thoughts away. This isn't his Renji. This Renji is wild and angry and stressed, and about as friendly as a cornered wolf. Byakuya is - should be - the only real threat here, and even then only if they're being conscientious about what a 'threat' looks like. But Ichigo comes to the abrupt, disturbing realisation that everything could still go spectacularly to hell if he doesn't get into the right mindset here.

"Shit," mutters Ichigo.

Something quick, glowing and blue slices a hairline cut into Renji's cheek. Ichigo is close enough to see his eyes go wide, the contraction of his pupils in response to the sting, the flare of his nostrils when he inhales sharply.

Ichigo hears the soft tap of Ishida's steps, and that's when he realises he's seeing light - huge, glowing blue lights - reflected from the metal fencing and gleaming on the bitumen. He can see the bow in the reflection of Renji's sunglasses. It's huge, uncontrolled, leaking tendrils of power into the atmosphere.

The light wavers as Ishida moves. Now that he's paying attention, Ichigo can feel that barely-controlled power at his back take two quiet steps forward. A dark streak drips from Renji's cheek down the curve of his jaw.

When Ishida finally speaks his voice is...

Ishida runs hot when he’s frustrated. There’s shouting, there’s arm-waving, there’s bared teeth and that stupid noise he makes when he’s compelled past the point of actually verbalising how irritated
he is. (Ichigo is probably the person in the world most familiar with that noise, for, you know, reasons.)

When he’s really upset though, Ishida is cold and quiet. His face goes pale and his voice goes low and hard. That’s what he sounds like now.

"We're stupid? You think we’re stupid? You've made three contradictory statements in the last six and a half minutes. Firstly, that Kurosaki must die for the purpose of Rukia regaining her powers; secondly, that she is to be imprisoned for a period of time dependent upon the - on somebody - judging her actions; thirdly, that she will be executed. If she will be executed, she cannot be imprisoned, and if she is to be executed or imprisoned regaining her powers is irrelevant."

Renji makes a low, wordless noise of pique, and the tip of his sword trembles. But Ishida isn't finished. Ichigo kind of wishes he could be finished, because the tension isn't exactly dropping here.

"You are angry, and reckless, and clearly confused. You seem to be friends with Rukia, but you've also admitted it's possible that Rukia will be executed. You obviously have no idea what will truly happen if you succeed in taking her back. Are you prepared for the reality of that outcome? Are you really prepared to stand by and see your friend executed?"

Ichigo swallows. He's pretty sure he can feel the heat of Ishida's body behind him, and he can certainly see the bright glow of that arrow peeking over his shoulder. Aiming from behind Ichigo or Orihime is a habit now, probably.

"You..." Renji's voice shakes. "Who the hell are you?"

"A concerned classmate," says Ishida flatly.

"Yeah?" Renji looks less and less like he's holding it together by the second. Ichigo can see this crashing and burning and he has no idea how to stop it. How do you de-escalate something like this? "And what the fuck do you think you know about us?"

He steps forward, focused more on Ishida than Ichigo or Rukia.

"Renji, no!" Rukia darts out from behind Ichigo, shoving herself to the front, the sentimental little idiot. "He is a classmate! From a high school. You can't just come to the living world and attack humans!" She looks over toward Byakuya, who is very apathetic in the face of her distress. "Nii-sama," she says, and it would be fierce, but she’s so obviously too afraid to raise her voice to him. It comes out quiet and hoarse.

"That’s never stopped the shinigami before," says Ishida in a voice that is positively glacial. His breath is coming hard, rasping when he speaks. Ichigo wonders if maybe he shouldn't have been so hasty in thinking Renji is the one about to lose it.

He wishes he could take his eyes from Renji - and more importantly, Byakuya, presently a much more significant threat - long enough to see Ishida’s expression.

"Shut up," Renji snaps. His attention wavers from Ishida to Rukia again, bypassing Ichigo completely for the moment. "You don't have the luxury of worrying about him, Rukia - worry about yourself!"

The next attack is quick, angry, and Ichigo moves to stop him again. There's a metallic whine as their swords scrape together.
"You are really starting to get on my nerves," Renji says, soft and low, and Ichigo feels his breath on his face.

"Will you try to kill her yourself, Abarai Renji?" Ishida's voice is shaking. He sounds sort of sick. Ichigo blinks at his use of Renji's full name -- which they're not even supposed to know, come on, Ishida -- and still he doesn't see it coming.

Renji snarls incoherently, reiatsu makes a trembling crackle around them all, blue light flickers and swells, and the corrosive tang of burning atmosphere tugs at Ichigo's senses. And then --

"Kurosaki," says Ishida, flat and cool. "Plan C."

Plan what? They don't have a plan C! They barely have a plan B. "Wh--?"

Then Ishida shoots Renji.

Reishi cracks. The arrow almost blinds him on the right side.

Ichigo yelps and hurls himself sideways, taking Rukia with him.

They roll to a stop and Ichigo is on one knee immediately. There's a shocked silence settling over them, tense like the hush before a storm. Rasping breath fills the night air.

Renji's left arm is bloodied and dangling uselessly from his side, but it evidently protected his skull, because he's still standing. Er. More or less.

Shit. This is bad. Shit, shit, shit. Ichigo can see Ishida's face now, and his expression is hard and blank even though his hands are starting to shake.

"URYŪ, WHAT THE HELL," screams Ichigo, shooting to his feet. Next to him, Rukia is rolling to hers, bruised but still moving under her own power. "What the hell is plan C?"

*Murder everybody?* Is that plan C? Plan C is terrible!

Rukia kicks him in the ankle. He barely feels it. "WHAT WAS PLAN A?" She bellows.

"...the fuck?" croaks Renji.

"That was your warning, shinigami," says Ishida. The bow burns in his hands and he draws up another shining reishi arrow.

As Ichigo watches, Renji's sunglasses crack right down the middle. The glass hits the bitumen with a clink.

He swallows.

"Ishida." He pauses. Dammit. "Uryū," he says, trying to keep himself between Rukia and Byakuya even as he approaches cautiously.

If Ishida doesn't calm the fuck down, he's going to a) show himself to be a threat to Soul Society right in front of a shinigami captain and b) kill Renji. Ichigo can't think of anything much more alarming to the Gotei 13 than a teenaged Quincy killing a shinigami lieutenant in a fair fight.

"No, Kurosaki," says Ishida flatly. His voice is steady but his hands are shaking, and there's a flush across his cheeks and sweat on his skin. He looks -- bad. Ishida looks bad, the same way Ichigo feels when he wakes up alone. "I won't stand here and I won't watch this."
And it's official. Ishida has lost his fucking mind. *More than usual.*

Ichigo sees the shift of his shoulder, the same twitch he gets in class when Ishida senses a hollow.

They're out of time. Ichigo doesn't blink. He just moves.

He barrels into Ishida, knocking him down and sending them both sprawling, but the arrow's already been fired. He looks up, panicked, at Renji and --

The shot goes wide, hits a tree and burns it from the inside out. Ishida's arrow fills it with blue cracking power that turns it black and smoking in under a second.

Ishida snarls, scrambling up and staggering forward, shaking out the cross-shaped charm on his arm, power gathering again. There's mud on his knees and along one hip now, and dirt on one side of his jaw.

Ichigo springs up to grab his arm, wrenches it back -- blue fire erupts between them, Ishida's bow fed by Ichigo's enormous spiritual pressure. It's almost as big as he is, and for a second Ichigo can see the glow of it in the whites of Ishida's eyes.

"I'll kill him," he hisses.

And... yeah, Ichigo's pretty sure he will, if nobody stops him.

Ishida's spiritual pressure is rising as he sucks reishi from the atmosphere, high enough for even Ichigo to feel - Rukia, powerless in her gigai, must feel like she's breathing soup.

He flares his reiatsu in response, letting it unfurl and blanket them, wrapping it around Ishida's and crushing it as much as he can. Rukia sways on her feet, Renji staggers, and even Byakuya gives a telltale twitch back there somewhere.

Ishida just shoves harder at Ichigo. "Let me--" he's gasping now, blue light sharp and reckless, searing Ichigo's eyes. A wild swing from his flailing elbow clocks Ichigo in the face hard enough to make him see stars.

An engine roars, startling them all.

Tyres screech, both too close and too loud. The sudden, bright flare of headlights almost obliterates the shine of Ishida's bow in the dark, streaming their shadows huge and ugly across the dirt and concrete.

A motorcycle slides to a stop about a foot away. It is big and dark-painted, radiating heat and rumbling in the cool night air, and perched on its back is Chad. He looks somehow bigger riding it. Clinging to his back is Orihime.

The whole thing looks like something out of a scene from a K-drama, it's so unexpected that for a second Ishida falters.

"Uryū-kun!" says Orihime, diving off the back and flinging her helmet away. She rushes to him in a panic.

"...where the hell did you get a motorcycle?" Ichigo wonders, squinting at Chad. He's still holding Ishida's right arm locked behind him because he's pretty sure Ishida will genuinely kill somebody - possibly Renji but possibly Ichigo - if he's allowed loose, but his attention is diverted between the two.
"Mm. It was nearby," Chad assures him, which is such an incredibly evasive non-answer that Ichigo is forced to assume it's stolen.

"You're injured," says Chad, frowning darkly.

"What?" says Ichigo.

Or, well, he means to. What actually comes out is "Wh--ghhkt!"

Two things happen simultaneously: Ishida elbows him in the guts and Byakuya moves.

Even as he curls into himself and away from the jab of Ishida’s elbow, Ichigo can hear the tap-tap of rapid shunpo, see the movement without even straining -- but he's still powerless to get out of the way fast enough.

Byakuya has timed it perfectly, because of course he has.

Senbonzakura strikes once, twice. There’s a spatter of blood and the steely shink of sliding metal, but aside from the hideous scraping Ichigo can feel against his rib, the strikes are as clean as you please.

Ichigo can taste blood. It’s bubbling up from his throat and choking him with the scent and taste of rust.

He drops Ishida’s arm to shove his hand against his sternum, like that will somehow keep the important things inside his body. Experience says it won’t.

Inside his skull the hollow roars. His reiatsu rises in response to the injury, a single huge pulse that knocks Orihime and Ishida right to their butts. Renji's knees hit the ground and he doesn't get up.

It doesn't change how severely injured Ichigo is, however, and as the blood begins to stream down his front - from a wound taken to his back, which is never good news - his power wanes dramatically.

Byakuya has already retreated. His grip on Rukia's arm is like a vise, and his eyes are cool and judgemental. "Come, Rukia," he says. "Renji."

The familiar flicker of a senkaimon heralds their departure, and a huge hell butterfly floats through. Contact. Soul Society is just through the door, and Ichigo feels heavy and stupid, staring helplessly at Rukia as her brother guides her toward those doors, straight to her own execution.

Then familiar spiritual power gathers with a low thrum, tight and concentrated but so intense that even Ichigo notices it. He recognises it, too. His eyes widen.

“No,” rumbles Chad. “We won’t let you.”

His right arm burns up in liquid energy, solidifies into black and magenta. There’s the roar of reiatsu rising, a horrific swell of power that bursts against everything nearby. The shadows of the trees sway, just a little. It is huge, raw, crushing; the pressure makes Ichigo’s ears pop and his skin sting.

“El directo.”

Then there’s nothing but the sound of screaming metal and tearing rock.

Ichigo throws up one hand to protect his eyes from the hot wind that streams from the point of
impact. The pulse of power drives the breath from him. Ichigo’s knees hit the bitumen. He can feel the strength draining out of him. His vision’s blurring, but he thinks there’s a lot of space where there used to be a lot of something else.

When the dust clears, he can see the shocked wideness of Byakuya’s eyes, see the second when he looks from Renji to Rukia, see the resolution come over him. His hair is singed and his scarf is a write-off, but he’s dodged the rest. How?

It takes Ichigo a second, because he’s hurt and he’s frantic and he’s not thinking clearly, but he realises that in trying to avoid hitting Rukia, Chad left Byakuya with the opening to dodge in a rush of lightning-quick shunpo.

"Ichigo." Rukia's eyes are wide in the settling dust. Above them, thunder rumbles. "Ichigo!"

Rukia’s face is white in the dark as Byakuya bears her implacably forward to the senkaimon.

It's the last thing Ichigo sees before he loses consciousness, and then darkness swoops down to enfold him.

Plan C sucks.

Chapter End Notes

Future Toz is gonna be so annoyed about these wildly differing chapter lengths. Oops.
URAHARA KISUKE: HAS A GODDAMN LIST

Chapter Summary

Urahara has a list of questions he would like answers to. Answers are not immediately forthcoming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Urahara shows up about three minutes after Byakuya leaves, carrying a large old-fashioned umbrella for the encroaching storm. He expects the injuries to Kurosaki - he wasn't sure if the boy would show up, but he only needs to meet him once to know that he'll step in if he saw something.

Against a captain and a lieutenant of the Gotei 13 the outcome is clear no matter how much potential Kurosaki might have.

"I'm sorry, Urahara-san," says Kurosaki's bright-haired friend from where she's bent over his body. Inoue Orihime, he knows of her from keeping an eye on Isshin's kid, but he doesn't recognise what she's doing. There's no trace of panic in her, just a calm certainty. "We don't have time to deal with you right now." She touches something at her temple that gleams for a split-second. Then a golden oval of light shimmers up around Kurosaki's bleeding body. "But I think Renji-san needs your help too."

There's more about this situation that's surprising and unpredictable than there is that's expected now. Inoue and her strange magic aside, Kurosaki has a zanpakuto and a shihakushou -- he's clearly a shinigami. Since Urahara is well aware that Kurosaki didn't get any power from Rukia, he has to wonder what's awakened the boy's own powers - and where his body is.

Urahara tears his eyes away from Kurosaki's spirit form - which everybody here can see, somehow - and Inoue's strange magic. Abarai Renji isn't well known to him - he gets reports, of course, and Yoruichi is an old hand at sneaking into Seireitei, so he knows the name but not much else about the young man.

It's true that he's injured. It's not as bad as Kurosaki's wound, but his left arm is badly broken and he's losing blood fast.

Aside from Kurosaki and the girl, there's a slight, pale young man and a huge foreigner with dark skin and hands as big as dinner plates. Keeping an eye on Kurosaki means he's aware of Inoue Orihime and Yasutora Sado peripherally, but the pale one is new. He’s only noticed him recently.

They're taking care of themselves, though, and it's true that Abarai isn't looking good.

Kisuke steps through steady drizzle, geta tapping gently on the wet bitumen. He can hear the giant Chad talking to the other boy in a low, careful voice, telling him it's okay, that they're all here. That boy must be high strung, or just still processing the adrenalin.

It strikes Kisuke as strange that Kuchiki Byakuya should flee with the mission objective and leave his lieutenant behind... It's a rare captain who has so little concern for his lieutenant -- more like
Mayuri than Byakuya, no matter how uptight the Sixth captain supposedly is these days...

What does that mean? That he saw a threat to his mission but not one to Renji? It's true that any idiot can see Kurosaki's not much of a killer, and Byakuya would certainly know Yoruichi and Kisuke haunt Karakura town -- and that one of them would get curious about that level of reiatsu nearby. It follows that she wouldn't leave Abarai, or Kisuke wouldn't...

That sounds more like Byakuya -- finish the confrontation quickly, achieve the objective, and take the very slender risk that someone might not be coming by to investigate.

But to make a decision like that, Kuchiki-taichou must have perceived a significant enough threat, not to himself perhaps but at least to his mission parameters. He thought they would either not kill Kurosaki, or not apprehend Rukia, if he didn't take the chance? And that risk outweighed the risk to Abarai?

Something doesn't quite add up. Kurosaki's reiatsu is enormous, yes. Kisuke felt that. But that's not enough of a threat to cow a captain-class shinigami.

Kisuke leans down, inspecting the injury to Abarai's arm even as a soft glow takes over his fingers. He's drifting between states of consciousness, but the press of Kisuke's reiatsu wakes him up.

"Hey!" He pulls away. It's actually quite hard to tell Abarai's expression beneath his tattoos -- they just make him look permanently hostile. His skin's pale, though, and his extremities are cold and swelling.

"Stay still, fukutaichou," says Urahara, angling his head so his eyes are shadowed by his hat. "Your injury is quite severe."

This time, Abarai seems to recognise the healing kido even if he doesn't recognise Kisuke -- and what, exactly, are they teaching kids in the academy these days? -- so he stays put.

"...did Taichou leave me?" he asks after a second.

"He felt me coming," Kisuke lies. No point in eroding the trust between the two of them faster than Byakuya-kun will do it on his own just through sheer force of personality.

"That guy..." Abarai says slowly.

"Mm?" Oddly, he's not looking toward Kurosaki - he's looking at the other boy, the pale one, still trembling, calming steadily now. And -- hm, odd. Close up, he's slightly familiar to Kisuke - something about the shape of his face and the way he straightens up when he's pulling himself together - but he can't place him.

"He's... he doesn't have much spiritual power of his own," says Renji, and Kisuke smiles a little. Abarai is using a lieutenant's estimation - for a human, that boy's reiryoku is very unlikely. All of them are like that, although it's hard to tell next to Kurosaki. "--but he took reishi from everywhere. I've never seen a weapon like that before."

Ah.

Kisuke pauses and looks back to the boy again. After a second, he finds what he's looking for beneath the muddy clothing - a silver cross on his wrist. That puts him in place in Kisuke's mind, too. This must be Ryuken's child.

...who is supposed to be quite weak, by Quincy standards.
Kisuke examines the wound again, cautiously.

"Mysterious," is all he says aloud, insincerely. Abarai gives him a look that actually is hostile, even under the tattoos. How cute. "Well, you'll stay with me for a few days, Abarai-fukutaichou, and then we'll send you back as good as new," he assures him, patting him on the shoulder.

"What? No. I have to go now!" He springs to his feet, too soon for all the blood he's lost. "Rukia's due to go to trial --"

Kisuke thins his lips at the reminder. He has a hunch that it won't be much of a trial. "And what can you do for her now?"

He can see how the boy bristles like he's going to protest, but the quick movement and the blood loss gets to him before he can -- he sways and sags. Finally.

Inoue, Yasutora and - presumably - Ishida have made a knot of people around Kurosaki, but not one of them is panicking or trying to call an ambulance. Instead, there's a low tense murmur of conversation. Kisuke can't really hear the specifics, but the general tone is 'what now?'

He manages to corral these kids back to the shop, wondering all the while.

It's actually harder to get Renji moving than it is to persuade Inoue and Yasutora to come. Inoue has given up her charge of Kurosaki to Yasutora, who has the physical strength to carry him. She, on the other hand, has taken over leading Ryūken's boy by the hand - literally in some cases, because Kisuke sees more than once, when Ishida surfaces from his fog and starts to panic, how Inoue takes his elbow and sets him back to walking calmly. He hears her tell him where he is more than once and wonders what's wrong with the boy.

Kisuke feels like a very strange pied piper, leading this strange assortment of children back to his shop.

He only gets more unsettled as the next few days pass. He has a list of questions that's just getting longer by the minute. Here's the first six points on his growing list:

One: Ichigo is a shinigami, clearly. He has his own zanpakuto, and his reiatsu doesn't feel scattered and diffuse like an untrained child's. It’s been blanketing the town for a while now, supposedly in response to the attack upon his sisters, but up close he has the disturbing inkling that this might be more intentional. It certainly makes him harder to pinpoint. Rukia never mentioned noticing anything of the sort, and although Kisuke is prepared to accept that she wouldn't have shared something like this..? She certainly wouldn't have come to him asking for an item that could perform konso for a non-shinigami if she'd known.

Two: Yasutora. When Renji's in a more lucid state, his report is strange at best. Yasutora, evidently, is the one who cleared a mile of forest and ripped up the railway running through the middle. This goes some way to explaining Kuchiki's retreat, yes, but it just leaves Kisuke with more questions. Yasutora's doesn't seem like a newly developed power, either - wielded automatically and powerfully, with enough conviction behind the power to make even a captain hesitate. That’s... Kisuke does not have a word to explain how unlikely that is.

Three: Ishida. From what Kisuke knows, which isn't much because Ryūken is a cold and uncommunicative man, Ishida Uryū is a low-rank Quincy at best, not someone who can let his temper slip and inflict a serious injury upon a shinigami lieutenant. Abarai's not one of the weaker lieutenants, either; he's young but the potential to develop into a captain-class fighter is clear. From what Kisuke can piece together, Ishida had some sort of emotional episode - and shot him fast
enough and with enough power to cause serious injury. Yeah, Kisuke has some questions about that, too.

Four: Inoue. Inoue. Whatever she does to Kurosaki is astonishingly effective, so much so that Kisuke is itching to examine her odd powers. From when he arrives, she heals most of Ichigo's major damage in minutes. Then she claims that Byakuya missed, and then lies - badly, and just as soon as Kisuke expresses a hint of interest in her power - about her ability to heal the rest. Kurosaki, maddeningly, falls into line with her appalling lie just as soon as he wakes up. When Kisuke presses, Inoue isn't even in the room - but he still just tilts his head, sighs at the burn in his chest from the stab wounds, and says, "Ah, yeah, well, she probably can't do any more."

And -- somebody has taught Kurosaki to be nearly as maddeningly obnoxious as Kisuke is when he lies, which he is doing with very little effort at sincerity. This is an experience that Urahara Kisuke no doubt has coming, but he isn’t sure he likes it.

Five: They're all covering for each other to some degree. Not just Inoue and Kurosaki, or the kids who seem closer -- any one of them will step right in to cover for any other, and they all seem to treat Kisuke's shop like a kind of diplomatic sojourn into hostile territory.

They're all behaving like crazy people - none of them has left his house since he took in Kurosaki to recover from his injuries, and one of them is always awake. Tessai says they're using something like kidō on the walls, but that it's cast with ambient reishi guided by personal power, not cast entirely by personal power like most kidō.

Six: Renji won't say anything explicit, but it's clear from his report that despite his injury being inflicted directly by Ishida, he is much more unsettled by his brief contact with Kurosaki.

In short, Kisuke needs to talk to Isshin and maybe even Ryūken.

What the hell.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder who could have taught Ichigo to be nearly as obnoxious as Urahara when he's lying?? Oh my goodness what a mystery??

(Sorry.)
The kids decide that sometimes the best way to recover is literally disappearing off the face of the planet. And for once, a character who desperately needs a hug... gets a hug? :0

There is some genuinely tooth-rotting fluff in this chapter. *Brace yourself.*

When Ichigo wakes again he's in a strange room all alone.

His memory says Orihime was right there when he got injured, but she's not here now. The blanket thrown over him is heavy and real-feeling, but how does he really know? There's a throb in the middle of his body, the dull ache of partially-healed injuries.

Partially healed means Orihime was interrupted before she could finish. He has a confused memory of Ishida shooting at somebody in a shinigami shihakushou, of Chad firing an el directo across a forest in the living world --

Did they get caught during a supply run? Ichigo's stomach clenches and his eyes fly open.

Stay calm, he reminds himself. Whoever's got them has kept Ichigo alive so they'll have kept the others alive too. That means that all Ichigo has to do is break out and slaughter his way back to his friends.

He can do that.

It's with this plan in mind that he sits upright, tense and hot with determination, and --

"Oho, Kurosaki-kun, that's a scary expression!" says Urahara, who is sitting cross-legged at the foot of Ichigo's pallet.

Ichigo blinks. "...geta-boushi?" There's so much relief he physically sags with it. If Urahara's here, he's safe -- or, maybe not safe, but he'll at least have somebody to help him plan and point him in the right direction. There's an enormous sense of relief in knowing that someone smarter than him is here to direct him. Ichigo can take charge - and he will, if he needs to - but he functions best when somebody else is there to point him at a target.

Urahara's good at that. Even better when he just says what he wants instead of trying to manipulate Ichigo into it. And he's right there, fan covering his mouth and stripy hat tilted back on his head. His eyes are visible for a change.

"Eh? That's not very nice, Kurosaki-kun. Did you forget my name already?"
"Forget your name?" Ichigo repeats blankly. Um... no?

Urahara's eyes narrow, and like always that expression makes Ichigo think of a hound catching a promising scent. Urahara'd be powerful even if he was a moron, but his brain is the really threatening part of him.

That expression jars Ichigo. He frowns. And then he remembers. Right. Time lines. His sisters. Rukia.

Shit.

_Rukia._

And an Urahara who isn't his one. Ichigo stops, blinks, swallows. He takes a second to repack all his emotions. Relief is the first to get shoved back in the trunk. It takes a lot of his energy with it.

Ichigo is abruptly exhausted. As messed up as his time line might be, and as much as he can do here to fix this one, he wants it back. He misses his people. Missing people, he’s discovered, is the worst when he’s looking at them and they’re not even gone. They’re just... different.

"Urahara-san, right?" he says, raising his eyebrows.

Now that he's paying proper attention he can actually tell that it's Urahara's shop, smelling like Tessai's cooking and the strange neck-ruffling scent of storage and cleaning products. It's oddly distinctive, even if it's a smell he associates mostly with napping under Urahara's coat, these days.

There's yelling somewhere distant, which is probably Jinta getting mad at Ururu over nothing much.

"Ah, you do remember me!" He closes the fan with a snap and beams at Ichigo. "I'm flattered, Kurosaki-kun. Do you recall what happened?"

Yeah. Yeah he does. But he's not sure what Urahara knows. He exhales a slow sigh, sets his jaw. There's one thing they definitely both agree on, and which Urahara definitely knows about: Rukia. They've taken her back to Soul Society, and they can't be allowed to execute her. Aizen can't be allowed to add Urahara's hōgyoku to his own.

"Rukia..."

"Returned to Soul Society with her brother, I'm afraid."

Ichigo grunts. Urahara manages to sound way less worried than he ought to be.

"Your friends did quite a number on Abarai-fukutaichou, you know," Urahara prompts.

Yeah, Ichigo's not even touching that one. Giving Urahara any information is like giving him blanket permission to worm around in all your business and hoard every detail he discovers -- which will be _all_ of them. "Are they here?" he asks instead.

"Oh, yes. I'm sure Inoue will be back to complete your healing in a few minutes."

Yeah, right. If Orihime stopped, it's probably because Urahara is a prying bastard. Ichigo straightens and tries stretching out the muscles in his chest. It hurts. But it hurts in a slowly recovering sort of way, rather than a mortally injured sort of way. "Ah. Yeah, well," he temporises and then decides to be vague and hope for the best. It works for Urahara, after all. "She probably
can't do any more."

Urahara's expression is unreadable but he nods thoughtfully. Is he buying it, or just leaving it alone? Ichigo can't tell. "If you say so, Kurosaki-kun." Then he unfolds to his feet. "I'll go let them know you're awake, shall I?"

When he slides back the rice paper partition, Chad, Ishida and Orihime are all waiting right outside the room. "...or just let them in," says Urahara, bemused.

"I think I heard Abarai breaking something earlier," says Ishida mildly as they step into the room.

Ichigo frowns. Renji's still here, then? That's ...different. He's not sure if it's good or bad just yet, but it's different.

"...is that so," says Urahara.

"Jinta," Chad clarifies, without giving Ishida so much as a look. "He was breaking Jinta."

And Urahara sighs and sweeps past them to go make sure that his pet projects haven't killed the recovering shinigami.

The door slides closed and Ishida pulls out a tiny silver canister, then slaps a glowing blue seal over the wall.

Ichigo eyes Ishida critically. He looks fine now, if stressed, no trace of the pallor and glazed feverish rage Ichigo recalls.

He wants to scream at him. What the hell happened to their plan? What happened to not making the shinigami suspect about how powerful they are? What possessed Ishida to attack Renji, of all people?

Say what you like about shinigami as a whole, but Renji's one of the good ones. And -- and he's a friend.

But... he knows already. He knows exactly what happened.

Of course he does. Ishida has never been entirely predictable where shinigami are concerned. He certainly wasn't getting better about it when the Gotei 13 was trying to hunt them down, and now they're stuck in this past Karakura trying to avoid drawing too much notice, running around trying to adapt to familiar people who don't recognise them at all.

And Ishida's more isolated than any of them.

They've had a bad run with shinigami in the past year. And then a few short weeks ago, Ichigo gave him the holy office stamp and...

Ishida isn't getting any more stable. Obviously.

Now Ichigo's been quiet for too long and Ishida's staring over Ichigo's bare shoulder with an expression like ice and his teeth clenched hard.

Honestly, this is at least partially Ichigo's fault. He froze up when he saw Renji looking at him like the worst kind of scum, and he didn't adapt to it in time. And any moron should have known better than to drag Ishida into a confrontation with shinigami, given his mental state and how stressed they've all been.
All those nights of Ishida crawling into his bed and sleeping lightly but soundly, and Ichigo's been too selfish to even consider that it might not just be for Ichigo's sake.

He reaches out and smacks Ishida over the head.

"Ouch. Kurosaki--"

Then he hooks his fingers in his collar and pulls him closer, reels him in, clamps his arms around him and envelops him in a hug. He’s a little weaker than usual because he’s injured, and his muscles are shaking from even this much effort, but it's unmistakably a hug.

"Kurosaki," Ishida barks, sounding much more horrified about being hugged than being hit.

He flails one arm and tries to free himself without exacerbating Ichigo's injuries. It's not going to happen. Ichigo is way more willing to get injured than Ishida is to do the injuring.

"Just shut up," Ichigo says, pulling him in harder. He's probably crushing his chest. Whatever, Ishida will get over it. "You're an idiot. I'm sorry," he adds abruptly.

"Ichigo," mutters Ishida incredulously, using his first name for once, and his voice comes out almost too quiet to hear. "I got you stabbed."

"Don't be stupid, I got stabbed because Byakuya's quick and I was distracted." And isn't that the truth of it. He was stupid and got his butt kicked and now Rukia is back in Soul Society. All the work they've done, and nothing's even changed.

Ichigo takes a deep breath. "And I'm sorry because... I've been selfish. I've been thinking about myself only, lately. Or myself and Karin and Yuzu, at least--"

Ishida snorts, and Ichigo crushes him harder in retaliation. There’s a very satisfying wheeze. Yes. Good.

"--And I didn't think about you guys. How this must be... for you. I didn't consider that I'm not the only one who's hurting."

Ishida doesn't respond, but he stops resisting and, briefly, melts against Ichigo. It's the best he's going to get.

"Ah... I don't really know, but I think it's normal to think about yourself and your family. We all..." Orihime shrugs.

*You're my family too, though*, Ichigo wants to say. The words get caught in his throat.

Orihime's smile is like the sun coming up, though, so he thinks she understands. She hurls herself forward with zero hesitation and gate crashes the manly hug Ichigo is forcing upon Ishida, toppling them in a pile of hair and limbs.

Ishida sputters and Ichigo wants to be annoyed but the expression on his face is just too good, so he ends up laughing again.

"Chad!" Orihime is kneeling beside them, and now she reaches out one hand to Chad. "Chad. It's your duty," she explains earnestly.

Chad considers this for a moment while Ichigo is still thinking 'huh?'

Then he gives a solemn grunt of agreement and takes her hand --
"Ow! Shit, ow! Chad, no!" Ichigo is at the bottom of the pile and his ribs are being crushed. Chad weighs as much as a baby elephant.

Orihime laughs in delight and even Ishida sounds like he's amused despite himself when he huffs "You're all ridiculous," into Ichigo's collarbone.

Of course this is when the door slides open. "Oh my," says Urahara, in the most insinuating tone possible.

Of course.

A split-second later Ishida is across the other side of the room, red faced as he straightens his clothes and adjusts his glasses.

Chad helps Ichigo sit up properly again. Ichigo can feel the enormous strength in his arms when he easily pushes Ichigo into position. It's a little humiliating, but any movement for which Ichigo doesn't have to tense his abdominals is a small victory right now. Byakuya did a hell of a job.

"Oh. You're back," Ichigo says to Urahara, completely unnecessarily.

"And just in time, it seems," says Urahara cheerfully. "Who knows what scandalous activities might have occurred if--"

"Pervert!" Ichigo snaps, hurling his pillow at Urahara's stupid face. It hits him with a soft whump, which serves him right.

"Ouch." Urahara holds his hands up as though he's fending off an attack, although the pillow is slumped forlornly next to his right foot and not likely to hurt him. "Don't be so temperamental, Kurosaki-kun. I thought you might like to know... We received word back from Soul Society about Kuchiki-san's trial."

A still silence settles over the room. All of them are tense, waiting for the verdict from Urahara, although they all know what it will be.

He dips his head, letting the shadow of his fan and his hat cover his expression.

"Kuchiki Rukia has been sentenced to death. Her execution has been expedited and will take place in less than a month."

There's a long, unhappy silence. Ichigo can feel the tension in Chad where he's leaning against him, and Orihime's as pale as milk. He glances toward her.

"Aa," says Ichigo finally. "Have you told Renji?" He realises too late he should have said ‘Abarai’. Oh well.

Urahara probably catches it, but it’s hard to tell. He looks away. "Mm. He... isn't taking it well."

No. He wouldn't be. Ichigo leans forward and scrubs his hands over his face.

"Right," he mutters. There's only really one path open to them, although it's not the one they wanted to choose. "Then I guess we just have to get her back, don't we?"

And come up with some way to stop Aizen from getting the hōgyoku out of her... again.

He shares a look with the others. They all know they have their work cut out for them, and that there can be no more mistakes. Not like this one, anyway.
It doesn’t take long before Urahara has to leave again -- miraculously he seems to have developed actual customers at some point, and has to go sell them the kinds of weird specialty sweets he keeps in stock for the actual normal people who show up at his shop. From what Ichigo knows, these are few and far between, and mostly middle schoolers.

As soon as he leaves the room, he’s no longer within the bounds of Ishida’s seals and they can talk freely, however briefly.

“At least we definitely know we can do it,” Orihime rallies.

Ishida looks like all of the positive effects of their hugging have worn off completely: he’s pale and grim and sort of guilty-looking.

“Yeah,” Ichigo says, rolling his neck sideways until it gives a satisfying pop. “Invade Soul Society, rescue Rukia. No big deal.”

“There’s still the very real risk that Aizen will get his hands on the hōgyoku,” Ishida points out repressively.

Ichigo runs his fingers through his hair, feeling grim and fatalistic. “And so what?” he says flatly, after a long, bleak pause. “If Aizen gets his hands on the hōgyoku, I’ll take him down. And then we’ll destroy it.”

“And then Soul Society will come for us again.”

“It won’t be any worse than it was,” Ichigo points out. “And I think it’s pretty obvious that we suck at planning. Let’s just go and cut him down, then blow up the hōgyoku--”

“Reject, Ichigo-kun,” corrects Orihime, mildly reproachful.

“—and leave. We can do it now, and save everyone twelve years of war.”

“And what happens after that? What happens to us?”

“They won’t be nearly as strong or as developed as they were,” Ichigo points out. “As it is now, there’s basically nobody in the Gotei 13 we can’t defeat--”

“So we should fight them all?!” Ishida asks incredulously. “That’s your plan?”

“If we have to!”

“We don’t have to! We just have to avoid revealing all our strength to them, and blame Aizen’s defeat on somebody else. We can do that.”

There’s a pause. “Can we?” Ichigo wonders. There’s a strong temptation to point out that Ishida was the one who really messed up in front of Renji and Byakuya, but he already blames himself and there’s no point belabouring it. It’s also true that very little would have stopped them from taking Rukia with them when they left, except an outright defeat in battle. That, in turn, would have tipped their hand anyway.

“Of course we can,” says Orihime, planting her hands on her hips. “How hard can that possibly be? The wrong people get blamed for things all the time.”

“Yeah,” says Ichigo slowly. On the other hand, though, plans involving Ichigo, Orihime Chad and Ishida almost never go to plan.
“If nothing else,” says Ishida, adjusting his glasses on his nose so they reflect the light brilliantly for a split second, “we should be able to derail some of Aizen’s future plans while he’s still hiding his true intentions in Soul Society.”

Sabotage?

Oh, hell yes.

“That,” says Ichigo, “yeah. We can do that.”

In fact, he can think of a couple right off the top of his head. There's plenty going on in Hueco Mundo and Ichigo can make a garganta...

All their plans haven't gone very well so far, and after waking up injured and defeated and frustrated by their own clumsy failures, Ichigo is in exactly the kind of mood to share the joy around.

“All we have to do to make a plan go horribly wrong is show up,” Orihime says brightly, which, despite her flippant and optimistic tone, is completely accurate.

They are really, really good at mess ing up other people’s plans.

They can do that.

“Besides,” Ishida goes on, once Chad has agreed with a nod, “that will give us the benefit of being able to lay low in the living world, too. No doubt they’re... monitoring,” he finishes uncomfortably.

Monitoring, yeah. No doubt. If they hadn’t already caught Soul Society’s attention, well, Byakuya has to report sometime. And they’re definitely going to notice a missing lieutenant.

There’s not a lot Ichigo can do to assuage whatever mess is inside Ishida’s head right now.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Plan C,” Orihime says cheerfully, striking her palm with one fist. “This one sounds much better.”

It’s actually plan D, Ichigo thinks, because plan C was something along the lines of shoot everyone, murder everything, declare peace from atop a pile of bodies. Plan C was terrible.

He’s not going to correct her outright, but he does glance toward Ishida, who meets his eyes only for long enough to start going very red.

“I’m tired,” Ichigo declares loudly, slumping back and dropping his skull on one of Chad’s thighs. It’s not a smooth change of subject.

Still, he probably could use the recovery time. What the hell, Urahara’s place is pretty safe, except from Urahara, who isn’t really likely to do anything to them. He enjoys figuring things out for himself too much.

He must be more tired than he thought, because he falls asleep while the others are still talking quietly, rearranging themselves around the room.

When Ichigo wakes up the next morning it's almost half past seven and Chad's hand is buried in his hair, huge and warm and lax. Ichigo can't sense the others clearly, but he can hear the sound of Urahara's geta on the concrete outside briefly. Orihime and Ishida are still asleep in a pile nearby. Chad's thigh is serving as a pretty good pillow, but Ichigo doesn't think he's properly asleep -
lightly dozing, maybe. Ichigo, however, is starting to get hungry - he missed two meals while he was out, and his reiatsu burns up food pretty fast. It's lucky they're at Urahara's, really, because this place will at least have food he can eat outside his living body.

Chad opens his eyes when Ichigo moves, but other than a soft hum in response to Ichigo's 'good morning' he doesn't say anything. Ichigo gets to his feet, stretching carefully. The wound in his stomach is bandaged up, but it pulls in a way that suggests to Ichigo that it's not really all that serious anyway. He runs his fingers over the bandage. He can feel a dull pain at the pressure, but no weird gouges or missing chunks make themselves apparent. It'll be a pretty normal-looking scar, at least.

With that discovered, he stumbles half-asleep into the front rooms.

And...

Renji's there.

Renji pauses in the middle of grinding his knuckles into the top of Jinta's head. It's obvious that his right arm is doing all the work. The left is still bandaged up to the shoulder, and he's babying it a little.

That's the thing with Quincy weapons: they're not designed to cut clean and purify like a zanpakuto. Their only purpose is to destroy. Even with kidō, healing takes a while.

Renji looks at Ichigo like he's seen a ghost, which is ironic, considering.

"You," he says flatly. "They said you were getting better but you can't have recovered this quickly. I saw Kuchiki-taichou stab you."

"Aa?" Ichigo shrugs. "Well, I'm not completely healed yet."

"You don't recover from an injury to the saketsu and hakusui this quickly," says Renji, giving Ichigo a deeply suspicious once over.

"Guess he missed." Byakuya is a singularly precise person. They both know he's not in the habit of missing an easy target. Ichigo can't think of anything better to fill the silence.

Renji's expression darkens immediately.

"Kuchiki-taichou didn't miss!" He lets go of Jinta and slams his hand onto the low table between them. One thump, big and deep for emphasis. Jinta, like all little brats, knows when it's time to skedaddle. He glowers fiercely, and in a way that Ichigo would be wary of were it directed at him and not Renji, and he flees. Renji doesn't even seem to notice.

"Nobody recovers that fast, not even with kidō." There's an uncomfortable pause, and Ichigo can almost see the wheels turning. Renji slows down a little to add: "And that reiatsu when you got hit... And before that, you had no problem keeping up --"

Why does Renji have to choose now to come over all perceptive?

"It's Kurosaki, right? ...are you even human?"

And... what the hell's Ichigo meant to say to that, anyway?

"Yeah," says Ichigo, trying to tread the line between being vague and outright lying. "Mostly."
"'Mostly'?" Renji repeats, rising to his feet. Renji's a big guy. Big shoulders. He fills the room in the way of guys who are walking slabs of muscle. Ichigo is suddenly very sick of being this young. "What the hell kind of answer is that?!

"An honest one." Ichigo grunts. "Look, I'm starving, so if we could have this fight later--" he leaves the end of the sentence open and ducks around Renji to get to the tiny cramped kitchen. This is the domain of Tessai and Ururu - because nobody wants Urahara to cook, ever - and it won't pay to mess it up too much. He needs to remember where he found things and put them back properly when he's done.

Renji, unsurprisingly, follows him. Somehow he manages to stomp in socks. "Stop avoiding the question."

"I'm not avoiding the question," Ichigo snaps back. "Kurosaki Ichigo, fifteen, mostly human, Karakura middle school student. Pleased to meet you." He eyes the rice on the top shelf. "Can you reach that?"

Renji looks up. Scoffs. "Something wrong with your arms, Kurosaki?"

No, but there's something still wrong with his chest and all the muscles connected to his arms, because Byakuya shoved thirty inches of steel right through him.

“If you can't reach--"

Renji tugs the bag down and thrusts it at him, scowling thunderously.

Ichigo grinds his teeth and says "thank you," because, and this is important: Renji is a complete stranger. He only feels familiar. No doubt Ichigo will slip again later, but for now, he's very aware of that.

"Awfully polite, considering we tried to kill each other," Renji says suspiciously.

Oh, for --

Ichigo wants to reach over and smack him, but that's only going to make his injuries hurt more. The only one of them who was properly committed to killing anyone that night was Byakuya - as evidenced by how they're standing around talking about it now. Even Ishida was aiming for Renji's arm with that first shot. Ichigo doesn't know a lot about archery but he's pretty sure that nobody aims for an enemy's non-dominant arm when they're going for a kill shot.

Byakuya though... yeah. That was a killing blow. That would have been pretty dire without Orihime on hand.

"Do you want some of this or not?" Ichigo asks, in lieu of dwelling on it. If he lets himself get all upset every time he suffers a near-fatal wound he'll never get anything done.

Ichigo unearths an ancient-looking rice cooker, which is something of a victory because Urahara's kitchen is very tightly packed. Carrying it is not a joy, but he doesn't want to ask Renji again.

This Renji isn't Ichigo's Renji, but he still responds exactly as Ichigo expects, which is to say: only idiots reject free food. And if he keeps an eye on Ichigo while he throws together a simple meal, well, Ichigo won't hold it against him.

"...this isn't bad," he mutters grudgingly once it's on the table in front of him.
Renji’s a pretty simple guy, when you get down to it. It is not that hard to generate a little goodwill, especially not if you wave free food at him.

It's a pretty straightforward meal of vegetables, egg and rice, neither as carefully prepared as something Yuzu would make nor as outright weird as Orihime's cooking. Still, Ichigo's not surprised to see Renji wolf it down like somebody might take it away from him if he leaves it too long. That's just Renji.

He slows near the end though, frowning unhappily into his rice. That's ...less like Renji.

"They're going to execute her," he says, flatly and suddenly, and the change in his temper makes sense now.

Ichigo remembers what Renji - his Renji - was like when Rukia died. Once she was irrefutably gone, when she was quiet and still and the body was turning to reishi in the saturated air of Hueco Mundo --

"No," says Ichigo. Just... no. Rukia's death hurt. He's not doing it again. He refuses.

He was pretty clear on how he's going to act before, but now it's solidified inside his head.

Renji gives him a dirty look. "The hell are you talking about? She's been sentenced --"

"So what?" Ichigo says. "We'll break her out."

"The whole Gotei 13 will fight you," says Renji, looking increasingly worked up. Ichigo gets it - he's not as oblivious as that, no matter what Ishida says - but once again Renji's too wrapped up in the rules and the society that spawned them.

"Yeah? Let them."

"You think this is some kind of joke? You don't get it. You remember Kuchiki-taichou? He's one of thirteen captains. And there's eleven more lieutenants like me. What the hell's a human like you going to do? You're going to fight all of them?"

Ichigo scowls. "Yeah, if I have to."

He puts his bowl down on the table with a clatter. He's done with it anyway.

"Listen... Renji. You can sit around bitching about how sad it is that your friend's going to die," he tells him, ignoring the way his face twists at the comment, "or you can stand up and fight for her. Rukia, she's someone you'd fight for, right?"

"Don't be stupid," says Renji, narrowing his eyes.

It is kind of a stupid question. 'Something Renji would fight for' is an extremely broad category. He likes fighting.

"Well, you live in Soul Society. So maybe there's some conflicting ideas for you here. But me? I'm going to get her back. Nobody's going to execute her because I'll stop them."

"Just like that," Renji says. His voice is low and dark, sneering.

Ichigo sets his jaw. "No, not 'just like that'. It's going to be hard work, and we're going to need a bunch of plans and we'll probably have to beg for help from Urahara-san just to get there. But in the end? Yeah, actually: Just like that."
Renji's face is red, his eyes glittering with something hot and unhappy. Angry, Ichigo thinks. There are rules in Soul Society, stringent, strict, stagnant rules that nobody dares break; not even people like Kenpachi, not where it really counts.

Renji's more mad at himself than he is at Ichigo. For Rukia, Ichigo will set those rules on their heads and throw caution to the wind. And Renji, for all his greater history with her, can't do it.

Which is a crock of shit, of course. Ichigo knows it is. Renji can do it, will do it, has done it, once upon an alternative timeline. He just needs the impetus to start.

Renji is, in the end, Renji's own worst enemy.

Ichigo smiles at him. "You can help," he says on a whim, "or you can stay the hell out of our way. Your choice."

Renji blinks.

Ichigo can almost see him processing it. He doesn't really believe in Ichigo, not yet, and he certainly doesn't believe in himself - not the way he needs to for this kind of leap of faith. But the person he could be is peering out cautiously from behind those brown eyes, and that person? That person wants to act.

"I'll think about it," Renji says slowly.

"Okay," says Ichigo. He gets up. Slowly, because stab wounds suck.

They have plans to make. He hopes Renji will help, for Renji's sake if no one else's. But it's not really up to him.

Either way, he's pretty sure Renji won't interfere. That's good. Ichigo wasn't looking forward to that fight. It's not that he's worried about the fight - at this point in time Renji's barely even achieved bankai. But fighting against him is one thing; fighting against him when he's like this...

Well, some fights are more bitter than others.

It's good he won't have to face that one.

Ichigo has other things to think of. Urahara is clearly suspicious, which makes sense because it's not as though they've been really good about hiding. He's pretty sure that they can trust Urahara if they have to, but...

Even if they assume he won't share the information with Soul Society and potentially compromise everything, the man's not above blackmail. Not even a little bit.

Better that they keep him guessing.

And they will, because even Urahara has to jump through some mental hoops before he comes to 'time travel' as a viable conclusion.

In the end he offers to get the four of them to Soul Society with only slightly less enthusiasm than Ichigo remembers. He still has to stop Aizen, after all, and even if sending a group of cagey high schoolers with weird powers over there backfires on him -- well, Yoruichi's going, isn't she?

Ichigo figures that plan B, for Urahara, involves using him as a distraction while Yoruichi steals the hōgyoku back away on silent kitty-cat paws.
"Hm, that's not a bad plan," Orihime reflects when he points this out. "We could do that!"

"Use Ichigo as a distraction?" Chad says slowly.

"Or use something else as a distraction," Orihime says thoughtfully.

"It would have to be a pretty big distraction," Ichigo says.

He can think of a couple of things that might work for that purpose, but he's not sure how workable they are.

Orihime looks like she's thinking terrible thoughts with her terrible imagination, and he decides not to ask what kinds of distractions she's thinking about.

The ones Ichigo's contemplating are scary enough.

They did say they wanted to sabotage Aizen's plans, though. And honestly at this point Ichigo kind of lives for sabotaging Aizen's plans.

Ichigo has to pick his human body up, of course, and after nearly two days of being left to its own devices at Orihime's place his body is pretty gross. It's the best place to recover, though, and when he crawls back into it the weight and physicality is comforting. He never really noticed when he's running around in spirit form, but coming back is oddly nice.

Then it's back to school for the remaining days until the holidays begin. There's only a couple, and very few of his classmates seem to remember Rukia at all. Urahara's the only person who's been available for this kind of mopping up. Seems like he's been busy accosting highschoolers and stealing their memories.

Ishida steps up training Karin and Yuzu, relentlessly demanding. "We won't be here for a while," he tells them, adjusting his glasses so they hide his expression with their reflection. "So you need to be careful."

The only explanation Ichigo will offer them when they ask is that one of their friends is stuck and they have to go help her. It's more than he told them last time and more than he really wants to tell them now.

Nobody tells Isshin anything. Ichigo figures he can ask Urahara if he needs to, and frankly his old man's just reaping the whirlwind here. Maybe if he ever told Ichigo anything, Ichigo would be more inclined to tell him about this kind of stuff.

If Ishida's having similar problems with Ryūken then he keeps them to himself.

Once freed of Urahara's obvious oversight - although no doubt he's still paying plenty of attention - Ishida and Orihime go back to tranquillising hollows to test their hōgyoku-removal technique. They were so close when Renji and Byakuya came to collect Rukia, it only takes a week and a half longer to bring them to a reliable ten second buffer.

That's a bleak sort of victory, but --

"At least now we'll be ready," says Orihime, determined and implacable.

"Yeah," agrees Ichigo. They'll be ready. And this time he's prepared to fight -- prepared to see people he once knew and fought beside arrayed against him with disgust on their faces. It's a jarring change, but he can do it now.
Then it's five in the morning, four days before they're meant to leave to get to Soul Society, and they all meet outside Orihime's place in the predawn dark. The security lights are flickering quietly. There's a moth stuck to one of them, fluttering weakly in a spiderweb.

All of them are dressed sensibly, although Ishida is still all in white like a pale target in the dimness. Orihime's still wearing one of her cute dresses, but it's long-sleeved, and she's wearing thick leggings under it. They all know it's cold where they're going.

Several of Orihime's huge bags get slung over their shoulders and their many pockets are full of useful odds and ends. They arrive at almost the same time, each wandering into the circle of illumination cast by the street lights next to Orihime's building within minutes of each other.

Chad shows up last, guitar over one shoulder. He's a huge familiar silhouette in the dark. Ichigo can just make out his flashy turquoise shirt under the moon. He's carrying Orihime's second pair of sneakers by their tongues.

"Ah," she says when she realises and bends down to find somewhere to shove them into her pack.

Then Orihime casts a barrier with a wave of her hand, and it swells huge around them, warm and golden. The light glints from Ishida's glasses and in Chad's hair.

"All right. Unless they have line of sight, nobody should be able to sense it."

Ichigo nods. He closes his eyes and frowns for a moment, looking for the places where a doorway might want to open. A second later he reaches out, grabs the air and rips.

A garganta opens like a ragged mouth in the sky.

"Better," sniffs Ishida, like somebody asked him. "The last one was all wonky."

"I was being shot at!" Ichigo snaps.

"You wouldn't have been, had your escape route been stable." He gives Ichigo possibly the most superior look in the world.

Ichigo balls one hand into a fist.

"What the hell is that?" says a familiar voice from the roof of Orihime's building.

Everybody tenses. Ichigo looks up with a hint of anxiety settling in his stomach.

Renji stares back down at them. His gaze is drawn, maybe inevitably, back to the garganta. "That's-"

He stops and looks back at Ichigo.

"You're late," Ichigo says, consciously relaxing and rocking back on his heels. "We have to close that before something else comes through to this side. So are you coming or not?"

There's a long, silent pause. Orihime hums thoughtfully and Ishida and Chad share a look behind Ichigo's shoulder.

Renji's lips curl into a smirk. It's not a nice one. They don't know each other well enough for that. "I've got no idea what's going on," he admits freely, "but don't think you're getting rid of me now."

He drops down to street level with a thud, bending to absorb the impact, and strolls forward. The
barrier does nothing when he pokes it with Zabimaru's hilt, washing over the sword without resistance.

They watch him interact with it.

"Are you sure--" Ishida starts, leaning in toward Ichigo. The garganta even sounds alien, making weird ripping noises like air caught in the wrong way in a low constant hum. It’s the kind of sound that’ll drive a guy insane if he listens too long.

"Not at all," Ichigo says in an equally low voice. "But we're going to rescue Rukia, right?"

"I'm not about to let her die," Ishida says. Again, Ichigo adds internally, for both of them.

After his sword comes back clean and whole, Renji tries a finger. Nothing happens, so he steps through the barrier with a shiver and a suspicious eye.

"Then we all want the same thing," Orihime says cheerfully. From nowhere, she pulls out another huge over-packed bag. "Lucky I brought extra," she declares, and passes it to Renji.

Renji accepts it with an 'oof' and a bewildered look. Up close, he seems even warier of the garganta, and his expression flickers uncertainly when he looks between it and Ichigo.

"Last chance," Ichigo offers. He says it like a challenge. "If you want to back out --"

Renji straightens his spine, just as expected. “Who’s backing out?”

"Let's go then."

Ishida takes point, if only because he's best at creating a stable pathway of reishi underfoot. Ichigo's version of a 'path' tends to look like a wobbly platform and sometimes disappears without warning. With Ishida in front, it's easier for the rest of them to follow.

Chad takes up the rear, and all five of them disappear into the darkness on the way to Hueco Mundo.

Outside, Orihime's sprites hold the barrier until the crack between worlds is almost healed. Then they disperse it in a glimmer of golden light and flutter through what remains of the tear just before it closes.

If anyone's paying attention, the fading remains of the garganta will look like a tiny blip of hollow energy - maybe an angry ghost, nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

The previous Urahara chapter overlaps with this one, time-wise; they're just from different points of view. I think that should be clear? But in case it wasn't: there's overlap.

Anyway, Ishida desperately needed a hug. (Three hugs. A conveyor belt of hugs. All the hugs. Shh.)
Hueco Mundo is huge and barren. It’s beautiful in a bleak and soulless sort of way. The moon overheard leeches all colour from the world and everything comes up in shades of white and black. The air is all reishi, and it sinks into their skin.

The wind is icy.

There’s a small part of Ichigo that finally settles when he puts his feet on the sand. He’d like to think it’s the hollow in him feeling the pull of its natural home, but he’s not optimistic.

"Welcome to Hueco Mundo," says Orihime cheerfully to Renji, tucking some of her hair away from her face. "Have you been here before, Renji-san?"

Renji’s looking around, eyes narrowed and mouth sharp, but now he turns to look at her critically. 
"...why have you been here before?"

Her smile fades. "Well, ah, sometimes things happen..." she rubs the back of her neck with one hand and holds the other up as if to wave away his concern. "Anyway, it's not as scary as it seems!"

Renji makes a derisive noise low in his throat. Which is fair, because for most shinigami Hueco Mundo is exactly as scary as it seems. It’s Orihime’s sheer power, and the company she keeps, that makes it seem less frightening.

"If you've never been here before, navigating can be hard," Orihime begins.

"And I'm asking you again why a human kid's been here?"

There's an awkward silence.

"It's a good place to stay under the radar," Ichigo says, after the long pause gets to be too much for him.

Ishida shoots him a Look, capitals intended.

Ichigo shrugs uncomfortably. "Look... Renji's not going to go telling everyone everything, alright? He knows we'll probably have to fight some of Soul Society to rescue Rukia..."

"That doesn't mean he'll know how to keep his mouth shut," Ishida points out. Renji, predictably, bristles.

"Well, what are we supposed to do? We've already brought him to Hueco Mundo with us--"
"Whose bright idea was that? Oh, right, it was yours--"

The pair continues in this vein for some time.

"It's because of the wind and the sand," says Orihime to Renji, completely ignoring their argument. "The wind blows the sand around and since so much of the place is dunes, things can look really different. You can't rely on many landmarks. If you're good at sensing, you can use the Forest of Menos as a landmark and judge where you are in relation to it--"


"Menos," Orihime says, as though she thinks he might actually not have heard her. "Gillian?"

"...girl, I know what a Menos is," Renji says slowly.

Ichigo is mostly focused on explaining to Ishida why he should have had an opinion earlier if he’s going to be fussy about bringing Renji now, but he can see in his peripheral vision that Renji is looking at Orihime with the dawning suspicion that there is something wrong with her.

Hesitantly, Orihime pats Renji’s shoulder. “They're not that aggressive unless they're provoked or hungry," she assures him --

“Fussy?” repeats Ishida, voice soaring.

"-- and we're not going too close. It's mostly the adjuchas we'll need to keep an eye out for--"

"Stop scaring him, Orihime," says Chad, watching Renji from beneath a sweep of dark hair.

She blinks, looking up at Renji with wide eyes. "O-oh," she murmurs. Her cheerful demeanour drops away. "I'm sorry, I forgot--"

"Che. I'm not scared," Renji spits, glowering at Chad over her head. Chad is impassive. "Just wondering how brats like you learnt about this stuff without getting eaten."

"We can take care of ourselves," says Ishida coolly, turning away from Ichigo mid-argument to snap at Renji. "Without shinigami help."

"Ain't he a shinigami?" Renji asks, pointing at Ichigo.

Ichigo closes his mouth with a click and crosses his arms. Arguing with Ishida is a constant in his life and it’s a little bit weird how annoyed he is that Renji has distracted them. “I told you, I'm mostly human.”

Renji scoffs, which makes his tattoos do weird things to his facial expression. "Sure you are. And I'm a hollow."

"Ehh?" Orihime leans right in close, staring at Renji. "But you don't have a mask or anything!"

"...What?"

"Hmm," says Chad, also examining him closely. He rubs his chin. "Could it be...? I can't believe he's been hiding this kind of power... this whole time..."

"Idiots!" Ishida smacks them both over the heads. The blow to Orihime is notably lighter. Despite ongoing evidence that Orihime is about as delicate as an armoured tank, Ishida never does stop treating her like she might be easily injured. He's less gentle with Chad, who still doesn't seem to
really feel the blow. He whirls them around with hands fisted in their clothing, red faced and cranky. "Can't you take this seriously for thirty seconds together?"

"But-"

"The vi-"

"*He's not a hollow!* He has no hollow powers! He's making a point!"

Ichigo rubs his hands over his face and sighs. "Go on," he mutters to Renji without even looking up.

"...the point is," says Renji, with the air of somebody desperate not to touch that whole exchange, "I couldn't believe you're a human even if I really wanted to, Kurosaki."

"Mostly human." He pauses. "My mother was human. My dad's a shinigami. And I'm--" everything under the sun, basically. He scrunches up his face. "Complicated?"

"...that's..." Renji pauses, looking into the distance of Hueco Mundo. It's stark and bleak under the moon.

"If you're going to say 'really illegal'," Ichigo begins.

"Really illegal," Renji repeats with emphasis. "No wonder you don't want Soul Society to know. That's way worse than what Rukia..." He stops there, trailing off. "You really don't have her powers. They're yours, right? I know for sure she can't open a garganta, for one-"

Ichigo shakes his head. "Nope." He sighs. "Look, Renji, you seem like a pretty okay guy, but there's some complicated stuff we can't explain right now. We don't have anything against the people in Soul Society--"

"Well," says Ishida. Ichigo braces himself for a rant on the failures of shinigami, just as poorly timed as humanly possible, but all Ishida says is, "There's Kurotsuchi."

"Kurotsuchi-taichou?" Renji repeats slowly.

Ichigo sighs. "Yes, all right, Kurotsuchi."

"And Tousen," Chad adds.

"I never really liked Ichimaru-taichou either," Orihime interjects.

"And the whole Centre Forty-Six--" Ishida goes on, nodding to himself.

"ALL RIGHT," Ichigo bellows over them. "We don't have anything against most of the people in Soul Society, not including a short list of assholes, but definitely including the people you personally care about--"

"Actually I'm not really a fan of Kuchiki Byakuya's right now, either," Ishida admits pensively.

"Please tell me which shinigami you do like," Ichigo grates. It'll be a shorter list and they both know it.

Ishida reflects upon this for a moment. "Mmm. Rukia-san's sensible," he decides magnanimously. Then, after a considering pause, he goes on: "How like the shinigami--"
And Ichigo just -- Ichigo gives up.

“--to execute the only one of them who--mmphrgle!”

He slaps a hand over Ishida's mouth, muffling him. His talking rapidly turns into offended yelling, and he yanks at Ichigo, who does his best to remain implacable and immovable.

"The point is," he says loudly over Ishida's muffled complaining, "We don't really want to hurt the people in Soul Society," at this Ishida gets louder and Ichigo kicks him pointedly in the ankle, "it's just that the rules and laws are stupid. We really are going to rescue Rukia, and we really are going back to Karakura in a few days to do it. But before that... There's some stuff we have to do here. You don't have to come, but it's fine if you do. It'll help us save Rukia in the long run," Ichigo stops there, then pauses. "That's it, I guess."

He relaxes a little and Ishida wrenches away, finally shoving Ichigo's hand off his face. His face is flushed right across his cheekbones, either from exertion or because Ichigo's hand was stopping him from getting enough air. "Even if he comes," Ishida says, glowering at Ichigo like it's Ichigo's fault Ishida wouldn't stop talking, "we're still going to kill Kurotsuchi if we get the chance."

And... Great. Ishida's usually the rational one, but once he becomes irrationally attached to something he turns into a complete dork about it. Exhibit A is that white mantle thing he's still wearing right now.

"Secondary goal," Ichigo offers by way of compromise.

It takes a second, but Ishida nods. "...yes, all right. It's more important that Rukia-san is okay."

Renji's frowning at them. Contrary to Ichigo's expectations it seems that their arguing has helped sell him on it, rather than making it sound like they're the most suspicious people in the world.

He cleans out his ear with his pinky, squinting thoughtfully at them. "Kurotsuchi-taicho is..." he pauses. Makes a face. Ichigo is waiting, but Renji can't seem to work up the same loyalty for Kurotsuchi as he might for his own captain. "...Okay."

There's a pause, and then Renji adds: "But if it turns out you're lying about this, I'm going to kill you." He says it conversationally, like it's not that he really wants to kill them or anything, but he does have standards and he's prepared to enforce them.

"That's fair," says Ichigo, nodding. It really is. Especially given the amount of weird shit Ichigo's going to ask him to put up with over the next few days.

"We should get moving," Ishida says, adjusting his glasses. "Before we attract something hungry."

There's a point. Ichigo is about to agree, but Chad clears his throat and points behind them.

"Like that?" He asks.

They turn to follow his line of sight. A huge, lion-like adjuchas looms upon a rock, tufted tail ticking back and forth as it watches them. Its yellow eyes gleam brightly from behind its bone-white mask.

"Exactly like that," sighs Ishida, shaking his cross from his sleeve.

A low, rumbling growl issues from deep in its chest.
They don't really have time for a fight right now. They've only got a couple of days to pull this off and Ichigo is eager to get started.

“I've got it.”

Ichigo draws his zanpakuto and disappears in a rapid four-step shunpo attack -- two to charge, one to feint, one to take it out from behind. There’s the crack of its mask and the spray of sand under one of Ichigo’s shoes, and then it’s down, dead. The eyes are empty and the body makes no sound.

The hollow is dissolving into reishi by the time he drops back beside the group.

"Ichigo, your injuries--" Orihime begins, reaching for him.

"I feel fine," he says, but he lets her check anyway. It'll stop her worrying. Her small hands are cold on his skin.

They start walking when she's done, moving slowly but steadily across the dunes. Even Ichigo can feel the energy signature they're chasing. He's not sure if Renji's aware just yet that that's what they're heading for.

"...you didn't fight like that before," Renji says warily. He must be thinking about how easily Byakuya took him out of the fight.

The thing is, it's not just that Ichigo was trying to hide his power then. Byakuya's attack came when Ichigo was worried about Rukia, sure, but it also came when he was really, really distracted. At that time, Ishida was the biggest threat to all of them, and he was so far out of control--

Ichigo can almost feel Ishida getting tense and upset next to him.

"Yeah, well," he says, not even looking as he reaches over to give Ishida a hard shove sideways, "Some idiot kept elbowing me in the ribs."

Ishida almost topples. Chad catches him one-handed, huge fingers wrapping around his biceps, and hauls him away from the sand dune that's threatening to swallow his feet.

"I have no idea what you mean," Ishida huffs, putting his glasses back in order and resettling his mantle over his shoulders.

It's sort of cute how at fifteen Ishida was such a slight, twiggy-looking nerd despite the obvious draw weight on his bow, but --

Actually, they are in Hueco Mundo way before they would have been in their original time line, aren't they?

“Wait,” he says, stopping as a wave of consternation washes over him. He looks over his shoulder. The hollow he killed is almost entirely gone. "That's not Grimmjow, is it?"

"Grim-- Ku-ro-sa-ki," sighs Ishida, drawing each syllable out between his teeth. He never did approve of Ichigo's attachment to an arrancar who routinely tries to kill him.

"No, no, Grimmjow-san's a panther," Orihime assures them. "And as an adjuchas, he was much smaller!"

"Aa," Ichigo says, relieved. Then: "...wait, smaller?"

"Mm! He was very cute, according to Ulquiorra."
A dubious silence meets this statement. It seems very unlikely on several levels: one, that Grimmjow has ever been 'cute'; two, that had Grimmjow ever been cute, Ulquiorra might have noticed; and three, that had Grimmjow been cute and had Ulquiorra ever noticed, he might have shared that observation.

Ichigo knows Orihime had some kind of strange Stockholm syndrome-esque attachment to Ulquiorra as her primary carer during her brief time in captivity. However, between getting her out of there and finally killing that stone faced asshole years later, Ichigo is still pretty convinced that he had no personality to speak of.

Orihime murmurs something about 'fluffy ears', which Ichigo chooses not to contemplate overmuch. It might give him an aneurism.

"O-oi," says Renji, squinting. "Is she talking about a hollow?"

...and then there's Renji, who is about to get a really harsh crash course in how pointless some of Soul Society's most stringent rules can be.

Ichigo rubs the back of his head. He ignores the look Ishida's giving him, which is all sorts of flavours of I told you so.

"Yeah," Ichigo says, and now he's trying to figure out if he should be preparing Renji to meet more hollows who are pretty much just really weird violent people, or maybe reassuring him that there are dark underpasses and strange-smelling alleys in Orihime's pretty head where everyone fears to tread.

In the end, he sighs. "Grimmjow. Yeah. He's... not a bad guy, in the scheme of things. Sort of." Well, probably.

Ishida's expression is at least as dubious as Renji's. "Really, Ichigo," he mutters. "He's a brute."

Ichigo takes a deep breath. "Yeah, well--"

Bickering, they make their way deeper into the desert.

Renji gets appreciably more nervous the closer they get to their destination. It's a pretty common reaction -- most people who are sensitive to spiritual pressure think Starrk is a lot closer than he actually is. His power is huge. By the time they get to where their senses tell them the huge power is, they're still at least a mile out.

"They're not going to attack," Chad assures Renji at one point.

"If they did--"

"If they do," Ichigo interrupts, "I'll take them out. But they won't."

"Kurosaki, that's a hollow. How--?"

"It's an arrancar," Ichigo explains. "They're not really a hollow, exactly."

"An--" Renji pauses. He has a facial expression, partially scrunched up like he knows the word 'arrancar' but isn't sure where he's heard it. Ichigo doubts it's something he's encountered often, although certainly R&D would know about it. Among hollows, natural arrancar are absurdly rare. Even Barragan and Harribel, to Ichigo's knowledge, were vasto lorde but not arrancar until Aizen broke down those walls.
"They're hollows who have broken off their mask, Renji-san," says Orihime. "They're part shinigami now."

"Is that even possible?"

"Yes," says Chad.

"Very," sighs Ishida. He sounds to Ichigo like the possibility is a thing he regrets.

As they go, walking through Starrk's power becomes more and more like walking through reiatsu soup. None of them is weak enough that they're in danger of actual injury, but it's a little like a long walk under a threatening sky -- there's the feeling that a storm is imminent and there's nowhere to hide. Perversely, Ichigo even finds himself relaxing a little. It's only been a few months since he was used to bedding down with this reiatsu blanketing him. It's... homey, in a way.

"Ichigo," says Chad, which is when Ichigo realises his own power is unfurling, rising to meet the other in greeting. He pauses, shoving it back down. His control is poor, but it's not usually that poor.

By the time they're in view of the bones, Renji is wound tightly enough to snap and Ichigo decides to go on alone.

He leaves calming Renji to Orihime, Ishida and Chad. There's no harm in splitting up this close to Starrk -- there's almost no chance of being attacked because everything in a mile radius is dead.

"Yo," Ichigo calls out when he gets closer, striding forward with purpose. "Anyone home?"

There must be, he assumes, because the pile of bones at the mouth of their cave has some pretty recent looking additions, half eaten away in the moonlight. Decomposition in Hueco Mundo is a weird, weird thing.

A familiar head sticks up, bone mask all pointy on one side with a single large, glossy eye peering out from beneath its edge.

"Yeah, we are. And you should get lost before you disintegrate," says Lilynette.

She climbs on top of the decaying skull of an enormous antelope-creature, one of the bigger kinds of adjuchas. She's dressed only in a ragged cloak, but she's just as obviously Lilynette.

This time Ichigo means to do it. He lets his reiatsu rise, huge and just as powerful, right under Starrk's. "I'm not going to disintegrate."

"You --" She looks dubious until she feels it, and then he can see her visible eye widen. "Wait there!" She snaps, and then she's gone, hurtling back into her cave.

Ichigo can hear her bellowing at Starrk, and winces at the sound of what's very obviously somebody getting kicked in the ribs more than once.

When he emerges, Starrk is just as poorly clothed as Lilynette, and just as faintly scruffy as Ichigo remembers. He scratches his belly and yawns, watching Ichigo with sleepy eyes. They catch a lot more than they let on.

"Hi," says Ichigo. He can't help his smile, even if it's small and inappropriate. He actually is happy to see these two. He won't be able to say the same for most of the other arrancar.
He rubs the back of his head. “So... I'm Kurosaki Ichigo. Want to be friends?"

Starrk says nothing for a few long moments. His eyes are heavy-lidded, and it's hard to tell what he’s thinking. Finally Lilynette gets bored or impatient and kicks him in the shins. “What are you doing?” she snaps, planting her hands on her hips.

"...I'm listening." Starrk says slowly, watching Ichigo warily.

In the end, all Ichigo wants from Starrk is an agreement not to fight. Given that Starrk basically wants to do nothing but chill out and meet people he can’t kill just by existing, he figures it’s not that big a deal to ask for.

"Aizen really can help you find companions," Ichigo says eventually, because it pays to be honest with Starrk. "But it seems like he wants to kill all my companions. And he'll want you to fight for him."

Starrk is silent for too long.

"...and we can come with you?" Lilynette asks.

"Lilynette," Starrk murmurs, looking down at her.

"You said we could go anywhere," she hisses back to him.

Starrk sighs, huge and sleepy. "I did say that, didn't I."

"What," says Ichigo slowly, "to ...to Soul Society?"

"I don't care," she says, "but we're not going to be left behind."

That's... unexpected. Ichigo was more planning on visiting them and spending a lot of time in Hueco Mundo. It's more his home than the living world is now, and he can imagine spending a lot of time here. He'd probably draw less hollows to Karakura that way, anyway.

"Well--" he pauses as Lilynette's expression hardens, and then he realises he can't promise companionship and then tell her he'll be back later. Starrk and Lilynette are easygoing, but they're also suspicious by nature. He doesn't feel like he has a lot of choice here. "Sure," he shrugs.

Great. Now they're going to have to figure out how to stop these two from accidentally killing the pluses they come across in Soul Society. There must be some way...

Maybe Urahara...

But no, Urahara doesn't even know what's going on. Ichigo frowns. They'll have to figure that out... There must be some way.

"For now we're going to be in Hueco Mundo for a couple days," Ichigo admits. "There are some other people we have to meet."

Lilynette and Starrk pack up and leave their cave and their pile of bones without further encouragement. They have no real reason to stay, after all.

It's a little sad, if Ichigo thinks about it too much.

It's significantly less sad when Ishida takes one look at what Lilynette's wearing and *dives* for his sewing kit. She looks surprisingly cute in all that Quincy blue and white, and she spins around like
she's actually a young girl, excited by the flare of her skirt when she whirls.

"Look," she exhorts Starrk, who has adopted a pair of Chad's jeans from their packs. He doesn't seem too inclined to get a shirt, but the cloak he's been wearing is covering his shoulders. It's not like the weather here can do much to him.

"Look, isn't it pretty?"

"Hmm," says Starrk.

She leaps on his shoulders, limbs flailing. "You're not even looking!"

"It's good, Lilynette."

"Aa," agrees Chad, nodding seriously. Lilynette seems mollified by his acknowledgement, although she sticks her tongue out at Starrk behind his back.

"I like it!" Orihime declares. "If you give him time, Uryū-kun might even add pockets to it. Do you want to see mine?"

She does want to see Orihime’s. From the glint of his glasses, Ichigo is betting the pockets are more of an inevitability than a possibility.

It's really only Renji who struggles with their inclusion in the group. He doesn’t make the mistake of pointing out that Lilynette is a child -- instead, he’s obviously painfully aware that she’s a hollow. He watches them both with twitchy fingers and tense shoulders for hours upon hours as they travel.

He seems fixated on how he can see right through Lilynette's belly at first, and then when it's covered by the dress he shifts his gaze to the dark hole in Starrk's chest.

"You'll get used to it," Orihime assures him quietly.

"I don't want to get used to it," he says flatly.

Ichigo lets it go. Renji’s adaptable. He’ll get over it -- either on his own, or he’ll say something stupid and Lilynette will start pulling his hair and yelling at him. Either way, the mystery will definitely wear off in time.

When they bed down for the night, though, it doesn't seem like Renji has any plans to sleep, which is a shame because this is the most comfortable Ichigo has felt in months -- basically on par with the nights spent curled next to Ishida, but with much smaller likelihood of his father screaming about safe sex at the door.

Still. It'll be better if Renji gets used to this, fast.

"I'll keep watch," Ichigo offers with a sigh. It feels like a huge concession, because there's such a good chance that he could sleep like the dead tonight -- touching Ishida, Chad and Orihime, with Starrk and Lilynette blanketing the area with their thick, heady reiatsu. He could sleep on a bed of broken glass under those circumstances.

"Thanks," says Renji, "but I'm not likely to sleep anyway." A pause. "It's not just them, so stop looking at me like that," he adds, sighing.

Ichigo didn't realise he was so transparent. "It's not-"
"You really trust these guys, huh?"

Ichigo shrugs. He's uncomfortable now. Because, yes. He trusts Starrk. He trusts Lilynette, even though she's an annoying brat. But he can't really say why because as far as this time line's concerned, they've only just met. And they're hollows; in theory they're natural predators for strong souls like Ichigo's.

"Ahh," sighs Renji, huge and put-upon. "I haven't been to Hueco Mundo before. The air here's different, the sky's different -- everything's different. I won't be able to sleep either way."

That's... Probably true. "Aa. I'll stay up with you."

Renji doesn't bother arguing. They keep watch for the night, while the others bed down. Orihime's supplies come through for them and result in a pile of bedding fit for the dry dunes. There's food, too, although it's just protein bars, and bottled water.

All up, they're more comfortable now than they were when they first went on the run.

The major surprise to Ichigo is that Lilynette scampers away from Starrk to sprawl halfway across Chad to sleep. Starrk watches them with dark eyes, but he doesn't stop her.

Ichigo has shared watches with Renji before, but the only time he's had so little to say was in the days following Rukia's death. It is disconcerting to have so little bickering between them. But then, they really don't know each other, do they?

Keeping still while staying awake is kind of an art form. Ichigo's spent so much time over the past months trying to sleep that he feels out of practice - especially with the pile of people he trusts dozing nearly within reach. Renji takes his time settling in, too.

The only real danger is that Renji won't feel anything over Starrk's huge, uncontrolled reiatsu - and that, in itself, is hardly a danger. Sleeping next to Lilynette and Starrk is almost always safe in Hueco Mundo. Unless another arrancar is actively seeking them out, the sheer density of their energy drives away almost everything. Gillian, adjuchas - doesn't matter. Very few hollows are stupid enough to come looking for these two.

"Hey," says Renji finally, gruffly, some twenty minutes after the last watchful member of their group - Lilynette, interestingly - drops off to sleep. "These two... they don't seem that bad, for hollows, but... where we're going, I can feel a lot of reiatsu out that way."

That's as oblique as anybody could hope to come at the question. "Yeah," says Ichigo, "there are more arrancar out that way."

"And you want to -- what? Talk to them? Recruit them? Why? Even if you want to take them to rescue Rukia --"

"No," Ichigo bites out. It's not like Ichigo thinks they're going to be able to avoid any confrontation in Soul Society, per se -- but there's a lot of room on any scale between 'unavoidable confrontation' and 'arrancar running amok in Soul Society'.

That's just... No.

Starrk and Lilynette are one thing, because provided they can be smuggled in and hidden, they won't really create that much more risk -- Lilynette is excitable but she's not bloodthirsty like most hollows and she's sturdy enough that she won't be in much danger if they take her with them, and Starrk... probably all they'll need to do is find Starrk a handy hammock. Problem solved.
Ichigo knows it's not really as simple as all that, but it's also not the blinding headache that bringing, say, Grimmjow, might have become. Starrk is easy, and Lilynette is only slightly more difficult. They’re manageable.

"Well, why then?" Renji's patience for Ichigo's woolgathering is growing thin and his voice rises a little. Orihime makes a confused noise, mutters something about zombies and brain pickling, and rolls over. They both still.

One of Chad's eyes cracks open anyway. "Ichigo?"

"We're fine." He assures him, closing the one step he needs to knock Chad’s shoulder with an ankle.

"Mm," Chad agrees. He curls more closely around Lilynette, a huge protective shape under Hueco Mundo's moon.

Ichigo doesn't fight his slightly silly smile. Chad likes small, cute things, and this response to Lilynette seeking him out is downright predictable. She’ll be embarrassed in the morning.

"Kurosaki," Renji interrupts, once again in a softer tone. "Stop stalling and answer me."

Ichigo sighs, crosses his arms, and turns back to Renji. He's a much less pleasant view than Chad curled up around tiny Lilynette like a sleeping dragon hunched over its hoard.

Ichigo frowns. He knows he really needs to explain this to Renji, but the chances of Renji actually believing him are vanishingly small.

He wishes Ishida were the one stuck trying to explain this. He's got a lot of faith in Ishida’s ability to verbalise things -- at exhaustive, condescending length, most of the time. Ishida likes the sound of his own voice.

Unfortunately, Renji still looks at Ishida like a half-trained animal, one with dubious domestication value. Considering how Renji’s arm’s still bandaged, even if he seems to be using it normally... yeah, that’s probably a recipe for disaster.

"Okay," Ichigo says slowly, running his hands through his hair. “Come on."

He draws Renji away from where everyone is already sleeping. The sand is endless and they won’t lose their line of sight, but this might get loud. He doesn't want it to get loud, but Renji is loud and so’s Ichigo, so there's a strong possibility. At least at a bit of a distance he’s less likely to wake everyone up.

He slows eventually, turning back. Renji’s taller than Ichigo, broad and looming with his shadow streamed across the sand. It’s funny that he comes in such an outwardly intimidating shape when he’s probably the least frightening person here.

"So Starrk there," Ichigo points vaguely, "he's a naturally-born arrancar, right? He's a hollow - a vasto lorde - who tore his own mask off and became... basically part shinigami."

Renji nods slowly. He doesn't even turn a hair when Ichigo points out that Starrk's a vasto lorde. "When you first said it, I didn't believe it," he says reflectively, and glances over his shoulder at Starrk's lanky body where he’s dozing quietly on the outermost edge of the group. "But his reiatsu... it doesn't even feel like a hollow's - not exactly. The reiatsu doesn't feel like a shinigami’s, but..."
His expression says it all: *neither does yours.*

"So is that what you are, Kurosaki?"

That question is probably inevitable. "No. I was never a hollow to begin with." Which is a half truth, really. The hollow has always been there. He's part of Ichigo. He's not before or after, he just is. "But arrancar, they're not really common. A hollow has to become powerful -- really, really powerful -- to take off its own mask."

"That makes sense," Renji agrees. He glances sideways at Starrk. "You could feel him from anywhere. If there were more of them, then we'd know more about it. Even gillian and adjuchas aren't that common - we hear about them, and there are case studies we learn about in the academy, but even as a lieutenant I've only been called out to deal with two events."

Ichigo nods. If they don’t stop Aizen posthaste, that’s not likely to be the case for much longer. In Ichigo's time line it certainly wasn’t.

"Where we're going, out that way--" he points, and he wants to say it's west but there's no real north in Hueco Mundo so he can’t say for sure. His 'north' is the snarling mass of gillian in the Forest of Menos, which is big enough that even he can feel it most of the time. Back when they lived here, after the first war, they'd used Hallibel's deep thrumming reiatsu in Las Noches as a similar beacon. "-- there are hundreds of arrancar."

He pauses so Renji has a moment to take that in.

"Wh... What?"

"They're not natural-born arrancar. They're adjuchas. They’ve been turned into arrancar with help."

"...who the hell would want that?!"

"Good question," says Ichigo. For now, he figures it's better that he shouldn't try to convince Renji of the 'who'. Aizen's reputation is airtight. If their plans actually work for a change -- and being as they seem to be up to plan D, maybe even plan E if he thinks about Lilynette and Starrk wanting to come to Soul Society, that seems like an increasingly large *if* -- Aizen might well even still get a state funeral with all honours. It won't matter to Ichigo as long as he's dead.

Ichigo isn't a natural killer, but some skills you learn. He'll make all kinds of exceptions for Aizen Sousuke.

The hollow makes a soft happy hum in the back of his skull. He ignores it. Practice makes perfect. He blinks his attention back to Renji, who looks like he’s just realised how very much he’s bitten off here.

"It's a shinigami," says Renji slowly, like he’s only just figured that out. There's a sick expression rising on his face. "You know who, right? You must."

Renji is not very clever. His instincts, though? Those are top notch.

"Yeah," says Ichigo quietly. "I know. I'd tell you, but I think it'll be hard to believe. But--" he pauses. "If you ask, I'll tell you."

"It has to be a captain, then," says Renji, steadily picking it apart as though he hasn't quite heard.

He looks greener by the second, but he's not even close to denying it's possible. He knows it’s
possible. That, from a shinigami lieutenant, is as good as an outright acknowledgement that such corruption’s rampant. Something is very rotten in Soul Society and everyone knows it.

He's still thinking aloud. “Or -- maybe someone from a noble house? Or a high-ranking member of the Onmitsukido...” There are too many options. “Otherwise you'd just tell them. Something as scary as that - and as easy to investigate - they'd check it even if the report came from a suspect human like you.”

"Thanks," drawls Ichigo sarcastically. He is a little surprised, despite all evidence, that Renji seems actually pretty aware of how corrupt Soul Society is. He's not sure why that's surprising. Renji's a street kid from Rukongai, and now he's a shinigami lieutenant. If anybody's going to notice, it'll be someone like Renji.

"And you want -- what, you're trying to..."

"I'm... trying to steal his army," Ichigo admits finally.

Renji looks at him blankly.

"Starrk's the strongest, but there are heaps of others. By the time we go to Soul Society to save Rukia, I want... Well, some stuff will probably happen when we do that, and then it'll be easy for him to take advantage of the confusion, so..."

"You... Kurosaki, how the hell do you think you're gonna steal an army?"

"I'm not trying to recruit them," Ichigo shrugs. "I just want them to desert, mainly. And..."

He's not sure how he's going to steal the army, exactly. If it comes to it, he figures he'll just challenge the espada, kick their asses and declare himself in charge.

He looks at Renji and decides not to tell him that.

That can be plan B, anyway. Wait, no. Plan F? What are they up to now? He’s pretty sure Starrk and Lilynette derailed plan D, so this was plan E and... so changes to plan E must mean...

Ichigo scratches his head. Huh.

Anyway, fighting all the espada is going to be Ichigo's last plan of action. Contrary to what Ishida likes to complain, Ichigo is actually not a complete moron and he does have more self-preservation instincts than the average lemming.

"Shit!" Renji kicks a dune. Sand sprays. The expression on his face says it's exactly as unsatisfying as Ichigo knows it to be. He turns and scowls ferociously at Ichigo. "This is beyond a bad joke."

Ichigo snorts. Renji doesn't know the half of it.

"Even if what you're doing works out, we end up with goddamn superpowered hollows crawling around, and someone powerful enough to cover this up is still--" He stops. "Is this why you want to kill Kurosukichi-taichou so much?"

"No," shrugs Ichigo, although it's a logical guess, he'll give Renji that. Kurosukichi Mayuri would be a great candidate for scapegoating this mess. "You'll have to ask Ishida about that."

He’s betting Renji won’t ask Ishida anything if he can help it, but the important thing is that by deflecting Ichigo no longer has to lie about it.
Then he sighs. "Honestly, the arrancar themselves aren't that much of a problem. They're not," he adds defensively, upon noticing Renji's incredulous expression and steadily reddening face. "They're basically just really violent, kind of weird people. If the shinigami leave them alone in Hueco Mundo they won't bother you much."

"Kurosaki, hollows eat people."

"Eating human souls would not even come close to filling up an arrancar. They mostly eat other hollows - gillian and adjuchas." And, occasionally, each other. But Ichigo's not going to bring that up if he doesn't have to.

"And what the hell do we do when one breaks through the Dangai and ends up in Soul Society?"

"What do you usually do when hollows show up in Soul Society?"

Renji clenches his jaw and Ichigo sees him flick a look toward Starrk's sleeping body. He knows what he's thinking -- if something like Starrk breaks into Soul Society for a snack, it's the rank and file shinigami who'll be sent to confront it and it'll end up picking Renji's subordinates from its teeth while the captains run around trying to find their own butts.

"Starrk's more powerful than most of them," Ichigo tries. He declines to point out that Starrk isn't even in resureccion and, really, Starrk should be the least of Renji's worries.

This still doesn't seem to reassure him, and Ichigo loses patience. He smacks Renji over the back of the head. "If something like that does happen, well, you know about it now. So train harder, and then you can protect the people you need to. What else are you gonna do?"

This is a philosophy that Ichigo has embraced for more than a decade now and he's pleased to see that it settles Renji's nerves a lot faster than any vague attempts at comfort.

A plan of action is always best. And honestly, what's the alternative? Curl into a ball and cry while everybody gets cut down around you? Ichigo knows Renji better than that. If Renji needs to fight, he'll fight.

After that, the night's not so long. They head back to where the others are sleeping, with Ichigo feeling slightly better about their current situation and Renji sunk in a grim silence. They still don't have a lot to talk about, and Ichigo can see Renji thinking things over - he can see the question on the tip of his tongue: who is it?

Ichigo lets him think about it before he asks. He'll find out either way - one of the arrancar is bound to let it slip eventually. But Ichigo won't tell him unless he asks.

He's not sure who they'll encounter first when they get to Las Noches. Hopefully not somebody completely off the wall. The best he can hope for is somebody who won't immediately attack, probably. Hallibel is ideal, but Ichigo isn't sure if she's even an arrancar yet. Ulquiorra wouldn't be too bad, as much as Ichigo doesn't like him...

He likes Grimmjow better but he's perfectly aware that that? Would be an actual nightmare. Nothing would prime the others for hostilities faster. Fighting them all is meant to be the last resort plan.

Renji doesn't ask for two long, brooding days, and the night before he does is the time when Ishida and Chad are starting to give Ichigo annoyed looks when he doesn't come to bed. Chad's are subtle. Ishida's are ...not.
"It's because he doesn't trust us," Lilynette says shrewdly, giving Ichigo a challenging face: chin up, teeth bared, shoulders set at a pugnacious tilt.

"Hardly," scoffs Ishida, who is mending something - or adding more pockets, God only knows - under the moonlight while it's still a mostly full moon. He doesn't even look up. "He's staying up because the shinigami doesn't trust you, and he doesn't trust the shinigami not to knife you in your sleep."

Ichigo twitches. Could Ishida be any less tactful? If Ichigo is able to correct somebody on their tact, it's symptomatic of a big problem.

"Eh?" Renji looks between Lilynette and Ishida, and then slowly turns his eyes on Ichigo. His brows furrow and it makes his tattoos look somehow even wilder. "That’s not--"

"Which is just silly, of course," Orihime chips in, leaning in and smiling brightly at Lilynette. Ichigo has half a second to think, *oh good, she's going to defuse this,* but what actually happens is the smile drops off her face completely and she says: "I'd never let him come close."

There's a short but very silent pause. Ichigo feels the shift in the air when Renji shuffles his weight back on his heels. Starrk cracks open a watchful eye. Lilynette looks dumbfounded.

"Oh. Er. Ah!," Orihime straightens up and waves her hands defensively in front of her, suddenly blushing and backtracking. "Not that I think Renji-san would do that kind of thing! Uryū-kun, that wasn't fair--"

"No," sighs Ishida, pushing his glasses up his nose, "I suppose not. Abarai would definitely wake you up first if he was going to attack you."

He doesn't even look up from his sewing when he says it.

"Mm," Chad nods, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "That seems accurate."

"Ah! No! No, Lilynette-chan, I'm sure Renji-san isn't going to attack you at all!" She shoots Ichigo a pleading look.

What Ichigo's meant to do here, he's not sure.

"It doesn't matter if he does," Lilynette declares, setting her jaw and scowling up in Renji's direction. "I'm not scared of any shinigami. We can beat him --" and here she turns her fierce expression back on Orihime, "without your help."

Ichigo heaves a sigh. "Yeah, sure," he says dismissively, ignoring the way Renji sputters at his easy acquiescence, "but that's the whole point of having companions. That you can doesn't matter. You don't *have* to do it without our help."

Lilynette stops then. She looks a little lost. She looks over her shoulder at Starrk.

He yawns widely like he hasn’t been paying any attention, and she makes an annoyed noise. Ichigo snorts at the byplay. Never much help there.

"Nobody's fighting anyone, anyway," he adds brusquely. "If you want a fight I can guarantee you can find one where we're going. Lilynette, Renji's not going to kill you. Ishida's an idiot--"

"--if I'm an idiot, why won't you sleep with the rest of us?"
Ichigo grinds his teeth. "If it means so much to you, I will," he growls.

He waves one hand at Renji, who seems -- ruffled, suddenly unsure of his welcome. Ichigo rolls his eyes. He really hasn't been that worried about Renji flipping out and trying to hurt somebody since that first night, anyway. Now he's had plenty of time to get used to the idea of Starrk and Lilynette as people, not just people-shaped hollows, and his silences are stressed but dogged. Renji solves problems practically, and if nothing else he's always adapted well to alliances of convenience.

Besides, it's definitely true that Renji won't stab anyone their sleep. He's not, say, Ishida.

And anyway, when Ichigo prepares to bed down with the rest of them, he can see that Starrk's still awake. He doesn't look it, but Ichigo can see the glimmer of his iris beneath a fluttering eyelash. It's a bit sad that Starrk doesn't trust them, but Ichigo can't really blame him.

He wakes up nine hours after he goes to sleep with Ishida's face pillowed on his belly and Orihime's hair in his mouth, still blanketed in Starrk's steady reiatsu. The moon's high overhead. Chad's up, picking out notes apparently at random on his guitar while Lilynette peppers him with quiet questions. It's awesome.

That's the day Renji asks, and also the day they make it to Las Noches.

Less awesome.

"Tell me who," Renji demands finally.

"Aizen Sousuke," says Ichigo, with no fanfare whatsoever.

The rising tension in the group makes Lilynette look uncertainly around at them and then duck into Starrk's shadow, scowling thunderously. He doesn't comment, although Ichigo's sure he's watching them. Starrk really is lazy and he really does sleep a lot... but he notices more than he lets on, too.

"Aizen-taichou?" Renji repeats, looking absolutely bewildered. Of all the people he might have guessed, it's clear that Aizen is at the very bottom of Renji's list of suspects. "That can't... You must have something wrong."

He's been the source of all the ills in Ichigo's life for so long that it seems weird for anybody to have faith in Aizen’s good character. From the way Ishida is scowling over at Renji, he agrees. Ichigo knocks his shoulder into Ishida's, breaking him out of whatever cruel thoughts might be tempting him - at least temporarily.

Travelling in Hueco Mundo is gross, gritty work. They're used to it, but they don't need any infighting to make it more exciting. Ichigo is betting it'll get unnecessarily exciting all on its own soon enough.

Renji shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he says after a while, "I just can't imagine it."

That's partially because of Aizen and Kyouka Suigetsu but also partially because Renji's just not that suspicious by nature. He's someone you can take at face value, and he treats other people like that, too.

"It's fine if you can't believe me now," Ichigo says after a pause. Renji's a straightforward guy, so Ichigo is straightforward with him: "An army of arrancar is still a bad thing, right?"

"Shit yes," says Renji fervently.
"And we're still going to rescue Rukia, yeah?"

"Of course." He shoots Ichigo a sharp-edged smile.

"Then just... Let's do that. That's enough for now, isn't it?"

Renji doesn't hesitate. "Yeah," he agrees.

Ishida makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. In Renji's position, he'd definitely have a lot of questions - but Renji isn't Ishida. He follows his gut and his convictions, and doesn't reason things out with cool critical analysis. Or, as Ishida might put it: Renji is an idiot, like Ichigo.

On the other hand, if Renji was more like Ishida, he'd be causing a lot more problems.

Ichigo will take his blessings where he finds them.

Chapter End Notes

a) "really weird violent people" sums up about 90% of Ichigo's social circle

b) Renji is beginning to hope this whole experience is an elaborate practical joke although the logistics of organising it escape him

c) "[Renji] does have standards and he's prepared to enforce them." With murder, obviously. Which, I mean. See point A.
Ichigo is great at making new friends. This is fine. Everything is... everything is under control. Not Ichigo's control, sure, but... oh, who am I kidding.

They’re still a while away from Hueco Mundo when they finally encounter their next arrancar. It isn’t Grimmjow, thank god, but it’s also not Ulquiorra or Neliel. It isn’t anybody Ichigo even considered.

It’s only vaguely humanoid, with a body that’s perfectly round like a beach ball. Its limbs stick out, skinny and incongruous.

“What... the hell is that thing?” Renji mutters, squinting. “It’s way stronger than an average hollow, but it’s not...”

“I have no idea,” Ichigo frowns. He doesn’t remember anything that looks like this. He really hopes they’re not about to discover something none of them encountered in the previous time line, because that would seem... ominous.

“I do,” says Ishida. His tone’s grim, but Ichigo can’t help but feel a little relieved that he recognises it at all. “Don’t step in any traps."

“Ah!” The arrancar cries when it notices them. It points. “Lumina! Lu-mi-na!”

Okay... What’s lumina?

“Eh?” Ichigo points at himself uncertainly. Is he meant to be a lumina? Is lumina even a noun?

Another, almost identical arrancar appears out of virtually nowhere from behind a dune. It gasps dramatically.

Oh. That’s Lumina, then.

They babble unintelligibly for a moment, and then they seem to decide the group of humans, arrancar and shinigami are threatening. Then they scamper away.

“...you recognise those?” Ichigo asks, scratching his head.

Chad shakes his head. Even Orihime looks uncertain, and she spent more time around Aizen’s army of arrancar than anyone. “They feel familiar, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen them before,” she says slowly.

"Are they also arrancar?" Starrk wonders.

“They’re dumb,” Lilynette says, scowling. “I thought we’d get to meet arrancar like us!”
“They’re the fraccion of Szayelaporro Granz,” Ishida says with his mouth twisting in distaste. “He’s…”

“Ah, are they?” Orihime says. She bites her lip. “Poor things.”

“He’s more like you guys,” Ichigo promises awkwardly, although Lilynette looks far from mollified and the noise Ishida makes is actually a little offended. “Should we follow them? He’s basically their version of geta-bōshi… right?” They could keep going and find somebody else. Depending on how crazy Szayel turns out to be in this time line, it might be easier to deal with even somebody as aggressive as Grimmjow.

Ishida looks distinctly uncomfortable. "He’s not combative …exactly.”

‘Not combative’ is a weird thing for Ishida to say, given that he engaged in actual combat with this arrancar in particular.

Ichigo raises his eyebrows. “So… will he talk to us?”

“So much,” says Ishida drily. That tells Ichigo a lot but is not actually very helpful.

“He’ll be very curious,” Orihime tells him, taking the high road either because she’s kind or just because she’s oblivious to Ishida’s meaning. “I’m sure he’ll talk to us. He used to say he doesn’t like fighting, but if we do have to fight him, Ichigo-kun –”

“Stay away from gross liquid pods on his wings, I remember. Nobody likes a crushed stomach.” He looks sideways at Ishida.

“…a crushed stomach,” Starrk says, although he doesn’t sound like he can work up much stress about the idea. "It sounds uncomfortable.”

“Sounds gross,” Lilynette corrects, toeing him in the shin. It has to be annoying, but Starrk barely seems to notice. “Where would the, ugh, the stomach juice go?”

“Out your mouth,” Ishida says, in the voice of unpleasant experience.

“What are you worried about?” murmurs Starrk. “You don’t have a stomach.”

Lilynette hesitates, then pokes the belly of her dress with one finger. Her finger dips in – and in, far further than a human body would allow. The fabric pulls tight around her hole, showing its edges. “I guess.” She sounds uncertain.

Ichigo can see Renji’s face in his peripheral vision. There’s a sick fascination there, equal parts compelled and disturbed by the careless display of the hole right through Lilynette’s middle.

“She has other organs,” Ishida says repressively. “Stay away from his limbs.”

Starrk gives him a sleepy sideways glance. “Aa.”

They follow the trail left by the two fraccion through the sand before it’s erased by the wind whipping across the dunes. There’s a great deal of babbling coming from the pair, and Ichigo tries to figure out how the crazed figure he remembers could possibly put up with that. When he encountered Szayel he was so mad he could barely put up with himself.

The opening between mineral outcroppings where the fraccion vanish leads underground to several broad, straight corridors. They’re in good repair and, compared to the moonlight outside, they’re
They all blink for a few seconds, and quickly lose track of the fraccion around a corner somewhere. There’s a half blind moment where their vision adjusts. Ichigo is suddenly reminded of how bright all of Chad’s shirts are. The one he’s wearing is flashy and turquoise with the collar open. It’s very… there.

Lilynetted examines Orihime’s hair like she’s never seen it before, combing through the bright strands of it with her fingers.

“Hey, hey, Ichigo –” She turns her eyes on him, huge and fascinated.

Ichigo sighs and ducks his head so it’s in easy reach. It’s probably the first time she’s been exposed to light so bright and consistent. Ichigo can humour her a little.

“It’s so bright!”

As everyone keeps reminding him. “You aren’t the first to notice that,” he says. Then, “Ow! Don’t pull it! That’s attached!”

Lilynetted snatches her hand away. “Whatever.” Pause. “…crybaby.” She doesn’t try again, though, and Ichigo feels a miniscule tug of guilt for driving her off.

Orihime tries to stifle her giggling. When Ichigo looks, Ishida is pointedly looking away with one gloved hand covering his mouth.

“Have you never seen this stuff in the light before?” Renji wonders, squinting at Lilynetted suspiciously.

He isn’t paying any attention to Starrk, who Ichigo can eyeing Renji’s head with an unreadable face but oddly intent eyes. He doesn’t have Lilynetted’s compulsion to reach out and touch, though - - probably for the better, really. Renji is still kind of coming around to the idea of arrancar as a phenomenon.

Lilynetted is immediately and disproportionately defensive. She braces her hands on her hips and glowers fiercely up at Renji. “When would we have done that?” she snaps.

“Wha -- How the hell should I know?”

“Hey,” Chad interrupts. They all look toward him. “We lost them,” he points out simply. He has nice, normal, brown hair rather like Starrk’s, so he doesn’t really suffer the indignity of Lilynetted’s curiosity – she drifts over and tugs on his shirt, compares it to her hair, and then loses interest completely.

“I bet if we start walking we’ll find someone eventually.” Orihime is optimistic. She’s probably right, too, although Ichigo thinks it wouldn’t be wise to just go wandering.

“Yeah,” Renji agrees with her, tipping his head back and eyeing the roof like it might be about to grow teeth, ”but are we sure we want to run into whatever’s down here?”

“You said there would be traps,” Ichigo says to Ishida.

“Yes. There’s also surveillance,” Ishida says. Then he hesitates: “Probably.”

Yeah, that sounds likely. Ichigo contemplates it for a second. Then he shrugs and takes a deep
breath. "HEY, SZAYELAPORRO-SAN! WE’RE HERE TO TALK."

When the answer comes, it does so in a purring voice that seems to rise right from the walls. “There’s no need to bellow, shinigami-san. After all, how could I deny such a... gracious invitation?”

Ichigo looks around, but sees nothing. He can’t actually see the cameras, which is a little disconcerting. He suddenly desperately wants a shower.

And now everyone’s expecting him to say something. “What,” he mutters when he sees the looks Renji and Ishida are giving him in the silence.

Renji’s eyebrows rise, contorting his tattoos into weird shapes.

“Well – It’s weird just talking to some disembodied voice!”

Great, now even Starrk is giving him that look, rocking back on his heels and staring at him.

Starrk’s hands have somehow naturally found their way to the pockets of Ichigo’s jeans, and despite being nearly of a height with Renji, he manages through maximum slouching to give the impression of being a lot closer to Ichigo’s height.

“Well,” he says. And with that one word he manages to convey both how unimpressed he is with Ichigo’s clumsy approach and how much he’d rather be sleeping.

Ichigo glowers at him.

There’s a put-upon sigh from the walls, soft and chiding and echoing, and then abruptly the floor just disappears completely.

Ichigo barely has time to yelp.

Orihime catches herself, Chad and Lilynette on a floating shield and Ishida moves at light speed with his goddamn hirenkyaku – so it’s just Ichigo and Renji who fall on their faces.

Starrk lands on his feet. On Ichigo.

Ichigo wheezes out the last of his breath. His spine is basically crushing his diaphragm.

“Ah,” Starrk murmurs, lifting one booted foot to examine Ichigo’s back beneath it. “Hm.”

Then, after a second, he steps off. “Are you…” He hesitates.

“...’m fine,” Ichigo croaks. “Just fine.” His spine may never be the same. Oh god.

“Ah, Ichigo-kun…” Orihime looks like seeing him in pain is causing her actual physical discomfort.

Lilynette starts laughing her ass off, though, and that distracts Orihime. “Ah! Ano, Lilynette-chan, that’s not—”

Chad offers him a silent hand up. Bless Chad, seriously. Ichigo takes it. The bunch and shift of muscle under Chad’s shirt is very obvious, and Ichigo zooms to his feet almost too fast to balance. Somewhere behind him, Renji is getting to his feet and shaking the hair out of his eyes.

“Oh my,” drawls the voice. It’s not coming from the walls anymore. It takes Ichigo a second to
follow it, because this room seems large and empty, all stone.

He looks up and finds that there’s a mezzanine maybe eight feet from the ground, and the railing there is where their scientist is perched, legs crossed and pristinely dressed, watching them all with gleaming golden eyes.

Szayelaporro Granz isn’t someone Ichigo really knows. He’s one of the few espada he isn’t sure about at all. He knows of him. He’s seen him. They even spoke once or twice, in as much as anybody could have been said to speak to Szayel…

But, see, by the time Urahara put him down back in their prior time line, Szayel had already slipped into the loving embrace of really, truly absolute lunacy.

Ichigo doesn’t have a lot of hope for Szayel because he remembers a towering, too-skinny figure with strange purplish blobs hanging off it and reeking of rot, tangled hair and huge wings of brittle bone, breath like bile and wild unfocused eyes.

Ichigo squints up there at him now, though, and he’s basically a different person. A cleaner, vastly more coherent person, although calling him sane is, by reputation, overstatement.

He’s… actually sort of pretty, in an aggressively androgynous confuse-your-brain sort of way. Weird.

Ishida’s earliest description of him remains pretty much accurate in essentials, though: Szayelaporro is vain, clever, sneaky and paranoid as hell.

“Er,” says Ichigo, and then remembers that he’s really going to have to sell this.

He really should have thought this through.

“Don’t worry,” Szayel says, ignoring Ichigo’s open mouth and awkward silence. “I already know why you’re here.”

Oh.

Well… good.

“You were scanned at the door, of course,” he goes on, playing idly with a strand of pink hair. “Two of you at least are shinigami,” he declares, although with the way his eyes waver upon him, Ichigo has a hunch that he’s sure about Renji but hedging his bets on Ichigo, which is… fair, probably.

“Shinigami don’t come to Hueco Mundo very often, or without a very good reason, you see. And you,” he points at Ichigo, “have brought two of the strongest hollows in Hueco Mundo with you here. Either you’re here to conquer Las Noches – unlikely –” he shoots Renji a sneering, superior sort of look, “– or you’re here about Aizen-sama. A traitor in your midst must be very troubling. It wouldn’t take much more than a rumour.”

Renji makes a disbelieving noise.

“Like us, my butt,” mutters Lilynnette under her breath, kicking the floor with her toe. Starrk drops one big, repressive hand on top of her helmet without ever taking his eyes off Szayel. She glares up at him, but says nothing else.

“That’s… completely right,” Ichigo says, and decides that probably Szayel doesn’t need to know
about Rukia. Let him think it’s all about Aizen. Better his attention’s not diverted toward the hogyoku anyway.

“Of course it is,” Szayel agrees, preening.

Ichigo itches to point out that he’s delivered no adequate explanation for Ishida, Orihime or Chad yet. He doesn’t, but he can pretty much feel the words creeping up his throat and hiding behind his teeth.

“You must want something from me,” he points out, giving them all narrow eyes and a mean, inviting smile.

“Ah…” Ichigo scratches the back of his neck, scowling at Szayel’s boots. It’s easier than watching his face. He’s pretty, yeah… and also unbearably smug. Ichigo wants to punch him. “It doesn’t really matter if you support us,” he says finally, sick of trying to find a nice way to say it, “just as long as you don’t support Aizen.”

“Who you intend to hunt… So, a non-aggression agreement,” Szayel muses. “It’s the traditional opening to negotiations.”

Ichigo isn’t really opening negotiations here, exactly. If Szayel doesn’t agree, Ichigo will probably end up fighting him. Then he’ll grind his face into the ground until either he does agree or he dies, whichever comes first.

He’d prefer not to end up doing that. Szayel’s hard to pin down, functionally immortal and clever to boot. Ichigo will win, of course, through sheer overwhelming power alone if he has to. But Szayel’s one of the few arrancar here who will make him work for it.

“Well, that’s fine. I wasn’t likely to follow him for very long anyway.”

That, Ichigo knows, is a lie – in another world, Szayel follows Aizen for years, and past all hope of sanity. He can feel himself scowling darkly.

Szayel, on the other hand, scoffs at his expression. “You think a shinigami who betrays shinigami will care to keep his word to a bunch of hollows?” He gives a humourless but nonetheless delighted little laugh. “No.”

Well… that’s true.

He flicks the hair from his eyes with a dramatic little gesture. “It’s obvious he’ll turn on us as soon as it suits him to do it; those of us using him for our own ends will need to tie off any loose ends and be prepared to cut and run. I’ve been examining the possibilities for some time now.“ His eyes narrow, and he smiles a superior little smile, rocking forward on his perch. ”You’ve just become plan A.” Then he leans forward and adds with a coy purr: “Do try not to disappoint me, won’t you?”

Ichigo wonders if maybe he should share his recent observations about planning with this cocky arrancar shit, but he decides against it.

“…so you’re betraying Aizen before he can betray you,” he surmises instead, one eyebrow twitching. Urge to punch: rising.

“You can’t betray somebody who doesn’t trust you,” Szayel declares blithely. He dismisses the idea with a flutter of his fingers.
“You’re not going to try this proposition on with Barragan, are you?” He says, leaning back on his perch and crossing his arms. He rubs his bottom lip with one thumb thoughtfully. “He’s too busy tormenting his own fraccion, and he’ll betray you in a second anyway –”

“So you have a lot in common, then,” Ishida interjects.

Szayel favours him with a glance and a condescending smile, then continues as though he never spoke: “Laboratory conditions are best for controlling all possible variables, but I’m looking forward to the opportunity to observe the shinigami interacting in their natural habitat.”

Wait– “What?”

Szayelaporro gives him a pitying look, like Ichigo is the poor dumb kid who didn’t know that sniffing glue makes you slow. “Naturally,” he says, spreading an arm expressively. He’s smiling, and Ichigo gets the impression that he’s trying to be friendly. It is not working. “You can’t truly know a creature if you’ve only studied it in captivity.”

This isn’t the point of confusion. “You– you want to come to Soul Society?” Ichigo asks weakly.

“…but of course,” says Szayel, puzzled. His eyebrows furrow over the rim of his mask. “Obviously.”

Ichigo splutters. “But–”

“Tsk. You are taking them, aren’t you?” And he nods toward Lilynette.

“Well–”

Szayel sniffs. “You could smuggle half an army in under his reiatsu.” He points directly at Starrk, flinging his arm out wide and dramatic with the gesture.

This is true, but Ichigo doesn’t even have a way to get Starrk and Lilynette in yet. And he’s pretty sure that Szayel will cause a whole hell of a lot more problems than Starrk will.

The twitch of Ichigo’s eyebrow is starting to look kind of permanent. "Listen," he growls, and takes a deep breath to launch into a blunt explanation of exactly why taking a mad, overcurious sociopath with him is a completely terrible idea.

“That’s an excellent idea,” says Ishida out of nowhere.

“What,” says Ichigo tightly.

Szayel gives him a pleased, over-friendly look through his eyelashes. “All of my ideas are.”

Ichigo whirls on Ishida.

“How is that a good idea?” Ichigo hisses. His sudden movement effectively cuts Szayel out of the conversation. Over his shoulder, the arrancar makes an offended little noise in his throat.

Ishida’s eyes are glittering behind his glasses, and there’s a mean curve to his mouth that bodes very ill for somebody. Ichigo is abruptly torn between fear and sudden onset attraction. It’s uncomfortable.

“Szayelaporro-san would just love to explore research and development, don’t you think?”

“O-oi,” says Renji, in a tone rapidly switching from suspicion to outright alarm. “You don’t
mean–”

“Kurotsuchi Mayuri…” Ichigo trails off.

“Kurosaki,” hisses Renji, shifting from foot to foot. “You can’t.”

He can, actually. It’s simple. And it’s completely devastating to the shinigami. Pretty much nothing could distract them from Ichigo more than this. Ichigo looks at Szayel critically. The only real downside is that he might get the arrancar killed.

It’s not that he likes Szayel, of course. Szayel is a spooky little bastard, even in this time line. But he’s on their side for now, and Ichigo is constitutionally incapable of not taking care of his allies.

Last time they fought that Ichigo knows of, Kurotsuchi poisoned Szayel and literally drove him insane. He can feel his face making that thunderous scowl that people keep telling him frightens children.

“The only reason Kurotsuchi might win is if he’s more prepared than Szayelaporro-san,” Ishida points out. He adjusts his glasses with a glint that’s completely evil. With their reflection shielding the rest of his expression, he smiles straight over Ichigo’s shoulder at Szayel. “I’ll provide him with my observations. I’m sure that will be sufficient for him to defeat a shinigami captain.”

Ichigo glances over his shoulder, but Szayel’s eyes are glassy. His pupils are huge, blown wide. “…research and development, you said?” he breathes.

“Kurosaki,” Renji repeats, but there’s a soft sound that keeps distracting Ichigo from Renji’s actually completely valid concerns.

Is Ishida laughing?

Yeah, Ishida’s laughing.

Just like that, Ichigo figures he’s not going to win this one.

If Ishida can convince Szayel to try to take on the 12th a Division captain inside his own squad headquarters – well, at least that can be guaranteed to make a really big distraction.

Szayel is watching Ishida now like a snake stares at a rabbit, and Ichigo just gets out of the way. “I’m leaving you here,” he tells him, a little resentfully.

Ishida waves him off, intent upon his particular brand of mayhem.

They’ll be fine. Probably.

…Initially, at least.

Well. Ichigo has faith that if they’re not fine, that’s a fight Ishida will win.

They leave him there, talking animatedly with Szayel, who looks like it’s Christmas eve and he just can’t wait to tear into his presents.

“Hey… is it really okay to leave him there?” Renji asks, peering over his shoulder. He can’t see Ishida because there’s a door between them now, but the intention is there.

“He’ll be fine.” Ichigo might not be, because the compound is winding and complicated, and they can’t get out the way they came in because they fell through the floor to get here.
“You can’t take him to Soul Society,” Renji says after a few more moments. “These two, well, maybe, but that guy is—”

“You did hear him, right?” Ichigo says, grinding his teeth. As though he doesn’t know it’s a bad idea to take Szayel to Soul Society.

“What? Yeah.”

“He talked about Aizen without me saying anything,” he points out.

Renji frowns. Then, after a few seconds, he frowns harder. “Did he?” he asks dubiously. “I can’t remember.”

Ah, Kyouka Suigetsu, then. Ichigo sighs. It was probably a long shot. But at least Renji’s obviously smart enough to know that that, at least, is suspicious all on its own. Even if he can’t accept it until he’s directly confronted, Ichigo knows that each bit of evidence will breed suspicion somewhere, and Renji will be that much harder for Aizen to keep a grip on.

Ichigo shakes it off. At least now, with Renji’s face all scrunched up and troubled, he’s changed the subject. “If you see a map, let me know.”

“Idiot,” sighs Renji. “Why would they have a map?”

“I don’t know! Maybe arrancar get lost, too?” Ichigo snaps back.

In the end, it’s Lilynette who leads them unerringly toward the surface, somehow sensing which branches and turns they need to take to get there. “Your sense of direction sucks,” she informs Ichigo.

He has a pithy and quite rude rejoinder to that, but they emerge into Las Noches proper from beneath a shaded overhang of pale stone. The sun is overhead, lighting everything brightly.

“Whoa,” mutters Lilynette, all insults forgotten.

Ichigo’s still not sure how it works that there’s one sun and it hangs specifically over Las Noches, unseen from outside, but whatever Aizen’s illusion is doing, it’s top notch.

Starrk follows Lilynette’s gaze up. He doesn’t say anything, but there’s a hesitation in his footsteps right behind Ichigo when he looks upon it.

“Huh,” says Renji. “I didn’t know there was any sun here at all. I’m pretty sure all our lectures said it was only a moon—”

“The sun’s artificial, Renji-san,” Orihime tells him. “It’s an illusion—” and then, just as quickly, she begins to tell him about how the moon is in the opposite part of its cycle to whatever the moon is doing in the living world. Ichigo tunes it out when she gets to a rambling argument with herself about whether or not the moon in Hueco Mundo exhibits any control over the tides in the living world.

Ichigo can’t sense the next person he’s looking for through the ambient reiatsu, and he looks over at Orihime.

“Ah… Nel?” she asks.

He nods and she points. Las Noches isn’t exactly a peaceful city, what with being filled with
arrancar in various states of murderousness, but Ichigo is a little surprised that they end up
travelling toward the angry shrieking rather than away from it.

They almost walk into Neliel, who is coming out through a nearby door. It’s still cracked open
behind her, but Ichigo can’t see what’s in there.

She’s an adult here, tall and graceful with her green hair tumbling over her shoulders. Ichigo can’t
help the strange and unsettled nostalgia that comes over him looking at her. Here, Nel is whole,
straight-spined with her mask gleaming and perched in her hair like she’s just pulled it up and out
of the way. But when Ichigo thinks of Neliel, he remembers her stuck in her reduced form most of
the time, trapped behind the developmental distance of a very young child. He can’t quite reconcile
the two, even knowing her story.

Looking at her now, he wants to know what might have happened, had she been allowed to
continue growing like this.

“Oh!” she says in surprise, touching one hand to her chest. Whether she has a heart to calm is a
matter for some debate.

“Hello? I’m not sure you should be here, you know.” Her brow furrows.

Behind her, a voice gives a wordless frustrated screech, and she winces at the noise. She holds up
one hand to indicate that they should wait a moment, then turns back to the doorway and sticks her
head in.

“I have no interest in killing animals. If you want to die like a warrior,” she says in her sweet,
incongruous voice, “you should try living like one.”

"We’re already dead, you dumb bitch!” snaps the voice right back, a raw scary counterpoint to the
rough scrape of metal on stone, and Ichigo finally recognises it.

Oh.

Right.

Neliel gives an exasperated sigh, turns back to them, and closes the door behind her. There must be
more than one person in there, because there’s a yelp of pain and more growled cursing.

Muffled through the door, Ichigo hears somebody snap, “Don’t think we’re on the same level—!”
The rest isn’t discernable.

“Sorry, was there something you needed? I’m not really sure you should be here…” Nelie l taps her
lip thoughtfully. Her expression is concerned, but her eyes are huge and her face is --

“Haaaah,” murmurs Orihime, who is trying, and plainly failing, to contain herself.

Yeah, that.

Chad shares a look with her and nods solemnly. “Mm.”

Even as an adult arrancar, Nel is all kinds of adorable.

She’s also a lot easier to talk to than Szayel. Ichigo glances toward Lilynette, who is assessing her
with big bright eyes.

“We’re trying to rescue a friend,” Ichigo says, scratching the back of his neck. “It’s kind of
complicated…”

She frowns, but gently persuades them all into a room full of extremely white cushions and a low table. Ichigo doesn’t recognise it, but he hasn’t really explored everywhere in Las Noches even in his original time line. None of them really sits down, except Starrk, who ignores everybody standing awkwardly and burrows into a cushion posthaste.

Shifting on his toes, Ichigo launches into an explanation from the top. He likes Nel, and more than that, he respects Nel. She deserves to know as much as he can tell her about what’s really going on. It takes him a while to provide enough context to make the story meaningful to her.

“Hmm,” she says, when he’s finished explaining. “That’s pretty bad for you guys… I don’t think we should fight you.” That’s a hell of a relief, really. “But I don’t think I should betray Aizen-sama like that…”

She rubs her chin, looking troubled.

The door into the room explodes inwards and rebounds against the wall. Renji twitches wildly and Orihime’s fingers fly to her temples. Starrk makes a soft, annoyed noise from where he's basically napping.

“You idiot, did you miss the part where they’re invading soul society?” Nnoitra leans in, ducking beneath the frame because he’s at least half a foot taller than its arch. His dark hair falls forward in a curtain.

Even though he knew from the yelling earlier that he was there, Ichigo almost flinches at the sight of him. Orihime, too, shifts on her feet. Nel catches the movement, looks at them, glances back at Nnoitra.

Her eyes narrow – at Ichigo, not at Nnoitra. Ichigo can feel parts of himself coiling up with tension. That’s… not good.

Meanwhile, Nnoitra’s smile takes up roughly a third of his face and it is awful. “TESLA,” he bellows over his shoulder and into the corridor behind him. "WE’RE INVADING SOUL SOCIETY."

Ichigo opens his mouth to say ‘Shit, no,’ but then closes it again.

Because… if he does say no, there’s every chance that Nnoitra will march right back to Aizen, reveal everything, and make any attempt at a plan completely futile.

He gets that Aizen will know eventually, and probably has systems in place to keep an eye on his interests in Las Noches. But even the insane genius of Kurosaki struggled to track them in Hueco Mundo, and Aizen’s genius has always been less about the experiments and technology and more about the human element. He’s betting there’s a pretty hefty delay between something happening in Las Noches and Aizen finding out about it all the way in Soul Society.

Ichigo narrows his eyes. He only fought Nnoitra the once in their previous time line, but one fight is more than enough to know that Nnoitra is probably clever enough to recognise this much and certainly enough of an asshole to act on it.

So Ichigo shifts his hand, reaching for Zangetsu’s hilt.

Nel shifts on her feet too, not quite going for her sword. Not yet.
Ichigo stops.

At this time, these two are still on the same side. Nel will fight to defend Nnoitra, both because she thinks it’s right and because it’ll piss him off. She has no particular loyalty to Ichigo.

_Shit._

Distantly, Ichigo hears a steady, polite voice: “I’d be happy to invade anywhere you like with you, Nnoitra-sama. There’s bound to be some shinigami worthy of your weapon…”

Ichigo shares a sideways look with Chad and Orihime.

It is mostly a look of blind panic.

_Help_, he thinks, and both of them give him blank, slightly worried looks back.

There is really no helping this.

Nel’s expression contorts, and she glances at Ichigo and then toward the other espada again.

“Nnoitra…”

“What?” He barks, turning back toward her. His smile twists at the edges until it’s more of a toothy sneer. “Rescuing some shitty damsel isn’t a good enough _reason_ for you to fight?”

As if that’s why he wants to go. Neliel shakes her head, solemn and repressive, but in the end it is extremely clear that Nnoitra will do whatever the hell Nnoitra feels like.

“At least if he’s coming with us we can aim him at a target..?” Orihime suggests uncertainly, voice low.

“…there’s _no_ target in Soul Society that you should aim him at,” says Renji, strained and through his teeth. Ichigo really hadn’t considered how much Renji would be able to feel the reiatsu in a place like this. Both Nel and Nnoitra are orders of magnitude scarier than Szayel in terms of raw power, and Nnoitra’s reiatsu is particularly hostile.

“At least he won’t kill anyone too weak to fight,” Chad offers. He doesn’t sound that optimistic either.

Ichigo is inclined to agree with Renji, though. Nowhere in Soul Society deserves Nnoitra. In fact, he’s not completely sold on the idea that _Hueco Mundo_ deserves Nnoitra. Right now, he's talking quietly -- and, Ichigo thinks, threateningly -- to his fraccion and not paying the rest of them the slightest attention. He must know they can't really stop him coming along. Ichigo grinds his teeth.

“Aizen-sama,” says Nel slowly, soft and considered. Ichigo twitches. He doesn't like hearing Aizen’s name with the honorific. “Is not good for us here. Many of us have only come to understand now that we’ve removed our masks, which was possible only with his assistance, but…”

“But?” Orihime prompts when her pause lasts a little longer than what’s polite.

“Mmm,” Neliel shakes her head, sending waves of green hair tumbling over her shoulders. “Aizen Sousuke is a shinigami. He isn’t equipped to rule over hollows. I don’t want to fight him, but… Hueco Mundo should be for the hollows, don’t you think?”

“Neliel-san?”
She shakes her head again. “Just thinking. We can delay reporting on this to him,” she says, shrugging like it’s just that simple to her. "Try not to get Nnoitra killed, Kurosaki-kun.” There’s something almost fond in her expression – in the same distant way a trainer is fond of a small, aggressive dog learning to walk on its hind legs. “He’s an idiot, but I think he might learn one day.”

Ichigo’s not sure how that’s meant to be a good thing – Nnoitra learning sounds like a smarter Nnoitra, which is a singularly ominous thought – but he nods all the same. Honestly, if somebody ends up killing Nnoitra, Ichigo thinks it’ll probably be him. He’s old enough and jaded enough to know that sometimes animals have to be put down.

“Excellent. Ne, ne -- Dondochakka, Pesche and I will be having tea soon. Did you want to stay? I don’t meet new people very often.”

“What,” says Renji.

Nel’s face is guileless and her eyes are big and glossy. “They’re my fraccion,” she tells him, as though that’s actually the thing that’s concerning Renji.

Ichigo thinks that having tea with Nel might be a lot like playing tea party with Yuzu, but about a million times more dangerous. Throwing Pesche and Dondochakka in…

“Ah, I think I have to talk to Szayel-san about how we’re getting to S–”

“I’d love to,” says Orihime immediately, and Nel’s whole face brightens in response.

“We’d be happy to have you.”

“Oh, um. Where did I…” Orihime begins digging through her many, many pockets until she produces from somewhere a tin of home-made biscuits. “Ahh, I knew I had them somewhere!”

Ichigo isn’t going to ask why, when packing for Hueco Mundo, Orihime thought those might be necessary. He doesn’t want to know.

Nel claps excitedly, beaming.

“Did you want to come, Renji-san?” Orihime asks politely over her shoulder.

Renji seems distinctly wrong-footed. Ichigo can see his fingers flexing, and he shifts his weight from his heels to the balls of his feet and back. “Um,” he says. He looks sideways at Ichigo.

“It’s fine if you want to,” Ichigo prompts. Nel’s dangerous but not volatile, and Orihime won’t let anything happen to them. Nel’s fraccion are basically a circus, but again, not really a threat.

“Come on,” Orihime says when Renji remains silent in the face of this invitation to politely sit down to tea with a hollow. She grabs him by the arm and propels him along.

For Renji’s sake, Ichigo hopes he doesn’t try to eat those biscuits.

Chapter End Notes

1. NEW FRIENDS ARE SO IMPORTANT.
2. The real enemy here is Orihime's cooking.
3. We are now caught up to what is actually written of this story.

End Notes

This story is already quite long and is slated to be very self indulgent. There's not much romance and the plot kind of runs away with it (along with everything else). Please let me know if there's something you particularly liked? On the other hand if you dislike it, you're under no obligation to keep reading and you can just leave. I won't mind. ;)

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