Wanderlust

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Summary

“You’re just like my brother,” Kukaku tells him, eyes full of quiet empathy when she catches Ichigo sneaking out of the Shiba house in the middle of the night yet again, too tired to train but too restless to sleep with thoughts of Rukia’s execution plaguing him and the foreign night wind coaxing him outside. “You want to run with the wind.”

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own anything from Bleach.

I have absolutely no idea where this came from but I’m hoping to keep it short, so four or five chapters at most. There’s no huge plot involved like my other Bleach fics; just something small that hopped into my brain and won’t stop bouncing around.
Chapter 1

Even when he was just a kid, Ichigo has never been able to stay still. For a while, when his mom was alive, he could push that itch to the back of his mind and concentrate on staying in one place. He loved his mother more than anything in the world, and he knew that it would upset her if he went through with the quicksilver thoughts of just picking a direction and taking off without looking back.

Then his mother dies but Ichigo still has to bite down on the desire to go where the wind takes him because his father is an idiot and his sisters need someone responsible to look after them. That someone is Ichigo; Yuzu and Karin are his sisters after all, five years old and still so young, and no matter what anyone says, it is Ichigo’s fault that their family’s heart is dead.

So Ichigo satisfies his itchy feet with even more karate lessons, and he starts hitting back when people pick on him and shove him around because of his hair or his school marks or a hundred other redundant reasons. The adrenaline from those fights keeps most of him occupied.

He stops crying and begins helping, keeping their insane father in line, doing the grocery shopping, and taking over most of the housework until Yuzu and Karin are old enough to insist on sharing a few chores with him as well.

Ichigo reluctantly lets them (but not until they both turn nine and their continuous nagging finally makes him cave) but he is also determined to be a good big brother so he always remembers to walk his sisters to and from school, he assists them as best he can when they get stumped over a math problem or English word tense, he finds a good soccer club for Karin and helps her sign up for it when he catches her staring enviously at a group of kids kicking a ball around, and he puts aside enough time to go over every single recipe in the cookbook with Yuzu when she tells him that she wants to learn how to cook but can’t understand all the measurements and a few of the longer words teaching her how. He also supervises her by moving his homework into the kitchen because even at nine with a stool under her feet, she can’t quite reach all the knobs on the stove, and Ichigo isn’t going to risk letting her cut herself with a knife or something equally terrifying just because he isn’t there to make sure she’s safe.

On the side, he also quadruple-checks every person he comes across to teach himself how to distinguish between ghosts and humans, and if that means he has to stare a little longer at some people and they shoot him weird looks in return, giving him a wide berth and hurrying away, he thinks it’s a small price to pay for not making another mistake and costing someone else their life.

And only at night does he open the window and sit on the ledge, legs swinging absently over the side as he allows himself to stare down the long stretch of road and wonder where it would lead if he continues walking down it straight out of town and beyond.
He never tells anyone because he knows it’s a bit strange, this yearning to travel, to wander the roads without care, tied to nothing but the direction of the winds.

But he’s used to ignoring the gnawing ache in his chest so it’s an easy enough matter to push aside. He focuses on getting good grades instead, tucks his sisters into bed, devotedly reads them bedtime stories until they turn eight, and silently wonders if his father still-blames him for Kurosaki Masaki’s death when the man continuously wakes him up with flying kicks or greets him at the door with out-of-the-blue punches.

He doesn’t complain or whine or bawl about it though, and the only thing he regrets about this decision is the fact that Karin follows suit and copies him, which means he has to keep an extra eye on her so that he can bandage all the scrapes she comes home from soccer with. In turn, she watches him like a hawk when he goes to pick them up from school, and drags him into the bathroom to dab antiseptic on the bloodied knuckles that he acquires from numerous scuffles in and out of school.

They have a silent agreement that Yuzu – kindest, sweetest, and most innocent of the three of them – is never to find out because neither of them can stand making her worry or cry. Telling their father is something they roll their eyes at because the man is already busy enough with singlehandedly running the family clinic, not to mention... well, it’s their father, enough said.

And this is how they grow up, month by month, year by year. Ichigo’s father gets crazier (if that’s at all possible), Yuzu becomes a better cook than anyone Ichigo knows, Karin’s a natural soccer player, and Ichigo pulls mostly A’s at school, gets into more fights than he can count (and cows most of the bullies and small-time yakuza who come after him), and pretends he doesn’t hear the wind enticing him with a siren’s call or the horizon beckoning him with the expanse of a sky that goes on forever.

Then Rukia appears, kicking off the biggest series of death-defying events to happen to any one person that Ichigo has ever even read about in adventure novels. He worries himself sick over his sisters and his father and his friends, and he runs around killing Hollows and training his ass off and trying to understand everything happening around him because Urahara is a cryptic bastard who probably secretly enjoys Ichigo’s clueless floundering.

However, all this serves to distract Ichigo from the incessant longing tugging at him, and for a long while, it’s enough to turn his eyes away from the road and the wind and concentrate on saving Rukia instead.

It’s when they’re staying at the Shiba house, lying low and getting stronger as they prepare to invade Seireitei, when Ichigo finds someone who finally sees and, more importantly, understands.
“You’re just like my brother,” Kukaku tells him, eyes full of quiet empathy when she catches Ichigo sneaking out of the Shiba house in the middle of the night yet again, too tired to train but too restless to sleep with thoughts of Rukia’s execution plaguing him and the foreign night wind coaxing him outside. “You want to run with the wind.”

That night, Ichigo sits on the roof beside Kukaku as she tells him about Shiba Kaien and his refusal to stay within the walls of Seireitei, choosing instead to train on the road and travel where he pleased.

“Ganju and I went with him, of course,” Kukaku says with a wistful smile. “We preferred it too, not being caged or tied to anything. The thing about most Shibas is that we all have itchy feet, at least until we find something worth settling down for. For me and Ganju, it’s always been Kaien. He goes, we follow, and we had fun. Those times spent travelling were the best.”

Ichigo hesitates, glancing at the house below them and the walls of Seireitei in the far distance. “But he eventually became a lieutenant, right? What changed?”

Kukaku snorts and takes a swig of her sake. “He found something worth staying for. We were out fighting some Hollows when a squad of Shinigami swooped in to save the day, led by a captain – Ukitake Juushirou, head of the Thirteenth Division.”

She pauses, tilting her head back to stare idly up at the moon hanging in the sky. “I never did find out what Ukitake-san said to Kaien but whatever it was, it was enough to send Kaien back to Seireitei. He applied for the Academy and said his goal was to enter the Thirteenth Division and work under its captain. Kaien respected Ukitake-san more than anyone else in the world.”

Ichigo isn’t sure but he wonders if there’s some resentment on Kukaku’s part over the fact that Kaien serving in the Gotei 13 ultimately resulted in her brother’s death. Then again, she probably understood the dangers, that there would have always been a day when Kaien wouldn't come home alive.

“Eventually, other things tied him down as well,” Kukaku continues when Ichigo remains silent. “Miyako was one, his wife. His entire squad, obviously. And then there was that protégé of his.”

Rukia, Ichigo’s mind supplies, recalling the sad tale that the female Shinigami had revealed to him. Still, he says nothing for a long while, simply sitting beside Kukaku and listening to the distant sounds of night time in Soul Society.
“Do you think... Do you think I’m a Shiba?” He rushes out in a hushed voice many minutes later. “I mean- I know humans and Shinigami probably aren’t supposed to- well. But maybe- an ancestor or something-”

Kukaku looks at him with something akin to pity, but mostly with anger that he instinctively knows isn’t directed at him. “...Maybe. I’ll tell you one thing – you look far too much like Kaien not to have some Shiba blood in you.” She grins, but there’s little humour in the expression. “And you inherited the worst of our wanderlust. Lucky you.”

Ichigo blinks, remembering the empty pang in his heart and the pull of the open road for almost his entire life. He takes in the way Kukaku looks like she understands when no one else, not even his family, has ever even glimpsed what he feels, and for just a moment, Ichigo doesn’t think he has ever loved anyone more, his mother included.

They don’t talk about this again for the rest of the time Ichigo and his friends stay at the Shiba house, but on nights when he can’t sleep, Kukaku joins him outside and shows him some of the secrets hidden away in the forests out back. The one that stands out in his mind is the time she shows him the clear, calm lake in an eerily beautiful clearing, just in time to watch the surrounding Queen of the Nights bloom and wither within hours.

This only serves to make Ichigo wonder what other phenomenal sights are out there for him to see if only he could just-

But he can’t, and that’s the entire point. Besides, his friends are more important than waltzing off to see the world, and Ichigo’s always been good at putting his responsibilities before his wants. He’s been doing it for as long as he remembers after all.

So Ichigo shoves aside the tempting whispers of travelling, and storms Seireitei instead where he battles Shinigami after Shinigami, all to save a girl he’s barely known for a handful of months, but who is also far too accepting of her own death for his liking. Her brother just pisses him off even more so Ichigo doesn't regret throwing everything he has at Byakuya and pounding some common big-brother sense into the guy.

And then, because life just likes to screw with him more than anyone else, Aizen decides to reveal his game plan of three-world domination (and seriously, what the fuck is wrong with these Shinigami that they can be blind enough to not notice one of their own people plotting chaos and World War III behind their backs for centuries?), and Ichigo can only watch as the madman retreats through a Garganta, smirking all the way. Ichigo’s gut tells him that a life-changing war is on the horizon, and he’s going to be smack in the middle of it.
But for a short while after that, everything returns to normal. Ichigo and his friends go back to school, Inoue is slightly less ditzy (in an exasperatingly endearing sort of way) than before, Chad still has Ichigo’s back, and Ishida complains about hanging out with them when everyone and their grandma knows he doesn't mean a word of it.

And Ichigo continues keeping up with his grades, kills the random Hollow that threatens his father or sisters, dreams of a cackling black-and-yellow-eyed monster living inside him, and disregards the call of the wind and the agitation of his own soul.

Their relative peace is interrupted once more when Arrancar start showing up, and Ichigo has no choice but to follow Hirako Shinji to his base and train to get stronger. He spares a few seconds to resent Urahara for not explaining things clearly to him but soon dismisses this in favour of focusing on his inner Hollow and learning how to control it.

And then Inoue gets kidnapped, and Ichigo has never been angrier when the Gotei 13 refuses to send a rescue team for her, the old man even going so far as to accuse her of betrayal. Ichigo can’t possibly be any more disgusted than he already is; for an organization who can’t even pick out a real betrayal in their own midst, he can’t believe they have the gall to accuse someone of the same thing without any proof whatsoever.

So Ichigo does what he does best – he forges on by himself, makes his own plans and heads off to Hueco Mundo with his friends tagging along to save Inoue. When it comes to dealing with the Shinigami, he’s learnt that if he wants anything done, he has to do it himself because the Gotei 13 in general is far too big a fan of sitting back and waiting to see what happens before retaliating when it might already be too late.

Ichigo nearly dies several times, does sort of die at Ulquiorra’s hands (who is so miserably lonely and doesn't even know it that even Ichigo sympathizes just a little), but he’s a man on a mission so he kills what needs to be killed and defeats the rest through desperate skill and sheer willpower, never letting up until finally, finally, the Shinigami show up to lend a hand.

He is ushered back to the Human World by Unohana and upon everyone else’s urging, where Aizen boasts of his plans and fends off captain-class Shinigami like he’s playing with children.

And later, much later, Ichigo will wonder why the older Shinigami, Unohana and Kyouraku and even Hirako, all refuse to release their Bankai, because clearly, Aizen doesn't expect them to, knows they won’t because of their pride or their laws or their decades of complacency, and Ichigo can’t help thinking that the war would end that much faster if all the captains simply get their acts together and throw everything they have at Aizen Sousuke. Surely not even a wannabe-god can stand up to the
entire combined might of the Gotei 13 elite, and it certainly wouldn’t hurt for them to at least try.

But they don’t, and in the middle of a war, Ichigo doesn't have time to think about such things, so when his father (his father, for fuck’s sake, and everything Kukaku didn't say makes a whole lot more sense) whisks him away and tells him that he has to learn the Final Getsuga Tenshou to win the war, Ichigo agrees even though he’s not quite certain what this attack entails. But it’s his dad who suggests it, and even though the man will never win Father of the Year, and has lied to him and played the fool even when Ichigo was lost in a world of gods and monsters (it leaves a bitter tang in his mouth), it’s still his dad so surely it can’t be that bad.

As it turns out, it is that bad. Ichigo has to pay the ultimate price to save three worlds (nothing worth having ever comes cheap), and he ends up losing all his powers, and the ache in his soul suddenly grows a hundredfold.

Despite saving his hometown and Soul Society and everyone in both, Ichigo thinks, deep in his heart, that he might just hate everyone a little bit. He doesn't understand why it takes a teenager who doesn't really understand the full extent of his powers to save the day when a bunch of people who have centuries more experience than he does can’t.

Ichigo can’t wallow in self-pity forever though, and he doesn't want to worry his sisters more than he already has, so eventually, he drags himself out of bed, nails his usual scowl on his face, goes back to school, and pretends that everyone isn’t tiptoeing around him like he’s made of glass and one word of Shinigami or Hollow is going to make him break down in tears.

He hates it though. He’s never hated anything more, the way Ishida and Inoue and even Chad on occasion look at him with mournful pitying looks, the way they run off to deal with Hollows without even mentioning it in passing to him because he obviously can’t do anything about them anymore, the way none of his Shinigami friends or allies come to visit, the way not even the Visored have stopped by for a chat when once they had welcomed him into their fold with open arms, the way Urahara is infuriatingly evasive about their whereabouts and always seems like he can’t wait for Ichigo to leave his shop when Ichigo swings by to visit him because he is that goddamn lonely.

All in all, Ichigo hates being useless because at least when he was useful, people seemed to like having him around.

Even his family is drifting away from him. Now that his father’s secret is out in the open, the man spends more time with Urahara and even Ishida’s old man, and while Ichigo’s mind says that he shouldn’t begrudge his dad for wanting to socialize with old friends, his heart wants to plant a fist through a wall because at least that pain will distract him from the festering bitterness coiled in his chest.
And his sisters are growing up too, and Ichigo can’t be happier for them (though he sometimes wonders why they aren’t like him, why they both seem perfectly happy to stay put). Yuzu has made more friends, and Ichigo delights in scaring the crap out of the boys who are beginning to sniff around his oblivious sister. She still takes time to ask after Ichigo, if he’s sleeping well, if he’s eating enough, and she fusses over him in a way that makes him smile and lie and say yes to both because it’s Yuzu.

Karin on the other hand...

The first time he catches Karin slipping out of Urahara’s shop, Ichigo takes off down the road and runs and runs and runs until he can’t run anymore because he knows that if had stayed, he would’ve done something he would regret, like giving Karin the third degree or yelling at Urahara until the man probably cracks up with laughter at Ichigo’s childish temper tantrum because the shopkeeper can be that much of an asshole.

When he finally drags himself home and confronts Karin about it, she starts out as vague as Ichigo both expects and doesn’t expect (because his sisters have never been anything but open and honest with him), and perhaps Karin sees the flash of hurt that Ichigo can’t quite suppress because she hastily tacks on that she’s not doing anything bad, and nor is Urahara making her do anything she doesn’t want to.

“I’m just learning more about Hollows, Ichi-nii, I promise it’s nothing dangerous,” Karin tells him, and then tinges pink in a way that Ichigo has never seen before. “And- um- I sometimes go to Soul Society for a little while. You know, ’cause Kukaku-san and Ganju-san are there.”

Ichigo’s eyes widen at this but he bites back the ‘you shouldn't go there’ that’s at the tip of his tongue because there’s no reason for her to not go, and they do have family up there after all.

So, “Okay,” He says quietly, tousling her hair and letting her give him a hug before he leaves. He’s back in his own room before he wonders why she was blushing if she’s only travelling to Soul Society to visit family.

Still, Karin’s a growing girl, a teenager now, and all teenagers have things they don’t want to tell anyone else about. Ichigo lets it be.

He lets it be and pretends he doesn't usually have the house to himself most of the time now. He pretends he doesn't notice the way Inoue, Ishida, and Chad stop whispering between themselves
whenever he approaches them but seem to be okay with continuing their conversation if it’s Tatsuki, Mizuiro, or Keigo instead. He pretends they don’t try to change the subject as fast as possible whenever he tries to ask after Rukia or Renji or any of the other Shinigami in Soul Society. He pretends he doesn’t have trouble sleeping, and pretends his dreams aren’t filled with blood and death and murderous monsters.

He pretends and pretends until he looks out the window one night at an empty street and a sky that stretches on forever, and he hears the winds singing to him, louder and stronger than ever before.

And he wonders, why not?

Why can’t he do what he wants for once? He has no responsibilities anymore. He’s almost finished his final year of high school. His sisters don’t really need him anymore. He sees more of his books than his friends these days. His father, when the man is around, watches his every movement as if he thinks that Ichigo is on the verge of a meltdown via Shinigami withdrawal, and he hasn’t even heard from his Shinigami friends since he and Rukia said goodbye.

So really, there’s nothing stopping him from taking off as soon as he finishes the year. Granted, under Japanese law, he’s not a legal adult until he turns twenty, but eighteen-almost-nineteen is close enough, not to mention he very much doubts his father would go to the trouble of filing a missing persons report for him anyway; Ichigo has always been able to take care of himself. He’s raised himself and helped raise his sisters since he was nine years old.

Besides, being known as the top fighter in all of Karakura has its perks. Ichigo has fought against everything from school bullies to shady thugs, and he knows the underground network of criminal activity in this town better than he probably should. Even just off the top of his head, he knows three different people – excluding Mizuiro who might or might not try to stop him – who can sell him decent fake Ids in case he ever needs them.

And for the first time since the end of the Winter War, Ichigo smiles, anticipation and excitement welling up inside him as he realizes that he no longer has to stay.

~W~

Ichigo throws himself into his end-of-year exams with no less resolve to do well than usual but more fervour than all the years before combined, determined to finish his schooling with the highest marks possible. His friends have begun filling out applications for universities or colleges, and while Ichigo dutifully fills out his own fair share, he also knows that it’s just for show; he’s not continuing his education, at least not immediately afterwards.
Over a few dinners, his dad actually takes the time to ask after Ichigo’s future education, so Ichigo waves a few school applications in the man’s face without really saying anything at all substantial, but it satisfies his father, makes his sisters beam proudly, creates a smokescreen for Ichigo’s real plans, and everyone’s happy.

When the final grades are posted, Ichigo smirks widely at the looks of shock on his classmates’ faces when they find out that the ‘orange-haired delinquent’ has secured the second highest mark in their entire graduating class, booting Inoue down to third place and only beaten out by Ishida for the top spot and, of course, valedictorian. Ichigo’s never been a fan of making speeches anyway.

The graduation ceremony comes as something of a surprise because not only are his sisters and father sitting in the audience, with Ishida’s old man settled stiffly beside Isshin, Ichigo also spots Urahara and Tessai – both wearing normal modern-day clothes – a row behind them, and even Jinta and Ururu wave at him from beside Yuzu and Karin (actually, the waving is just Ururu).

Ichigo mentally shakes his head as his name is called and he gets to his feet. Of course, they are here for the others. After all, he’s overheard from snippets of murmured conversations that Tessai has been helping Chad train, and Urahara is still overseeing Inoue’s progress with her spirits. Ichigo even has a hunch that Tatsuki, Mizuiro, and even Keigo have been over at the shop more than a few times.

So Ichigo is borderline shocked when Urahara approaches him with a winning smile after Yuzu and Karin have congratulated him, and his father has slapped him on the back with a broad grin and a slightly awkward ‘you did well’.

“Congratulations on your successful graduation, Kurosaki-san,” Urahara chirps cheerfully, and Ichigo has no idea what to make of the glint of fond, genuine pride in the shopkeeper’s eyes. “I wish you all the luck in your future endeavours.”

The words sound somewhat cliché and almost as if Urahara has rehearsed them in front of the bathroom mirror several times before coming today to deliver them, but they ring clear with sincerity, and it’s already more than Isshin has said, so Ichigo is understandably taken aback.

Perhaps some of his astonishment creeps through the cracks and into his typical scowl – not to mention Urahara is more perceptive than anyone Ichigo knows – because the even smile on the shopkeeper’s face falters a little and becomes more puzzled. “Kurosaki-san? Are you alright?”
Ichigo hastily fumbles for a reply, mildly embarrassed. “Uh, yeah, thanks. I mean, thanks for- for the... er, good wishes. I just didn't expect it, that’s all.”

Something sharpens in Urahara’s gaze, grey eyes narrowing and flitting briefly over to Isshin before one hand reaches up to tug down his striped hat in an automatic gesture. Ichigo swears he hears the shopkeeper mutter something that sounds confusingly like ‘Isshin-san, you fool’, but that can’t be right.

And then Urahara looks up again, all sly smiles and shrewd eyes, and he suggests, “You should come over more often, Kurosaki-san. We never see you anymore.”

This only serves to perplex Ichigo even more because he can barely remember the last time someone has invited him into Shinigami domain, or actively wants him there at all when he shows up unannounced, and why would they want to anyway? He’s useless without his powers.

“Uh, I’ll think about it,” He agrees in stilted tones, and then scoots off before Urahara can throw out anymore bewildering offers. Even as Ichigo slips outside though, he can feel the shopkeeper’s gaze on his back until he turns a corner.

It doesn't really matter, he later decides in the privacy of his room. Urahara was most likely extending an invitation out of sympathetic politeness after the way Ichigo accidentally implies that his father has been less than fatherly (though why anyone would be surprised by this is beyond him).

Besides, Ichigo will be gone soon anyway.

He chooses to wait another week before leaving the day after. Karin has a soccer camp to go to for the next seven days, and Yuzu is bouncing around making pies for a five-day-long bake sale, and while Ichigo has considered simply leaving a note before taking off, he doesn't really want to do that to his sisters. Undoubtedly, they’ll be upset once they find out that he has chosen to travel instead of attending university, but it isn’t as if they can really stop him, especially since he has kept it secret until the last minute.

So, in the following week, Ichigo meticulously triple-checks everything he wants to bring with him. He’s decided on taking only one duffel bag filled with clothes, money, necessary toiletries, a book, and some dry foods, as well as his identification, both real and fake. He also goes down to the local drugstore and picks out a few maps of various areas in Japan but he knows that he probably won’t look at them. Travelling without a destination in mind is so much more fun.
This only occupies him for two days at most, and by the third day, his knee is jittering up and down whenever he sits, his hands won’t stay still, and he spends more and more time strolling up and down the streets of Karakura, always finding it harder to turn back each day when the sun sets.

It’s different now than before, back when he didn't allow himself more than a fleeting thought of leaving. Now, leaving is a very real possibility, about to turn into reality in a few days’ time, and he can barely stand it as he waits for each minute to tick by.

By the time Thursday evening rolls around and Karin sends him a text message to tell him that she’s almost home, Ichigo has all but worn a hole in his carpet. Yuzu is over at a friend’s house while his dad is finished work for the day and has already skipped off to Urahara’s place. Ichigo peers out the window, frowns at the darkening sky, and grabs the car keys before leaving the house to go pick up Karin.

As it turns out, things don’t go the way Ichigo imagines. He is greeted with a grin and a self-conscious I’m-a-teenager-but-you’re-my-favourite-big-brother hug but before he can ask her how her soccer camp went, Karin scratches her cheek and confesses, “Actually, Ichi-nii, I have other plans tonight. Can you drop me off at Urahara-san’s?”

Ichigo blinks at her, stomach twisting uncomfortably. “Why? Tired of your big brother already?”

Karin huffs and thumps him good-naturedly on the arm. “Of course not, but-” She clears her throat, blushing like she had that first and only time Ichigo asked her about her dealings in the supernatural. She takes a steadying breath before blurring out, “Ichi-nii, I have a boyfriend. Sort of.”

She cringes like she expects him to start yelling. Ichigo might’ve if he doesn’t feel so numb.

“Boyfriend?” He repeats slowly, and he didn't graduate from Karakura High as the second smartest guy for nothing. “This boyfriend wouldn't happen to be a Shinigami, would he?”

Karin shuffles in place but nods staunchly. “It’s- I mean, it’s a recent thing. We were just friends before, but you know, I’ll be fourteen in a month, and we’re not doing anything- you know. We’re just going on- a date. Just dinner. Today. Like, with friends, so it’s not even a real date.”
Ichigo takes a deep breath. “Who is he?”

Karin bites her lip. “Toshiro-kun.”

Ichigo grits his teeth. “Hitsugaya Toshiro?”

Karin nods, face beet red.

Ichigo’s jaw clenches harder. “And he didn't come see me about this... development because...?”

Karin rubs the back of her head, looking sheepish and cautiously tentative now. “Oh, well, Goat-Face gave the okay, and we just didn't- I mean everyone thought we shouldn't remind you of-”

*Everyone thought we shouldn't remind you of everything you’ve lost.*

Ichigo closes his eyes. Screws them shut and tries not to scream out loud. *Goat-Face* knew, and Ichigo didn’t? Since when has Karin or even Yuzu ever gone to their father first before him? Why can’t anyone see that it is exactly because everybody keeps everything from him that he feels that loss all the more? To him, it isn’t just his powers that he has lost. He has lost his family, his friends, even his self-proclaimed rivals and teachers and allies.

“Ichi-nii?”

Ichigo keeps his eyes closed. “Does... Yuzu know?” Yuzu, who can only see blurry images of Shinigami at best.

“Um, yeah. She thought it was- cute.”

Ichigo opens his eyes and starts the car.

He loves his sisters more than anything in the world, loves his father even, and cares about his
friends, would die for them, would kill for them, \textit{has} killed for them, but-

“I’ll drop you off at Urahara-san’s.”

-but right now, he can’t bear to look at any of them.

\textit{~W~}

Karin is flustered and says she’s sorry even though Ichigo can tell that she’s not quite sure which part she’s apologizing for. Ichigo pastes a smile on his face and waves her out of the car, tells her it’s fine and jokes (half-jokes) that the next time he sees Toshiro, the captain will receive at least a broken nose, and Karin smiles, looking relieved before she drops a kiss on his cheek and darts towards the shop.

Ichigo watches until she reaches the door where Urahara – clearly in a Gigai – opens it and welcomes her inside with a practiced bow and a flap of his fan. The shopkeeper turns to look at Ichigo almost expectantly but Ichigo only nods once before peeling away from the shop.

If he goes in there when his emotions are so tangled with anger and resentment and hurt, he doesn't know what he'll do but it probably won’t be pretty.

In the end, Ichigo eats his dinner alone. Sometime between boiling water for his instant ramen and putting Karin’s dirty clothes in the washing machine, Yuzu phones home and begs permission to stay over at her friend’s house for a sleepover because they’re having some sort of movie marathon. Ichigo doesn’t have the heart to say no.

Isshin doesn't even call, but Ichigo’s used to it, so he puts away the two other instant ramen he had previously set out and settles down at the dinner table to scarf down his own meal.

By the time he’s showered and is getting ready for bed, the house is still as empty as it was before.

His lips thin as his gaze falls on his duffel bag. He has set his alarm clock for four in the morning, intent on taking the first bus out of Karakura, and he’s not about to change his plans just because his family wasn’t home for him to tell them said plans. It’s not exactly their fault that they all have other things to do since Ichigo hasn’t told them that he has something to tell them at all. Really,
it’s his own fault for not saying anything earlier.

Still, the thoughts sit like lead in his stomach.

~W~

When he wakes up with the sun the next day, Ichigo isn’t surprised to find the house still vacant of everyone save himself. It doesn’t hurt as much as last night though, especially when he’s brushing his teeth and the first rays of sunshine wash over him through the window.

_It’s today_, Ichigo thinks with a sudden rush of exhilaration. _I can finally leave today._

He flies through the rest of his morning routine, throws on a pair of comfortable jeans and a shirt, and charges downstairs to wolf down a bowl of cereal. He pauses only long enough to tear out a page from a spare notepad and actually think about what he wants to write before penning a short message filled with an explanation of where he is going, why he is leaving, tells them not to worry, that he’ll come back sooner or later, and, after a long moment of contemplation, signs it off without adding any apologies.

Because he’s not sorry.

Satisfied, he pins the note to the corner of the fridge that their family has always left notes on before hurrying back up to his room and picking up his duffel bag, stuffing his charger and cell into it as well. He takes one last look at his room, eyes lingering on the Substitute Shinigami badge that he hasn’t even looked at for over a year now and has deliberately left on his desk since last night for someone to retrieve, and then descends the stairs, pulls on his socks, toes on his running shoes, and steps outside, locking the door behind him.

The sound of the click makes him smile.

He steps out onto the quiet street where not a single soul is stirring. He remembers to make a trip to his mother’s grave first, and he tells her that he loves her but that he has to go and he hopes she isn’t too mad at him for it.

And then he leaves.
The road stretches on and on and on, the wind ruffles his hair playfully, and Ichigo’s smile widens in the light of the sunrise as he finally sets off on his journey.

This is everything he has ever wanted.

Later, he takes it as a sign that he has made the right decision in leaving when he doesn't get his first frantic where-are-you until three in the afternoon when he’s in Kyoto exploring Arashiyama and the Tenryuu-ji Temple.

It’s from Yuzu, who calls five times and intersperses the phone calls with two dozen texts, each more hysterical than the last.

Ichigo bites down on a flare of guilt, stares up at the open sky, and knows he can’t go back, not yet. The wind croons contentedly around him and there’s still so much to see. He can’t return to a place where he’ll be restricted, his wings clipped, so he ignores the calls and fires off an ‘I’m fine’ before putting his phone on silent and stuffing it back into his bag.

He doesn't look at it again until nightfall and he’s safely checked into a cheap hostel for the night, legs tired, ceiling fan whirring above him, and feeling happier than he has felt in a long, long time.

Please leave a review on your way out.
Chapter 2

Yuzu finds out that her big brother has left on a Friday afternoon at two-fifty-three pm on the first of April. Years later, she will still remember that exact time and date.

She is at her friend Sora’s house that day, not waking up until ten because they both stayed up late watch reruns of old anime movies until two in the morning. She ends up staying for lunch – or brunch – before Sora helps her bake a cake for Karin as an apology for Yuzu not being home yesterday to welcome her twin sister back from camp.

It’s only two-thirty when they finish but the sky outside is dark grey and ominous, a huge contrast from just that morning’s sunny skies, so Yuzu phones home to ask if Ichigo isn’t too busy to come pick her up.

No one answers.

Yuzu doesn’t find that too strange. Ever since her brother lost his Shinigami powers, Ichigo has started spending more time in his room but, to Yuzu’s relief, he’s gotten better since then. Ichigo could just be out with friends (or, more likely, by himself). Karin and their father usually are as well so both of them not answering the phone isn’t very surprising either. Yuzu tries Ichigo’s cell phone as well, just in case, but he isn’t picking up (which strikes her as just a bit odd but it’s happened on occasion before too). She doesn’t try Karin’s because her sister can’t drive yet, and their father isn’t really worth mentioning (even if that’s a bit mean, and Yuzu silently apologizes in her mind).

Sora lends her an umbrella as rain begins to drizzle down onto the streets and houses, and Yuzu hurries home as quickly as possible, cake box balanced in one hand. It takes her about fifteen minutes.

The house is predictably empty when she unlocks the door and slips inside, shaking out the umbrella on the doorstep before sticking it into the umbrella stand. She hums a light tune as she trots into the kitchen and carefully slips the cake into the fridge before turning to shrug off her slightly damp coat.

Ichigo’s strawberry magnet in the LEAVE A NOTE corner of the fridge catches her eye and makes her stop, mostly because none of them have really left notes for each other since she and Karin turned eleven.
Something cold squeezes Yuzu’s heart for reasons she doesn’t understand. She barely notices her jacket dropping to the ground with a muffled thump as she reaches for what looks like an entire paragraph of writing on the piece of paper that Ichigo has left. Notes have never been this long; they usually consist of ‘out to buy milk’ or ‘went to a friend’s house’ or ‘have to stay late at school for project today; won’t be back for dinner’.

Tentatively, Yuzu takes down the note with suddenly trembling hands, mind racing as she tries to remember if her brother has been especially lonely lately, if he’s been even unhappier than normal (and she hates that there’s a normal for Onii-chan being unhappy nowadays), if she’s made his favourite meal recently.

Her breath freezes in her throat as she reads her brother’s somewhat messy scrawl.

Yuzu, Karin, Goat-Face,

By the time you read this, I’ll be gone. Not gone forever of course, I’ll come back eventually, but I just can’t stay here anymore. I’ve never actually said it but it’s stifling for me to stay in one place for so long, so I’m going to travel around for a while. I don’t really know where but you know I can take care of myself, so don’t worry. I have money, clothes, I know how to fight, and I can work odd jobs when I need to. Karakura just doesn’t feel like home anymore, and with everyone tiptoeing around me with the whole Shinigami issue and having to avoid me whenever they talk about that sort of thing, I figured it would be best for all of us if I left. Yuzu, Karin, I love you both but you’re growing up and you don’t need me to hover over your shoulder all the time and play big brother anymore. Keep dad out of trouble because God knows that idiot can walk into a circus and get thrown out for public disturbance. Karin, remember to tell Toshiro that if he breaks your heart, I’ll break every bone in his body (sorry, I’m playing big brother again, but this is the last time, I promise). And Yuzu, you’ve always been great at taking care of all of us even though you’re the youngest, so just keep doing what you’ve always done but don’t forget to live your life too. I know I’ve been extra difficult to live with for the past two years or so, so I think we’ll all be happier if I get out of your hair for a while and spend some time apart. I’ll return sooner or later, so again, please don’t worry about me, and I’ll see you when I come back.

Ichigo

For a long minute, Yuzu simply cannot understand what she has read. The note may as well be written in German. She scans it again, and then a third time, and still the words won’t sink in.

And then she reads it a fourth time, and when she finishes, something snaps in her chest and she can’t get to her jacket fast enough. She all but rips her coat apart trying to get to her phone, and then she almost drops it before she can speed dial her brother – her only brother in the whole
wide world who is gone – and pray he picks up.

He doesn’t. Yuzu waits and waits, eight, ten, twelve rings before she is directed to voicemail. She leaves a message before she hangs up and calls again, frantically jabbing out several texts and shooting those off as well.

With her cell at her ear and the devastating note now stuffed in her jeans pocket, Yuzu scrambles up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She barrels into Ichigo’s room and throws open his closet and drawers. She’s the one who does most of the laundry these days so she can instantly tell that about a quarter of Ichigo’s clothes are gone.

She tears into the bedside table next, rifling through it in a frenzy and coming up empty. Ichigo has even taken his passport, which means her brother may not even be in Japan any more.

(The voicemail operator comes on again and Yuzu leaves her third message before hanging up, typing another grammar-skewed text and sending it off, and then dialing Ichigo’s cell once more.)

She spins around without any idea what she should do even as she tries to stay calm and think, and then her eyes land on the desk.

Her brother’s Substitute Shinigami badge lies innocently on the wooden surface, and Yuzu doesn’t think she has ever hated anything more.

She is back downstairs and out the door before her next call goes to voicemail again, the badge clutched tightly in one hand as she sprints down the street towards the place that she knows pretty much everyone is gathered at, not caring in the least that she doesn't have shoes, or that she has left the front door wide open, or that the rain is coming down harder than ever. Burglary is the least of her problems right now, and she doesn't care if she catches a cold.

It isn’t fair. It is so very, very unfair, the way Ichigo’s friends have pulled away from him after he has lost his powers, the way Yuzu hasn’t seen Rukia in over two years, and barely even sees Chad or Tatsuki or Ishida or Inoue these days, and almost never with her brother.

As if the only thing Onii-chan is good for is his Shinigami powers, and now that he doesn't have that anymore, he is left behind.
Because of this, Yuzu mostly stays away from the supernatural as well. She’s always been envious of Ichigo and Karin for being able to see ghosts, but now that her brother can’t anymore, not even blurry images like Yuzu can, she thinks it’s only fair if she stays away from them too, just to show Ichigo that she doesn’t need him to be able to fight monsters to still be a great big brother.

She spends more time with him, especially when she notices the way his friends treat him, the way he is becoming more and more isolated, and the way their own father tells her and Karin not to talk about ghosts around Ichigo, that it’s supposed to help their big brother move on.

Yuzu didn’t necessarily agree at the time (and definitely doesn’t now) but their dad is a Shinigami and should know best (And isn’t that stupid? Since when has their father ever known best when it comes to Ichigo?), so she has tried other ways to help her big brother. She has tried her best to make sure Ichigo gets second helpings at dinner because she hates the way his cheekbones sometimes look sharp enough to cut, especially at the beginning right after that war (and why was her sixteen-year-old brother required to fight in a war in the first place? Shouldn’t that be illegal?). She has tried to take over more of Ichigo’s chores because she knows her brother isn’t getting much sleep. Between herself and Karin, Yuzu has always been the lighter sleeper, so on occasion, she knows that Ichigo wakes up with bitten-off screams and doesn’t go back to sleep for the rest of the night.

But Ichigo has always been a private person who doesn’t like to worry anyone around him, so when Yuzu asks him if he’s alright, if he’s had a good night’s sleep, she knows that he’s lying when he says yes even without looking at the bags under his eyes. But Yuzu doesn’t really know what to do about that because Ichigo has always been the one to take care of her, of Karin, even of their dad, never the other way around.

So she pushes more food on her brother, and sometimes, she goes to his room after Karin has fallen asleep, tells Ichigo that she can’t sleep, and he teases her fondly about still being a baby before letting her cuddle up against him, and she thinks that helps him chase the nightmares away for a little while because he always looks less tired in the morning when they wake up.

Yuzu can’t do that anymore if Ichigo isn’t even here though, and while she’s never been a particularly strong person, not like her big brother who’s the strongest person she knows, not like Karin who’s almost as independent as Onii-chan, not ever like their father who gets so rough with Ichigo sometimes, but she is a Kurosaki and she’s tough in her own right.

Which means she’s going to lay the blame right where it belongs, and she isn’t going to forgive anybody, not even herself (for not speaking up, for not scolding the others for their behaviour, for not pushing Ichigo into talking about his problems more), until Ichigo himself comes home.
She rounds a corner at top speed, almost gets hit by a car, doesn't bother apologizing to the driver, and continues flying down the wet street at top speed. Her phone pings with an incoming message, and she's both relieved and anxious when she sees that Ichigo has answered with an 'I'm fine' but nothing else (at least he's alive), not even when she sends off another three texts asking him to tell her where he is, if he's really 'fine', to please come back so they can at least talk about it.

It takes her a record-breaking ten minutes to reach the shop, and she wheels into the front yard and crashes through the front door like an out-of-control juggernaut, patting down her sweater before yanking out the glasses that Karin brought home for her months ago, assuring her that they will tap into her small amount of reiryoku and help her see Shinigami clearly.

She jams them onto her face even as she clatters through the empty storefront and into the back living room where a sea of startled faces stare back at her, laughter at whatever joke or story or conversation they were having dying in the air.

Yuzu stands in the doorway, drenched from head to toe and gasping for air like a landed fish as her eyes linger on her sister sitting beside the white-haired captain on the far left, and then to her father whose grin hasn’t quite faded as he sits beside Ishida’s stern-faced father (who doesn't look like he wants to be there at all). Tessai is crouched between Ururu and Jinta, and the cat-woman whom Yuzu’s only seen once or twice in the past two years is sprawled by the table with a bottle of sake in front of her. And then there’s Inoue and Ishida and Chad, all crowded in one corner and looking like they were in the middle of a card game.

The kicker, Yuzu thinks in utter disbelief, is the fact that Rukia and that red-haired Shinigami that, up until two years ago, Yuzu was convinced was one of her brother’s best friends, are both sitting cross-legged beside them.

If Yuzu is more violent-prone, she thinks she may actually want to murder someone.

It takes her another moment to spot Urahara standing in another doorway at the other end of the room, a cup of tea in hand and his expression shadowed beneath the brim of his hat.

Yuzu looks over them one more time, and for just a moment, she thinks – angrily, spitefully – that Onii-chan has done the right thing, and she only wishes that he had thought to take her with him.

(Because no matter what, Yuzu would've said yes, would've packed up right then and there and left with Ichigo. She would do anything for her big brother.)
“Yuzu?” Her father levers himself to his feet, concern marring his face, and Yuzu can’t help but think that that concern is both misplaced and about ten years too late. “Is something wrong-”

That’s the last straw, and her emotions burst out in a flood.

“DON’T!!” She shrills hysterically, stumbling back and bumping into the doorframe. Her father freezes in his tracks, looking completely at sea. “Don’t-! You don’t know- Do you have any idea what you’ve- How can all of you just sit here-”

She can’t even get the words out, and all at once, she is crying, choking and sobbing with broken tears even as she tries to wipe them away. She doesn't have any right to cry when they're the ones who have let Ichigo down, when her brother thinks that they’re all better off without him (and that has never been the case; not before their mother died, and certainly not after).

“Yuzu,” And that’s Karin’s arms suddenly wrapped around her shoulders. “Yuzu, deep breaths. Breathe, come on, just breathe.”

Yuzu gulps down a shuddering lungful of air, acutely aware of all the alarmed eyes focused on her, and the rush of anger is back, coiling tight in her chest.

She runs a soaked sleeve over her eyes, shoves a stunned Karin away from her, takes two steps forward, and hurls the Substitute Shinigami badge across the room. The thing flies through the air and smashes into the opposite wall, actually leaving a small dent before gravity grabs it and drags it to the ground with a deafening thud in the ensuing silence.

Nobody says a word as they all stare between the badge and Yuzu.

Yuzu is distantly conscious of the fact that she is shaking, less from her wet clothes and more from the slow realization that half her world has just skipped town with the belief that nobody here cares enough about him for him to stick around for.

“I hope you’re happy,” Yuzu says without care, hands balled into white-knuckled fists at her sides. She wants to hurt, hurt them as much as they’ve evidently hurt her brother. “I hope you’re really, really happy, living it up here. He never meant anything to you people in the first place, did he? He saved all your lives, and you think that’s all he was good for, don’t you?”
Nobody says anything. At the far end of the room, Urahara’s eyes are still shielded from sight but the grim line of his mouth tells Yuzu that the man has already more or less guessed what has happened.

“...Yuzu?” Karin touches her on the shoulder, fear entering her features to war with the denial already painted there. “What’s- What’s going on? What happened?”

Yuzu swallows hard and reaches into her jeans to draw out Ichigo’s crumpled note. It’s a bit soggy along one edge but otherwise still intact.

“He’s gone,” She says quietly, miserably, into the damning silence as she hands the note over to her twin. “Onii-chan’s gone. He left town. He won’t answer his phone. He didn't say when he’ll come back.”

Still, no one says a word. Yuzu would bet an arm that they don’t know what to say. Disbelief and shock colour an ugly picture on each of their faces.

“-best for all of-” Karin murmurs as she raises her head and stare at Yuzu with wild eyes. “Best for all of us? Ichi-nii- Ichi-nii thinks it’s best for all of us if he left? If he-” She checks the note like she can’t believe what she’s read. “He thinks we’d be happier if he got out of our hair for a while?! That we don’t need him to play big broth- Yuzu-”

“I told you to tell him,” Yuzu says with a steely note in her voice that some part of her can’t believe she possesses. She has never, in her entire life, ever gotten mad at her sister before. Once or twice, she’s thrown a temper tantrum at her brother who always manages to both discipline her and cheer her up at the same time, but Yuzu has never once turned on Karin before.

There’s always a first for everything.

“I told you to tell him,” She repeats stonily. “About your boyfriend.” Karin flinches. “Why would you ask Otou-san? We always go to Onii-chan first! Onii-chan’s the one who takes care of us; he’s the one who’s practically raised us since he was nine! He read us bedtime stories when he didn't have to, he walked us to and from school when he didn't have to, and he beat up all the bullies who picked on us and got hurt protecting us when he didn't have to! He taught me how to cook and clean when I asked, he signed you up for soccer and you didn't even have to ask, he's never even missed a single one of your games until all this Shinigami stuff started, and even then, he’s only missed two because he was busy saving lives!”
Yuzu is fired up again, and so, so angry. She’s never been so mad in her whole life. Teeth gritted, she rounds on a pale-faced Hitsugaya next.

“I thought you were one of Onii-chan’s friends!” She accuses harshly, glaring at him for all she’s worth. “He’s mentioned you before when I asked him to tell me about Soul Society! Why wouldn’t you go to him to ask for his permission? No, actually, why wouldn’t you go to him at all? You know, as a friend!”

She looks at all of them, and it’s ridiculous how disgusted she feels. “I thought all of you were his friends, but when was the last time any of you actually had a decent conversation with him? Some of you haven’t even come to visit him in two years! Just because he can’t see ghosts anymore, you barely ever talk to him at all nowadays! What did Onii-chan do for all of you to abandon him?!”

Her chest is heaving with emotion by the time she finishes but she takes some vindictive pleasure from the dread and rising shame tingeing the others’ faces.

“We thought-” It’s the redhead, though Yuzu can’t quite remember what his name is. He shrinks under Yuzu’s glower. “We thought it would be best if we left him alone. So we wouldn’t remind him of-”

“You did a great job,” Yuzu snarls at him, and since when has she been able to wield sarcasm this well? “You left him alone alright. Do you even know how little he eats these days? Do you know he wakes up in the middle of the night screaming from nightmares, only to stop because he doesn’t want to wake the rest of the house up? I’m thirteen, and even I know you can’t walk out of a war at sixteen years of age and be perfectly fine!”

“And you!” She finally turns all her ire and frustration and fury on her father who is still standing motionless five feet away. “You’re a doctor, but more than that, you’re a father! More importantly, you’re Oni-chan’s father! You don’t just have two daughters! You have a son as well, and yeah, Oni-chan can take care of himself most of the time, but he’s not- he’s not unbreakable! When was the last time you actually sat down with Oni-chan and talked to him? At the very least, you should’ve talked to him about the war! Isn’t there- Isn’t there stuff like PTSD? Or- Or other mental health issues? Shouldn’t you care about that even just a little?”

Her father blanches like Yuzu has slapped him, but the man raises his hands in a feeble placating gesture. “I’ve kept an eye on him, Yuzu-”
“When?!” Yuzu rages, aiming a kick at the table that knocks over the cat-woman’s sake and spills the clear liquid across the surface. To the Shinigami’s credit, at least she doesn’t try to save it, more focused on Yuzu than anything else. “You’re only ever home when me and Karin are as well! You’re always over here now!”

She pauses when a thought strikes her, and she looks desperately between her father and sister. “Yes- Yesterday, last night, you were home with Onii-chan, right? At least one of you? I only asked to stay over at Sora-chan’s house for a sleepover because Karin was coming home yesterday, so I thought...”

She trails off when Karin refuses to meet her eyes. Yuzu doesn't even have to look at her father.

She opens her mouth and then closes it again when she can’t even find the words to go on. No wonder Ichigo left. Under these circumstances, she would've left too.

Her eyes snap up when her father, looking sheepish (as if Onii-chan just stepped next door) but still trying to smile at her like he’s attempting to calm her down with a hug or something, starts approaching her again. Blood roars in her ears as her line of sight narrows on the man’s face, and her right hand involuntarily curls into an even tighter fist as she clinically wonders whether or not she’s tall enough to punch him square in the face and make it hurt.

And then a rustle of clothes and an invisible breeze sweeps past her, and Yuzu’s mouth drops open a little when her father suddenly drops like a stone, wheezing as he wraps an arm around his torso.

“Isshin-san, I advise you to stay down there for your own safety,” Urahara’s mild voice cuts in, sounding for all the world like he’s commenting on the weather. Yuzu just watches with wide eyes as the shopkeeper removes the end of his wooden cane from her father’s solar plexus. “Your daughter is more likely to break your nose than give you a hug right now.”

Urahara turns to look at her, and while he’s smiling as well, Yuzu notes that his eyes are humourless and a nasty storm is brewing underneath that calm grey gaze.

“Yuzu-san,” The shopkeeper starts pleasantly. “I assume you have tried calling your brother?”
Yuzu manages a shaky nod. Now that she’s actually finished yelling at people, and someone’s finally taken charge of the situation, she feels exhausted and ready to sleep until this nightmare is over if not for the fact that her brother will still be missing even if she sleeps for a week.

“He hasn’t answered any of my calls or messages,” She reveals sorrowfully. “He sent back one text, just an ‘I’m fine’ but I haven’t heard from him since.”

Urahara takes all this in with a thoughtful nod before glancing at Karin still standing hunched over and looking distraught as her eyes remain on their brother’s message. “Karin-san, may I see that please?”

Karin blinks, glances at Yuzu, and then dazedly holds out the note. Urahara examines it critically, and only Yuzu is close enough to see the way the man’s eyes stop several times at certain parts of the note, jaw clenching exactly twice with the faintest hint of anger.

When he looks up, the shopkeeper is as composed as ever.

“Do you want to find him and bring him back?” He looks at Yuzu like her opinion is the only one that matters.

From the floor, Isshin glances up with a token protest of, “Of cour-”

This time, it’s Ishida’s father who kicks at Isshin’s shoulder to keep him quiet. The older Quincy’s glasses flash an uncompromising warning.

Oddly enough, Yuzu doesn’t care about all the abuse being heaped on her dad.

Instead, she closes her eyes, pushing her palms against them to stop the tears still stinging them as she thinks of Ichigo’s weary eyes and slouched shoulders, face always faintly lined with age that shouldn’t be found on any teenager.

“I want to find him,” Yuzu says when she opens her eyes again. “But- But if he doesn't want to come back, I don’t want- I don’t want to force him or guilt him into coming back, so if he wants to stay away, then I think- I think that’s okay too.”
Urahara doesn't try to talk her out of it or object her decision. He only nods again, tilting his hat down with one hand before turning sharply to the rest of the room. “I normally do not mind guests but I believe it’s time for all of you to go home.”

There was a moment where most of the room’s occupants cringe even as they get to their feet, all of them avoiding each other’s eyes.

“Kuchiki-san, Abarai-san, Hitsugaya-san,” Urahara continues, gaze lingering on each of them. “I don’t suppose you can keep this to yourselves?”


“I doubt Kurosaki-san would want his life splashed across the front page news all through Seireitei,” Urahara rebukes, tone still as placid as before, but Abarai recoils a little anyway. Rukia hasn’t even looked up.

“I... have to report this,” Hitsugaya speaks up reluctantly. His mouth is tilted down in a bleak line. “The Captain-Commander... he’ll want to know. He’ll probably send people out to look for Kurosaki.”

“Kurosaki-san is not one of his Shinigami officers,” Urahara counters, voice suddenly dangerously soft.

Yuzu doesn't really understand all the unspoken words passing between the Shinigami in the room but she frowns as she tries to work out what she’s heard so far. This Captain-Commander is still keeping tabs on her brother? Obviously not very closely, but maybe... enough to make sure that Ichigo stays in Karakura?

But why? Her brother has lost all his Shinigami powers.

“He’s right, Kisuke,” The cat-woman interjects, golden eyes glittering with a hard glint. “Toshirou-bou is a captain, as am I. It’s our duty to report it. Besides, Ichigo might be in trouble. More people looking for him would be best.”

Urahara’s eyes narrow. “Yoruichi-san-”
“I’ve reaccepted my position as captain of the Second and head of the Onmitsukidou but my foothold there is tentative at best after last time. One toe out of line and that’s it for me, and you know Yamamoto-soutaichou will find out sooner or later,” Yoruichi says, and then, even quieter, “I can’t abandon Sui-Feng again, Kisuke. For you, and Tessai, fine. But...”

“But not for Kurosaki-san,” Urahara tips his hat and hides the majority of his expression so that even Yuzu, standing beside him, can’t figure out what he’s thinking. “Very well, I understand.”

He looks up and scans the room again, nodding briefly in an obvious farewell gesture. “I trust you to see yourselves out. Tessai-san, do you mind airing out one of the guest bedrooms?”

Tessai nods, glancing once at Yuzu before ushering both Jinta and Ururu out of the room. The others shuffle out after them, and Yuzu watches as Hitsugaya stops beside Karin to share a quiet word before leaving. She notices that Ishida’s father stays put, ignoring his son’s questioning look.

“Yuzu-san,” Urahara turns back to her again, one hand absently flipping open his fan. “Would you like to stay here or go home?”

“I’d- I’d like to stay here,” Yuzu stammers out, surprised that this is even an option but taking it gladly anyway. She doesn't want to go home with her father right now, and she remembers that, once upon a time, this shopkeeper was the one Ichigo used to go to for everything, from advice to training to phone calls in the middle of the night if something Shinigami-related pops up, and Urahara has always answered no matter how much Ichigo complains about how manipulative and vague the man can be.

It makes her wonder all the more about why the shopkeeper has pretty much cut all connections with her brother.

Yuzu catches Karin shifting uncomfortably out of the corner, and her heart softens without meaning to. This is her twin after all, and no matter what mistakes they’ve both made, Yuzu knows that the one thing that won’t change is their love for their brother.
“And can Karin stay too?” She adds, one hand swinging out to reach for her sister’s. Karin instantly responds without hesitation, looking gratefully relieved.

Urahara’s knowing smile becomes a touch more authentic as he inclines his head. “Of course. I trust you’ll only need the one room?”

Yuzu nods along with Karin as she recalls that the shopkeeper has already sent Tessai off to prepare a bedroom for them, not two. Urahara is scarily perceptive.

“Come on, Yuzu,” Karin tugs at her hand. “You need to get out of those wet clothes.”

Yuzu follows on sluggish feet, and then halts, grudgingly turning back when she remembers something important.

“I left the front door open,” She mumbles in her father’s direction. “And I made a mess in Onii-chan’s room when I was checking for what was missing.”

Her father takes an uncertain step forward and Yuzu abruptly shies away, whirling around again and letting Karin lead her out.

As the door slides shut behind her and she stumbles down one hallway, Yuzu lets her shoulders slump.

“Onii-chan’s gone,” She whispers to Karin, and it makes the whole thing even more horrifyingly real now that she’s voiced it out loud.

Karin glances back and squeezes her hand. Her eyes are bright with conviction. “Ichi-nii says he’ll come back. He’s never broken a promise before, and he won’t this time. He’ll come back.”

Yuzu manages a wobbly smile that falls as quickly as it appears, but she nods back. Between the two of them, she’s the one who’s good at placing her trust in people, at believing in them without her twin sister’s instinctive suspicion of those she doesn't know, but once that trust is secured, Karin is the one who holds on and refuses to let go, no matter how bad the situation, persevering doggedly even with nothing to go on save faith.
Their brother has always kept his word, no matter the situation. If Ichigo has promised to come back, then Yuzu has to believe he will, and that he won’t change his mind one day and leave them forever.

~W~

Kisuke slides the door shut behind the Kurosaki twins, his movements carefully measured. After the door has closed, he doesn't turn around right away. Instead, he stares at the wooden frame and takes a deep breath, holding it for two heartbeats before releasing it in a slow near-silent exhale.

He does it one more time just in case his grasp on his centuries-polished equanimity slips.

And then he turns around.

Several feet away and still sitting, Ryuken looks about as unconcerned as ever, utterly unruffled by the disastrous situation that has just been delivered to Kisuke’s doorstep.

On the other hand, Isshin is standing in place, looking lost and ashamed and regretful.

Kisuke doesn't have enough compassion to feel sorry for him.

Because this is Isshin’s fault.

Oh, they all share a bit of the blame, some more than others. Karin and Yuzu are only thirteen so Kisuke can’t really blame them, especially Yuzu, for listening to their father. But the other teenagers, and half the Shinigami from Soul Society, the ones who have been with Kurosaki Ichigo through thick and thin, Kisuke thinks that they have no excuse.

And he himself isn’t blameless. Kisuke all but makes a living out of weaving lies and manipulating those around him, though he tries not to do it unless it turns out to be necessary. But while he’s good at lying to others, he doesn't make a habit of lying to himself, so he knows he could've done better, should’ve done better, by his old student.

His first mistake was letting Isshin pull the ‘I’m his father’ card.
“Well, get it over with,” Isshin abruptly speaks up, crossing his arms and giving Kisuke a flat stare.

Kisuke gives the man a thin smile. “We are not juvenile toddlers, Isshin-san. I am not going to say ‘I told you so’.”

He pauses, and when he speaks again, his voice is cooler than even he expects. “I trust that if and when I find Kurosaki-san, I will be allowed to talk to my student again?”

Isshin bristles automatically. “I never said you couldn't talk to him—”

“I am well aware of what you said,” Kisuke cuts him off, and it’s absurd how hard it is to keep his emotions under control. “I believe you told me to keep all otherworldly issues away from Kurosaki-san. I was not to invite him to my shop because in doing so, conversation about Shinigami or Hollows or Seireitei would inevitably occur. If he were to come here himself, I was to send him on his way as quickly as possible. And should I bump into him on the street, I was not to speak to him about such matters either. Is that about right, Isshin-san?”

Kisuke doesn't wait for a response as he forges on in a cutting tone. “I respected your wishes because you are his father in the end, and compared to that, I have no right to approach him with Shinigami business when you insist otherwise. But Kurosaki-san would first have to be diagnosed with amnesia before he stops asking me about his... well, I am loath to call them friends, but there you have it. And if he asks and I avoid the subject, he would only get angry and suspicious and worried, particularly worried, and a worried Kurosaki-san is both unpredictable and reckless; who knows what he would do then? So, under those circumstances, what exactly can I talk to him about if I talk to him at all?”

He stops for a breath, studying the hard line of Isshin’s jaw and the stubborn gleam behind the guilt in his eyes. “It was for his own good. He doesn't have his powers anymore. It would've been best if he had just moved on.”

“And this,” Kisuke shoots back softly. “All this avoiding and isolating him, pushing him away from our world, his world, is supposed to help? Has it never occurred to you, Isshin-san, that every single person Kurosaki-san cares about is involved in the very things you have been trying your utmost to stop him from associating with for the past two years? He has no one else, you realize, and it doesn't help that you spend all your time here. You even let your daughters do the same.”
A flush of red crawls up Isshin’s neck as the man opens his mouth to retort, but Kisuke doesn't give him any time to do so, moving forward and around the table to pick up the Substitute Shinigami badge that Yuzu threw earlier before straightening and heading for the door.

He paused in the doorway, glancing back over his shoulder. “I talked to him at his graduation. Even I found it quite sad when Kurosaki-san responded to my simple offer of congratulations with an alarming amount of confusion and surprise.”

Kisuke lets a grimly satisfied smile flicker across his face as he closes the door in Isshin’s dismayed face. Now the man is Ryuuken’s problem. Kisuke has more important things to do.

He heaves a tired sigh as he makes his way to his lab.

He knows it; after that outrageous encounter with Ichigo at the kid’s – not really kid anymore – graduation, he should’ve done something more than simply tossing Isshin’s demands out the window and inviting Ichigo over to his shop. After two years of barely any contact, the former Visored probably thought Kisuke was extending said invitation out of pity or something equally trivial.

Shutting the door to his lab behind him, Kisuke tosses the badge onto one of the counters before dropping rather gracelessly into a chair. He doesn’t even want to think about what will happen when word reaches Shinji and the other Visored. After being exiled, Kisuke knows that they are particularly protective of their own, and powers or no powers, Ichigo has been one of them since Shinji took the kid under his wing.

The fact that they haven’t visited also comes under the category labelled ‘Kisuke’s Fault’.

Kisuke sighs again and rakes an irritated hand through his hair, knocking his hat off in the process. He should’ve started disregarding Isshin years ago. The man is arguably an even worse father than Ryuuken. At least Ryuuken has talked to his son about his time in the war.

It isn’t as if Isshin is completely hopeless. The man is good to his girls, doting on them and lending a hand when they ask for it (which, admittedly, isn’t often). But Isshin has always been distant with Ichigo, unable to connect, and after so many years of never taking the time to understand his son, Kisuke knows that it would be next to useless to push that issue.

So he wouldn't have pushed, but had Isshin not been so adamantly I'm-his-father-and-
what-I-say-goes, Kisuke would've been more than happy to maybe sit Ichigo down over a pot of tea to work out some of the trauma that the kid has undoubtedly acquired after the war. After all, killing a low-levelled Hollow and killing humanoid Arrancars are two very different things, not to mention that fiasco with losing his powers, losing two-thirds of his soul, and even battling Aizen to near-death – those things need to be talked about.

Kisuke should’ve gone with his gut instinct; he has listened to Isshin instead.

Sheer stupidity on his part, and Ichigo is the one who ends up paying for it.

Ichigo seems to end up paying for a lot of things that aren’t actually his to pay.

Like the Captain-Commander’s order for the Gotei 13 to leave Ichigo alone. After Yoruichi came to Kisuke with that news, Kisuke actually fumed for a good six hours and even stabbed a few Hollows wandering Karakura just to release some of his ire. The old man is still the same as ever, overly strict with his laws, and far too quick to condemn those he believes to be threats. After all, Ichigo all but defeated Aizen; the boy was getting far too powerful, but now that he has lost his powers, the best thing, in Yamamoto’s (and probably with Central 46’s backing) opinion, would obviously be to leave him completely human and inside Karakura where his location can be monitored when they feel the need.

Still, Kisuke thought, wrongly so, that at least some of Ichigo’s closer friends would’ve risked the Captain-Commander’s wrath and visited Ichigo anyway.

They didn't, he didn't, and now Ichigo is gone.

Kisuke frowns. He can’t say he was expecting it, but it doesn't exactly come as a shock either. Even Ichigo, with his infinite loyalty and devotion to his friends and family, would get fed up sometime down the road. That time just happens to be now.

Ichigo still has his phone on him though, and without his reiatsu anymore, Kisuke just may be able to find Ichigo before the Gotei 13 does, especially since the former Visored was smart enough – or lucky enough – to leave his badge behind.

Kisuke tosses a disdainful look at the device. For all his kindness and polite words, Ukitake didn't get to be one of the strongest and oldest Shinigami in a stringent organization like the Gotei 13 by being nice. The fact that the captain has actually dropped a few hints for Ichigo about
the badge at all is astounding. It looks like Ichigo’s charisma knows no bounds. It’s just too bad that it isn’t enough.

Kisuke sighs a third time before clambering to his feet again. Time to get to work. He hasn’t the faintest clue what he’s supposed to do once he finds Ichigo, but dropping a warning about the Shinigami on his tail is the least Kisuke can do.

~W~

Shinji’s day has started out not so great. He isn’t aware that it’s about to get worse. Like Hiyori-bashing-him-over-the-head-half-a-dozen-times-for-coming-to-work-with-a-hangover-and-then-finding-out-all-the-painkillers-are-gone kind of worse, and then multiply that by ten.

At the moment though, he’s cursing his job and his decision to take up his old post again just so he can keep an eye on Lisa, Kensei, and Mashiro, who were all convinced by either Kyouraku or Hisagi (the kid would make an excellent lawyer) to return. Shinji wasn’t about to let them fend for themselves here so he had come back as well, along with the others. He had thought that it wouldn’t be so bad, especially since they have all been given full pardons.

The sky-high pile of paperwork stacked on his desk, along with the reports that Hiyori has turned in (all filled out with her near-incomprehensible chicken scratch), is doing a good job of convincing him otherwise.

Even worse, today is one of those days where his other lieutenant Hinamori has had another episode and is currently at the Fourth getting her head sorted out. God damn Aizen and his twisted mind games.

Normally, with Hinamori’s weaker mental condition, Shinji would've fired her by now, or at least given her medical leave, no matter how much he sympathizes or how much that snowy-haired captain glares. But the young Shinigami is fine on most days, and working as one of the Fifth Division lieutenants seems to give her a purpose and put more life in her eyes so Shinji has kept her on.

He clicks his tongue in annoyance after signing his name on yet another report before shoving it to the side. He doesn't know how Kensei can stand being in charge of sorting out the collective reports of every single division in the Gotei 13.
A familiar reiatsu signature and two near-inaudible steps landing on the windowsill behind him isn’t enough to make him look up from the next file in front of him but he grumbles, “Somethin’ wrong with the door, Hitsugaya-taichou?”

No answer. Shinji frowns, picking up the subtle tension all but making the Tenth Division captain’s reiatsu vibrate, and he abruptly drops his pen and spins around in his seat.

His eyebrows rise as he takes in Hitsugaya’s too-pale features and haunted eyes. Cold dread begins seeping into his heart as he runs through the numerous scenarios that could possibly put that expression on the younger captain’s face.

“What’s wrong? What’s happened?” He demands harshly. “Is it that girl you’re datin’? Ichigo’s sister?”

Hitsugaya turns even paler, and Shinji assumes that something has happened to Kurosaki Karin, and Ichigo is about to do something rash. Shinji hasn’t seen the former Visored in years but maybe he can seize this as an excuse to check in on Ichigo even if the kid doesn't want to see him.

He blinks when Hitsugaya shakes his head, steps fully into the office, and, without so much as a by-your-leave, wanders over to the couch and collapses into it.

Shinji is really starting to get worried. “Alright, chibi, what the hell is goin’ on?”

Hitsugaya doesn't even give him that sideways glower that he usually does whenever Shinji throws in a quip about his height. Instead, the captain leans back, closes his eyes for a moment, and then opens them again and looks back at Shinji like he’s about to confess all his sins before God himself.

Shinji isn’t sure if he’s the right person for this job. He’s got a couple dozen sins sitting in his backlog as well.

“We’ve been lying to you.”

Shinji stares, completely bewildered. “What?”
Hitsugaya’s eyes drop to his hands as he leans forward to balance his weight on his thighs, seemingly unable to meet Shinji’s gaze anymore. And then he starts talking and Shinji’s day goes from not-so-great to shot-to-hell.

“Kurosaki never actually said he didn’t want anything to do with Shinigami ever again,” Hitsugaya explains in a monotone voice. “But his father insisted on keeping him out of any and all Shinigami business ever since he lost his powers. To help him move on with his life. So, since Shiba-tai- Isshin-san’s wishes coincided with the Captain-Commander’s orders, we – I mean myself, Abarai, Kuchiki, Urahara, Shihouin, and a few others – we decided it would be... best to spread the word that Kurosaki himself didn’t want to see any of us again.”

A stifling silence descends on the office as Shinji watches the younger captain with half-lidded eyes and a growing tangle of rage simmering just beneath his restraint. He watches as Hitsugaya starts squirming under his gaze, just a little, and he takes a spiteful sort of pleasure in drawing it out as long as possible.

“And ya have the gall ta date his sister?” Shinji says at last, voice pitched low and unyielding.

Hitsugaya stiffens. “We’re not really-”

He stops when Shinji narrows his eyes even further, unamused and unimpressed.

“What about his Human friends?” Shinji enquires next, still outwardly calm. “I’m gonna assume somethin’ big happened if ya’ve come ta reveal everythin’ ta me now.”

Hitsugaya grimaces like his next words literally pain him. “I wasn’t always there; Karin usually comes to Seireitei but, from what I’ve gathered, they haven’t been... they haven’t been interacting with him very much either. Ishida, Inoue, and Sado, and those three other humans with higher levels of reiryoku are usually gathered at Urahara’s shop with Abarai and Kuchiki. Kurosaki is... unofficially banned from that place as per Shiba-tai- Isshin-san’s request, and at the beginning, I’ve seen Urahara turn him away at the door as quickly as possible without giving away the... plan. Recently however, for perhaps a year now, I believe Kurosaki has been distancing himself from everyone around him-”

Hitsugaya shuts up when Shinji slams a hand down against his desk and the entire office floods with a tidal wave of his reiatsu.
“How can he distance himself from anyone if you’ve already isolated him?!” Shinji shouts, and the door bursts open a second later, Hiyori careening inside with an indignant look of accusation on her face.

“Shinji, you dickhead! You’ve forced half the seated officers onto their knees with your reiatsu and knocked out all the unseated officers in the vicinity! What the fuck is goin’ o-” She stops when she realizes that Shinji isn’t even looking at her, and anyone with half a brain can pick up the unchecked fury on his face.

Now, Hiyori is a lot of things, and in Shinji’s opinion, the girl gets on his case far too often for his liking, but when it comes to choosing sides, us-against-them has always been the Visored’s mentality ever since they were Hollowfied.

So.

“What did you do?!” Hiyori screeches, rounding on Hitsugaya like he’s an enemy that has to be taken down at the first opportunity.

Shinji spares a moment to mentally smirk at the slightly apprehensive expression on Hitsugaya’s face. Hiyori is short and small but she’s also a foul-mouthed ball of rage with little to no self-preservation depending on the situation, and nobody in their right mind would want to get on her bad side.

“He’s here about Ichigo,” Shinji clarifies, and he catches a flash of hope on Hiyori’s face before she forces a nonchalant scowl over it.

“So what?” She dismisses flippantly. “Did that dumbass finally change his mind about wantin’ to see us? Cuz he’s gonna have to do a lot o’ grovellin’ before I’m gonna forgive him-”

“He didn't change his mind,” Shinji interrupts her rant. His lip involuntarily curls into a sneer. “Apparently, he didn't have any say in it at all. It was a lie, spun by this one and quite a few others.”

Never let it be said that Hiyori can’t connect the dots. Three seconds later, the blonde is hurtling across the room, and had Hitsugaya not been a captain, he would've acquired at least a few broken bones.
“You bastard!” Hiyori shrieks, picking up Shinji’s paperweight and chucking it at Hitsugaya’s head. The captain dodges just in time.

“We don’t have time for this!” Hitsugaya bellows, and Shinji is suddenly aware of the fact that Hitsugaya still hasn’t come clean about why he has unexpectedly owned up to two years’ worth of lies.

“Hiyori!” Shinji snaps, throwing a sharp look at her that stops her from throwing anything else. The lieutenant doesn't stop seething and glaring daggers at Hitsugaya though. “Okay, chibi, what’s the grand finale of this giant clusterfuck?”

Hitsugaya pinches the bridge of his nose, looking like he’s warding off a headache. “Kurosaki took off sometime between yesterday evening and this afternoon. He only left a note behind. Nobody knows where he’s gone.”

Shinji blinks once, twice, and then releases a bark of incredulous laughter. “Are ya surprised? Ichigo’s never been one ta sit around in a situation he doesn't like. Ya might recall the invasion he led just cuz he didn’t like Rukia bein’ executed. Or that other invasion inta Hueco Mundo ta save Orihime-chan cuz you lot refused ta get off your asses. I could go on but I'm hopin’ ya get the point.”

Hitsugaya has reddened with embarrassment or shame; whichever it is, he doesn't linger on it and, instead, tells them bluntly, “Shihouin has gone to the Captain-Commander with this news. Yamamoto-soutaichou will most likely send people out to retrieve Kurosaki. If Kurosaki somehow regains his powers-”

“-the Captain-Commander will put ’im down like a rabid dog?” Shinji finishes with cold eyes and a colder smile. Beside him, Hiyori looks torn between disgust and outrage. Hitsugaya flinches minutely.

“You Shinigami...” Shinji shakes his head. “Sometimes, even I forget how low ya can sink, though I didn't expect Yoruichi ta pull rank now of all times.”

Hitsugaya’s jaw tightens and he straightens in place. “You’re a Shinigami too, Hirako.”

Shinji’s smile turns razor-sharp. “I’m a Visored now, chibi. I don’t count myself as a Shinigami, and even if I did, I don’t count myself in with ya lot.”
A long silence falls before Shinji arches an eyebrow. “Is that all?”

Hitsugaya nods curtly.

Shinji tips his head at the window. “Good. Get out.”

Hitsugaya’s lips thin but he doesn’t protest the rude treatment. For a moment, he looks like he wants to say something more, but the words are bitten back and the captain disappears in a flit of Shunpo.

“What are we gonna do?” Hiyori asks the instant Hitsugaya’s reiatsu signature is out of hearing distance. “You know the old man’s gonna send people after him.”

Shinji scoffs. “Good luck ta them. Ichigo’s got no reiatsu signature. Even the Onmitsukidou will have difficulties findin’ him.”

“They might still find him!” Hiyori persists vehemently.

Shinji pauses to grin slyly at his lieutenant. “What’s this? You’re really worried about the strawberry after all, aren’t ya?”

Hiyori retaliates by flinging her sandal at his face. Shinji dodges with a roll of his eyes.

“I ain’t worried!” Hiyori growls, crossing her arms stubbornly, but a brooding frown creases her brow. “He lost his Hollow, dickhead. And Zanpakutou. Even I know that’s not healthy, but I thought he at least had people to support him. I never thought-”

She cuts herself off with an angry jerk of one hand slicing through the air.

Shinji heaves a sigh and scrubs a hand over his face. He knows why even Hiyori is more concerned than usual. Zanpakutou and, for them, inner Hollows are part of every Shinigami or Visored’s soul. To lose parts of themselves would be practically unimaginable. Shinji would
probably go crazy if Sakanade is ever ripped from him.

“So?” Hiyori prompts impatiently once more, one foot tapping against the floorboards.

Shinji exhales shortly before striding over to the window and sticking his head out to squint at the distant orange roof of the First Division. It doesn't look like any activity is stirring quite yet, and there aren’t any Jigokuchou being sent out en masse.

Shinji looks down, hands curling over the smooth wood of the windowsill. The only reason he returned to Seireitei as captain of the Fifth is because he wants to look after his people. Even if they're now divided amongst various divisions, Kensei and Mashiro, Lisa and Hachi, Rose and Love, and even Hiyori, they are all his, and he is responsible for their safety and continued wellbeing. He has been for over a century now after they all accepted him as de facto leader.

But Kurosaki Ichigo is his too. Shinji wasn't kidding when he told Yamamoto that the Visored are Ichigo’s allies.

Shinji quirks an involuntary smile. He still remembers that brat turning down every single one of his offers to join the Visored at the beginning, rude and brash and downright refusing to acknowledge Shinji’s authority on the matter.

But the kid scrapped his pride in the end when there was no other way, and it impressed the hell out of Shinji. He knows Shinigami ten times Ichigo’s age who can’t do the same even when something important is on the line, and Ichigo did it without hesitation, with only a certain amount of caution towards them before he learned to trust them.

Shinji thought, after the end of the war, after Ichigo lost his powers, that the kid might need some time to come to terms with his lack of reiatsu (and two-thirds of his soul), so he sent word through Yoruichi and Urahara to tell the youngest member of Shinji’s misfit family that when Ichigo was ready, if he wanted, the Visored would go visit him. Ichigo simply has to send word.

And then Yoruichi came back, telling them all that Ichigo no longer wanted anything to do with any of them, Shinigami or Visored or Hollows, that he wanted to live his life without anymore disturbances, that he wanted to move on and not let what he has lost drag him down, and if everyone in Soul Society cared about him at all, they would respect his wishes.

It was the last that stopped Shinji from storming down to Karakura to confront Ichigo.
himself, to shake some sense into the boy, and now he regrets not doing so with all his heart.

Thinking back, the reasons now sound flimsy at best. Ichigo has always been a strong person, a strong man, forced to grow up too quickly but never one to back down, and never, ever one to turn his back on the people he even remotely cared about. Shinji should’ve known there was something wrong when Yoruichi implied that Ichigo was all but leaving his friends behind.

And now, as it turns out, for all that Ichigo is the one who has walked away, it’s really all of them who have left him behind.

Ironic at its best. The fucking universe does like its jokes.

“Shinji, for God’s sakes–”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya,” Shinji grouses testily as he turns around again. In one motion, he shucks off his captain’s haori and tosses it over the back of the chair. “I’m leavin’.”

Hiyori grins, energized and vicious. “Finally! I can’t wait to ditch this–”

Shinji shakes his head. “You’re not comin’.”

Hiyori’s grin drops, washed away by a murderous glower. “What? You’re gonna leave me behind? No way! You think I don’t know what’s goin’ on? You go after Ichigo and there’s no way the old man’s gonna let you stay on as captain. You leave now, you’re leavin’ for good. You think any of us are gonna stay here without you?”

Shinji glances skyward, praying for patience. “Lisa? Kensei? Mashiro? All the others? Ring a bell? Kyouraku takes good care of his subordinates, and Kensei’s entire seated complement has always been loyal to him, bug-boy notwithstanding. And Mashiro will stick with Kensei. Rose is gettin’ pretty attached to that lieutenant of his, and Love will stick with him. Even Hachi’s found a place back in the Kidou Corps. Ya know that.”

Hiyori throws her hands up. “I don’t see how that has anythin’ to do with me. What, you want me to stay here and captain the Fifth or somethin’?” She flushes, just a little, and Shinji reluctantly softens. “Who the hell’s gonna listen to me, dumbass? I’m not captain material. Besides, you know I can’t stand flower-girl. She’s too... nice and... sweet. She drives me insane!”
Shinji sweatdrops. “Hinamori’s got her own backbone when times call for it. Besides, there’s still the Fifth ta consider-”

“And flower-girl handled it before we got here,” Hiyori dismisses with another wave of her hand. “Not handled it fine, but she handled it, and the old man will scrounge up another captain from somewhere. ’Sides, I’m not stupid; the only reason I got an invite back to Seireitei is cuz the rest of you would be more difficult to handle if I was left out. They don’t need me, not like they needed you and Kensei and Rose, in particular.”

If there is one thing Shinji grudgingly admires about this girl, it’s the way she never minces words and always gets straight to the point, no matter how harsh the truth. It’s no wonder she wasn’t particularly happy serving under Kisuke; the shopkeeper would’ve been too sly and scheming for Hiyori’s tastes.

Still, she is far too troublesome to deal with even on a good day, and today is about as far away from a good day as it can get.

“Yes, if anyone should stay, it’s you,” Hiyori points out matter-of-factly. “What kinda captain ups and leaves just like that?”

Shinji scoffs and glances out the window again. “The kind who needs ta find a wayward member of the family before anyone else gets ta him. Besides, this squad will probably be glad ta see the back of me. Ya know most of the Gotei 13 doesn’t trust us farther than they can throw us.”

Hiyori snorts and rubs at her forehead in frustration. They both know this is the truth. The Shinigami who saw them fight against Aizen are mostly willing to extend a tentative line of trust towards them, but the other officers, especially the unseated ones, are all largely afraid and wary of them.

“Well, you’re not leavin’ me behind,” Hiyori repeats obstinately as she gives him the stink eye. “I’ll follow you, and then my Jigokuchou will be revoked, and I’ll be stuck in the Human World anyway.”

Shinji wonders what he did in a past life to deserve this annoyance. He ducks just in time when Hiyori hops up and attempts to plant a kick in his face as if she knows exactly what he’s thinking about.
“Alright, alright, fine!” Shinji relents in exasperation. “Jeez, I don’t know why I put up with ya. Grab what ya need; I’m leavin’ right now.”

Hiyori smirks and scampers off, clearly smug at getting what she wants.

Shinji rolls his eyes again before summoning his Jigokuchou and sending it off with a message to the other Visored. He won’t ask them to come with him but it won’t hurt to inform them of what is going on and where he is going.

His eyes follow the butterfly’s flight for as long as he can before giving himself a mental shake and turning to scribble a note for Hinamori. After two years, while not particularly close, the girl has always been polite and helpful, and Shinji regrets having to leave so abruptly, but between Hinamori and Ichigo, Ichigo will always win hands down.

Placing the note on top of the finished paperwork, Shinji grabs the few odds and ends that he’s accumulated over time and doesn't want to leave behind, stuffing them all in a bag just as Hiyori runs back inside, no longer in Shinigami clothing and back in her red jogging suit and white shirt with a small bag slung over one shoulder.

“We gotta go!” Hiyori urges, shifting from one foot to another. “There’s a Shinigami from the First at the front gates askin’ to see you!”

Shinji inwardly curses their luck before shoving Hiyori towards the window. “Out. Straight ta the Senkaimon. And damn it, did ya have ta change clothes?”

Hiyori scowls at him but doesn’t waste time arguing as they sprint over the rooftops towards the Senkaimon at their fastest Shunpo.

Shinji thinks he hears a yell behind them, and he knows they have no time to waste. Yamamoto isn’t the Captain-Commander for nothing; the old man knows that at least some of them will go after Ichigo without authorization, and the ones most suspected of doing so will most likely be placed under lockdown.

They skid to a stop in front of the Senkaimon, and one of the Kidou Corps guards step forward and salutes them. “Hirako-taichou, Sarugaki-fukutaichou.”
Shinji just nods tersely. “We have an urgent mission to attend to in the Human World. Open the gate.”

A flicker of suspicion surfaces briefly in the Shinigami’s eyes but, with a wave of his hand, he orders the other guards to activate the Senkaimon.

Unfortunately, just as the gate doors slide open and the light of the Senkaimon shoots up into the sky, a distant, commanding holler reaches their ears.

“Stop! Close the gate! Don’t let them through!”

Shinji reacts even before whoever is on their tail finishes yelling their orders. With a flick of his wrist, he unsheathes his Zanpakutou and pushes Hiyori towards the Senkaimon.

“Collaps, Sakanade!” He barks, and his blade transforms into its Shikai form. “Go, Hiyori!”

Hiyori doesn’t dither, diving for the gate and taking out two Kidou Corps guards trying to corner her in the process. Shinji waits only long enough to make sure Hiyori is already on her way before spinning his Zanpakutou and activating its Shikai ability.

He grins as a pink mist spreads out around him.

“Enjoy livin’ in an inverted world.” He calls out jauntily before turning on his heel and slipping through the gate as well, leaving utter chaos in his wake.

As the Senkaimon closes behind him, cutting off the babble of disorderly shouts, Shinji quickens his pace to catch up to where Hiyori is waiting for him.

The blonde harrumphs at him and nods at his Zanpakutou. “Now they really have a reason to exile you.”

Shinji snorts and seals Sakanade away again. “Well, if I’m gonna be sentenced again, I
might as well do somethin’ worth bein’ sentenced for. Now come on.”

“How’re we gonna find Ichigo anyway?” Hiyori presses as they start off at a brisk jog.

“Kisuke,” Shinji says simply before his mouth tilts up in a dark mockery of a smile. “Although before that, I’ve got a few choice words ta share with him. Isshin too.”

Hiyori’s grin mirrors his as they hurry on. “Good, I call first dibs on my dear old, dumbass captain.”

Shinji snickers. “So long as I get Isshin.”

And yeah, Shinji isn’t going to let this go. He’s always been aware that Isshin has never been all that good a father, at least not to Ichigo, but the kid has never complained, and it really isn’t Shinji’s place to rag at Isshin for his parenting skills.

But this? This is taking things a dozen steps too far. He knows that Isshin knew about Ichigo’s Visored status through Kisuke, and that his son was sent to Shinji for training. And when Isshin didn’t say anything against it, it’s a clear sign to everyone involved that Shinji now has a stake in Ichigo’s life. For Shinji to be kept in the dark like he has been for the last two years, especially when the kid may actually want someone to help him through his issues, is a betrayal on both Isshin and Kisuke’s part.

After that first exile, Shinji doesn’t have a lot of people left to care about. The Visored is the only family he has left, the only people he can trust not to stab him in the back, and that includes Ichigo even if they haven’t known each for all that long compared to the others. Kisuke, and even Isshin, should know what it means to mess with Shinji’s family.

Because now that Shinji’s found out that those morons in Karakura have chased Ichigo straight out of town, the consequences aren’t going to be pretty.

Shinji will make sure of it.

~W~

At the Sixth Division compound in Seireitei, Byakuya’s fingers clench around his cup of
tea as he watches his lieutenant mope at his desk behind a stack of paperwork. If he was still as... hotheaded as when he was young, Byakuya might've thrown out a scathing remark about Renji bringing this on himself.

But he isn’t, so he keeps the thought to himself, and he concentrates on his own work as he listens with half an ear to the frantic bustle of Shinigami rushing back and forth outside, trying to make sure no one else will go after Kurosaki Ichigo without explicit permission. Hirako and Sarugaki have already slipped the net.

In the privacy of his own mind, Byakuya can admit that it is somewhat astonishing to see the effects, good and bad, that one man has on so many people. Half of Soul Society is running scared that Kurosaki Ichigo will still, even after two years, find a way to regain his powers and become stronger than anything they can control, even if the former Substitute Shinigami has never shown any hostile intentions.

Not recently anyway.

And the other half has risen to the occasion, resentment stirring in their ranks as the rumours fly, all wanting to lend a hand to the young man who was the only one to match Aizen during the war, but lost almost everything in the wake of it.

Byakuya would like to count himself as neutral but...

He sighs, a muted exhale that doesn't even make Renji blink from the sheets of paper in front of him.

Byakuya thinks of Rukia, of how, for the first time since he found her, she came home crying and looking like the world has ended. Even he was mildly alarmed until Renji shouldered forward and revealed what has really been going on in regards to Kurosaki Ichigo.

Byakuya listened to it all without commenting, and then orders them both to either take the rest of the day off or get back to work before striding away.

Kurosaki Ichigo has the singular maddening ability to annoy Byakuya with a mere handful of words and a cocky smirk, but it is also true that there are very few others that Byakuya respects as much as he does the former Substitute Shinigami. He owes Kurosaki Ichigo twice over, and it doesn't sit well with him at all that his own lieutenant and sister-in-law are partially responsible for
pushing the young man far enough away that he feels that he has to leave altogether.

So Byakuya doesn't say anything about the misery on Renji's face or the remorse in Rukia's puffy eyes. He lets them stew in their own guilt and thinks it is punishment all on its own, better than anything anyone else can come up with.

And he keeps to himself the traitorous thoughts in his own head, the ones that already know full well where Byakuya will stand when this situation comes to a head and the Captain-Commander orders Kurosaki Ichigo's arrest.

For now however, Byakuya holds his silence, holds his peace, and wordlessly hopes that Kurosaki Ichigo will stay one step ahead of all those sent after him and wanting to do him harm.

~W~

Inoue won't stop crying, Sado hasn't said a word since this nightmare started, Arisawa has stormed off somewhere, Asano is sulking in the corner, Kojima is nowhere to be found, and Uryuu is near the end of his tether.

He isn't good at comforting people, so he doesn't, especially since he has enough trouble dealing with his own emotions. Instead, he takes a deep breath, vacates his depression-filled room for the umpteenth time since they wordlessly holed up there earlier, and wanders down to his kitchen for some water.

He grits his teeth when he finds that his father has finally come home, but the man doesn't look up from the newspaper he is perusing so Uryuu ignores him as well and heads for the cabinets for a glass.

He pauses at the sink, gaze absently drifting to the window to stare sightlessly at the grey skies outside and the pelting rain coming down in buckets.

He wonders when they started going wrong. Six months ago? A year? From the very beginning?

Probably from the very beginning. Uryuu has always found Kurosaki to be difficult to deal with. For all his tendencies to be blunt and direct and near-foolhardy, Kurosaki has never been
simple.

“Stop letting the water run; it’s wasteful.”

Uryuu jerks back into the present, glares at Ryuuken (who still hasn’t looked up from his paper; Uryuu would very much like to know what sort of breaking news is that interesting) for appearance’s sake, and quickly turns off the running water.

And then he turns it back on when he realizes he hasn’t poured himself that glass of water yet.

He doesn't leave the kitchen right away like he normally would when Ryuuken is in it. Between his father and his friends, Uryuu would rather stay with the former.

“Did you ever talk to Kurosaki about the war?” Uryuu asks abruptly, wincing at how loud his voice sounds in the previous silence.

Ryuken’s gaze doesn't shift. “No.”

Uryuu inwardly fidgets, and he takes a gulp of water as he words his next sentence. “You talked to me about it. And I didn't even want to.”

His father doesn't miss a beat when he answers. “You’re my son.”

Uryuu can’t help the thrum of warm gratitude and just the slightest bit of relief in his chest at these words. He tries his hardest to ignore it.

“I offered,” Ryuken continues unexpectedly, and Uryuu’s gaze snaps up to look at his father. Ryuken finally glances back at him, expression as unreadable as ever.

He doesn't say anything else, nothing incriminating, but Uryuu can guess. Depending on who Ryuuken went to to offer his expertise, either Kurosaki refused, or Kurosaki’s father refused.
Still, it’s a little weird that Ryuuken would offer help at all, even if Kurosaki is Uryuu’s... friend.

Ryuuken must have caught his puzzlement because the man actually puts his paper down and leans back with a contemplative expression on his face.

“I had an adopted sister,” Ryuuken finally reveals. Uryuu almost gapes. What? Since when? And ‘had’? So whoever it was died? Is that why Uryuu has never heard of this sister before? His adopted aunt?

“She died,” Ryuuken confirmed, eyes distant behind his glasses. “Killed by a Hollow. She was a good woman. Loved her husband, and loved her three children even more. I believe she loved them all equally but if she had ever had to pick a favourite, it would most likely be her eldest. Her only son.”

Uryuu is far from stupid so he can put the pieces together himself. It makes his jaw drop for several stunned seconds. “She- Kurosaki Masaki was your- What?”

Ryuuken would probably roll his eyes if he was the type to do so. As it is, the man only sighs and picks up his newspaper again. “In a way, Kurosaki-kun is my nephew. I owe it to Masaki to at least offer the necessary medical assistance, but his father is one of the most stubborn men I have ever met. He said he would handle it himself. I respected his wishes.”

Silence falls once more. Uryuu takes another sip, still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that he and Kurosaki may as well be cousins, probably would’ve grown up together if Kurosaki’s father didn’t keep Kurosaki ignorant about their world until the teen was forcibly dumped into it.

He almost jumps a foot in the air when something upstairs shatters and Inoue’s voice rises into muffled but hysterical words that Uryuu can’t quite make out. He considers staying down here, but Ryuuken gives him a narrow-eyed look that makes Uryuu grimace, down the rest of his water, and return to his room.

He doesn't know what to do, doesn't understand why everything feels like it’s unravelling without Kurosaki around to hold them together when they have unknowingly pushed him away for two years already in the process of trying to help him adjust to life without being able to see souls.

Perhaps it’s because Uryuu has always thought – foolishly, selfishly – that Kurosaki would
still be there when he looks around, when they need him, and that was enough to make all of them forget that Kurosaki might feel isolated and unwanted, enough to give him that extra push to leave.

Uryuu takes off his glasses and rubs at his eyes. Foolish, selfish; some friends they are.

Inoue screams something again, and Asano’s voice rises as well in accusation along with Sado’s low, uncharacteristically harsh tones, and Uryuu puts his glasses back on, squares his shoulders, and goes in to do damage control.

He has no idea how to go about getting Kurosaki back, doesn't even know if maybe it would be better for Kurosaki if they just let him go, but the least Uryuu can do right now, being the most level-headed one out of this lot, is to make sure they don’t tear each other’s throats out in the meantime.

It’s the least he can do because he knows Kurosaki well enough to guess that the other teen would disapprove of all of them throwing blame at each other.

Especially when they all share the blame equally.

~W~

Kukaku, along with Ganju, listens to Yoruichi’s pained explanation and takes in her downcast eyes and sombre features before nodding and sending her on her way.

She walks back to her room while Ganju meanders outside, neither of them sharing any words. Kukaku grabs a bottle of sake and two cups, fills them both, and sets them down on her table, opposite to each other, one for her and one for someone who may or may not return one day.

For a moment, she cocks her head and picks up the sound of Ganju’s hooting laughter from somewhere out in the backyard.

And then she smirks as well, grinning broadly as she picks up the cup in front of her and raises it like a toast to the young man wandering the roads without care.
“Good for you, kid,” Kukaku remarks, turning her eyes to the blue open expanse of sky outside her window. “It’s about damn time.”

She thinks of Kurosaki Ichigo, *Shiba* Ichigo, and remembers Shiba Kaien, her brother who was always happiest on the move, never tied to one place.

She thinks that Ichigo would've liked her brother – Kaien with the same restless nature, gaze always drawn to the distant horizon, someone who would've understood Ichigo better than anyone else, more than Kukaku or Ganju, and certainly more than Isshin.

And she thinks, with a touch of melancholic nostalgia, that Kaien would've liked their little cousin too.

**Please leave a review on your way out.**
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I might’ve said it before but this fic isn’t as epically plot-y as some of my other fics so don’t expect anything huge. It’s just something I wrote for personal enjoyment in a what-if-Ichigo-left scenario.

[Four Years Later]

Sakai Arashi was a mostly ordinary man at twenty-eight. He ran the local bar with his beautiful, kind-hearted wife, had a daughter who was – in his opinion – the best thing to ever grace the face of this planet, and was generally quite happy with his lot in life.

Of course, Arashi was only mostly ordinary. He didn't quite make completely ordinary because... well.

Because he could see monsters.

Not very well, blurred shapes and flickers at the corner of his eye at most, but that didn't change the fact that he could see just a little more of the world than other people.

So it came as an overwhelming relief when, three years ago, when a monster had snatched his wife and two-year-old daughter, and Arashi had had absolutely no one to turn to, a complete stranger had turned up, a nineteen-year-old with ridiculously bright orange hair whom Arashi had bumped into by chance.

To be honest, Arashi had simply been running after the monster, trying to keep up with it as best he could down several deserted side streets. It hadn't even occurred to him to remain tight-lipped about seeing monsters – something that most people would either laugh at him or send him to the loony bin for – but the stranger had believed him without batting an eye, and within the next twenty minutes, the orange-haired barely-out-of-diapers (did that make Arashi sound old?) man had singlehandedly hunted the monster down and hurled an abandoned metal pole at the thing – and gotten three deep gashes in retaliation – before finishing it off with a downward strike that had Arashi suspecting that the younger man knew kendo.
And all of that, Kurosaki Ichigo – as the stranger had introduced – had done with only Arashi shouting directions at him. Apparently, Ichigo couldn't actually see the monsters (or Hollows, as Ichigo had explained to Arashi and his wife after they had all been safely bundled back inside the then-newly-opened bar).

In the end though, none of that truly mattered. It wasn't as if Arashi bumped into those Hollows on a daily basis – or even on a monthly basis really; just glimpses on occasion – and after Ichigo had told him that cracking open a Hollow’s mask would get rid of them (and Arashi, while not a black belt, could still hold his own in most back alley fights), Arashi hadn't seen the need to be more paranoid about the world around him than he had ever been. He was the sort of person who took most things in stride; worrying himself to death over a situation that had been pretty much resolved was a waste of time and energy.

What he – and his family – did see the need to do however, was to keep one Kurosaki Ichigo in their lives. After all, the man had saved Arashi’s wife and daughter; to him, there was nothing else anyone could do to effectively secure Arashi’s eternal gratitude.

Ichigo had admitted that he was simply travelling with no actual destination in mind, only seeing the sights so to speak, and that he had left behind family and friends (who hadn't actually been much of a family or friends to him, as Arashi had guessed after catching the shadows darting through Ichigo’s eyes) so Arashi had offered the younger man the guestroom above the bar as a place to come back to if he ever wanted to take a short break from wandering around all over the place. Ichigo could leave anytime he wanted, but he would always be welcome amongst their family.

(Not to mention little Keiko needed a godfather, and who better for the position than someone who had saved her life and hadn't expected or wanted anything in return?)

Ichigo had ended up staying for two months before taking off again, and over the course of those weeks, Arashi had gotten to know him better, had heard a handful of sparse words on the touchy subject of the people Ichigo had left behind, and to this day, he hadn't once regretted his decision on insisting that Ichigo stay in touch. Hotaru doted on the bright-haired youth like a younger brother, and Keiko adored her godfather, especially since Arashi’s wife hadn't wasted any time telling their daughter of Ichigo’s heroics the moment she was old enough to understand.

(It didn't hurt that Ichigo – when he came back to visit between his trips all across Japan – always brought a present and numerous stories of his travels along. Arashi might’ve been jealous if it weren’t for the fact that Ichigo treated Keiko like gold.)

And after three years of having Ichigo in their lives, Arashi firmly considered the younger man to be part of his family, which meant he didn't take kindly to anyone who might prove to be a threat to Ichigo.
So it stood to reason that the three shady-looking characters currently trekking in through the bar door – one was decked out in a red jogging suit even though she didn't look like the sporty type (especially coupled with yellow flip-flops), another (he probably would've been the most normal if it wasn't for the somewhat unnerving smile on his face) was wearing trousers, a dress shirt, a tie, and a newsboy cap, and the last was sporting wooden sandals, a bucket hat, and, overall, a fairly traditional Japanese ensemble for god’s sakes – instantly had Arashi on high alert.

Along with a general overview of the other world filled with Hollows and Shinigami and whatnot, Arashi and Hotaru had both managed to coax Ichigo into opening up enough for the younger man to reveal – reluctantly – that he had also once been a Shinigami of sorts, and later a Visored, but also a substitute who had fought for the Gotei 13 in a war against one of their own, a Shinigami-captain-turned-traitor, and had sacrificed all his reiatsu to defeat the madman, but had been unneeded – cast aside, Arashi had supplied scathingly in the privacy of his own mind while Hotaru had fumed angrily on Ichigo’s behalf – once he had been stripped of his powers.

It had been a major factor in Ichigo’s decision to leave his old life behind, and as sad as that was, as much as Arashi wanted to somehow go back in time and smack all of Ichigo’s friends over the head for being stupid and self-centered enough to screw over someone as amazing as Ichigo, a part of him also – guiltily – didn't want to.

After all, if Ichigo hadn't been pushed to leave, then Arashi would never have met him, and he very much doubted that his wife and daughter would still be alive if that had been the case.

Nevertheless, despite the close friend he had inexplicably found in the twenty-two-year-old ex-Visored, Arashi had never managed to discover who exactly Ichigo’s old family and friends were.

That didn't matter. Arashi didn't need a physical description. The three that had entered simply had a... an otherworldly air about them regardless of the fact that they looked human (with odd attire choices fit for the carnival). Even if they weren’t Shinigami in Gigai, they were definitely related to that world in some way.

Arashi watched through narrowed eyes as the three newcomers stopped just inside the doorway and had an urgent whispered conversation between them. Or rather, the man with the newsboy cap and the girl were arguing with each other while the pale blond stood to the side, face half-hidden behind a paper fan as he waited patiently for the former two to finish.

All three, Arashi noticed, had bags under their eyes, their faces holding the slightest hints of strained exhaustion even though they hid it well, and their clothes, upon closer observation, were dusty as if they had been travelling quite a bit.
“Just shut it, Hiyori! Let me handle this, and whatever ya do, don’t open your big mouth!”

Arashi arched an eyebrow as the short girl – Hiyori – growled something back and kicked the blond in the shin. The blond hissed out a string of swearwords that made Arashi very glad that Keiko was playing in the backyard and not within hearing distance. He’d strangle all three newcomers if his daughter ever picked up any cusses from this suspicious lot.

He cleared his expression of any distaste he was feeling and plastered on a smile as the blond that had been arguing stalked up to the bar table, closely followed by the other blond with the girl bringing up the rear. “Hello, welcome to Firefly House. What can I get you?”

The blond visibly shoved down whatever prior irritation he was still feeling before offering a sharp smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. It looked more grim than anything else. “We’re not here for drinks, thanks. Word has it that you’re pretty well-versed in the comin’s and goin’s o’ this town.”

Arashi let his smile fade a little but made an effort to remain friendly. “Word has it right then; I can point you to a number of popular tourist spots around town, though it’s a bit early for vacationers to be coming through.”

The girl huffed and rolled her eyes, but Arashi only stiffened when both the men he was facing pinned him with twin looks of shrewd intensity, calling him out on his bullshit in equal measure.

Arashi stood his ground. Like hell he was going to crack and give one of his closest friends away to a bunch of weird-looking strangers, especially since they seemed to be from Ichigo’s past. He had sworn ages ago that people from Ichigo’s past were not welcome anywhere near his family.

“That ain’t what we’re here for either,” The blond looked frustrated now, voice a little rougher than before. “Look, I’ll cut ta the chase; we have it on pretty good authority that a young man with orange hair – Japanese – has been seen hangin’ at this place on and off for the past three years or so. Goes by the name of Kurosaki Ichigo. I’m sure ya know him.”

Arashi offered a cautiously crafted, politely puzzled frown. “I’m afraid not. Orange hair? That’s a bit strange for someone of Japanese desce-”
He was cut off when the blond released a huff of annoyance, and then had to blink when a photograph was abruptly thrust under his nose.

“That’s him,” The blond growled. “Ichigo. Jogged your memory yet? We’re friends of his. We’ve been lookin’ for him for goin’ on four years now. We don’t mean ’im any harm.”

Arashi only needed a fraction of a second to identify his daughter’s godfather amongst the crinkled family picture of three, though the Ichigo in the picture had shorter hair and was wearing a scowl that looked permanently etched onto his face, something Arashi had only seen on occasion ever since he had met the man. The younger Ichigo looked far more stressed too, shoulders slightly tense and features faintly creased with far too much age for a teenager even while the other two people in the picture – his sisters no doubt – beamed happily at the camera.

If Arashi had had any qualms about keeping Ichigo’s whereabouts a secret from the three newcomers before, the unsmiling teenager in the photograph effortlessly threw them out the window.

“Might’ve seen him,” Arashi shrugged, calmly pushing the picture away from his face. “I get a lot of customers all year round so he might’ve passed through once or twice. I couldn't tell you where he is now though.”

Which was actually very true. Arashi only had the vaguest of ideas that Ichigo was somewhere in Taiwan at the moment, and that was merely because the younger man had sent a postcard home depicting Taipei 101 a few weeks back. For all he knew, Ichigo might not even be in that country anymore.

“You lying dumb- mmph!”

Arashi raised his eyebrows again when the girl was cut off by a paper fan to the face, and the pale blond who had so far remained silent on the side, letting his companions talk, finally stepped forward, a deceptively light, innocent-for-all-intents-and-purposes smile on his face.

Arashi didn’t trust it for a second.

“I understand how this looks,” The second man said in an appeasing manner as he moved to stand beside the darker blond. “I wouldn’t trust us either if our positions were switched. However, it doesn't change the fact that we are old... acquaintances of Kurosaki-san, and we would very much like to talk to him. I believe he would want to at least hear what we have to say.”
The blond paused, studying Arashi carefully, and Arashi had to fight to stay as stoic as before. Of the three, it was this man that made him feel like he was under a microscope, and while his words had been genial and serene thus far, the grey gaze that the pale blond – Shinigami? – had levelled on him felt like it was staring straight through Arashi’s very soul.

And all of a sudden, his mouth felt dry, and it was almost as if he couldn't breathe, the oxygen still present around him but something else pressing in, closing around his throat and heart – his entire being – like a vice, and it took him a moment to realize that this was probably reiatsu, that energy stuff that Ichigo had explained to him, and it was coming from the pale blond, growing and growing until it was all but suffocating Arashi.

Arashi set his jaw and glared back, lips thinning despite the sweat beading his forehead. He may be Human but it would take more than a few intimidation tactics to force him to capitulate. And out of sight, one of his hands inched for the meat cleaver under the counter. These people were already dead; no one would miss them if he accidentally on purpose stabbed at least one of them if they decided to torture information out of him.

To his private perplexity, the pale blond merely released a quiet huff of unsurprised resignation, neatly reigning in his reiatsu once more as one hand reached up to tug at the brim of his bucket hat. Even the other two, while evidently still irritated, reacted rather peculiarly. The other blond man snorted, a flash of exasperation crossing his face, while the girl clicked her tongue, crossed her arms, and kicked half-heartedly at the wooden floor.

“Figures he'd make friends with a guy like this,” The darker blond grumbled without any real heat. The annoyance seemed to ebb even further, exhaustion fast replacing it instead.

Arashi refused to feel any sympathy, glowering harshly at all three but focusing on the pale blond in particular.

The fan-wielding Shinigami raised his hands in the universal placating gesture, lips curving into an apologetic smile. “My apologies; consider that a test of sorts. Judging by your reaction, or lack thereof, I suppose it is safe to assume that you already know of reiatsu and what we are?”

The blond ended on an upward lilt but Arashi didn't bother replying; they both knew it wasn't really a question.

“That saves us some time then,” The man continued after a pregnant pause. “As you've most likely already guessed, the three of us are Shinigami. Well, I am, and the other two are Visored. My name is Urahara Kisuke, and my friends here are Hirako Shinji and Sarugaki Hiyori.”
“Who’s your friend?” Arashi heard the girl – Sarugaki – mutter under her breath.

Urahara paid her no mind, studying Arashi instead with thoughtful eyes. “...Hmm, so Kurosaki-san hasn’t spoken of us. Well, not unexpected, all things considered.”

Arashi held back a scowl at the ease in which Urahara had read him. He really didn't like this guy.

“I’ve already told you,” He maintained flatly. “I don’t know this Kurosaki character. I suggest you look somewhere else if you want to find him.”

Again, the girl opened her mouth, eyes blazing with indignant fury and impatience, but this time, it was the other blond – Hirako – who shut her up with a cuff to the head. Half a second later, Sarugaki had leapt forward, fists flying, and the two were soon – quite literally – at each other’s throats, spitting increasingly worse insults.

“Maa, don’t mind them,” Urahara waved a dismissive hand in the scuffling pair’s general direction. “They’re always like that.”

Again, Arashi was surveyed closely, and this time, he did scowl, bristling as he snapped, “If that’s all, I think you should leave. I'm a bartender, not an information broker. If you're not here for a drink or a bite to eat, I'm going to have to ask you to take a hike.”

His voice tightened into a scornful snarl near the end, his manners going on vacation without his permission as he scanned the gathered Shinigami with distaste, all three of whom looked to be gearing up for another argument.

As soon as they left, Arashi would have a phone call to make. While Ichigo preferred mostly dropping off the face of the planet on his trips around the world, and Arashi and Hotaru both respected this decision, the younger man had also – after two years of knowing them – gruffly given them an emergency phone number to contact him with just in case they needed him. Arashi hadn’t used it so far but if this wasn't an emergency, he didn’t know what was.

“Then could ya take a message?” It was the first blond – Hirako – who spoke this time, tone still snarky but suddenly – noticeably – stepping up as the leader of the group. Even Urahara seemed to defer to him just a little when Hirako had shaken his head minutely to stall any further attempts at persuasion from the pale blond.
“Ya know,” Hirako added dryly. “Just in case some orange-haired guy happens ta wander in sometime between now and after we leave.”

Arashi twitched and switched his glower onto Hirako. “Look, it sounds to me like you’re just stalking the poor guy. If you haven’t found him in four years, ever considered the thought that maybe he doesn’t want to be found?”

All at once, Hirako’s entire frame seemed to straighten from its previous half-slouch, and for the first time since they had arrived, Arashi caught a flash of the same subtle lethality that Ichigo had worn like a second skin when he had confronted that Hollow three years ago, except on Hirako, it was just a little older, even more matured than Ichigo’s warrior countenance.

Was this one of the captains then? Arashi had to wonder with an inward shudder. Ichigo had outlined the hierarchy of the Gotei 13 for him. This man certainly felt like he had the bearing of one.

Still, Arashi stood his ground in spite of the chill running up his spine. His loyalty was to Ichigo in this, and he’d be damned if he was going to sell out Keiko’s godfather. His wife and daughter would never forgive him. Heck, he’d never forgive himself.

However, to Arashi’s surprise, just as abruptly, Hirako deflated, shoulder slumping in almost defeat.

“We owe ’im an apology,” The blond confessed, and there was a tangle of emotions in that sparse handful of words, voice tight with a jagged ball of anger and guilt and who knew what else. “Not just us; a lot of other people too. And... well, that’s between him and us but it involves his safety. Now, are ya willin’ ta pass on a message or not?”

A steely edge had entered Hirako’s voice now, and this time, there was no compromise in his expression.

Arashi gritted his teeth. Well, he supposed it wouldn’t hurt. He knew that they knew that he knew who Kurosaki Ichigo was. “...I doubt this Kurosaki is going to magically appear in my bar but I’ll take the message, if only to get rid of all of you as soon as possible. What is it?”

The three Shinigami traded a loaded glance before Urahara voiced smoothly, “If you see him, please tell him that the Onmitsukidou have been regularly dispatched throughout the Human World over the
past four years, his whereabouts being their objective. That should be enough to draw his attention and hopefully have him agree to meet with us.”

Arashi inwardly frowned. Onmitsukidou – he didn't know that term but it rang forebodingly in his ears.

“And remind him that we don’t mean him any harm,” The girl piped up next. She cocked her head before tacking on with a smirk, “’Course, that doesn't mean I won’t be kickin’ his ass when I see him. Puttin’ me through four years on the damn road; that stupid strawberry has it comin’!”

Arashi eyed her small form dubiously. Ichigo might have lost his reiatsu and powers and whatnot, and this girl was, of course, a Shinigami, but Arashi had seen Ichigo fight; the younger man was deadly, and there were times when Arashi could swear that Ichigo’s movements were faster than humanly possible.

When it came to hand-to-hand combat, Arashi sincerely doubted that this Sarugaki girl could ever best Ichigo.

“And one last thing,” Urahara cut in, fan snapping shut with a soft click, and for the first time since Arashi had laid eyes on him, the sly, calculating edge in the blond’s expression disappeared, leaving behind a startling honesty reflected in his eyes as he continued. “Please tell him we miss him, and remind him that his sisters will be graduating in three weeks’ time.”

Arashi stared in silence for a long moment (and in the back of his mind, he spared a second to feel deeply satisfied when Sarugaki began shifting edgily in place), before nodding once curtly. “Fine, if I see him, I’ll pass it on. Now if you're not going to buy anything, I'm going to have to ask you to leave.”

Hirako grinned, shark-like and sharp again, and looking more alive than when he had first entered the bar as he tilted his cap in acknowledgement and sauntered for the door. Sarugaki followed, making a face at Arashi before bounding out after Hirako.

Urahara on the other hand lingered, silver gaze focused disconcertingly on Arashi. And then he sighed, also turning for the door as he called back over his shoulder one more time in a far too cheery voice, “We’ll be back tomorrow, Sakai-san! For food next time, of course. Have a good day!”

Arashi stared after the Shinigami in utter disbelief as the door swung shut, and then he groaned and
leaned forward, resting his forehead on the cool surface of the bar table. It was lucky there were no customers at this time of day. He didn't feel like working at all.

So this was how those Shinigami were going to play it then? Come back every day until Ichigo showed up?

Well then. They were in for a long wait.

~W~

“You sure they said their names were Urahara Kisuke and Hirako Shinji?”

“Yeah, and Sarugaki Hiyori, I believe. Why?”

“...I didn't expect that. I actually didn't really expect anyone to come after me at all, much less still be trying to track me down after almost four years. And Shinji... and Hiyori, you say?”

“Yes, is that significant?”

“Mm, you could say that. They mentioned the Onmitsukidou, the Second Division. That’s like the Gotei 13’s elite assassination squad by the way-”

“Assassination?!”

“Don’t freak out, Arashi, it’s not as bad as it sounds. I told you, it’s ridiculous how backwards Soul Society is. Without reiatsu, they virtually can’t track me down... unless the Twelfth... well, let’s not get into that. Don’t want to borrow trouble and all. Anyway, the only reason those three have caught up with me is probably because they’ve all spent over a century in the Human World. They’d be more familiar with how things work here, especially Urahara-san.”

“Okay, but what does that have to do with the other two? Hirako and Sarugaki?”

“...Well, I wouldn't know for sure, but last I heard, Shinji and Hiyori, along with the rest of
their group, had been pardoned and accepted back into Soul Society. That's all I managed to weasel out of Urahara-san though so I don't know if they're just living there now or if they've been integrated back into their respective squads or what. But if the Captain-Commander's sent the Onmitsukidō after me, I also don't know why Shinji and Hiyori have been allowed to search for me on their own. It's not like the Onmitsukidō's going to be asking me for tea or something if they find me. They're more likely to arrest me and march me back to Seireitei, though I have no idea why. I haven't done anything illegal lately.”

“...Your mysterious past of criminal activity should probably worry me more than it actually does. Alright, so what are you going to do? I have a feeling those Shinigami are going to keep coming back for a long while. I could phone you again when I know for certain that they've left for good?”

“...”

“Ichigo?”

“...No, I think... I have some things to wrap up here first, but then... Yeah, then I think I'll come home.”

“...What?!”

~W~

[Four Years Ago]

“Oh, Shinji-san, what an unexpected surprise~”

“Cut the bullshit, Kisuke!” Shinji barked as he marched right past the other blond, tossing his bag into a corner before storming onwards towards the front of the store. “Where’s Isshin? At his house?”

“He left with Ryuken-san a few minutes ago,” Kisuke answered hurriedly, trailing after him, and for the first time in over an entire goddamned century, Shinji actually managed to pick up just a touch of that old nervousness that the scientist had often carried around with him all those years ago.
Huh. Shinji hadn't thought it would ever make an appearance again. Exile had hardened them after all.

He smiled grimly. “Don’t look so worried, Kisuke. I'm not the one ya have ta worry about.”

And before Kisuke could do more than blink, a blur of red and pale yellow dashed out after them, screeching at the top of her voice, “YOU'RE DEAD, DICKHEAD!!”

As Kisuke yelped and collapsed under the double-footed kick to his face, courtesy of Hiyori as she began beating him up, Shinji smirked and left them to it. The idiot didn't deserve anything less.

And in the meantime, Shinji had his own grudges to settle.

~W~

They had both been captains once upon a time but Shinji had been one for far longer than Isshin had, not to mention out of the two of them, Shinji was the one who had kept up with his training despite the fact that Isshin had been exiled only around twenty years ago.

So it came as no surprise when Shinji managed to sneak up on Isshin – and Ryuuken – without either of them any the wiser, especially since the latter seemed to be giving the former the cold shoulder, and the Shinigami was looking too miserable to be all that aware of his surroundings anyway.

Shinji gave no warning. With a flex of his leg muscles, he had leapt forward and was practically on top of Isshin before the Shinigami had any inkling of his impending ass-kicking. There was no sun today, the skies overcast with storm clouds, so even Shinji’s shadow was hidden from view.

Shinji drew back one foot and let his reiatsu spike.

Isshin stiffened and whirled.
Shinji grinned nastily and smashed his foot straight into the former Shiba Clan Head’s face, feeling the man’s nose crack under the force of his attack.

The blow propelled Isshin backwards and right off the pavement, sending the man soaring several dozen feet down the street as Shinji flipped neatly in the air and landed on the balls of his feet.

He watched with dispassionate eyes as Isshin crashed heavily back to the ground, and then spared a glance for Ryuuken who was watching the exchange, shoulders only slightly tense as the man no doubt readied himself to move in case Shinji rounded on him.

Shinji’s lip curled. “I have no business with ya. Stay outta this, Quincy.”

Ryuuenk arched an eyebrow at the form of address but said nothing, obviously disinclined to interfere so long as Shinji wasn’t going to lash out at him as well. Apparently, the senior Ishida was perfectly fine with the beat down that Isshin was about to receive.

Without further fanfare, Shinji stalked forward, each step swirling with restrained but potent reiatsu. He didn’t give Isshin time to even sit up before he planted one heel against the man’s chest, digging down hard enough to make the Shinigami wheeze.

“Hello, Isshin,” Shinji grinned once more, humourless and dark. “Long time no see.”

Isshin scowled up at him but seemed to have enough brain cells to realize that any attempts at getting up would be a bad idea. “What do you want, Shinji?”

Shinji huffed a short dry laugh. “What do I want? Well, if ya could turn back time and erase the last two years, I’d be much obliged, might even be inclined ta forgive ya, but seein’ as that’s not exactly possible, I’ll settle for some answers.” He leaned forward, smile dropping. “What the hell did ya think ya were playin’ at, Shiba?”

The scowl on Isshin’s face morphed into a glower. “That’s none of your business. Ichigo’s my son; you don’t have any say in his life-“
“No say?!” Shinji snarled, pressing his foot down even harder. “No say?! Ya said nothin’ when ya sent the kid ta Kisuke, said nothin’ again when he was sent my way for trainin’! Ya put the boy’s life in my hands, ta be dealt with as I saw fit, even ta end it if he couldn’t overcome his inner Hollow. Ya gave him ta me, and in the end, he survived, and for all that he’s still his own person, he’s also mine now. Part of my family, just like all the other Visored. Ya know the kinda person I am, Isshin, ya know how I am when it comes ta the people I accept inta my home, and Ichigo was one of ’em the moment ya allowed him ta come ta me. And don’t even give me any bullshit about there not bein’ any other way. Ya could’ve come out with the truth any time, ya could’ve stopped him from bein’ a Shinigami in the first place! That Hollow that the Kuchiki girl faced that night didn’t have ta appear right outside your house! Even if it would’ve messed with his plans for Aizen, Kisuke was still willin’ ta draw it away and kill it elsewhere! But ya insisted, and then when he became a Visored, as ya knew he had every chance of becomin’ once Rukia broke the law and transferred her powers ta him, ya agreed with Kisuke that I was your best option. Ya knew what that entailed, so father or not, ya had no right keepin’ the kid locked up and away from me and the others! Especially when he needed us!”

A rib gave way under Shinji’s foot as his reiatsu raged, seething and roiling up and down the street as his anger rose to new heights.

“I didn't keep him locked up!” Isshin protested indignantly, grimacing even as his own reiatsu finally began pushing back to alleviate some of the pressure.

“That’s what ya took away from that?!” Shinji barked in disbelief. Furious, he pushed off of the Shinigami only so he could reel in his reiatsu before he killed someone. “Ya fool! In a town filled with people and monsters from our world, what else would ya call isolatin’ someone and keepin’ them from everythin’ he’s ever known? He’s been seein’ spirits his whole life! It’s hard enough that he can’t anymore! Ta keep us from him as well-”

“I decided it was for his own good,” Isshin growled harshly, heaving himself upright. “It’s unhealthy to obsess so much over something he doesn’t have any more. I know what’s best for him; I'm his father-”

“Kisuke’s a better father ta Ichigo than ya’ve ever been!” Shinji shouted, watching with vindictive satisfaction when Isshin flinched. “Don’t even go there, Isshin; you're good with your daughters, I’ll give ya that, but I knew ya messed up when it came ta Ichigo the moment I realized he didn’t know anythin’ about his heritage before he met the Kuchiki girl. Secrets breed lies, Taichou, ya should know that from experience, and lies only break people when they come ta light, as all lies do. Ichigo may have forgiven ya for keepin’ what ya are, what he is, from him for most of his life, for not explainin’ things ta him even when he blamed himself for his mom’s death, but it also means he ain’t gonna turn ta ya for help no matter what. He doesn’t trust ya anymore. And ya don’t talk ta him. From what Kisuke’s told me, ya’ve never talked ta him, not properly. Ya think a relationship like that can last? Did ya even talk ta him about the war? It’s no wonder he skipped town if ya’ve been neglectin’ him all the time. He may be independent but no one can go at everythin’ alone. By bannin’ us from seein’ him, ya forced him ta do just that. And the kid may be a bit of a loner but he
thrives on havin’ people around him, even just ta protect. I’ve known him for a quarter of the time ya’ve known him, and even I can understand that much.”

Shinji wasn’t normally one to chew people out, but when he did, it was long and loud and always ended with injuries for the person he was yelling at. Isshin, while standing, had an arm wrapped around his torso, a broken bloody nose, and probably quite the sizeable bruises blooming on his chest and back.

The bastard deserved it in Shinji’s humble opinion.

But now that Shinji had finished his tirade, the pouring rain took over, filling the ears of the three people crazy enough to still be out in this weather.

Shinji drew in a deep breath through his nose, tipping his head back as the buckets of water thundering down from the heavens above continued drenching him from head to toe. He tightened his already clenched hands before allowing them to relax, drawing on his centuries-polished control to tamp down on the rest of his ire.

Tilting his head to the side, he caught sight of Ryuuken through the sheets of rain, leaning against a wall on the side of the street and looking like he had been keeping himself upright with more than a little effort. Shinji couldn’t blame him; his reiatsu – when completely uncontained – could floor anyone below the power levels of the strongest of captains. And Ichigo. For a Human, even a Quincy, Ishida Senior wasn’t too shabby.

“…He’s my son,” Isshin’s voice was quiet, barely audible above the torrential downpour. “He’s my only son. I tried my best with him but he’s so… He’s difficult to connect with.”

Shinji scoffed under his breath, exhaling shortly as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “Not that difficult, moron. I did fine with him. So did Kisuke.”

“Neither of you are his father,” Isshin dismissed in a hard tone.

Shinji snorted, meeting Isshin’s gaze evenly. “And ya are? What have ya ever done for him? Ya can’t even bring yourself ta tell him the truth about his own family.”

To his credit, Isshin made no move to defend himself this time, shoulders slumping as he stared
sightlessly off to the side.

Shinji shook his head and turned away. As much as he’d like to continue tearing Isshin a new one, this would have to do for now. It wouldn’t be long before Shinigami were sent after him, and he had to get himself and Hiyori hidden away by the time that happened. Hopefully, Kisuke had a couple of reiatsu-suppressing Gigai lying around.

“Shinji.”

Shinji halted but didn’t turn around.

“You’ll find him?”

One of Shinji’s eyebrows ticked up with irritation. “Givin’ up on him already?”

A defeated sigh. “He wouldn’t appreciate it if I go after him. He might be more… receptive if you and Kisuke went.”

Shinji snorted once more and began moving up the street again. “Say ya will, Isshin. All I see is someone who ain’t willin’ ta expend the effort for his only son. Even if he hates ya for followin’ him, at least he’ll know and you’ll know that ya tried.”

And with that parting shot, Shinji shunpoed away, flashing back across town towards the Urahara Shouten. He had work to do, and no more time to waste on Kurosaki Isshin.

[Present]

Kisuke gazed idly into his cup of tea, not really seeing it as his mind half-dozed off to the clinking sounds of glass over at the bar, the quiet murmurs of conversation around them, and the lackluster bickering of yet another argument between his own travelling companions.

He was tired.
Four years on the road, pulling all-nighters more often than not, especially at the beginning (he hadn't seen many Shinigami these days, to the point where he had begun suspecting that the Gotei 13 had given up), and using every method at his disposal – contacts, inventions, and Kidou spells – to track down Ichigo and feed the Shinigami fake but feasible trails to places that Kisuke was certain that Ichigo wasn’t in was no small feat.

It helped that ‘Kurosaki’ was a fairly common surname, and ‘Ichigo’ wasn’t all that rare either even though the meaning behind it was unique to their Ichigo. Still, Kisuke was getting too old for this, or perhaps his Onmitsukidou training had gotten even rustier than he had realized, yet he couldn’t bring himself to give up. Shinji was older and the blond was still powering forward with all the obstinate determination of a dog with a bone.

Absently, Kisuke glanced to the side at where the bartender was polishing a martini flute. And simultaneously giving them the evil eye. Kisuke smiled back wryly and raised his tea in a toast. The man glared back even harder.

Kisuke chuckled inwardly. He had known the moment he had stepped into this bar the first time that they had finally hit jackpot. Even just by talking to him, Kisuke had sensed that Sakai Arashi had that feel about him, the one that said that he had been touched by Ichigo’s charisma, and would now go to hell and back for the bright-haired young man if need be. That had been clear enough when the bartender had flat-out refused to give away anything about Ichigo, and the last three times they had tried questioning him again, Arashi had verbally strung them up and cursed them out in a low heated tone, spewing swearwords and contemptuous insults at them that had made even Kisuke wince.

Most of Ichigo’s acquaintances turned out that way – crazy, stubborn, and near-fanatical about dogging Ichigo’s footsteps even into the most dangerous of situations, ignoring all warnings and common sense in the process.

Until those two years of course. That… hadn’t been pretty to watch. Those bonds had unravelled without any of them realizing until it had been too late.

“More tea, sir?” A polite if slightly chilly voice interrupted his thoughts.

And then there was the wife, who was certainly far more than just a pretty face.

Kisuke smiled again, equally genial. “Yes, please.”
If Sakai Arashi was fire and brimstone under his stiffly civil countenance, then Sakai Hotaru was ice and steel forged under the coldest of moonbeams.

“Thank you very much,” Kisuke plastered on his most charming smile this time, only to receive a deceptively demure one in return that clearly told him ‘if I knew how to hide your bodies, you would already be dead’.

Kisuke used to be an assassin; he could appreciate that kind of subtle venomous lethality in a woman. Sakai Arashi was a lucky man.

Hotaru swept away, gliding back towards the bar and her husband, and looking for all the world like a harmless woman who hadn’t just gone completely mother-tiger on Kisuke with only her facial expression.

Kisuke shifted his gaze back to his tea. It figured that even away from Soul Society and all it entailed, Ichigo would pick up the most interesting characters living on the planet.

He took a sip of tea, sighing contentedly as the hot beverage warmed his insides. He wondered what Ichigo was doing now. Undoubtedly, Arashi had already contacted the former Visored two weeks ago after that first visit, but whether or not that meant that Ichigo was on his way back or on his way out of the Eastern Hemisphere was anybody’s guess.

He was pulled out of his musings once more when his phone buzzed, signalling an incoming call that Kisuke automatically answered. There was only one person who even had this number these days, and Kisuke was always willing to talk to her.

Sometimes, he wondered – with a touch of guilt – whether or not he might just be projecting, seeing one in the other simply because he had failed the former so badly.

“Good afternoon, Yuzu-san,” Kisuke greeted, ignoring the glances from both Hiyori and Shinji. “What can I do for you today?”

“Hello, Urahara-san, sorry to bother you. I wasn't sure whether or not to call but- well, in the end, my graduation is coming up, and I decided I should remind you of our agreement after all.”
Kisuke quirked a rueful smile. To this day, Kurosaki Yuzu still possessed her kind and compassionate nature that she had inherited from her mother but the girl – practically a young woman now – had also taken on some of her brother’s traits after that fiasco four years ago, gaining both a wilful streak a mile wide and the bullheaded tendency to do what she wished regardless of the opinions of the people around her. Of course, she hid those qualities quite well behind a gentle smile, more generous with her good manners than Ichigo had been, but they were still there, and the people who interacted with her on a regular basis knew it.

“Yes, the agreement,” Kisuke acknowledged. “If Kurosaki-san has not returned by the time you graduate, you will join us on our search, correct?”

“Yes,” Yuzu confirmed, a hint of diamond resolve entering her voice. “My graduation – along with Karin’s – will take place in one week. If my brother has still not returned, then I do expect at least one of you to be meeting me at the bus station the moment the ceremony is over.”

Kisuke internally sighed. Like brother, like sister. He had always assumed that it would be Karin who turned out most like Ichigo, but while the older of the twins had gone through a few changes of her own over the past several years, it had been Yuzu who now reminded everyone most of the still missing Kurosaki.

“Have you talked to your father about this, Yuzu-san?” Kisuke finally enquired. Again, he paid no attention to Hiyori’s loud scoff or Shinji’s stony expression.

A pregnant pause ballooned on the other end of the line. “…I do not understand what that has to do with anything. I have, of course, told Otou-san and Karin that I will not be applying to any universities or colleges yet, and that I will be travelling for a while. Otou-san was unhappy with this decision and is still trying to talk me out of it but it is none of his business. I am almost an adult, and he has no say in my post-secondary education or lack thereof. Now, do I have your promise that you will come pick me up on the day of the graduation should Onii-chan not make it back?”

A sliver of hurt choked her voice for a moment, but there was resignation there too as if Yuzu was already reconciled with the fact that Ichigo would not return to see her graduate.

Kisuke really did sigh out loud this time. “We will be there, Yuzu-san. Though might I enquire about any extra guests in town?”

They’d arranged it long ago that ‘extra guests’ were synonymous to ‘Shinigami’ so that anyone – Human or otherwise – eavesdropping on them would be none the wiser.
“None,” Yuzu denied. “I haven’t seen anyone new coming or going for a good six months now. The same people are still doing the rounds, though there haven’t been any major disturbances besides the usual.”

Kisuke frowned thoughtfully. So Kuchiki Rukia, Abarai Renji, and a number of the other captains and lieutenants were still stationed in Karakura and taking turns patrolling the streets, with only minor Hollows to contend with. Two years ago, the uproar had finally started dying down, with the Onmitsukidou and some other unknowns being withdrawn from their high alert guard duty around Karakura, and not long after that, Yamamoto had begun sending the more familiar faces of the Gotei 13 down to patrol the town once again. From what Yuzu had reported to him, even Ukitake and Kyouraku had been seen a handful of times trekking across the rooftops and stopping by both the Shouten and the Kurosaki household.

Yuzu had given them all a wide berth each time, especially when Yoruichi had been dispatched. Kisuke was fairly certain that the youngest Kurosaki would never forgive his old friend since it had been she who had personally delivered the news of Ichigo’s disappearance to the Captain-Commander.

“Alright,” Kisuke continued amicably. “We will see you in a week, whether or not we find Kurosaki-san by then.”

Judging by the subsequent sigh and subdued goodbye, Yuzu wasn’t expecting any miracles.

“You didn’t tell her,” Hiyori observed after he hung up, watching him critically. “That we’re pretty close this time.”

“We were ‘pretty close’ quite a few other times in the past,” Shinji pointed out testily. “And she was more disappointed every time we had to tell her that we’d just hit another dead end. Better to just produce her brother for her than give her false hope if this lead doesn’t work out either.”

“We’re closer than we’ve ever been,” Hiyori insisted huffily before dropping her head into her arms on top of the table with a wordless grumble. She’d calmed down a little over the last four years, still prone to yelling at Shinji and picking fights with the former captain but not as much. Kisuke deduced that it was probably too exhausting for even Hiyori to keep up a constant angry diatribe on the road.
Kisuke eyed his former lieutenant rather fondly before downing the rest of his tea and looking around. Most people had left, the lunch hour rush being over, and the last of the other customers was just shuffling out the door, leaving the three of them alone with the Sakais.

He stilled when he caught sight of Arashi stalking towards the door, Shinji and Hiyori turning to look as well when the bartender reached out and flipped the sign to Closed before heading in their direction, his wife joining him halfway.

“I’ll make this short,” Arashi told them bluntly without so much as a how-do-you-do. “You hurt him in any way, and Shinigami or not, I will find a way to hurt you. Badly.”

Beside him, Hotaru smiled, sweet as poisoned honey. “Ichigo is part of our family, and we owe him more than we can ever say. If you attempt to make him do anything he doesn’t want to do, then I can promise you that my husband won’t have time to do anything before I finish dealing with you.”

Kisuke stared a little wide-eyed, and he didn't have to look at his two companions to know that they were just as stunned with this turnabout play.

The couple was still watching them with expressions akin to a cat staring down a rat. Kisuke cleared his throat. “We understand. We are not here to harm Kurosaki-san. ...I take it that he is coming back today?”

A spark of anticipation shot through him at Arashi’s curt affirmative nod, and for the first time in four years, Kisuke could actually see things looking up. Hiyori broke out into a toothy grin, and Shinji closed his eyes for a moment, a near-untraceable flicker of relief crossing his face now that they knew that their gamble with this family had paid off at last.

“His plane landed half an hour ago,” Arashi said gruffly, though the hostility seemed to have receded a little, eyes turning contemplative now as he took in their respective expressions. “He’ll be here in another ten. Sit tight. Don’t accost him the moment he walks in through the door.”

And with that said, the man swung an arm around Hotaru’s shoulders and the two strode away, disappearing into the back where a flight of stairs most likely led up to the house built on top of the bar.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Shinji drawled, leaning back in his seat. “Here I thought it
would take at least a few more weeks and us gettin’ chucked outta the bar before Ichigo came back.”

“Don’t go jinxin’ it then!” Hiyori snapped, knee jittering up and down underneath the table as she kept half an eye on the door. “If either of you screws this up, and we end up havin’ to start from scratch again, I’m gonna rip out your spines and feed them to you.”

Shinji snorted and told her that he’d like to see her midget-self try, resulting in Hiyori launching herself over the table to tackle the blond with flying fists.

Kisuke mentally rolled his eyes. Honestly, they were like children sometimes.

He turned his attention to the clock on the wall, and then shifted his gaze to the door.

Ten minutes.

~W~

He didn't bother hurrying but his pace was steady and his strides were sure. Duffel bag slung over one shoulder, he rounded a corner and caught sight of Firefly House. The familiar building brought a smile to his lips.

It had been a little over three months since his last visit, and despite his love of travel, he still found himself missing two of his closest friends. And of course, there was his precious goddaughter whom he couldn't wait to see again. Even back when he had just been eighteen, if someone had told him that he would have a goddaughter at all before he had hit twenty, he would've laughed in their face. After all, who in their right mind would want to trust their kid to him when he spent more time hopping around the world than staying in one place?

But he had formed a very fast and very close friendship with Hotaru and Arashi even though the couple was, respectively, four and six years older than he was, and the two trusted him to be there for their daughter if anything happened to them, yet still gave him the freedom to go where he pleased, never nagging at him to stay and always welcoming him home with open arms. Over the years, the four of them had only grown closer as a family, and he’d do anything – even remain in town if they ever asked it of him (and they wouldn't, which was why Ichigo would) – for them.

It had been a long and fulfilling four years, and Ichigo couldn't possibly be happier.
So it figured that his past would take this time to barge back into his life at last.

In all honesty, Ichigo hadn't been lying when he had told Arashi over the phone two weeks ago that he hadn't expected anyone to come after him. It had been four years after all, and after the first few weeks when he had received nothing but frantic phone calls and text messages, those too had petered out until only Yuzu had sent the occasional hopeful text message every few months in the first year he had been away.

Even at the beginning, he had cherished those messages. Out of everyone back home, he had known it would be Yuzu who would miss him most even though she had been growing up at her own pace and spending less time around the house before he had left. He had, from time to time, been tempted to send something back, but he had promised himself that he would be cutting ties from his old life, and he hadn't wanted to give anyone even more ways to track him, especially after Yuzu had mentioned that she thought that the Shinigami might come after Ichigo, though for what reason, even Ichigo couldn't figure out.

Nonetheless, after a year, his phone bill had proven too much to keep up with, especially since he rarely used his cell in the first place, so he had gotten rid of it in the end, choosing to use a much cheaper pay-as-you-go phone instead, and only when he was away from Firefly House.

On the other hand, Ichigo had sent anonymous presents – one for Yuzu and one for Karin – each year on their birthday and for Christmas. Neither were stupid; the first time he had sent each of them a box of souvenirs from his travels for their fifteenth birthday, he had received two exceedingly relieved thank-yous and glad-you're-still-alives from both his sisters before he had cancelled his phone plan.

But other than that, he had refrained from contacting them, content in the knowledge that they were still growing up fine without him. Instead, he had planned on returning, for better or for worse, when they graduated, just for a short visit to attend the ceremony and maybe exchange a few words with them afterwards.

There had been no need for Urahara, Hirako, and Sarugaki to tell Arashi to remind Ichigo about that issue. It wasn't as if Ichigo was going to forget his own sisters’ graduation.

His steps slowed as he reached the Firefly House at last, something in his chest easing as he produced his own key. In his peripheral vision, he caught sight of a fleeting shadow sprinting away from one of the upstairs window accompanied by the muffled sound of an excited squeal. A tiny smile quirked his lips. It looked like he would have quite the welcoming party.
He slipped inside without further ado, and his gaze was instantly drawn to the corner table. Three pairs of eyes stared right back at him, I-can’t-believe-he’s-really-here disbelief mixed with relief and a hint of its-been-four-years awkwardness.

Ichigo let the door swing shut behind him, locking it again without looking.

And then—

“Ichi-ji-chan!”

Ichigo’s attention instantly shifted away from the three people from his past, a wide grin spreading across his face as he dropped his bag to the ground and opened his arms for the small girl that came racing out from the back of the bar, the hem of her long-sleeved white dress flapping behind her as she bounded towards him.

“Hey!” Ichigo scooped up the dark-haired, hazel-eyed child, the spitting image of her mother save for her eyes which she had inherited from her father. “How’s my favourite goddaughter in the world?”

Delighted giggles erupted from the girl as Keiko half-strangled him with a hug, pulling back just enough to grin impishly back at him with adoring eyes. “Silly Ji-chan; I’m your only goddaughter!”

Ichigo smirked, shifting his arms so that he could carry her more comfortably with one arm. “So you are, but if I had more, you’d still be my favourite.”

Keiko beamed at him, hugging him once more before squirming a little to settle herself, making absolutely no move to get back down on the ground as she perched imperiously on his forearm like he was her throne. Ichigo snorted softly, running an affectionate hand through her wavy black curls. “Still a princess, huh? Your daddy’s been spoiling you again.”

“Indeed he has,” Another voice rang out, amused and long-suffering at the same time. “But he’s a softie like that, so what can we do? Welcome home, Ichigo.”

Ichigo smiled, striding forward to accept a warm hug from Hotaru that engulfed both him and Keiko, who grinned happily and mimicked her mother with another hug of her own around them.
as best she could with her shorter limbs.

“Gorgeous as ever, Hotaru,” Ichigo flashed a playful grin when he was released, ducking down to press a kiss to the older woman’s cheek before drawing back. “Arashi doesn’t deserve you.”

Hotaru laughed, a chime-like sound that lit up her blue eyes. “You’re a charmer, Ichigo. Don’t let my husband hear you say that.”

“Too late,” The final member of their family grumbled from the doorway with mock indignity before walking over to join them. “Are you trying to steal my wife from me again, Kurosaki?”

“Well, she could certainly do better than an old man like you,” Ichigo taunted back, keeping his face straight as Hotaru smiled with helpless mirth beside him. “Now I on the other hand – prime of my youth, good looks, good grades, good- ouch!”

Ichigo snickered even as Arashi smacked him over the head with a roll of his eyes.

“You’re a brat, Ichigo,” Arashi informed him before clapping him on the shoulder. “Good to have you home.”

“Good to be home,” Ichigo agreed, straightening and turning back to Keiko who had been watching them with avid curiosity. Being only five but still very intelligent, she had probably comprehended most of the byplay, especially since Ichigo and Arashi always pulled something like this every time he came home, but she wasn’t quite old enough to understand every nuance of the conversation yet.

Seeing that their exchange was over though, Keiko tugged insistently at Ichigo’s shirt, batting innocent eyes at him that always worked like a charm. “Did you bring me a present this time, Ichi-ji-chan?”

Ichigo laughed, tousling her hair before smoothing out the strands again. “Yes, yes, of course I did, Keiko-hime. Down you get, and I’ll dig it out for you.”

Keiko pouted a little at having to stand on her own feet again but soon broke out into a
grin once more as she wriggled back to the ground, immediately latching onto his hand instead. Ichigo rolled his eyes and bent down to rifle one-handed through his duffel bag before producing a package wrapped in sky blue paper. It was her favourite colour.

Like all children, a mysterious present was enough to distract her from everything else, and Keiko finally let go of Ichigo to bounce forward and carefully accept the gift with barely contained enthusiasm.

“How about you open it upstairs, sweetheart?” Hotaru interjected gently, dropping a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Your godfather has some extra business to deal with before he can join you.”

Both of Keiko’s parents were naturally clever people, and it was clear that the girl had inherited their brains as her gaze sharpened and her eyes darted over to where the other occupants of the bar were sitting, all three clearly eavesdropping while pretending not to.

“I’ll wait for Ichi-ji-chan to finish,” Keiko decided stoutly as she turned back to Ichigo, a wide smile dimpling her cheeks. “I always love Ji-chan’s presents anyway, but none of the presents are as nice as spending time with Ji-chan, so, I can wait.”

Ichigo softened, and he dropped to one knee to wrap her in a hug again. Damn, he loved this girl. “I’ll finish up as quick as I can, Keiko, and then I’m all yours.”

“Okay!” Keiko cheered brightly, waving at him before letting her mother lead her back upstairs.

Arashi stayed behind, waiting until both were out of sight before the good humour faded from his features and a hard glare replaced it, one that was directed at the far table. “You want me to stay?”

Ichigo shook his head, a wry smile curving his lips. “It’s fine, Arashi, I can handle it.”

Arashi sighed but nodded, picking up Ichigo’s bag before moving towards the stairs as
well. “I’ll take this up to your room. Call if you need anything.”

And that was that. Ichigo watched him leave, and then, sucking in a silent fortifying breath, he squared his shoulders and turned to face his old acquaintances.

~W~

He looked good.

That was the first thought that struck Shinji when the former Visored stepped in through the door, and he didn't mean in appearance alone, though Ichigo had certainly matured into an attractive young man, all sleek subtle muscles and lean slender-limbed frame that told Shinji that Ichigo had kept up with his training despite his lack of powers. The kid had grown more into his mother’s looks than his father’s in the physical aspect, nowhere near as bulky as Isshin, and he now sported hair that fell to the nape of his neck in a slightly wind-swept mess of orange locks, along with – Shinji was certain – about half a foot taller in height than the last time Shinji had laid eyes on him, probably matching if not surpassing Kisuke’s six feet now.

But more than that, it was the manner in which Ichigo carried himself, posture relaxed in a way that said that he was comfortable in his own skin, and confident without any of it being faked or forced, the way it had sometimes been back when the young man had still been a teen leading a bunch of other teens who had all looked to him for guidance.

And his face.

Shinji hadn’t known that Ichigo could actually live without a perpetual scowl creasing his brow, always frowning even when he smiled, and yet here he was, features smooth and unstressed, and when his goddaughter – goddaughter! – had come rushing in, Ichigo had grinned and laughed without holding anything back as the Sakais folded him into their midst with the natural ease of long familiarity.

It was obvious to anyone with eyes that the girl – Keiko – thought her godfather hung the moon and stars, and her parents were equally accepting, welcoming Ichigo back with the effortless air of family greeting family. And in return, one would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to notice the affection glowing in Ichigo’s eyes and thrumming in his voice as he interacted with the three Humans.
Shinji had *never*, not once, seen Ichigo this happy, and wasn't that just fucking sad.

He smiled sardonically to himself. Not surprising considering the fact that they had been going through a war for most of the time Shinji had known Ichigo, and save for the brief visit he and the other Visored had made back when Ichigo had first been born, and then one more time when he had been a year old, none of them had had anything to do with the kid’s childhood either.

He glanced across the table. Hiyori was gawking unabashedly at the reunion across the room with all the inconspicuousness of Zaraki on a rampage. Kisuke on the other hand wasn't staring at all, eyes glued to his teacup instead, his expression about as unreadable as a face could get.

Shinji looked around again when the last Sakai’s footsteps retreated into the back, and all of a sudden, Ichigo was approaching them, gait unfaftering as he loped over to their table.

A stilted silence pervaded the air. Neither Hiyori nor Kisuke seemed to know what to do next.

Shinji mentally made a face. He was too old for this shit.

With one foot, he kicked out the remaining seat beside him. “It’s been a while, Ichigo.”

A pause, and then a crooked smile as Ichigo dropped into the seat with casual grace (Shinji had been right; the former Visored had grown taller than him now, though to be fair, Shinji had never been a particularly tall man at five-foot-nine). “Yeah, it has. Good to see you again, Hirako, Sarugaki, Urahara-san.”

Shinji frowned a bit. Hiyori made a strangled noise that sounded like she was holding back the urge to kick Ichigo in the face. She scowled instead, fierce and sullen.

“Since when do you call me by my last name?” She demanded broodingly. Under normal circumstances, Shinji was sure that she wouldn't care less what Ichigo called her (so long as it had nothing to do with her lack of height), but it had been four years, and the fact that Ichigo had referred to her by her surname, something he had never done before for the simple reason of it being longer than her first name, most likely meant that Ichigo was instinctively distancing himself from them, and it evidently didn't sit well with Hiyori.

Ichigo blinked at her, a flash of puzzlement flitting across his features before his expression cleared
and a teasing smirk appeared. “You want me to call you Hiyori then? Or Hiyori-chan?”

Hiyori’s mouth dropped open before her face reddened and she began spluttering. “You- You-! No I don’t wanna be called that, dickhead!”

If anything, Ichigo’s smirk just grew more pronounced. “Well what do you know? You can blush after all. It’s a good look on you, Hiyori-cha-”

He had to duck when Hiyori shrieked with outrage and chucked a fork at his face, one that he caught before it embedded itself into the wall behind him. The former Visored righted himself, chuckling with amusement as he tossed the eating utensil back on the table. “Sorry, sorry, I'm only joking. Just Hiyori then; don’t be mad, okay?”

Hiyori huffed and glowered even harder but she settled down again, crossing her arms sulkily as the flush in her cheeks slowly died away. Ichigo just grinned before turning back to the rest of them.

“So,” He looked between Shinji and Kisuke. “Down to business then. I hear you've got some things to tell me about the Onmitsukidou trying to find me. What I want to know before that though is why you three are looking for me in the first place.”

Shinji scoffed, swirling the half-empty glass of whiskey he was still holding. “Ya didn’t really think ya could up and leave without any of us comin’ after ya, did ya?”

This earned him a blank look. Shinji grimaced. “Okay, so ya did. ...Sorry.”

Ichigo cocked his head, eyeing Shinji with a strange expression. “Why are you sorry? It isn’t as if you were charged with watching over me or something. We all had our own lives. From what Urahara-san told me, I managed to figure out that you and Hiyori and the other Visored were pardoned and welcomed back into Soul Society. I didn't have my powers anymore so it wasn't exactly rocket science to realize that we would all go our separate ways.”

Shinji’s lips thinned. He tossed a glare over at Kisuke who was tugging at his hat to shadow his eyes even further.

“As if we cared about that, moron,” Hiyori butted in with a look of disgust. “We thought you didn’t want us to come see you because this dumbass over here is a lyin’, schemin’, manipulative son-of-a-
bitch!”

Shinji snorted at her choice of insults even as Kisuke grimaced before offering a sheepish smile in Ichigo’s direction.

Ichigo just looked from one to the other, a frown marring his features at last. “What are you talking about?”

Kisuke coughed, putting down his teacup before picking it up again. Shinji watched as the man steeled himself before looking his former student square in the eye. Well, at least the shopkeeper had backbone.

“Shinji-san, Hiyori-san, and the other Visored did want to come see you, Kurosaki-san, even after they were respectively reinstated as captains and lieutenants in Soul Society,” Kisuke admitted carefully. “However, as you might or might not know, Yamamoto-soutaichou had given the order for the Gotei 13 to stay away from you. Even with that command, they had fully planned on ignoring it, but in addition to that, your father did not want anyone connected to the Spiritual World interacting with you so that you could move on, and in the end, a lie was constructed to keep everyone away.”

Shinji stayed silent as Kisuke reiterated every last detail of the idiotic plan that had been hatched six years ago after the end of the Winter War. Instead, he opted to study Ichigo’s expression, looking for angry betrayal or righteous fury or even loathing.

He didn't find any.

As Kisuke spoke, Ichigo remained calm and quietly attentive, eyes sharp and never shifting from Kisuke’s face as the shopkeeper admitted his and the others’ wrongdoings, all the secrets that they had crept around with while shutting Ichigo out all those years ago.

The kid really had grown up, Shinji thought with some nostalgia. Without any input or influence from them. Ichigo had found his own way out in the world, and he hadn't let his past drag him down.

There was a touch of resignation in Ichigo’s expression as if the former Visored had pretty much expected something along these lines (or at least wasn't surprised with the way things had turned out), and there was perhaps a hint of hurt there as well once Kisuke had wound the story to a close,
but overall, Ichigo didn't look too affected, as he probably would've been as a teenager. Heck, Shinji could practically picture a younger Ichigo on his feet, temper high, scowling for all he was worth, and snapping heatedly at those who had wronged him.

This Ichigo merely nodded contemplatively after Kisuke finished, mouth curling into a slightly lopsided smile before he released a soft sigh. “...Sounds like something Goat-Face would do. Well, it’s in the past, and I'm more than over it, so you can stop beating yourself up about it, Geta-boushi.”

Kisuke looked startled for a split second, evidently not expecting Ichigo to have picked up on that. Ichigo just smiled somewhat lazily, flipping a dismissive hand in the air. “Is that why you’ve been looking for me? Guilty conscience? Waste of four years if you ask me. I forgave you for the incident with Rukia; this issue is miniscule in comparison. You were only doing what Goat-Face wanted, and he is my dad after all, not to mention I was still a minor back then.”

“He had no right,” Shinji interrupted with an involuntarily dangerous pitch to his voice, because while he was glad that Ichigo didn't seem to hold a grudge against them, it was another matter entirely to simply wave aside the whole situation. “He had no right keepin’ ya from us.”

Ichigo side-eyed him thoughtfully before shrugging freely and offering a faint smile. “I’m touched, Hirako. Never knew I meant that much to you guys, what with you beating me into the ground every time we sparred.”

Despite the original subject of conversation, Shinji couldn't help grinning at that reminder. “Ya needed the trainin’.”

Some of the tension between them lifted as Ichigo rolled his eyes good-naturedly, but the former Visored pressed on in a more serious tone of voice. “So what’s this I hear about the Onmitsukidou? And if they’re tracking me, why did the old man let you guys come after me to warn me?”

“He didn't let us,” Shinji summarized succinctly with a grim smirk. “Hiyori and I slipped out before they could catch us, after your sister’s boyfriend came ta me ta confess all. Ya could say we’ve been unofficially convicted and exiled. Again.”

Astonishment surfaced on Ichigo’s face at last, quickly followed by a concerned frown as he glanced between Shinji and Hiyori. “You shouldn't have done that, Hirako. You two and the others have been wanting to return to Seireitei ever since you had to leave the first time, right? And now that you two are on the run, what about Kensei and the others? Are they okay? What if the old man tries to use them as leverage or something?”
Shinji eyed him for a long moment before sharing a glance with Hiyori, who snorted with half-hearted derision.

So Ichigo hadn't changed that much after all.

“Don’t worry about it,” Shinji assured assertively. “It ain’t as if we have ta return ta Soul Society; we like the Human World well enough, and Kisuke here was given the choice but didn’t return either. And the others can take care of themselves, plus the Captain-Commander isn’t that stupid; he’s not gonna get rid of half his captains and lieutenants again, especially after the shitstorm Aizen kicked up. Worse comes to worst, well, I know Kyouraku for one won’t stand by again and let his lieutenant take the fall. Ukitake will follow him, and that’s two of the Gotei 13’s strongest captains right there. Yamamoto won’t want ta turn them against him so he’ll have no choice but ta back down on that front.”

He paused as Ichigo nodded slowly, his troubled expression ebbing away a little. “Okay, well, you’d know better than I would. What about the Onmitsukidou then?”

“Mostly, the gist of it is that they want you where they can keep an eye on you,” Kisuke explained this time. “The Onmitsukidou was dispatched to apprehend you and return you to Karakura. Had you chosen to leave your hometown to go to a university elsewhere, they would’ve most likely allowed that since you would still be somewhere known to them. However, had you, say, opted for schooling overseas, then they would’ve probably stopped you. Likewise, since you left to travel the world, both the Captain-Commander and Central 46 have wanted you found. The search has eased up over the past two years, and most of the patrols stationed in Karakura in case you ever contacted anyone there have been lifted, but there has still been the occasional small squad sent out after you.”

Ichigo’s gaze narrowed, and for the first time since Ichigo had arrived at the bar, quicksilver anger unfurled in his eyes, turning the brown irises to a smouldering amber. But the younger man’s control over his temper had obviously gotten much better, and Ichigo didn't allow his irritation to flare outwardly.

“But why do they want to keep an eye on me in the first place?” Ichigo demanded, voice hard but still even and relatively normal in volume. “What, do they think I can somehow magically get my powers back? I’m basically useless to them now.”

Shinji gritted his teeth, shoving down hard on the desire to storm back to Karakura and wring Isshin’s neck. Maybe curb stomp Ichigo’s old friends into the ground as well. And see how Yoruichi liked having catnip stuffed down her throat when she was in Human form. And discover whether or not Hitsugaya could have his balls frozen off even with an ice-affiliated Zanpakutou.
Revenge all around; Shinji wasn't picky.

Across the table, Hiyori held nothing back and socked Kisuke on the shoulder hard enough to leave a sizeable bruise. Kisuke himself winced even before Hiyori’s punch landed.

“Powers or no, Kurosaki-san,” Kisuke spoke up quietly, grey eyes all the more intent when he removed his hat. “It was... shameful of us to isolate you as we did, especially after everything you had given up to win the war for us. You could never be considered useless to us. For my part in making you believe as much, I am truly sorry.”

It was odd, Shinji mused as he watched Hiyori gape at her former captain when the scientist bowed his head.

Urahara Kisuke, for all that he pretended to be otherwise, was a proud man who had only ever really yielded to one person in his lifetime – Shihouin Yoruichi. Even commands from the Captain-Commander himself had been cheerfully and unrepentantly bent and circumnavigated to their fullest extent, sometimes even borderline broken if it suited the scientist’s purposes. Kisuke had always hidden behind cunning words or playful mockery, with more and more success as the years had passed by, and in the many, many decades that Shinji had known him, Kisuke had never expressed sincere regret of any kind towards anyone for any deed, with the possible exceptions of Yoruichi and perhaps Tessai in private.

Yet from what Shinji had heard and seen, Kurosaki Ichigo had miraculously managed to humble the shopkeeper enough to the point where Kisuke had and would willingly shuck his pride, bow his head in remorse, and apologize, and not just once but twice in the comparatively short time that the shopkeeper had known Ichigo.

And perhaps this had also – subconsciously – played into the cause for Shinji’s wrath when he had learned of the truth, though the former Visored being part of his misfit family had been the main reason.

Shinji had always known, at the back of his mind, that Ichigo’s strength had never laid in the teenager’s overwhelming potential for growth or his astronomical amount of reiatsu or even his inability to give up when a situation seemed impossible. All those things had contributed of course, very much so, but to Shinji, it had been the kid’s natural talent for attracting others to his latest cause, no matter how insane or unattainable, to reel other people in and have them gladly, unwaveringly, faithfully, follow him into the deepest depths of hell and back, that had told Shinji just how dangerous Kurosaki Ichigo could be.
And it had been infuriating to realize that almost no one else had been able to recognize this, that Ichigo’s own father had measured his son’s value by Ichigo’s spiritual strength alone, and none of them had seen just how amazing it had been for three teenagers – one of them a Quincy to boot – to risk their lives for a Shinigami they hadn’t really known just because Ichigo had wanted to save her.

That it was astounding for one Human teenager to turn half of the Gotei 13’s upper echelon against their own laws just because Ichigo had convinced them through his actions that saving Rukia might not be the easiest thing to do but was still the right thing to do.

That it was downright mind-boggling for all of Ichigo’s closest friends to storm Hueco Mundo and throw themselves headlong into a war against a megalomaniac without so much as half a thought for their own safety just because Ichigo had resolved to fight against Aizen and everyone else who stood in his way. Some could speculate, but Shinji knew that at least Abarai Renji and Kuchiki Rukia had entered the Winter War for Ichigo, not for the organization they worked for.

There were other examples Shinji could pick out from all the stories Kisuke had told him – and Isshin – of the orange-haired former Substitute Shinigami, all the terrorists and rebels that had tried to one-up the Gotei 13 in the wake of Aizen’s betrayal that Ichigo had assisted in stopping, but if anyone had seen the same thing Shinji had, then it was probably Kisuke. The shopkeeper had been Ichigo’s teacher, but the respect between them went both ways. Ichigo listened to Kisuke’s advice no matter how much he probably wanted to violently strangle the scientist sometimes, but at the same time, from what Shinji had gleaned, Kisuke had almost always allowed Ichigo to do what he wanted, even if it went directly against the shopkeeper’s own plans.

“Would you stop doing that?”

Shinji blinked out of his thoughts at the sound of Ichigo’s exasperated voice. To his amusement, the former Visored actually reached across the table and plucked Kisuke’s hat out of the shopkeeper’s hand before whacking the blond over the head with it.

Kisuke jolted, looking torn between indignant at having his precious hat taken from him and wary of Ichigo’s reactions even as the scientist’s genius mind undoubtedly cycled through all the possible actions that the former Visored could take next.

“You’re an idiot,” Ichigo proclaimed bluntly. “I told you – I’m over it, and I definitely don’t blame you. Why would I? Besides, time away from Karakura’s done me good, and I probably would have left even earlier if you people had coddled me or something back when I had first lost my powers.”

He paused, head tilting in consideration as he took in all of them, hands absently fiddling with the hat
he had stolen. “...Kukaku told me a long time ago, back when we had just entered Soul Society and were hiding out at her place, that I'm a lot like her older brother used to be.”

Shinji stiffened, and then looked sharply at the younger man. Ichigo shrugged. “Apparently, Kaien was the same before he settled down in Seireitei, always wandering with Kukaku and Ganju out in Rukongai, happiest when he was on the move. I've always been like that, for as long as I can remember, but I stayed, first because I had my mom and she was enough, and then because I had to raise my sisters, and then the whole fiasco with Shinigami and Soul Society and the war. But I’ve always wanted to leave, to travel; I hated being stuck in one place.”

A short silence followed that revelation.

“...You’re related to the Shibas, you know,” Kisuke revealed abruptly. Shinji could almost see the scientist’s thought of screw Isshin and his secrets, which was ridiculously ironic considering Kisuke’s personality. “I don’t believe anyone actually ever confirmed that for you. Your sisters already knew, even back before you left.”

Ichigo didn’t look all that shocked. “Yeah, I figured. Tou-san never said but Kukaku pretty much implied it when I asked her, and Karin had mentioned that she was spending time in Seireitei.”

“Ya inherited the Shiba wanderlust though, unlike your sisters or even father,” Shinji commented, eyeing Ichigo critically. “Most of the Shibas I’ve met over the years have never been good at staying in one place for very long.”

“I always thought the wanderlust was just a rumour,” Hiyori piped up, brow scrunching. “It actually exists?”

“Of course it does,” Shinji snorted, and then dodged when Hiyori threw the napkin dispenser at him.

Ichigo snagged it out of the air before conking Shinji over the head with it, much to Hiyori’s delight. Shinji elbowed him in the ribs in retaliation.

“Ichigo,

“Ichigo scowled at him as Shinji smirked back unashamedly. “After I lost my powers, I didn't have the same responsibilities anymore. Yuzu and Karin were growing up, and nobody else really needed me around, so I decided to leave. It’s turned out to be one of my best decisions so, seriously, don’t apologize. I won’t accept it. I'm happy with how my life’s turned out, trust me.”
No one could argue with that, and Kisuke heaved a sigh before the barely noticeable edge of self-incrimination that had haunted his expression for four years dwindled at last. A somewhat amused smile took its place as his gaze flicked to the doorway at the back of the bar. “You do seem happy, Kurosaki-san. You're a godfather now?”

Ichigo grinned, and pride and affection shone through with the brightness of a thousand suns. “Yeah, Arashi and Hotaru named me godfather three years ago when Keiko was two. She’s great; couldn't ask for a better kid.”

Shinji said nothing in response for a few seconds as he ruthlessly squashed the burn of envy in his chest. Ichigo was still one of his; the kid just had his own family now.

“You three can talk about kids and reminisce on the good old days later,” Hiyori blared loudly, scowling indiscriminately at all of them. “What are you gonna do about the Onmitsukidou, you stupid strawberry?”

All at once, something darker snaked into Ichigo’s features, grim and cold, and it reminded Shinji of what Ichigo had sometimes looked like during the war, the expression too old for a face that young.

“I may not have my powers anymore,” Ichigo said coolly. “But I won’t let anyone cage me. I’d rather die.”

Shinji believed him. He fired a warning look at Hiyori when she opened his mouth before speaking up himself. “Ya’ve got more allies than ya think. I’m on your side, so is Hiyori and Kisuke, as well as the other Visored, officers or not. And no matter how much they fucked up, your friends in both Karakura and Soul Society will still stand with ya. That might actually be why the old man’s stopped sendin’ out as many of his Shinigami ta track ya down. He’s seen where the lines have been drawn and they're not in his favour.”

Ichigo glanced at him before quirking a smile. “Odds are in my favour for once, huh?”

Shinji scoffed. “From what I've heard, ya’ve never lost even when they weren’t.”

A familiar cocky smirk curled at Ichigo’s mouth but he corrected, “I have lost before. I just got back up and kept moving on afterwards.”
Shinji got the feeling that the former Visored was talking about losing Zangetsu and his inner Hollow this time.

“And what of your sisters’ graduation?” Kisuke enquired, cutting in smoothly as he leaned forward and snatched his hat back from Ichigo’s unsuspecting hands. “Will you come back for that? They’ve missed you very much, especially Yuzu-san.”

“Of course,” Ichigo instantly confirmed. “I can’t believe you thought I wouldn’t, telling Arashi to remind me about that. I’ll be there next week; I want to surprise them.”

“Then I’ll hold off on telling Yuzu-san that we’ve found you,” Kisuke agreed, dropping his hat back on his head. “Will you... stay afterwards?”

Ichigo scrutinized him, and then glanced at Hiyori before moving on to Shinji. “...You know I won’t. I don’t belong in Karakura anymore; I don’t think I ever have. Besides, if I had to pick a place, I’d say Firefly House is my home now. I applied to Toudai two and a half years ago and was accepted, and I’ve been doing all my courses online, so I can travel as much as I want.”

Shinji nudged Kisuke’s leg under the table when it looked like the shopkeeper was going to say something along the lines of Ichigo staying in Karakura for a while. Kisuke didn't look at him but subsided all the same.

“What are ya takin’ in university then?” Shinji asked lightly.

“Art and writing courses,” Ichigo announced with a pleased expression. “Believe it or not, I can actually paint, and I’ve always wanted to become a writer, so I’ve decided to do both. The artwork I send in through the mail, and one of the professors is a friend of mine so he lets me sit in on his classes whenever I’m around. The art department’s pretty lax in that aspect.”

As Ichigo launched into a more detailed description about the artwork he had done thus far, and how far along he was with his studies, and even some of the places he had been in his travels, Shinji eyed the quiet joy in the younger man’s features, and he swore right then and there that he’d personally kill the Captain-Commander himself, even take a leaf out of Aizen's book and slaughter Central 46 if it came down to it, if any of those old bastards tried to take this away from Ichigo. Ichigo goddamn deserved what he had managed to make for himself.
Shinji leaned his head against one hand, catching Kisuke’s eye in the process as Hiyori drilled Ichigo about Paris.

Kisuke nodded discreetly before focusing on Ichigo again, a slight smile playing on his lips.

Shinji smirked to himself. He certainly wouldn't be alone in his rather criminal endeavours.

Please leave a review on your way out.

Works inspired by this one:

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