

The Order of the Ebon Phoenix [#2]

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The Order of the Ebon Phoenix [#2]

by [Thalia Gray \(Madkat123\)](#)

Summary

The stakes are high, and everyone is lying.

At least, that's what everyone thinks Harry's doing. The Golden Trio look to Ichigo for guidance, but the shinigami is wrapped up in his own problems; namely, his hollow powers are out of control. Dumbledore seems to have vanished, Umbridge is promoting pink power, and there's a storm brewing like no other.

Harry really just needs a drink.

[Sequel to The Ebon Phoenix]

Brooms, Butterbeer, & Bereavement

Chapter 1

Brooms, Butterbeer, & Bereavement

Thrust.

Slash.

Block.

Repeat.

Sweat clung to his forehead and bare torso. The muscles in his hands were sore as they had been holding the weight of Zangetsu for hours now. Ichigo ignored the discomfort. He had become weak over the past year, but that wasn't something he could afford anymore. Things were different from what they were last year. He needed to be strong.

With a deep breath, he reached inside of his being as he swiped his hand across his face, solidifying his mask. He continued his training. Thrust, slash, block, repeat; further committing the movements to memory, more so than they already were. His muscles strained, but he only stopped when there was a knock from the open doorway.

Ichigo gazed at Sirius. The man looked at him, his face calm, but Ichigo could sense the apprehension jumping beneath his skin. "They're about to head out now to get Harry, would you like to join them?" With the lapse in concentration, Ichigo's mask disintegrated into the air. The shinigami raised his arm in time to catch the warm towel Sirius threw at him. He wiped the sweat from his face and chest before he slung it around his shoulders. The convict had clearly seen better days, his appearance was ragged, more so than usual, and his frame had thinned over the course of the past couple of months. Ichigo couldn't blame the man. His godson was being targeted by he-who-must-not-be-named.

"No, thanks. I've never been a fan of broomsticks, and I need a shower anyway." Ichigo watched as Sirius' face fell. "Don't worry, Harry will make it here safely," he explained as he passed the man while leaving the room. He clasped a strong hand on Sirius' shoulder and patted his back. Sirius nodded as Ichigo climbed the stairs to his room.

The stairs groaned under the weight of his body as he ascended them. Step by step, he made his way up to the second floor. Ichigo smiled when he overheard Hermione and Ron bickering over something trivial when he passed by their room. Something about a cat? He continued his trek until he reached his own room. He knocked twice before he entered.

Winky looked up as the door opened, but she was not disturbed when she didn't see anyone come in. Instead, her eyes moved to the prone form of her master that was lying in his bed. "Master, Winky has laid out fresh clothes for you on your dresser after your shower."

Ichigo smiled in the doorway from her perceptiveness. After all, it wasn't easy to explain to the house elf that his soul could leave his body, but she wouldn't be able to see it unless she had witnessed death. He told her that he would knock twice before entering the room to alert her of his presence. So far, it had gone smoothly.

The shinigami crawled onto the bed and enveloped his gigai. It only took a moment for his soul to weave itself back into place. He sat up and nodded to Winky. "Thank you, I'll be back in a little bit." He smiled, but she did not return it as whole heartily as she once had. His gaze roamed to the empty butterbeer mug on his nightstand, but he chose not to comment on it. That was a discussion for another time.

He slipped out of his bed and walked to the bathroom across the hall. Knocking to make sure it was empty -- he did share this one with everyone on the second floor after all -- he stepped inside, locking the door behind him. He relieved himself before he turned on the shower and stepped inside. As the scalding hot water covered him, Ichigo couldn't help but sigh and relax. Nothing could ever outdo a hot shower after training. Ichigo stood there for a while, just letting the heat embrace him as he thought about what was to come.

Harry's court date was next week and even though he couldn't join him in the proceedings, Ichigo still planned to accompany him to the ministry. With all the fussing they were doing, Ichigo knew that they were going to be a key player in this fight against You-Know-Who.

Not that they acknowledged his return, mind you.

After all, there were only three people who saw the dark wizard personally. Cedric was there, but because of the curse he received and the trauma he sustained to his soul, his memory of the event was shotty at best and could not be trusted. Harry obviously witnessed the account first hand as he was the one to report the dark lord's reappearance. The third was Ichigo, but the ministry wasn't going to touch him with a ten-foot pole. If they were unnerved by the return of You-Know-Who, they definitely weren't going to acknowledge the emergence of the Ebon Phoenix, despite several witches and wizards witnessing his feat of resurrecting Cedric.

Ichigo shook his head and watched as the water droplets sprayed across the shower. It wasn't his problem to deal with. If he were to be honest, he was happy the ministry was keeping its nose out of his business. The less suffocating they were, the better. Ichigo doubted that he would be able to investigate the cause behind his mask materialization with them breathing down his neck.

Realizing he was spacing out, Ichigo quickly lathered himself and rinsed it off. He turned the water off and pulled the shower curtain open. The cool air seemed to chill him down to his soul. He grabbed a worn red towel off the rack and patted down his hair and body before he stepped fully out of the shower, mindful not to drop water across the floor. A commotion of sound could be heard from outside the bathroom.

'Harry must be back. I guess I was in the shower much longer than I intended.'

Ichigo wrapped the towel around his waist before unlocking the door and stepping out. He caught the attention of the two teens who were hugging down the hallway. Harry and

Hermione looked at him for a moment before they pulled away from each other. The sour look on Ron's face did not go unnoticed by the man, but it seemed to alleviate itself when they parted.

Harry walked towards him, his friends in tow even though they had been in the same quarters for a while now. "Hey Ichigo, it's been a while!" Harry exclaimed as he pulled Ichigo in for a hug as well. It just seemed to dawn on the young wizard that Ichigo was still damp and unclothed as he quickly pulled away. "Oh, sorry."

Ichigo laughed, "That's alright. We can chat after I get dressed."

"Oh, actually," Harry began as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Molly asked that you join them downstairs once you're finished. 'Order stuff,' she said."

Ichigo nodded slowly. "Ah. Best not to keep her waiting, then. She is awfully daunting at times, you know." On that note, he returned to his room. He didn't knock before entering, but the creak of the old wood was enough to alert Winky of his return.

Ichigo smelt the tang of the butterbeer before he saw the mug that Winky was cradling in her hand. The shinigami sighed when he noticed the glaze over her eyes and the sway in her stance. She had begun to partake in her new hobby after the death of the Moody imposter, Crouch Jr. The house elf would only do it when Ichigo wasn't in the room or nearby. Ichigo didn't know what he was more upset about, the fact that she was trying to hide the addiction from him, or that she felt the alcohol in her grasp had a better effect than talking to him.

He bypassed the elf in favor of the clothes on his dresser. Molly had sent for him, after all. Ichigo wasn't even sure what he would say to her. Despite his annoyance at the situation, it was a delicate one. Everyone grieved differently, and Ichigo knew that better than most. Whereas he took to violence, Winky took solace in a bottle.

Ichigo dried his body one last time with the towel around his waist before he began to dress. Winky had set aside a pair of dark wash jeans and a wool gray sweater for him to wear. There was a satisfying snap as the elastic on his underwear conformed to his hips. He slid his feet into his pants and slid them up his legs before he fastened them. Ichigo had just pushed his head through his sweater when he heard Winky walk up behind him. "Is Master Ichigo mad at Winky?"

Ichigo turned around to find Winky standing with her head lowered and her hands fiddling with the hem of her dress. The shinigami kneeled before her and cradled her face with his hands. He lifted her head to look him in the eyes. "I could never be mad at you, Winky... I'm just disappointed in myself that you think butterbeer a better companion than I when you're in pain."

"That is not true!" Winky spoke up as her eyes began to glisten from something other than the alcohol in her system. "Winky loves Master Ichigo very much, that she does."

Ichigo pulled his hands back to his own lap. "Then why don't you talk to me?"

Without the man holding her head, Winky broke eye contact again in favor of watching her hands continue to tangle themselves in her dress. "Because Sir is busy with other things, and Winky's old master tried to hurt her new one and Winky has tried to tell others before how she feels, but no one listens... and Winky is scared that..."

"Scared of what?" Ichigo prompted.

"Winky's past masters were both good men at one point and Winky cannot help but feel as though she is the root of their problems and that if she is not careful, she will cause bad things to happen to her new master too."

Winky froze as strong arms pulled her into a tight embrace. Ichigo held onto the elf tightly. "Winky, it is not your fault. Crouch Jr. made his own decisions. No one forced him to do the things he did, not even the Dark Lord, do you understand me?" When she didn't respond, Ichigo pulled her away from him again.

"Winky, look at me," he demanded. She complied. "The only thing you are guilty of is making your family proud from your dedication. I'm proud to have you working for me. I want the whole world to know that Winky is my house elf. Do you understand me?" This time, she nodded with a tremble in her lips. Ichigo pulled her back into a hug, albeit gentler than he had before.

A tentative silence filled the space between them. Several moments passed before Winky spoke. "Winky is proud of Master Ichigo too, that she is... Mrs. Weasley asked for you while you were bathing."

Ichigo shook his head as he loosened the connection between them. "Molly can wait, you're more important right now. Come on, let's have some tea."

Judge & Jury

Chapter 2

Judge & Jury

“Now, obviously we can’t go in with you,” Arthur said as he, Harry, and Ichigo stood outside the courtroom doors. “So, be respectful, answer when spoken to, and you’ll be fine.”

Ichigo nodded in agreement with Arthur but didn’t add any more to the conversation. Harry still seemed skeptical. Without further promoting, however, Harry entered the courtroom, the heavy doors falling shut behind him. Arthur turned to look at Ichigo before he looked down at his watch. “I don’t imagine this taking more than an hour. I’d like to run by my office to pick up some paperwork before we leave, would you like to join me?”

“No thank you,” Ichigo replied as he shook his head. “I’d like to do some exploring of my own, if that’s alright?”

Arthur was confused as to why Ichigo would ask him such a question as if the Weasley had any say over what that man could and couldn’t do. Nevertheless, he humored him by shrugging his shoulders. “Do whatever you want, just don’t... don’t do anything that might cause Harry more trouble.”

Ichigo seemed to take the words to heart as he nodded. “That’s the last thing any of us want, Mr. Weasley.” That was enough to end the conversation it seemed, as they parted ways after that.

The shinigami turned around and returned the way they had come. He was eager to see if Draco’s father remained in the Department of Mysteries, and if he had, Ichigo would like to speak with him. After what Draco and he had discussed about his *friend*, Ichigo wanted to see what the man was like. The boy hadn’t said anything expressly, but it was pretty obvious he was a death eater or something of the like.

To his dismay, the man wasn’t where they had seen him earlier. Ichigo took his time maneuvering through the shelves of prophecies as he continued his investigation.

‘Do ya think there’s one for you?’

Ichigo couldn’t help but jump at the voice. Shiro had been relatively quiet since they had taken residence with the Order of the Phoenix. The shinigami couldn’t help but wonder if the name had been influenced by his legends. Upon further reflection, he thought that even that was too egotistical for him to believe. Not everything was about him.

Ichigo pondered the question. *“It’s hard to say.”*

‘Would you look at it if there was?’

Ichigo paused. Would he? Would he look at Harry's? If he had known about what would happen when he used Mugetsu, would he still have done it? Probably not. Ichigo was young then, and he knew deep in his soul that there was no way he would be able to bring about the destruction of his friends and family knowingly. Regardless of if they had died to Aizen's hand or his, Ichigo would never have chosen to live if they couldn't. The shinigami would've chosen to perish with them, together as a family.

"No... One often meets their fate on the path they choose to avoid it. A wise man once told me that, and I take it to heart. Ignorance is bliss." Ichigo answered. Shiro didn't reply, so Ichigo continued on with his search.

Ichigo thought about searching for the man's reiraku, but he didn't know him well enough to actually know which one was his, not with so many wizards at the ministry. He only dedicated another ten minutes to search for the man before he gave up. After all, the shinigami was sure to see him again, especially if he was a death eater. Ichigo would almost say it was inevitable.

Perhaps he should leave the Department of Mysteries and explore somewhere else? No, he doubted he had enough time for that. Arthur had probably already gathered the items from his office and was back at the courtroom. With this in mind, Ichigo turned back around and returned as well.

To his surprise, Arthur had not beaten him back. He was also startled when he saw Dumbledore slip through the heavy wooden door at a rather fast pace.

He called out to him, "Headmaster!"

The aged wizard abruptly turned around and sped towards him. Ichigo was about to ask him what he was doing when the man took hold of his wrist and dragged him away. Ichigo called out again as he was being pulled along, but the man did not answer, so he didn't try again after that.

They hurried down the winding shelves of prophecies. After several minutes, Dumbledore finally stopped and let go of Ichigo's wrist. The silence surrounding them was absolute. When by the courtroom and on his search for Draco's father, Ichigo could always hear a hum of voices and bustling activity, even though he could not see it. Now, though, it seemed they were so far away that even that had disappeared.

"Please, forgive me, Ichigo, but I must speak with you," Dumbledore explained.

Ichigo rubbed the wrist Dumbledore had held onto, even though the old man's grip wasn't strong enough to cause any form of discomfort. "Then couldn't we have done that where we were? I don't much appreciate being dragged along with no rhyme or reason."

"Once again, I apologize. I just," Dumbledore paused, thinking of the best way to word what he was about to say. "I need to distance myself from Harry, at the moment."

Ichigo's head perked up at the revelation. "Oh?" he prodded.

Dumbledore sighed, "The ministry is wary of me. Man will always fear what they cannot see and cannot control, and the minister is no different. With You-Know-Who having returned, he is paranoid, and instead of turning his efforts towards more useful endeavors, he is turning them towards me as a scapegoat."

Ichigo's eyebrow raised. "Does this mean they're going to be breathing down my neck as well?"

"I'm not sure," Dumbledore answered. "They would never acknowledge you having any connection to the Ebon Phoenix, regardless of rumors. Many did see you separate your soul from your body, however, which is viewed to be some of the darkest magic. Surely they'll keep an eye on you for that alone. Which, is why my hands are tied on this matter."

"Oh yes, I remember. I got your owl saying that the ministry had sent someone to fill the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, even though we had already that I would fill it? I'm sure they'd be interested just because I was originally going to teach it this year."

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed. I don't know who they're sending yet. The only thing I do know is that it is best if I keep a distance from Harry this year."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Ichigo asked.

"Like I said before, the ministry is watching me. I don't want to cause Harry anymore problems than he already has. And besides, he has you to look over him."

Ichigo nodded absentmindedly and they said their goodbyes after that. When he returned to the courtroom, both Harry and Arthur were waiting for him. Arthur was carrying a rather large stack of papers that Ichigo assumed were from his office. Ichigo looked at Harry and noted the solemn look in the youth's eyes.

"I take it from your face that the trial didn't go well?" The shinigami asked.

Harry looked up when he heard Ichigo's voice. "Oh, no. Headmaster Dumbledore showed up and I was cleared of all charges, but..."

"But...?"

"Well, I wanted to speak with him, but he left so quickly I didn't have the chance."

"I see," Ichigo said as he patted Harry's shoulder. "I'm sure you'll see him again soon, but right now, I'm ready to go back and have dinner with everyone."

The other two nodded in agreement and they returned the way they had came. While they were slipping through the crowds, Ichigo took the opportunity to look for the wizard he was searching for earlier. That too, was unfruitful. Their phone box appeared before them and lifted them back to the surface. Ichigo was surprised all three of them had managed to fit inside the phone booth. The shinigami was not a small man by any means.

When they returned to the order, they were met with cheers and warm embraces. Ichigo happily let the attention fall on Harry as he slipped around them. He found Winky in the

kitchens helping the other elf cook.

Ichigo approached her and asked, “What’s all this for then?”

In hindsight, perhaps the shinigami should have announced his presence *before* walking up behind the house elf. She was so startled that she dropped the bowl she was holding. Ichigo, ever the fast one, was able to catch it before it spilt all over the ground. A feat in and of itself, when considering how close Winky was to the floor herself and how far down Ichigo had to bend down to grab it. Nevertheless, grab it he did. Instead of returning it to Winky, he sat it on the counter to give her time to calm down.

“I’m so sorry, Winky. I didn’t mean to startle you.” Ichigo said.

Winky placed a tiny shaking hand over her racing heart and sighed. “You scared Winky, that you did.”

“Again, I’m so sorry.” Ichigo smiled, “Is there anyway I can make it up to you?”

Had he asked at the beginning of their relationship, she would have said no and shooed him away. They’ve known each other for almost a year now and Winky has learned that when Ichigo asks to help, he really wants to. So instead of shooing him away like she wanted to, Winky asked him to reach the vinegar from the cabinet. He happily obliged and they settled into a comfortable pace. Winky would ask for an ingredient or measuring container, and Ichigo would hand it to her so she could add it to whatever it was she was cooking.

Lemon-marinated chicken, it would seem.

When Molly returned from the welcoming committee for Harry and saw the shinigami in the kitchen cooking, she promptly ushered him out. Ichigo knew better than to argue, so he parted ways with his house elf and joined everyone else in the sitting room. Although, there were enough people in the residence that the group spilled out into the hallway as well.

He found Harry speaking with Ron and Hermione and honestly, when was he not -- especially since they had been parted since the end of the school year. The three noticed his approach unlike Winky, and greeted him with smiles.

“Did you know they were planning this?” Harry asked.

Ichigo looked around at the happy gathering. Sirius and Moody were talking by the door way, Arthur and Ginny were sitting together on a nearby couch, and others were mingling. “No, but I’m glad they did. Congratulations on being pardoned. If I had a glass, I’d raise it about now.” Ichigo laughed.

Harry’s cheeks reddened at the attention, “Thanks, but without you and Mr. Weasley and Headmaster, I wouldn’t have been able to do it.”

Ichigo noticed the slight pause when Harry mentioned Dumbledore, but he chose not to comment on it. Instead, he waved his hand in dismissal. “I didn’t do anything. I just tagged along for moral support.”

Harry sighed. “I need all the moral support I can get right about now.”

King's Cross

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 3

King's Cross

Dearest Ichigo,

I am delighted to hear that Harry's trial went well. He is a good wizard, and he will become a good man. Everyone on my end is doing well. I am enjoying the summer with my sister. We went swimming just a few days ago, I wish you could have come with us! It is a shame that you two have not spoken, I'm sure that you would get along well. Perhaps I will ask her to send you her own letters as well? That would be funny.

But enough of me, my sister and Harry, how are you? School is about to start for Hogwarts, isn't it? Are you going to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor like Dumbledore suggested? I know you'll be a great teacher. You are kind and patient, which is really all you need!

How is your... training going? I know you explained it to me before I left to return home, but I still cannot wrap my head around some things. That's how I feel about most things that happened, while at Hogwarts. Like it was all some sort of dream.

Does your mask still hurt when you summon it? Or have you gotten used to it again? That's how it works, right?

If I remember right, you think the reason you were so sick was because the two powers inside of you were switching? It went from light to dark, but your body was used to the light, so the adjustment took its toll. Something like that anyways... I also remember that your not too sure of it all yourself -- why they're shifting and changing at all, and that worries me greatly, that you don't.

I don't want to see you get hurt.

Love,

Fleur Delacour

Ichigo smiled as he finished reading Fleur's letter. After the tournament was over, Fleur left with the rest of her school to return home, but that didn't mean they had lost all contact. Owls, they had found, were a beautiful thing. Ichigo tucked the letter away in his trunk he had begun packing for Hogwarts. He would write back to Fleur once they arrived at the school since he was bound to have more to speak about then.

With the assistance of Winky, he finished packing his own trunk and a smaller one for Winky as well. Inside was a collection of simple outfits and trinkets he had gifted her over the past year they had spent together. Ichigo was happy to note the absence of any butterbeer. Winky

may not have been over her pain -- probably never would be -- but at least she had forsaken the comforts of a bottle.

Once finished, Ichigo poked his head out into the hallway. His eyes landed on Ron as he passed through the hallway. "Ron," he called out. The ginger paused to look at the shinigami. "Go and get Harry up if he isn't already. We're going to be late for the train." Ron nodded and returned the way he had come.

Ichigo stepped back into his room and smiled at Winky. "Well, are you excited? Another year at Hogwarts! I'm sure there will be all sorts of new adventures."

Winky nodded. "Any year should be better than last, Winky thinks, yes she does."

His smile widened. "I'll take it! C'mon, let's get our trunks downstairs."

"Yes, sir."

Ichigo took stock of the room one last time to make sure he had everything he needed. He had his case and Winky her's. Zangetsu was strapped around his waist and torso under his jumper. His wand was tucked into the side of his pants, easily within reach.

With this in mind, he pulled it free to cast a quick charm on their trunks to lighten their weight before returning it. Content they had everything they needed, Ichigo went downstairs, Winky in step behind him. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, as well as Fred and George, were already waiting for them downstairs. They had a lot more luggage with them, their pets and books taking up space that Ichigo didn't have a need to fill. They were all ready to go, except for the lack of the golden child.

A few minutes later the boy in question appeared, Sirius in tow. Ichigo frowned as he watched the men practically cling to Harry. It was obvious to anyone who actually spent time with the boy that he was upset. About what specifically, Ichigo had a few ideas. He was sure, though, that the boy's godfather hanging onto him was not helping.

"Sirius," Ichigo called out. The man turned his gaze from Harry to the shinigami.

"Ichigo. Is there something you need?"

Ichigo shook his head as he stepped towards him. He placed a hand on his shoulder, not missing how Harry practically crawled away from them once the opportunity presented itself. If Sirius noticed, he didn't let on.

"I just want to thank you for lending us your family home." Ichigo said as he pulled his hand back and bowed slightly in gratitude. "And don't worry, I'll keep an eye on Harry for you while we're away. I won't let anything happen to him, nothing that's not supposed to, anyways."

"I'll hold you to that." Ichigo did not miss the dangerous glint in Sirius' eyes. The shinigami had no doubt of the underlying threat. Ichigo couldn't decide if he was annoyed or amused by the notion.

Sirius was more than a competent wizard, Ichigo knew that very well. Everyone in the order was, even the children. The fact remained, however, that Ichigo had seen, fought, and bested more than the man before him could even imagine. He had not only a wand, but a zanpakuto and visord's mask by his side. For Sirius to think he could actually cause Ichigo harm, well, it rattled Ichigo's pride more than he cared to admit.

Perhaps some of the 'Lord's and 'Master's had gone to his head a bit.

It was also refreshing, in a way. People always walked on eggshells around him and after the reveal of his mask even more so. Sirius knew that Ichigo was no mere wizard, yet he did not let that stop him from threatening him. Ichigo made a mental note to never piss the man off if he could help it.

"Of course," Ichigo replied to the man's sorta-kind-of-threat. "I wouldn't expect anything less."

Sirius nodded, but Ichigo doubted he took his words to heart.

"Alright, everyone." Ichigo continued, turning back to the group. "Let's get going before we miss the train. I remember hearing something about a flying car last time that happened...?"

The faint blush on Harry's and Ron's faces was enough to confirm the story. Ichigo laughed as he rushed all eight of them out the front door. Using his height to his advantage, Ichigo hailed several cabbies since there was no way the lot of them could fit into one, and they were too far away from King's Cross to walk. Not with all their luggage, anyway.

Ichigo took care to keep Winky out of view, despite that muggles wouldn't be able to see her anyways. They could never be too careful. Winky did not seem bothered by it, in fact, she seemed uplifted. Ichigo doubted that Winky saw a lot of the muggle world while she worked for the Crouches. Fresh air would be good for her. That's what Ichigo hoped.

Fred, George, and Ginny's cab arrived first at the station, followed by Ron and Hermione, and then finished with Harry, Winky, and Ichigo. Their large group, luggage and all, attracted a lot of attention as they weaved through the station. Ichigo couldn't blame them, really. Especially since owls and the kantana on his hip were involved. He always made a point to check beside him to make Winky didn't get dragged off into the crowd.

By the time they made it 9 ³/₄, it seemed like everyone had already decided their sitting arrangements. Ron and Hermione were going to sit with the other prefects, leaving Harry with Ichigo and Winky. Fred and George were going to sit with each other, although, Ichigo wasn't sure how stationary they would be. Ginny was going to sit with Harry and Ichigo, but a classmate dragged her off the moment before they stepped onto the train. And if Ichigo noticed a black dog in the crowd, well, he certainly wasn't going to say anything.

Ichigo was the one who lifted their luggage onto the shelves above them as Harry and Winky sat on opposite sides of the compartment. He huffed at the exercise and joined Winky on her side, sitting between her and the window. The three of them sat together in silence. It wasn't until several minutes after the train departed that Ichigo broke that silence.

"So, what's bothering you?" he asked.

Ichigo watched as Harry's shoulders tensed before he answered. "Nothing."

"Harry," Ichigo began, the exasperation in his tone evident. "I may not be your Godfather and I haven't seen you very much for three months, but I'd like to think that I know you very well. Enough to know that you're upset, at least." Ichigo shifted in his seat as he reached into his pocket. He moved his hand to Winky, who held out an outstretched hand without question. He dropped several coins into her waiting palm. "Why don't you go grab us some snacks for the trip?"

Winky nodded and excused herself from the cabin. Ichigo watched her leave, hoping that their privacy would give Harry the room he needed to talk, and also that Winky understood to be gone for a while. "I assume this has to do with Sirius?"

Harry shook his head, his hands fidgeting with the edges of his robes. "No, it's not... well it's not *just* him. It's everything really. When I finally think one thing is getting better, another problem shows up in its wake. I feel like I'm never getting any peace."

"I see," Ichigo said. He did understand, at least to an extent, what the boy was going through. After all, fighting Aizen was a war all on its own. Literally. "What do you think is bothering you the most?" he asked, switching tactics.

"I think it's that the people I've come to rely on, that I've trusted, are starting to turn on me. It feels like that anyways." Ichigo didn't respond. Harry took the silence as a cue to keep going. "I've never drawn attention to the fact that I'm the 'chosen one,' and I've never wanted to, but I'm a good wizard. I've proven time and time again that I'm a capable wizard, but yet..."

Ichigo watched as Harry's hands clenched into fists.

"But yet...?"

"Yet Dumbledore chooses Ron and Hermione to be prefects and not me." The watery shine to the boy's eyes is undeniable. "And I know it's selfish to think like that, I should be proud of them, I know, but... they keep talking about it and they don't even act like it's strange I wasn't chosen! Like, they always knew I wouldn't be on the same level as them, and Dumbledore... perhaps he's upset with me? He was there at the trial, but once it was over he vanished, and now he does this? Maybe they're starting to believe everything in the papers, about how I faked what happened in the maze."

Ichigo reached his hand over to cover Harry's clenched one to keep the boy from continuing. "Dumbledore is a wise man, he wouldn't do anything without reason. You must know how much he cares for you, how much everyone cares for you -- including Ron and Hermione. You must have faith, Harry, in the people you've put trust into. I would be very surprised if it turns out to be misguided."

Winky took that opportunity to return back to the compartment. Her arms were full of snacks that Ichigo doubted they were going to eat before they arrived at the school. Regardless, he thanked Winky as she sat back down next to him. Harry opened a chocolate frog while Ichigo

split a bag of lemon crisps with Winky. “So,” Harry began as he popped a leg into his mouth. “How’s your, uh, training going?”

Ichigo smiled, happy to talk about anything other than the repressive thoughts that clouded their lives at the moment. “Pretty well, actually. I can hold my mask for several minutes now.”

Harry’s form shuddered. “I hate that bloody thing. It’s so... creepy. And it’s even more freaky because only a handful of people can actually see you while you’re using it.”

“Well, I don’t really plan on ever using it.” Ichigo admitted as he swallowed another crisp. “It’s more of a self-preservation thing, really. I suspect -- I don’t know for sure -- that the reason my body was in such pandemonium during the year had something to do with the Dark Lord. There’s something about him, some darkness, that is similar to what my old world was like. It called out to my own darker nature -- something that has been done in millenia. My body, not used to the abrupt change, was thrown into chaos.”

“But like I said, I can’t be certain about anything. I figured, though, that if I was able to get my body used to my hollow side, that it would be able to balance itself back out again.”

“Hollow?” Harry asked.

Ichigo tapped the side of his face. “My mask. It’s a manifestation the hollow powers I possess. Like I said before, I haven’t been able to summon it since I got to this world. The fact that I can now is... unsettling, to say the least.”

Harry nodded in understanding, but if the look on his face was anything to go by, Ichigo doubted he understood it at all. Ichigo was going to say more when the door to their cabin opened abruptly.

Draco stood there, a dark look on his face. When his eyes landed on Ichigo, they softened just a fraction. “Mr. Malfoy, to what do we owe this pleasure?”

Ichigo was not a stupid man, or even an oblivious one. He knew that Draco and Harry were at odds with one another. It was to be expected from their heritage, after all. Ichigo had hoped, though, that after the discussion last year, things would’ve calmed down.

“Oh, it’s um... nothing, never mind.” Draco said as he shut the door just as suddenly as he had opened it.

Perhaps things were looking better, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, finally, all caught up!

I'll try my best to keep it as up to date as possible, but well, I can't make any promises.

Friendly reminder to join the discord if you haven't already :)

One main note of interest is that I am currently looking for a betareader/editor for this fanfiction. The previous beta (one with whom I worked the second half of the first and beginning of this story with) has ghosted me. I've never had that happen before, so I'm a little disgruntled, to say the least. I mainly need someone to bounce ideas off of, and check for typos. PM me if interested.

Thestrals

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 4

Thestrals

“What are those things, d’you reckon?” Harry asked Ron.

“What things?”

Luna showed up without Harry ever getting an answer. Ichigo watched as the two of them went back and forth about the maybe-there-maybe-not-there creatures. It wasn’t until after the five of them had piled into the carriages that Ichigo decided to chime in.

“You’re not crazy, Harry,” he began. The five turned towards him, but Luna was the only one smiling. “They’re called Thestrals.”

“*What* are called Thestrals?” Ron practically begged. It seemed that now he was the one who thought he was going crazy.

“They’re horse-like creatures that only people who have seen death can see. I imagine the reason you can see them now, Harry, is because of witnessing Mister Diggory’s temporary demise last year. It’s also the reason that only you and a few other figures could see me properly when I went to retrieve his soul. It seems that, thankfully, both Ron and Hermione have yet to face such hardships, so they can not see them. Not like you and I, or Miss Lovegood, can.”

Now they all turned to Luna, who was still smiling. “Oh, yes, I can see them too. I’ve been able to see them since my first year here. You’re just as sane as I am.”

Harry chuckled nervously. “Thanks, I guess.”

Ichigo doubted the sincerity of Harry’s words, but choose not to comment. He was only half listening to the rest of the conversation. Hagrid popped up at one point, but by the time Ichigo tuned in, the conversation was over. Whatever had been said left a sour note in the air.

Upon entering the great hall, they went their separate ways. Luna left for the Ravenclaw table as Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny headed for the Gryffindor one. Ichigo made his way towards the staff table on the other end of the hall after bidding goodbye to Winky, who left for his chambers. He immediately took notice of the distinctly pink, distinctly toad-like woman sitting on the other side of Dumbledore, whispering in his ear.

Ichigo was never one to judge someone based on appearance alone, but he knew that he didn’t want to be anywhere near someone as high-strung as her. She seemed the type to enjoy confrontation and Ichigo had been spent enough time with people like that to last a lifetime. Several lifetimes, in fact.

The distinct voice of the sorting hat was lost in the background as he approached his chair, thankfully, on the other side of the headmaster. Dumbledore jumped at the opportunity to stop the unending torrent of words croaking out of the woman's throat. He grabbed the sleeve of Ichigo's jumper before he moved out of arm's reach.

"Oh, Dolores, here's another important staff member you haven't met yet," Dumbledore explained. He practically shoved Ichigo in the space between his seat and the pink woman's - Dolores. "This is our peacekeeper, Ichigo Kurosaki. I'm sure you've heard of him, yes?"

Ichigo, ever the polite one, bowed in greeting, "It's nice to meet you."

"Mm, yes, well -- I wish I could say the same." Her eyes latched onto the katana on his hip. "Oh my heavens, boy, whatever do you have a weapon on school grounds for?"

Ichigo eyebrow twitched as he straightened himself back out. "Well, Misses Dolores, I wouldn't be a very good peacekeeper if I didn't have something to protect students with, should the need arise."

Dolores covered her chest and scoffed, personally offended by the idea. "Miss Umbridge, thank you. And just what do you think is going to attack these students?"

"There is more evil buried in the hearts of man than you'll find in the pits of Hell, of that, I can assure you."

Umbridge tsked. "Well, we'll see how long you'll be able to hang onto that toy of yours. I've only been here a few hours and as I've been explaining to Headmaster here, there are several things that need to be taken care of."

Ichigo frowned but didn't get an opportunity to answer over the shouts of *GRYFFINDOR* and *HUFFLEPUFF*. Sensing the end of the conversation, Ichigo excused himself and finally sat down in his seat. The staff table was eerily silent for the rest of the sortings. Ichigo only half-heartedly listened to Dumbledore welcoming the students back to the school before he began eating.

It wasn't until he heard a distinct "*hem, hem*" that he paid attention to what Dumbledore was saying -- or trying to, anyway. He watched as Umbridge stood up and took the headmaster's spot.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Umbridge began, "for those kind words of welcome... Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say! And to see such happy little faces looking back at me! I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all, and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!"

She paused and for a moment, Ichigo hoped that she was finished. To his dismay, she took a deep breath for an even longer statement.

"The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding

community must be passed down through the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished, and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching...”

For such a stout woman, Ichigo wondered where she packed all of the air necessary for such prattle.

“In her head, I bet,” Shiro commented out of nowhere. Ichigo nearly snorted his drink from his goblet. He ignored the stares coming from the other professors.

“...because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgement. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.”

Umbridge finally finished her onslaught of conjectures and retired to her seat. Everyone in the room sighed with relief. Dumbledore finished what he had tried to say earlier before dismissing the students back to their lodgings. The students stood up and swarmed to the entrance, ready to turn in for the night.

Ichigo waited for the majority of the student body to vacate before he, too, stood up and stretched. The shinigami bid farewell to his coworkers before following the students out the door. A gentle hand on his shoulder stopped him from making his exit. He turned to address the person who had stopped him.

“Oh, Mister Diggory, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Cedric was staring at him, his lips pressed thin. He took his hand back and replaced it at his side. “Well, Mister Kurosaki, I -- er...”

Ichigo smiled and shook his head. “Just Ichigo is fine. I was about to head back to my chambers, why don’t you join me? I’m sure Winky already has tea brewing.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure.”

They made their way to Ichigo’s quarters. There weren’t any students left except for the occasional upperclassmen roaming around. The air between them was uncomfortable and tense. Ichigo could sense unease rolling off the man behind him.

“If I’m not mistaken, you’re a prefect, aren’t you?” Ichigo began, trying to test the waters. “Shouldn’t you be showing the first years where the Hufflepuff area is?”

Cedric shook his head. “No. They’ve been going easy on me since...”

“I see. Well, I’m happy to know that you chose to spend your free time with me, at least. Ah, here we are. Right between the Gryffindor and Slytherin common rooms. They always seem

to be at each other's throats as of late. Although, I've heard that Hufflepuffs and Slytherins make the best of friends, is that true?" Ichigo asked as he pushed open his door.

His chambers looked exactly the same as he'd left them at the end of last school year. Winky was setting up the logs in the fireplace, but Ichigo doubted that they'd actually light it anytime soon.

"Winky, we have a guest tonight." Winky stopped when she heard her master's voice and looked at them. "Mister Diggory, this is Winky, my elf. Winky, this is Cedric Diggory, he's a seventh-year prefect. Would you mind to get us some tea?" Winky nodded and walked to the other side of the room where a cart stood with a kettle and tea cups.

Ichigo led himself and Cedric to a low-sitting coffee table with cushions instead of chairs. The shinigami sat down and gestured for the other to join him. If Cedric minded, he didn't say anything. Winky sat down a tray with the kettle and cups before she backed away to keep herself occupied with something else.

Taking the lid off the top, Ichigo leaned in to take a whiff of the drink. "It's oolong today," he said as he poured a cup for Cedric and then one for himself. They sat in silence for a few minutes, sipping on their drinks.

"So," Ichigo began. "What is it that I can do for you?"

Cedric stared down at his cup. "To be honest, I'm not quite sure. It's just that, my father says that you're the reason I'm still alive right now, so I thought I'd at least introduce myself and thank you properly..." Cedric bit his lip. "The only problem is that I've never had to thank someone for saving my life before, so I don't know how one even goes about that."

"You truly don't remember anything from the maze?"

Cedric shook his head. "I remember Harry and I going in, but that's it. The next thing I can remember is waking up in the infirmary."

Ichigo sighed and took another sip of tea. "That's to be expected. As I've said before, your soul was forcibly severed from your body. You can't expect something tragic to happen like that and not have consequences."

"I just wish I could remember so I could support Harry. I *died*. How could anyone not believe him?"

"The world is full of idiots," Ichigo shrugged. "I'm surprised you're here, at Hogwarts. I'm sure the press and ministry are all over you."

"I suppose, but it wouldn't feel right to not finish off my last year here, you know? Hogwarts is a second home to a lot of people. I'll stand by Harry and Dumbledore, no matter what Rita Skeeter says."

"That's a good stance to take. With such a strong foe, everyone should be standing together instead of trying to tear each other apart."

Cedric laughed, “That’s exactly what the sorting had said this evening.”

Ichigo’s eyes widened. “Really? I wasn’t paying too much attention, I had other things on my mind.”

“I suppose I’ll leave it to you, then,” Cedric said as he stood up. “Thank you for the tea, and for saving my life. If there’s anything you need, please ask.”

Ichigo stood up as well and smiled. “That sounds like a perfect way to thank someone to me. You’re welcome for the tea, and for saving your life. Good night, Mister Diggory.”

“Good night, Ichigo.” The elder wizard walked Cedric to the door as he left.

Winky had already begun cleaning up the cups and kettle. After that, she set out a set of sleeping clothes for Ichigo. While the man was changing, Winky voiced her thoughts. “He seems like a nice boy, yes he does.”

Ichigo nodded and laughed. “He’s such a Hufflepuff.”

Chapter End Notes

Unedited

Unbearable Umbridge

Chapter 5

Unbearable Umbridge

"It's down-right idiotic, Minerva!" Ichigo spat as he paced around the older woman's office. "That insufferable woman *actually* believes that teaching defense is nothing more than, than reading a textbook in silence. It's not some history lesson where everything is over and done with. Defense against the dark arts is a skill, which is something that only occurs through practice."

The shinigami paused for a moment to take a sip from the cup in his hand but quickly continued. "And you'd think someone from the Ministry would show more concern about the upcoming O.W.L. exams."

"Believe me," Professor McGonagall chimed in from her place in the armchair, "I don't think anyone could be more upset about that prude of a woman than the inhabitants of this school, magical creatures included. As I said to Mr. Potter, however, it is crucial to remember who that woman is and who she works for."

Ichigo sighed as he sat down in the opposite armchair and stared into the lit fireplace. "I hate politics... I just don't see how they can ignore what's right in front of their pompous noses."

Minerva shrugged. "Humans are arrogant. We think that anything that happens in the world is directed towards us. Fudge believes that any move Albus, or anyone else for that matter, makes is intended to fuel his demise."

"Albus said something to me like that after Harry's trial."

Minerva nodded. They fell into silence as they enjoyed the rest of their tea, even if the topic of conversation left a bitter taste in the back of their throats.

After bothering the professor long enough for one day, Ichigo returned to his chambers. Now that he'd calmed down, he pulled out a blank piece of parchment to return Fleur's letter. As the minutes passed and Ichigo explained the situation, he found his anger returning. Ichigo wrapped up the letter and handed it to Winky.

"Will you take care of this for me?" he asked as he stood.

Winky nodded. "Where is Master Ichigo going?"

Ichigo sighed. "I need to burn off some steam. Watch over my body, would you?" The shinigami didn't wait for an answer before he dropped his gigai onto his bed. He took care to open his door quietly so as to not disturb Winky any more. Once in the hall, Ichigo took off in search of a place to train.

He needed a large room, but the only space that was big enough was outside. Even though some of the students had seen his soul form already, he wasn't inclined to show it so freely. Not only that, but he also didn't want to risk Dolores seeing it and taking extreme measures, as she seemed to do.

"Ya could go to the forest."

Shiro's voice was unexpected and it made Ichigo jump. He shook his head as he continued to look through rooms.

"No, it's forbidden. Even if it doesn't pose much of a threat to myself, I don't know what's in there and I won't go against Dumbledore's wishes."

Apparently Shiro didn't care enough about their topic of choice because silence was the only response Ichigo got.

Despite the sheer vastness of Hogwarts, there was hardly any spare space. Many rooms were shoved full of desks and chairs, papers and boxes, magical artifacts and... *other* items that had no place being in a school with children. He investigated some, but continued his search door by door, hall by hall, and eventually floor by floor.

Ichigo had long since given up on finding a place to train in favor of simply exploring the castle halls. He didn't search rooms one by one, but instead simply strolled around. Although he was in no way an expert on the layout of the school, a rather large, ornate door caught his eyes on the seventh floor.

'That's odd. I don't remember this being here.'

He expected such an imposing door to be locked, but to his surprise, the heavy wood gave way under his hand. The door opened to what looked like a desert. Ichigo was immediately reminded of Urahara's training grounds under his shop.

"That's not creepy."

Ichigo rolled his eyes. *'You're creepy.'*

If the contents of the room didn't surprise him (which it certainly did), its sheer size made it seem impossible to fit into the school. There was plenty of room for not only himself, but also for a partner to spar with - if he found one. It was also lacking anything Ichigo could potentially damage.

It was exactly what he needed.

Ichigo didn't hesitate to unsheath Zangetsu and toss his familiar weight between his hands. The chain at the hilt clinked and chimed a way Ichigo found more soothing than any other sound. He took a battle stance and his muscles automatically began swinging his zanpakuto in front of him.

Thrust. Slash. Block. Repeat.

Sweat began to bead on his body and Ichigo quickly removed his top. It wasn't long before Shiro's voice echoed in his mind again. "*Hey, don't leave me out!*"

Ichigo laughed, but he didn't refuse the request. He summoned his mask and continued to go through the positions. The sound of his breathing became watery, even to his own ears, and it took a while to become used to the sound again, after having to go so long without it. When his mask is summoned, he was enveloped in a layer of what Ichigo can only call power. It was radiating and pushing him to action, but he was lucky to even have his mask back at all as it was.

The curiousness of it all caused Ichigo to pause in his exercises and lower Zangetsu. Ichigo wasn't fazed when his mask disintegrated from the lack of focus. He dropped Zangetsu and sat in the sand himself, folding his arms in thought.

Ichigo hadn't been able to use his mask the two thousand years he lived in this world, but not only had Voldemort's proximity allowed him to, it *forced* it. Whatever the cause was, it was clear that Voldemort was at the center of it.

To his surprise, it's wasn't Shiro's voice that appeared in his head. '*He's a dark wizard with dark magic. I wouldn't be surprised if something he does manipulates the soul. Anything like that is bound to be hollow-like in nature.*'

Ichigo wasted no time entering his inner world. As usual, the fire was roaring and Shiro was sitting in one of the armchairs. What wasn't familiar was his zanpakuto sitting in the other.

"Zangetsu! You're awake."

Zangetsu nodded. Ichigo sat down across from him and took in the spirit's appearance. Despite the year he had spent asleep, the man looked exhausted.

"I'm surprised to hear from you... How are you feeling?" Zangetsu glared at Ichigo. He put his hands up in defense. "Sorry, stupid question, I know."

The zanpakuto sighed. "I'm worn out, but at least I can move now."

Ichigo nodded. "The only reason I can surmise to be the cause of this is that my body has finally adjusted to Shiro wreaking havoc on it, so it can spend more energy on supporting you as well."

"Yes, something along those lines."

Their following conversation was curt and bland. Ichigo wasn't a genius, but he could tell that Zangetsu needed more rest. So after a few short minutes of *exhilarating* converse about the weather, Ichigo left his inner world. Hours must have passed since his conversation with Minerva.

Upon his return to his chambers, Winky handed him a letter addressed to him.

"But there's no way she's already responded, and this isn't her handwriting."

Winky shook her head, "this is from Harry Potter, that it is. Master Ichigo was gone and so he gave it to Winky."

Ichigo nodded and took it from her.

"I need to speak with you. It's about Umbridge"

~Harry"

After rereading the note, he tossed it into the fire. Having something like that lying around wouldn't do anyone any good. It was too late to speak with Harry now, it would only get him into more trouble. With this in mind, Ichigo resolved to speak with him the next day as he prepared for bed.

Ichigo managed to find him the next day at breakfast. It was just Harry and Ron, Hermione was nowhere in sight. He waited until Harry was finished before he nudged him on the shoulder, gaining his attention.

"Oh, Ichigo, did you get my note? I, um, left it with Winky."

Ichigo nodded. "I'm sorry I missed you yesterday, I had, well some things on my mind."

"That's alright! I had stepped in and saw you - well, your body - but Winky said you weren't actually there."

"No, I was training with my sword. Gotta build my body back up, you know. Anyways, what did you want to talk about? About Dolores?"

The way Harry looked around nervously did not escape Ichigo's notice. "Yeah, but not here."

Harry stood up and grabbed Ichigo's wrist, leading him out of the great hall and into a deserted hallway nearby. He fumbled with his hands and didn't meet Ichigo's concerned gaze.

"What's wrong?"

Harry released a long breath as he steeled himself. "Umbridge makes me write lines in class with this special quill. I don't know how it works, but whatever I write is carved into my hand, look." Harry pulled back the sleeve of his robe to show Ichigo the irritated skin.

Ichigo saw red.

There was only an hour before classes started, so Ichigo was willing to bet that Umbridge was in her office, preparing for her unbearable lectures. He wasted no time making his way to the pink prison, hand on the hilt of Zangetsu. Ichigo pushed through the door, startling the woman into spilling some of the tea in her cup over its rim.

"Oh my goodness, what on *earth* do you think you're do-"

"I'm curious, Miss Umbridge, what makes you think you have the right to use physical discipline on the students of Hogwarts?"

Umbridge sat her tea down and stood up, meeting Ichigo's glare with one of her own. "I don't believe I like what you're insinuating, Mister Kurosaki."

Ichigo smiled. "Oh, I'm not insinuating anything. Your medieval methods are not within the parameters of Hogwarts' guidelines, and as such, are not permitted within these halls."

Students passing by heard the commotion and began to gather in the hallway.

"To question my methods," she began, stepping around her desk to crowd in front of Ichigo, "is to question the Ministry - to question the Minister."

The shinigami did not back down, instead using his height to tower over the toadish woman. "Well, it's a good thing that the Minister isn't here right now, is he? You are treading on Hogwarts' grounds, and here, you play by Hogwarts' rules. My job here is to protect the students from all threats, by any means necessary." Ichigo made it a point to slide Zangetsu slightly out of his sheath. "Do I make myself clear?"

Umbridge paled at the blatant threat of violence. She knew when to pick her battles.

"Perfectly."

Defense Association

Chapter 6

Defense Association

Ichigo sat at his coffee table, enjoying a fresh cup of tea as Hermione, Ron, and Harry filled the seats around him.

“No,” he answered, his eyes closed and face blank.

Hermione leaned forward in the armchair, practically falling out of it. “Please! We can’t just sit around while Umbridge teaches us nothing about defending ourselves.”

Ichigo looked at her sternly. “You know that I, of all people, absolutely loathe her methods, but I won’t do it.”

“But why not?” Ron groaned. The three of them had come into his room that morning, speaking of a plan to create a side-study group for defense against the dark arts. That said, they lacked someone to lead it, which led them to their current predicament.

Looking down, Ichigo watched as the dark liquid in his cup swirled around. Vague memories of his last student appeared in his mind. He frowned. “It’s personal.”

“But Ichigo,” Hermione stressed, “you’re the only staff member who’s willing to stand up to Umbridge, especially now that she’s been named High Inquisitor. And not only that, but there’s no telling how overqualified for the job you are. *Please.*”

“No, now stop pestering me. I’ve given you my answer and I’m not going to change my mind... don’t you three have O.W.L.S. to study for?”

The tension in the room thickened so much it was almost palpable. Ichigo’s resolve faltered when he saw their faces fall, but he stood his ground, nodding to the door. He would not budge on this matter. He couldn’t.

He watched all three of them leave. In their absence, Ichigo pondered Harry’s silence during their visit. Perhaps he was against the idea as well? It was hard to try and figure out what was going through the boy’s head, especially with the weight he carried on his shoulders. Ichigo understood the feeling all too well.

“I think you should do it, King,” Shiro cheered from the depths of his mind.

‘Of course you’d want to, blood-thirsty bastard.’

“I think you should as well, Ichigo.” Zangetsu added.

Ichigo’s brow furrowed. *‘Really, you too? Don’t you remember what happened last time I took on a student?’*

“Of course I do, and that’s precisely why you should.”

‘What do you mean?’ Ichigo asked as he watched Winky take his empty teacup.

“Whatever this darklord is doing, it’s clearly interfering with your abilities. Real-life training, with actual opponents, will help you understand these changes better.”

Ichigo sighed. *‘Yeah, I suppose you’ve got a point.’*

“Of course I do,” Zangetsu scoffed. *“When have I ever led you astray?”*

The shinigami didn’t have an answer, so he didn’t respond. Even though his Zanpakuto made a good point, Ichigo couldn’t shake the past off so easily. He worried for the students’ safety, for the danger he would surely attract to them. Less concerned for Harry, Ron, and Hermione since they had already had targets on their backs and experience under their belts, his focus was on the weaker students who wouldn’t be able to protect themselves, those who had never faced danger head-on.

“At least think about it.”

Ichigo nodded to himself as he got ready for the day. The only class he was planning on observing that day was the Slytherin potion’s class. There was no particular reason for it other than Malfoy was enrolled and Ichigo liked to keep an eye on him. He knew that the boy was struggling under expectations at home, and he wanted to be a pillar of support for him.

Thankfully, Winky already had an outfit laid out for him. Ichigo quickly got dressed and headed to Snape’s classroom. When he arrived, the room was half-full. Snape himself was standing by the door, eyeing Ichigo with disdain. The man didn’t bother trying to hide his negative attitude towards the peacekeeper. Ichigo always found his boldness amusing.

What wasn’t amusing, however, was the distinctly pink woman lurking at the back of the classroom. If she noticed his interest, she didn’t show it. Instead, her gaze remained fixed on the potion’s professor. Perhaps that was why he seemed more scathing than usual today. Ichigo knew better than most the ugliness that the mere presence of the toad-like woman could evoke. Despite this, Ichigo wasn’t going to change routine for her. He made his way to the back of the room, leaning back against the wall in his usual spot. If Umbridge scooted away from him an inch or two, well, he couldn’t say he wasn’t pleased.

As the time for class neared, the rest of the students found their seats. Ichigo noticed the near-white hair the moment Malfoy entered the room. Their eyes met briefly, but Malfoy ended the contact first in favor of sitting down. No one, not even someone as proud as Malfoy, wanted to incur the Inquisitor’s wrath. These children weren’t stupid. Well, most of them weren’t, anyway.

The topic of the day’s lesson was ingredients that could potentially increase the potency of certain potions. At first, it seemed straight-forward, but upon closer inspection, the actual execution was much more difficult. Too little and there was no effect, but too much and the whole potion would be rendered useless. Ichigo remembered several late nights with Merlin

as dozens of potions were thrown in the trash. The thought of Merlin's frustrated curses brought a smile to Ichigo's face.

"Ahem."

And there the smile went, replaced by a scowl.

Umbridge stepped away from the back and towards the front of the room. "A very interesting lesson choice, professor. I would like to ask, if I may, why you feel the need to teach students skills to increase defense potions, but not potions that increase... oh, well, let's say information retention? They do have exams coming up, after all."

"You may not," Snape replied, his expression cold as stone.

Umbridge's fake smile never faltered, but Ichigo noticed the skin of her knuckles whiten.

"Well," she began. Ichigo knew Snape was in for it. He could practically see her feather's ruffling. The students were all staring now. "Some other questions, then. And, as High Inquisitor, may I remind you that you are required to answer? First, how long have you been at Hogwarts?"

"Fourteen years."

Umbridge hummed in response, writing something down on her clipboard. "Impressive. And you've always been the potion's professor? Yet, it says here that you apply for the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts every year. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Then how come you've never gotten the position?"

It became clear to Ichigo what the purpose of this impromptu investigation was. Umbridge was trying to humiliate Snape in front of the students. It was a show of power, especially since Ichigo had taken it from her a couple weeks back. With Dumbledore absent, the woman was trying to take full reins of the school. High Inquisitor or not, what a joke.

"Miss Umbridge," he began from the back of the room. Umbridge's eyes shot to him, clearly upset about being interrupted. "Perhaps now is not the best time to be worrying about such things."

Umbridge's smile grew as she stepped towards him. "Well, since you're here, Mr. Kurosaki, I have a few questions for you as well. You were supposed to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts this year until the Ministry sought to appoint me instead. Your file is surprisingly blank for someone in such a high position. No age, nationality, or previous schooling is listed. How am I to know if you're qualified to even work here? Not only that, but the Ministry has reports of you performing soul manipulation at the tournament last year. That is very suspicious and quite the cause for alarm, wouldn't you agree?"

The students began to whisper as Umbridge spoke. Ichigo closed his eyes and sighed. If there was one thing that Umbridge was, it was a master manipulator. No matter how he answered,

he would incriminate himself. The best course of action would be to ignore the qualms completely.

“For High Inquisitor, you’re interrupting valuable class time. These students need all the information they can get for their upcoming exams.”

Umbridge saw it as the dismissal it was. She wasn’t going to get any information out of him, at least not that day and not in front of a room full of students. Umbridge nodded and left the room. Snape continued the lesson and Ichigo tried to ignore the stares aimed his way. Snape, never one to go easy on children, would smack a student’s head if it so much as leaned the wrong way. Ichigo was grateful. At least they had this in common.

If anything, recent events only solidified that Umbridge was trying to tear the school down, not build it up as she was preaching to the Ministry and the public. In a time of crisis, no less. Really, how did she or any other professor expect these students to actually grow and learn under these conditions?

“Perhaps Hermione’s offer looks more enticing now?” Zangitsu prompted. Ichigo didn’t respond.

A few hours later, after classes were over, Ichigo found himself in front of the fat lady painting. “The password changed last night.”

“How was I supposed to know that! Can you please let me in?” Ichigo pleaded.

She frowned from where she sat in the painting. “Ichigo, you know the rules better than anyone else. I can’t let you in without the password.”

“But I’m not a student! Surely I’m not held to the same standards as the children and besides... I’ll get you and Violet a bottle of that Moscato you like.”

The fat lady eyed him warily. “Two bottles?”

“Yes, yes,” Ichigo nodded.

She smiled as the painting opened. “Deal! Although, I feel like I should mention that I was just kidding.”

Ichigo groaned, but he didn’t take back his offer. Instead, he entered the Gryffindor common room. Ichigo wasn’t surprised that the golden trio were all gathered on the couch by the fire. They were always attached at the hip it seemed, even after all of their tension last year.

Harry was the first one to notice him when he looked up from the book he was reading. “Ichigo! What are you doing here?”

His call caught the attention of the other students in the room, but he only paid attention to the three he had come to see. Ichigo walked over and sat in one of the vacant armchairs. With the fire lit, they were all illuminated by its warm light.

“First, well, I want to apologize. I realize I was short with you this morning and I’m sorry. Teaching is a sore subject for me. To be honest, Dumbledore and I had decided that I would fill the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor this year. I was alright because it’s part of Hogwarts’ regular curriculum, but when you asked me to tutor you and a few other students, well, I was apprehensive. Going above and beyond basic defense is dangerous and draws attention to yourself. I didn’t want to do it because I didn’t want to put you or other students in danger like I have in the past.” Ichigo explained.

“Of course we forgive you,” Hermione began, “but we don’t know what else to do. With You-Know-Who back, we need to know how to protect ourselves.”

“You’re one hundred percent right, which is why I’ve decided to do it.”

Their eyes lit up. “Really?” Ron asked. Ichigo nodded.

Harry spoke up, “But what are we going to call it? Our group, I mean.”

While they talked, Ginny walked over from where she had entered the room. She sat down on the floor between them. “Why not the Defense Association, D.A. for short? It can also stand for Dumbledore’s Army.”

Ichigo shook his head. “No, this has nothing to do with Dumbledore. This is your fight, be proud of it. Stand up to Umbridge on your own feet. If you can’t do that, then how can you expect to stand up to the darklord?”

They all nodded in agreement, “Defense Association it is.”

Back to Basics

Chapter 7

Back to Basics

"The first few sessions are going to be about the basics of defense, starting with proper wand posture. After all, if you can't get the fundamentals right, how can you expect to get more complex spells mastered?" Ichigo explained to the group before him.

Most of the faces in the crowd were familiar to him, but there were a few new students he hadn't met yet. They could've been transfers, or just children that hadn't felt the need to speak with him. Whether or not that was a good thing remained to be seen. Of course there was Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny, but so was Cedric, Luna, and Neville. Ichigo was disappointed that he couldn't find Draco amongst the students, but he figured that Harry hadn't thought to invite him. Regardless, Ichigo was sure that Draco was receiving a different kind of training from his father. That thought, however, was for a different day.

"Normally, this kind of training occurs over the course of several years, but we don't have that kind of time," he explained. They were all within the Room of Requirement, it being the only space large enough for the D.A. to take place secretly with all the students. It kept the same sandy expanse that Ichigo had used earlier, which made the students uncomfortable. They had probably never been in that kind of environment before. Good.

Ichigo remained inside his gigai, but he had changed into more breathable clothes and kept Zangetsu on his hip. Winky, faithful as ever, was a few feet behind him. "While we relearn the basics of defense, I will also reshape the way you view combat. Just because you lose your wand, that doesn't mean the fight is over. You have a body - young bodies, use them to your advantage! These witches and wizards won't hesitate just because your children. They will kill you, given the chance."

"Don't give them that chance," Ichigo continued. "It's impossible to outrun a spell, but that doesn't mean you can't dodge it. They force your wand out of your hand using a spell, so knock their wands out with your palm. Don't think of your wand as a tool, think of it as an extension of your body. Be conscientious of your body, know your kinesthesia... Now, everyone pair up. We'll start with expelliarmus."

Ichigo watched as the students partnered together. He took his own wand out and performed a demonstration by moving his wand in a spiral motion. "Expelliarmus is a quick and easy spell to master. As easy as it is to use, however, it's also as easy to predict and deflect, so don't let it become your crutch. Begin."

One advantage of the Room being a desert was that there was plenty of space for the children to spread out. Shouts of spells and defensive charms came from almost every direction. This was good. In the event of a full-scale battle, they would be used to fighting battles amongst chaos, as they usually went, and stay focused. They also needed to know how to work

together and play to their strengths. Not every wizard was gifted in defense, but that didn't mean they were useless in battle.

Even with that thought in mind, however, Neville was indeed the first student to fall. Ichigo gave the boy a once over, but he seemed no worse for wear. "Up and adem, Mister Longbottom!"

After letting them get the hang of expelliarmus, which thankfully many students already knew, Ichigo moved them to stupefy. It progressed slower than he'd like, but they made progress and he couldn't really argue with that. Even though they weren't adept at the spell yet, it was getting late and Ichigo had to call it a night.

"That's enough, everyone. You've only got an hour until your curfew, so best get to it. Everyone did good work today, and we'll be back here in a few days."

The students nodded and bid him farewell. Ichigo waited and watched all the students leave before he turned to Winky. "Ready to go?" He asked.

The house elf nodded, but Ichigo doubted that she would answer any different if she wasn't. They stepped outside and Ichigo waited for the door to the room disappeared before leaving. When he turned around he locked eyes with Miss Norris, but didn't see it as a cause for concern. Whatever reservations people had for Filch, he wasn't the most intelligent, so Ichigo doubted anything of importance would come from his snooping.

When they returned to his chambers Winky gave him an outfit for bed. As he changed, he couldn't resist the opportunity to ask for his friend's advice. "Well, Winky, what did you think?"

"Winky thinks the children look silly, that she does."

Ichigo laughed. "Yes, I suppose the wizards you've served in the past were much more adept at the dark arts."

The shinigami realized what he had said only after it had come out of his mouth. If Winky was bothered by the topic, she didn't show it. Ichigo's eyes softened nonetheless. "I'm sorry, that was out of line."

Winky's face pinched up, just for a moment, but it was enough to betray her. Her hands twitched and Ichigo assumed she was struggling not to ball them into fists.

Ichigo stopped what he was doing and kneeled in front of her, but not close enough to impede her personal space. "Winky?"

"Winky is not... she is not *mad* at Master Ichigo..."

"It's perfectly alright for you to be mad at me. That was uncalled for and—"

"Winky is *mad* at herself."

Ichigo blinked at her. "I don't understand."

Winky's gaze darted to the bottom shelf of the tea cart where he had once stored butterbeer. Ichigo had, understandably, removed the temptation upon their return to Hogwarts. Simply removing the substance would never be enough to curb the craving, however, and the yearning he could see in Winky's eyes made his stomach churn.

"Winky's mad that she is mad. She shouldn't be upset over a dark wizard who hurt people, would have hurt Master Ichigo. But Winky still cares about her previous masters, she still worries, even if it is bad. Winky will accept any punishment Master Ichigo finds necessary for such bad thoughts."

Ichigo frowned. He reached a hand towards her and she flinched. He didn't hesitate. He grabbed her gently, pulling her into an embrace. She was stiff, confused. The situation reminded Ichigo of Grimmauld place. It was not the first time they discussed this and it would not be the last.

"Winky, I'm not going to punish you for having emotions, no matter what they are. As I've said before, Crouch Jr.'s actions are his own. It's okay to grieve for the person he was. Just because you care about someone, that doesn't mean you agree with their actions. You are not bad, Winky."

Ichigo did not care in the least that she was getting snot on his clothing and that he was going to have to change again. When her sniffles died down, she stepped back and got him a new shirt. While he finished redressing, a thought occurred to him.

"Winky, I think you should stay in here with me tonight."

"Winky doesn't-"

Ichigo held up his hand and she silenced. He shook his head, "You don't have to if you're uncomfortable with it, but I don't like the idea of you being alone right now."

Winky waited for a moment before she nodded. They followed their usual nightly routine with the exception of Winky crawling into the opposite side of the bed. Her frame was so small that Ichigo could barely notice the lump she made under the covers. He made sure to keep as much space between them as possible.

"If something starts bothering you, I want you to wake me up so that you're not by yourself. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but I still want you to wake me, okay?"

He saw her nod her head. "Master Ichigo, Winky... Winky thanks you."

"Of course. We're family, aren't we? Now get some sleep."

It only took a few minutes for Winky's breathing to become soft snores. Ichigo smiled as he settled into the sheets. His thoughts traveled back to their discussion and what he said. It wasn't like him to be so insensitive and aloof, especially about such a delicate subject. Ichigo wondered what had come over him.

"Today we're going to focus on your physical abilities. Fred, George, if you'd come here please... yes, good, thank you." Ichigo maneuvered them five feet apart, making sure that everyone in the Room could see them properly. "Now, wands out and no funny business. Take a casting stance."

They did as they were told. Just like everything they did, they were mirror images of each other. Ichigo was going to use that to his advantage. He walked around them, taking in their posture and position.

He nodded to himself. "This is more or less what you've been taught in school for duels. When battling dark wizards, however, it certainly won't be a proper duel. It won't be one-on-one, it won't be in a clear environment, and you certainly won't have a countdown to start casting. Fred, stay as you are please," Ichigo asked.

The shinigami spread George's feet apart, straightened his back, tucked in his arms, and lifted his head. It wasn't perfect, but it was a start. Ichigo turned to the group of students. "Alright, anyone want to take a guess as to why I changed what I did? Hermione?"

She cleared her throat, "Did you move his feet to give him better balance?"

"Yes, very good. Anyone else?" No one else raised their hands. "When you're battling someone, regardless of who or what they are, mobility and defense are key. You need to be prepared to lunge out of the way, turn around, jump, and anything else you may need to do to protect yourself and your friends. Pay close attention to the difference between Fred and George, and replicate it. Go."

Ichigo watched them do as they were told. He walked around and corrected them as he saw fit. As he passed Harry, he noticed him staring at Cho Chang and Cedric. Harry was so distracted that Ichigo was able to pluck his wand right out of his hand. "There's no point in training if you're not going to put any effort into it," he scolded.

Harry at least had the decency to look sheepish. "I'm sorry Ichigo."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ichigo saw that Ginny was staring at Harry as well. "Don't worry, Harry, you'll have time for all that stuff later."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

A Game of Snakes and Giants

A large group of students was crowded in the hallway, endlessly shoving against one another in order to see better. Ichigo paused his task to approach the group and noticed Hermione at the forefront.

"What's going on?" He asked as he stood next to her. Her lips were thin and her gaze burning. Ichigo didn't think he had ever seen her so furious. "What's wrong?"

"Someone *told*," she spat. "They had to have, look!"

Ichigo followed her gaze, his eyes landing on the newest addition to Umbridge's tyranny. According to the post, all student groups and activities had to be reported and approved by Umbridge.

"Well," Ichigo began, trying to lighten the mood. "Technically it says student groups and technically I'm not a student. It's not my fault that all of you just so happen to watch me practice the lesson plans that I don't have," he shrugged.

Hermione shook her head but kept her voice low, not wanting any extra listeners from the group around them. "The start of our meetings and this post are too close together to be a coincidence. That means that someone had to have told her. But everyone in that group is someone that we can - that we thought we could trust. "

"Hey, you and I both know how wicked that woman is. There's any number of ways that she gets her information. I wouldn't be surprised if she's reading students' mail. Besides, I'm sure a smart witch such as yourself can surely think of something to protect against that?"

Hermione rubbed her hand against her face. "There is this jinx that I read of once, I'm sure I could manipulate it to do just that."

Ichigo smiled. "See? There's no reason to get so worked up. I'll be off now, so you work on that."

Hermione nodded and Ichigo watched as she maneuvered her way through the throng of students, most likely heading back to the Gryffindor common rooms. First crisis of the day, averted. Ichigo's gaze lingered on Umbridge's new post for a moment longer before he turned away, heading back towards his original destination.

Earlier that morning, Winky had woken him to the news that Hagrid had finally returned to the castle grounds. How she came to know this, Ichigo couldn't fathom, but he was immensely grateful regardless. He had been absent for quite some time, and the shinigami missed the man's company. Many found Hagrid to be cumbersome and underwhelming, but

then again, these same people thought Ichigo was just a wizard. They were the kind of people who wouldn't know a bludger even if it hit them in the face.

The early winter air was crisp against Ichigo's skin as he stepped outside. He was suddenly glad that he had asked Winky not to accompany him today. She was so thin and wore so little that she would likely freeze to death. He also imagined that whatever he and Hagrid discussed, the other man would want to do so in private. Not that Ichigo could blame him, Ichigo had no doubt that Umbridge was going through everyone's mail (and who knew what else the old toad was up to).

Ichigo quickly crossed the remainder of the courtyard and came face to face with the door of Hagrid's hut. He knocked once, twice, and a third time before Hagrid finally opened up. Of all the things that caught Ichigo's attention, the bruises on the other's face are what took precedence. The dark marks and cuts stood out, even amongst all of his hair. Ichigo's expression soured into a scowl. Without saying a word, Hagrid stepped aside and let him in.

Barely waiting for Hagrid to shut the door, Ichigo turned around and asked, "Do I need to use this?" while he grabbed the hilt of Zangetsu.

Hagrid shook his head and waved him off, "No, nothin' like that."

"Good," Ichigo replied, sitting himself down on the couch. "Now, care to tell me where you've been the past few months without so much as a single letter?" he asked, glaring.

"I told Dumbledore where I was headed before I left." Hagrid frowned. "Did he not tell ya?"

Ichigo averted his eyes. "Headmaster Dumbledore has been rather distant lately."

"Ah, I see... Well, in that case..." Hagrid trailed off. Ichigo watched patiently as Hagrid poured two mugs of butterbeer. He tried to steer clear of the beverage around Winky, but watching the foam build up made him crave its sweet flavor. Hagrid handed him his share as he took a seat.

Ichigo eagerly raised the cup to his lips, relishing the smooth glide down his throat. "As you were saying?" he asked.

Looking into his cup, Hagrid answered. "As you know, tension among the Ministry is high, especially against Dumbledore. Not only that, but You-Know-Who has returned. With all o' this piling up, I thought it best to seek assistance. So... I went to speak with the giants."

Ichigo nearly spat out his drink. "G-giants...? How did it go?"

"I'm sure you can guess," Hagrid said, gesturing to his face.

"Well, that's unfortunate, but not entirely unexpected. Afterall, wizards an-" a knock interrupted Ichigo.

He and Hagrid looked at each other pointedly before Hagrid opened the door. A sickently pink woman forced her way into his hut. Ichigo couldn't quite make out what she was saying she spoke so fast, but when her eyes landed on him she paused.

"This is a private conversation, Mr. Kurosaki. Please head back to the school."

Ichigo took a long drink before he replied, glaring at her. "No. I was here first."

Umbridge visibly bristled. "Very well. I'm not naive enough to think you not privy to this information anyhow." She turned her sharp gaze on Hagrid. "I know where you went. After all, it's only natural that when one feels threatened, they turn to their family... now tell me, what did they say?"

Hagrid shook his head, "I don't know what you're talking about-"

"The *giants*!"

Her voice was so shrill Ichigo was surprised that it didn't shatter their mugs. If Hagrid was alarmed by her knowledge, he didn't show it. As for Ichigo, it only confirmed his suspicions that she was spying in on personal conversations. He would have to make sure that he and his companions had a secure method to contact one another should the need arise. Ichigo felt that it would be sooner rather than later.

"Like I said, I don't know what you're talking about. Everyone knows that wizards and giants don't get along. Why would I even need to talk to 'em in the first place?" Hagrid replied.

"You wish to feign ignorance? Very well. I gave you - both of you - the chance to work with me, with the Ministry. I will not hold my breath."

With those parting words, Umbridge left the hut.

"Good riddance," Ichigo said, downing the rest of his drink.

Hagrid made sure that Umbridge made it back into the castle before he continued their conversation. "Anyway, like I said, they wouldn't help."

Ichigo sighed. "I wouldn't help us either, if I were them."

Hagrid snorted in amusement.

"On that note," Ichigo said, standing up. "I best get back to the school. Who knows what those children will get into while I'm gone."

Hagrid nodded and they bid each other farewell. Ichigo was pleasantly surprised when Hagrid's pat on the back didn't knock him over. It was a testament to how much strength he had regained since last year. Ichigo stepped outside and headed back to the castle.

"*Yeah, King, that was a real drag.*"

Ichigo rolled his eyes. '*It's not like I meant to.*'

"*I can't help but feel partially to blame,*" Zangetsu confessed.

"Don't think too highly of yourself, ol' man. Although, it was pretty boring around here while you were sleeping."

Ichigo smirked, slowing down. *"Awe, Shiro, I didn't know you cared."*

"Shut up!"

Ichigo snickered and resumed his walk. Instead of returning to his chambers like he had planned, Ichigo decided to take a detour. Classes had just changed, so he was caught in the throng of students. When he was finally able to reach the bird statue, it took a moment to remember what the password was.

"Chocolate frogs."

Ichigo waited for a moment, but nothing happened.

"Chocolate frogs."

The statue remained motionless. Ichigo frowned. That was definitely the password. If it wasn't working, that meant that Dumbledore had changed the password recently... and hadn't told him. Ichigo glared at the statue. Even though he couldn't intimidate the statue into moving, it did make him feel marginally better. Ichigo thought about going to McGonagall, but the poor woman already had enough on her plate dealing with Umbridge as it was. The last thing she needed was for him to groan and complain to her.

Instead, he spent the rest of the day sitting in on lectures. His biggest mistake was going to a history class of Professor Binns. The ghost was boring enough on his own, but Ichigo actually *living* through the events made it even more brutal. Herbology proved much more pleasant, as did the more advanced Health and Healing course for seventh years. He had been wanting to attend a lesson once the new class had been announced, but hadn't gotten an opportunity to do so yet.

After watching classes, he went to the great hall for dinner. Unsurprisingly, Dumbledore was not in attendance. Umbridge did little to hide her glare from both himself and Hagrid. They ate, unbothered. Ichigo returned to his chambers after dinner. Winky prepared him some tea and he turned in early for the night.

A few hours later, Ichigo was shaken awake. He shot up and grabbed Zangatsu before his mind had finished clearing. When he was able to focus, Ichigo easily recognized bushy brunette curls. Her skin was pale, but her eyes were red even in the dark.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Something's happened with Harry, he's had another nightmare. Headmaster wants to see you."

Ichigo nodded. Grabbing a shirt from his dresser, he followed Hermione through the hallways and to Dumbledore's office. When they arrived, Ichigo saw Harry, Ron, Dumbledore, and McGonagall waiting for them. They all had grim looks on their faces. Harry was the only one

sitting down, and he's wrapped in a blanket. Ichigo senses a darkness in his magic that isn't normally there, but he's distracted by Dumbledore speaking to him.

"Ichigo, thank you for hurrying. I know it's late. Harry, please tell Ichigo what you told me."

Harry frowned and was silent for a moment, but he eventually nodded. "I had this nightmare. I was... some sort of creature. A snake, I think. And I was at the Ministry... All of a sudden, Mr. Weasley was there, in a room full of glass. Then I, well, the creature... it attacked him. I think he's in trouble."

"If I'm not mistaken, then this is one of the first... nightmares that we haven't shared." Ichigo announced. "I was sleeping just fine in my room. What do we do now"

Dumbledore turned to the portraits on the wall. Previous headmasters and mistresses, if Ichigo wasn't mistaken. "I'm going to raise the alarm. Ask the Order for help in locating Mr. Weasley."

Ichigo nodded. "I'll go with them."

Nightmarish Notions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 9

Nightmarish Notions

When Ichigo first saw the prophecies within the Department of Mysteries, he thought they were mesmerizing. Each one pulling him in with the promise of answers to questions he didn't know he had. Now, as he raced past shelf after shelf, row after row, they were disorienting. Had he already checked here? Should he go right or left? With Mr. Weasley's life on the line, every choice mattered, every second counted. Each prophecy exuded the reiraku of those whose future they contained. The cacophony was overwhelming.

He had not come searching for the man alone. Tonks and Lupin were also roaming the shelves. They agreed to split up when they first arrived since it would cover more ground. Ichigo had tried to sense for the man himself, but the prophecies made it impossible. Once someone found him, they were supposed to shoot a flare to signal their retreat. After all, it was very likely that his assailant was still nearby. It wouldn't be good to hang around and find out.

No such luck, however.

Among the identical isles, he searched for any kind of anomaly that could help him. A piece of clothing or a sound. It came in the smell of blood. A metallic stench that Ichigo would never be able to wipe from his memory. It was ingrained into his very soul from battle after battle. He stopped in his tracks, nearly toppling over from the speed he was running at.

Cautious, Ichigo drew Zangetsu, following the scent. It wasn't long before he finally came upon Mr. Weasley. Ichigo scanned the area before he sheathed his zanpakuto and approached. The man was oozing blood from a wound to the chest and he was also bleeding from a head wound, but there weren't any other marks on him. Ichigo couldn't see his wand anywhere so either his attacker took it or Mr. Weasley hadn't had the chance to use it before he was incapacitated. Either way, the man was in critical condition.

Ichigo took a step towards him but paused when the air around them changed. He took another step but couldn't stop the shudder that went through him. The aura around the injured man was dark. Very dark. A remnant, perhaps, of whatever had attacked him. Harry had mentioned a snake. What kind of snake would leave this in its wake? The sinister feeling mounted with every step closer. Still, Ichigo pushed on.

At last, he was within arm's reach. Ichigo sought out his wrist, but the second their skin met, his soul was forced out of his gigai.

"What-" Ichigo jerked his hand back as if burned. He watched as his gigai crumpled to the floor. He suddenly found himself back in the maze, when his powers were not his own. He took a few steps back, but his heart was already racing and breathing had become difficult.

His head was pounding. To his shock and dismay, his mask had begun to materialize without his control. It was suffocating.

' What's happening to me?'

Ichigo frantically looked around, trying to find something - anything that could help - when his eyes landed on Mr. Weasley. Whatever was happening, it had something to do with him, or at least whatever had attacked him. Shaking with exertion, Ichigo grabbed his gigai's chest and started dragging it away from the injured man. He struggled under the weight, but he was able to get enough distance that he was *finally* able to breathe. A few more yards and he didn't feel like he had to puke anymore.

With shaking hands, he grabbed the side of his half-formed mask and yanked it off. Ichigo watched as it clanged against the ground before disintegrating. After taking a few moments to catch his breath, Ichigo re-entered his gigai, relieved that it worked the first time. Ichigo didn't waste a moment pulling out his own wand and firing a bright red light into the air above him.

He sat, waiting for Tonks and Lupin to find him. Lupin discovered him first, and then Tonks shortly after. They looked at him, concern in their eyes. "Mr. Weasley is down that way. He needs to be taken to St. Mungo's." Tonks nodded, heading in the direction he pointed.

Lupin stayed behind, eyeing him warily. "What happened?"

Ichigo shook his head. "I couldn't explain it, even if I wanted to. What's important right now is that we get him medical help. I'm afraid I won't be able to touch him at the moment, but I can at least apparate us there."

Lupin looked like he wanted to say more, but instead, he extended his hand and helped Ichigo to his feet. They made their way to Tonks, who had pulled Mr. Weasley's arm over her shoulder. Lupin quickly stepped over to grab his other arm and share his weight. Tonks smiled at them gratefully.

"Are you ready?" Ichigo asked. The two of them nodded, and Ichigo grabbed Lupin's hand. He disappeared them to the hospital. The healers, to their credit, did not squeal when the three of them appeared, holding a prominent and bloody member of the Ministry in their arms. Instead, they were quick to action, guiding them to one of many private rooms. Lupin and Tonks laid Mr. Weasley down on the cot and Ichigo answered as many of their questions as he could.

"What happened?"

"He was attacked."

"By what?"

"I don't know."

"How long ago?"

"An hour or two at most."

"Where was he attacked?"

"The Ministry."

Ichigo could tell that they were bothered by his answer, but they didn't ask him any more questions. Instead, they put all of their focus into the man prone in front of them. Tonks and Lupin stayed with him for a few minutes in silence, then they promised to go update everyone and that they would be back later. Ichigo nodded as they left, keeping his eyes on Mr. Weasley and his guard up. He was close enough to make Ichigo dizzy, but not enough to give him a headache.

Because of Harry's nightmare, it was logical to assume that Voldemort was involved in this, but that was all the information he had. Was this attack planned? If so, why? What were they going after Mr. Weasley for? Was it because of his involvement with the Order? Or was this opportunistic? If that was the case, what was Voldemort doing at the Ministry in the first place? Were they going to come after him again? And his mask? The same thing had happened several months ago. Ichigo had hoped that training with his vizard powers would be able to give him better control, but clearly, that was not the case. There were simply too many variables at play here.

When they began cutting away Mr. Weasley's clothes, Ichigo stepped outside the room to give him privacy and increase the space between them. He stood at the door, wary of everyone who passed by. After all, Ichigo considered Mr. Weasley a friend and he wasn't going to let anyone harm him again. It was unusual for witches and wizards in this day and age to have physical injuries, most of the people in the hospital had strangely colored skin or animal limbs.

It wasn't long before Dumbledore appeared in the hallway, concern etched into his face. Tonks and Lupin weren't with him, so Ichigo assumed they had stayed at Grimmauld Place. "I've been told that Arthur is not in the best of shape. Thank you for finding him so quickly. But, Ichigo, you don't look well."

Ichigo shook his head but regretted it immediately after. The hallway swam and the people blurred together. He took a deep breath and steadied himself. "I'll rest later. What I'm more concerned about is what attacked Mr. Weasley, and why."

"I have some... ideas," Dumbledore hesitated.

Ichigo tried not to growl at the wizard in frustration, but he was tired and ready to go to sleep. He couldn't do that until he was sure Mr. Weasley would be safe. "Well?"

Dumbledore eyed the patrons around them and waved his hand in the air. He didn't say an incantation, but Ichigo could feel the presence of a sound barrier. Their conversation would not be overheard. "Harry mentioned a snake. I believe Arthur's attacker to be Nagini, Voldemort's loyal animal companion. As for why, well, I'm afraid the fault lies with me. The Order predicted that Voldemort would try to breach the Hall of Prophecies. We thought that he was going to try and view Harry's prophecy, which would be futile considering that only

the one who recorded the prophecy and the subject of the prophecy would be able to remove it. Nevertheless, I suggested that someone keep watch in the event that he did."

"Arthur made the most sense, since he actually works for the Ministry. I did not foresee this outcome." Dumbledore looked away, ashamed.

Ichigo rubbed his forehead. "Well, that explains the aura surrounding Mr. Weasley when I found him... Tell me, do Nagini and Voldemort share a bond that runs deeper than just companionship? A magical bond, perhaps."

"I... I have had a suspicion for some time that the reason Voldemort keeps Nagini so close is because she is a horcrux. Why do you ask?"

Ichigo ignored his question in favor of asking one of his own. "What's a horcrux?"

"Something that should not be discussed here, I'm afraid," Dumbledore answered. The old wizard smiled at Ichigo. "You look exhausted. Why don't you join the others at Grimmauld, I'll take Arthur's bedside vigilance."

Ichigo didn't have enough energy to argue and nodded. If what Dumbledore said was true, then it was unlikely Mr. Weasley would be attacked again. Ichigo said goodbye to Dumbledore and took his advice, apparating to just outside Grimmauld Place. He didn't bother knocking at such a late - well technically early - hour. Stepping inside, he was surprised to be greeted by Winky.

"Winky, what are you doing here?"

"Well, Dobby told Winky that the other Order members were staying here, so she asked Dumbledore to come with them, that she did. Winky is glad she did so, otherwise, who would prepare Master Ichigo's tea the way he likes it?"

Ichigo laughed, feeling lighter than he had since before he had gone to sleep that night and pat her head. "Thank you very much, Winky. I don't know where I would be without you. You can go ahead and put a pot on, I'd like to talk to Harry before I head up, if he's still awake?"

"Harry Potter went to sleep a few hours ago, but Sirius Black is in the kitchen, if Master Ichigo wants to speak to him."

"Yes, I think I will. I'll be up in a few minutes."

Winky nodded and disappeared up the stairs. Ichigo followed her instructions and indeed found Sirius in the kitchen. He was sitting at the table, drinking a hot mug of... something. Something probably much stronger than butterbeer, if he felt the same as Ichigo. Sirius didn't seem to notice him enter the room. Ichigo pulled out the chair across from him and sat down.

"How're the children?"

Sirius startled. He relaxed and sighed when he saw who it was. "They're finally asleep upstairs. It took ages they were so worried. Tonks' and Lupin's message was the only reason

they laid down."

Ichigo nodded in understanding. "And Harry? Has he said anything?"

Sirius nursed the warm cup in his hand. Ichigo watched as he took another sip. "It's... Harry told me this in confidence, but he said that right after he woke up from the nightmare, he was very angry. And that, when he saw Dumbledore, he wanted to *hurt* him. It was very disheartening to hear. That boy doesn't deserve any of this. I'm sure he feels partly responsible for what's happened tonight."

"Harry's aggression is probably related to Voldemort's involvement. If that's the case, it could also be related to the reason my mask manifested without my permission."

"That scary white one that just appears out of nowhere?" Sirius asked, eyeing him skeptically.

Ichigo smiled, "Yes, the scary white one."

It was clear that something with Nagini and Voldemort was behind all of this. Feelings of aggression, his mask manifesting, this sudden mention of a horcrux, whatever that was... Ichigo couldn't help but think of the darkness surrounding Mr. Weasley. Looking back, Ichigo was reminded of hollows.

There was a lot to look into.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! Finally, things are starting to pick up, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on it! I'm still interested in a beta reader for this story, so please PM if interested. Mostly someone who I can bounce ideas off of, and who can pester me to work on getting chapters out faster.

Of course, if you haven't yet, I highly recommend joining our discord, this is the link: <https://discord.gg/qPMZ7Ud>

Horrible Horcruxes

Chapter 10

Horrible Horcruxes

"The patronus is a very advanced skill. After watching all of you train, though, I feel that many of you will be able to produce at least a non-corporeal one. It's a defense spell created to protect a witch or wizard from dementors. It has many other uses as well. For example, it can be used as a light source or as a distraction. A patronus is the magical manifestation of a person's happiness, their dreams and desires, which take the form of an animal. Which animal, however, is unique to each individual and can change over a lifetime," Ichigo explained. The dozens of students watched excitedly as he drew his wand.

"Expecto Patronum!"

A large burst of pale blue light erupted from Ichigo's wand. The light particles floated in the air for a moment before congregating in front of the shinigami, shaping itself. A large dire wolf formed, its tail whipping back and forth. The students stared in awe. Some of them eyed the animal warily. It watched them, its keen eyes almost predatory in nature.

"There is a common misconception that only werewolves have wolf patronuses. This is simply not the case." As Ichigo said this, he laid his hand on the wolf's head. "A wolf can mean many different things, it can take many different roles. They are keen and relentless hunters." Ichigo's patronus stepped away from him as he said this, instead circling around the students. Some of them backed away, but some (namely Luna) stepped towards it.

"In my case," Ichigo continued, "a wolf stands for leadership and, more importantly, protection." The animal returned to his side. "A patronus can take on two forms. This is a corporeal one, where the patronus takes a physical form. This is a very difficult ability to master and it often takes several years to do so. Today we will be working on non-corporeal patronuses, or ones that don't take on a physical form. Everyone spread out. We'll need plenty of space for this."

Ichigo watched as the students spread out, most of them still eyeing his patronus warily. Other than Harry, none of them made much progress. That was to be expected, though. An hour or so into practice, Harry looked at him and Ichigo nodded. Harry stopped channeling his own patronus and moved to the nearest group of students in order to help them instead. As Ichigo watched, his eyes strayed from their wands and spellwork to Harry's scar. Dumbledore's voice filled his mind.

"I have had a suspicion for some time that the reason Voldemort keeps Nagini so close is because she is a horcrux. Why do you ask?"

Their conversation had cut short at the time, but now there was nothing holding it back. Ichigo made his way from the front towards Harry. He noticed his approach and stepped

away from a female student named Billie. Ichigo had only met her in passing, but she seemed sweet.

"What's up Ichigo?"

"I need to go speak with Dumbledore about something... er, school related. Since you already know what you're doing, do you mind staying with them for the remainder of class?"

Harry frowned, but he nodded regardless. "Yeah, I don't mind, but I..."

"But what?" Ichigo asked, searching Harry's face for any indication.

"It's fine, I just-" Harry shook his head. "Nevermind. Go on, I've got this."

Ichigo tried to say more, but Harry had already left to rejoin the other students. Ichigo huffed to himself and stepped towards the door, pausing for a moment to sense any nearby reiatsu before he slipped through. The majority of the hallways were empty on this wing of the school, so when Ichigo ran into Filch only a couple of halls down from the room, his guard was up. Well, more so than usual.

"Ah, Mr. Filch. Always a pleasure."

Filch's scowl deepened. The only scowl Ichigo daresay bested his own. "Kurosaki. Not many people in this part o' the castle. What brings you here?"

Ichigo smiled. "Well, Filch, just as you care for the school, I care for its students. Always gotta keep at least one eye on them, if you know what I mean. Never know what kind of shenanigans they'll get up to."

In a rare instance, Filch dropped his sour expression in favor of a mischievous glint. "Couldn't say it better myself. That's why I like Miss Umbridge. She'll keep these good-for-nothings in line, I reckon. I've heard rumors goin' round that some students are meeting up somewhere here. That's against decree number twenty four. So... if you hear anything, you let me know?"

Ichigo tried to keep himself from laughing, but it was quite difficult. He leaned down towards Filch, as if they were keeping some great secret, and nodded. "Oh absolutely I will."

"Good. Ya know, I wasn't sure about you Kurosaki, but you seem to me like you've got a good head on your shoulders."

"Thank you, Filch. Now, if you don't mind, I've got some things I must attend to."

With that said, Ichigo made his way towards Dumbledore's office. It wasn't until he was standing in front of the statue that he realized he still didn't know what the headmaster's new password was. He gave the few regulars a try, chocolate frogs, lemon drops, pig farts, sniggle warts, and to his dismay, none worked. He expected Shiro to laugh at him, but his hollow's spirit had been quieter as of late. Ever since Arthur's attack, both pieces of his soul were brooding. About what, Ichigo couldn't say, although he had a couple ideas.

With Dumbledore nowhere to be found, Ichigo thought about any other readily available sources of information. If Dumbledore refused to speak about it in public, it was unlikely to be found in the library, although there was a chance it was in the restricted section. Ichigo didn't quite feel like searching hundreds of tomes, however.

His first choice *would* be the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, but since he and the pink toad didn't get along very well, that left him with only option number two, the only other professor qualified to teach Defense. And so, Ichigo found his way to the potions classroom. Even though it was after typical class hours, he wasn't surprised to find Snape leaning over a cauldron, vial in hand.

"This better be good, Kurosaki, for you to be lurking in my doorway both uninvited and unannounced."

Ichigo smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck as he stepped inside the room. He felt a wave of dizziness as he passed the threshold, but it quickly left him. "Hello Snape, I was hoping to pick your brain a bit, if you don't mind."

Snape continued to observe the potion in front of him. "And whatever it is can't be found in the school's extensive and considerably underused library?"

"It's... a sensitive subject."

At that, he got Snape's attention. He looked up at Ichigo and sighed as he sat the vial down. "Well, go on then."

"Tell me, professor, what you know about horcruxes?"

Snape's eyes narrowed instantly. "Such a dark topic for such an ordinary day."

"As you know, Arthur Weasley was attacked recently and the Order believes Nagini is involved. Dumbledore mentioned Horcruxes, but he wasn't able to go into much detail. That's why I came here. I was hoping you could tell me."

Snape stared at him for several moments before he relented. "Very well. A horcrux is... in simple terms, a way to cheat death."

Ichigo's brows furrowed. "Cheat death? Like the sorcerer's stone?"

"Much darker than that, Kurosaki. You're familiar with the soul, aren't you, Grim Reaper?"

Ichigo nodded, almost offended. "Of course."

"A horcrux is the result of someone splitting their soul and inhabiting a piece of it in something earthbound. That way, when they die, their soul can live on through that piece."

"But... how could a mortal, even a wizard, split their own soul? That sounds -"

Hollow.

"Horcruxes are dark magic, very dark, and it requires dark energy to perform. In the end, it's just another cycle, if you think about it. To give life, you must take it."

"Murder?"

"Precisely."

"But, heaven help me, murder is something that can be done more than once... does that mean..?"

Snape nodded. "In theory, yes, more than one horcrux could be made from one soul. Although, there's not much information about them available, as you could imagine."

"Severing one's soul... chopping it up into pieces..." Images flash in Ichigo's mind of hollows, of hunger and decay, of decimation. "Surely that has effects."

"It does. Many claim that horcruxes widdle away their creator's humanity. Its effects are visible not only on their soul, but their physical body as well."

"Thank you professor, that- um, that helps a lot... If you'll excuse me." Ichigo stepped out of the room, his breath rapid and forceful. Gathering his wits, he left for his chambers.

He needed to think.

A Whole New World, Part One

Chapter 11

A Whole New World, Part One

It's both burning hot and freezing cold when Ichigo's body becomes aware.

He feels exhausted, impossibly drained as if someone sucked his soul out with a bendy straw. It takes him hours to find both the strength and the motivation to get up. He only makes it to sitting before his thoughts lose focus and he forgets what he's doing.

Looking to his left, Ichigo sees Zangetsu laying a few yards away from him in his bankai state, the chain on the end tangled in knots. Something about the sight confuses him, but he can't figure out why. He's covered in a layer of sweat and grime that feels like it'll take years to completely wash off. Maybe it will.

The thick woods that surround him create a cacophony of buzzing and trills that make it even more difficult to think.

So he sits. He sits and sits and sits until the sun that he just now notices sets. The first worthwhile thought since regaining consciousness passes through his mind. Once it's dark, he won't be able to find his way out of wherever he is.

That's what finally breaks him out of his trance. He pushes himself to his feet and wanders over to where Zangetsu lies. He picks the weapon up to put it away, but he's wearing a tee-shirt and jeans. That's when his confusion from earlier clicks into place.

He's not wearing his shihakusho, so he's in his body. If he's in his body, then why does he have his zanpakuto? Did he glitch out? Maybe if he left his body, he could reset himself? He grabs his shinigami badge from his pocket and presses it against his chest.

Nothing happens. He panics and tries again and again, still, nothing happens. If, for whatever reason, his badge isn't working, then he'll have to find Urahara or Rukia. Rukia... And then he remembers.

Oh, he *remembers* .

Images of a broken Karakura town flood his mind, his comrades - his father - broken down and bloody. He remembers Aizen, hunting his friends down like rats in a maze. He remembers the ultimate Getsuga, he remembers Mugetsu... but that's as far as his memories go.

Ichigo reaches his free hand up to feel his hair. It's no longer long, and he doubts that it's black anymore. He knows that regardless of whatever happened while he was unconscious, the battle is over. The air around him is too still, his being too quiet. Which side was victorious, though, remains to be seen.

Ichigo has no idea where he is, but he hopes it's Karakura town. Since he can't leave his body, he's stuck walking until further notice. Surrounded by trees, he has no idea which direction will lead him back to town. Ichigo decides to follow the direction of the sunset in both a fruitless attempt to preserve as much light as possible and as well as to keep himself from going in circles.

Thankfully, the trees break and he finds a dirt road before the last light of the day vanishes completely. As he walks, the chill of the night air makes him wish he was wearing a jacket before he left to save Orihime. That's the last time he remembers being in his body.

The light from the moon is the only guide Ichigo has while he follows the path. That's how he knows that he's not even in Japan anymore. There's almost always some form of light pollution. But if he's not in Japan, then where is he, and more importantly, how can he get back to his family?

Ichigo's legs and feet are burning by the time he sees a warm glow in the distance. As he gets nearer, he sees that it's a torch, two torches. There's a tall wooden fence with an open archway as an entrance. There's no sign saying he shouldn't, so he continues to follow the path inside.

It isn't long before Ichigo happens upon a small and decrepit wooden hut. The stones on the roof look as though they'll cause it to collapse in on itself. The look of it is definitely Japanese, but it's severely outdated. Then it hits him.

He must be in the Rukongai. He has to be, there really isn't another way to explain where he is. That could also be why Zangetsu - cold, silent - is held in his right hand. It doesn't explain why he's still in his body, or why he can't sense anyone, but it's the most logical explanation. And it's all he has to work with at the moment.

Even though he desperately wants to rest, he decides to keep moving. The hut doesn't look very safe, ready to cave in at any moment. Ichigo hopes to find a town, maybe even an inn before he stops. He doesn't think the few hundred yen in his pocket will get him anywhere in the Soul Society, but he's hoping that his shinigami status will.

It'll have to, it's all he has.

More lights appear in the distance. A weight Ichigo didn't realize was there lifts off his chest. Before he knows it, he's surrounded by multiple huts that increase in quality and number the farther he goes. He hears a shout and his eyes land on the form of a far-off person, a man, based on his stature and voice.

Ichigo couldn't make out what he said, but he doesn't care in the slightest. After being alone for hours with no knowledge of his friends or family, he's physically ravenous for social interaction of any kind.

They advance towards each other. The man isn't wearing the familiar black kimono, but Ichigo knows that he could still be a shinigami. He's hoping he is. He's dressed in a dark maroon kimono covered in brown padding on the chest, arms, and thighs. Some form of

samurai then, based on the katana on his hip. The man's face is serious. As his eyes land on Zangetsu, he grabs the hilt of his own blade.

He speaks, a command most likely, his voice firm. Ichigo knows, he *knows* that his man is speaking Japanese, but for the life of him, he has no idea what the man's saying. Ichigo wonders if, like everything else around him, they speak an outdated form of Japanese here as well.

The man is still eyeing Zangetsu, so he must see Ichigo as a threat. Ichigo doesn't know if his powers will work while he's still in his body, nor does he have the mental or physical capacity for a fight. He feels like he's about to kill over just thinking about putting forth the effort. Instead, he lifts both of his hands up as slowly as possible while bowing forward. "I'm sorry," Ichigo says, trying to keep his words simple. "I'm lost."

With his head down, Ichigo can't tell what the other man's thinking. There's a tsk and a sigh, and then he speaks. "Come."

That's something that Ichigo can do. He cautiously lifts his head to look, but the samurai has already turned around and is walking back in the direction he came. He is either very naive or he no longer sees Ichigo as a threat for him to expose his back like this.

As they walk, the dirt path turns into a road and the huts turn into a village. At its center is a large home, a mansion compared to the wooden buildings surrounding it. The blood-red of the roof shingles is vibrant even in the dead of night. As they get closer, Ichigo sees more samurai guarding the entrance to the home's gardens.

The man guiding him speaks to the others in hushed tones. They step aside to let him and Ichigo pass. The manor has a private garden complete with a koi pond and stream. Inside the home, Ichigo's guided through many hallways before he's brought to a large gathering room. There are a few more samurai sitting off to the side.

Ichigo's eyes are drawn to the figure sitting at the head of the room. Despite the early hour of the morning, he's dressed in fine red silks, and the top half of his long brown hair is gently pulled back by a golden pin, not a strand out of place. His eyes are closed, but they open when the two of them enter, revealing sharp green eyes. They remind him of Ulquiorra. He can't help but shudder at the memory of their fight.

He's none-to-gently coerced into sitting before the figure. Ichigo's never been one for formalities, but he has no idea where he's at. All he knows is that the man before him is some form of a Lord, and he doesn't feel like getting his head cut off today, thank you very much.

The lord's face is just as stoic as one would imagine. He speaks first, but Ichigo's only able to make out bits and pieces. "Who... land...?"

He's asking for a name. There's only one person Ichigo knows whose name would carry any sort of weight if he were in the soul society. "Kuchiki Byakuya..."

If the name means anything to the Lord, he doesn't show it. "Your name?"

"Kurosaki Ichigo?"

The lord nods. His gaze falls on Zangetsu. "... Katana?"

"It's for protection," Ichigo answers, hoping that carrying a weapon isn't against some form of law here.

Apparently, the Lord can't understand Ichigo very well either. His mouth downturns a minuscule amount. One of the samurai, a retainer most likely, says something about being a foreigner. He's pretty sure there's an insult in there somewhere.

"Yes," Ichigo says. It's the best backstory he has at the moment. It explains his strange clothes, why he can't speak this Japanese well, and why he has no idea where he is.

"Good?" The Lord asks, nodding towards his blade.

Ichigo nods. "Very good."

He thinks for a moment, rubbing his chin. "Work?"

Work? For the lord? Ichigo doesn't know anything about this man. He could be a tyrant for all Ichigo knew, another Central 46 in the making. Plus he still has no idea what's going on. The lord doesn't seem to recognize Byakuya's name, so it's unlikely he's in the Soul Society... but if he's not there, then where else could he be?

"No, thank you." Ichigo bows, head to the floor. He's not above begging right now. "I need sleep and food."

"Yes, rest... my guest."

Thank you...?"

"Kawahara Akihiko."

"Thank you, Kawahara-sama." Byakuya would caulk at hearing him using such formalities if the Kuchiki head was capable of such a facial expression.

The lord waves his hand, a universal dismissal to everyone in the room. The same man that led him here leads him back out of the room. He catches the arm of a passing servant. They exchange words before Ichigo is passed off to her instead. She shows him to a small but tasteful room.

She says something to him and then bows, leaving the room, but Ichigo barely notices. Physically and emotionally drained, Ichigo's eyes are stuck on the futon laying in the center of the room. The servant returns, a change of clothes in her arm. Once she leaves Ichigo wastes no time donning the white robes. With

care, he places Zangetsu on the floor next to him and crawls under the blanket. He had hoped that by now Zangetsu, or hell, even his hollow, would have spoken up by now, but both are silent.

Ichigo can't help but feel that he's utterly alone in this foreign and strange place.

The next few days pass by in slow motion. Barely able to communicate and with no knowledge of where he is, he spends most of his time in the gardens. Occasional servants attend to him, bringing him food and fresh clothes. His hands are restless and he cannot truly relax, even though it's the first time in years that he doesn't have an enemy breaking down his front door. He can't stop thinking about his friends and family and he hates this inactivity, but even someone as oblivious as him knows that leaving this safe haven when he has nothing to his name is foolish.

He's been at the manor for almost a week when the gardens' peace is disturbed for the first time. A few samurai are practicing with wooden katanas. Ichigo remembers them as some of Kawahara's retainers. They're running simple drills. It makes Ichigo realize that he's never been taught the basics of sword fighting, he's just run purely on instinct to get this far. And now that he has time to think, he also realizes that he's a child soldier, thrown into a war that was never his to begin with; used when convenient and abandoned when convenient. If Soul Society had truly cared for him, then perhaps they would've taken the time to train him when it wasn't a life-or-death battle.

One of the retainers notices him and stops what he's doing. He says something to the others and then makes his way over to Ichigo. Ichigo's back straightens and his eyes harden. The retainer must notice, for his own posture relaxes and he smiles slightly.

"Kurosaki, yes?"

Ichigo answers, "Yes... and your name?"

"Ah, Tanaka Kyosuke. You want to join us?" Tanaka asks, gesturing towards Zangetsu, who is propped up against his shoulder. Thankfully, as more time passes, he understands more and more of the historic Japanese being spoken around him.

Ichigo's nodding before he has finished processing the question. He grabs his zanpakuto's hilt and stands up. Tanaka's smile widens. "Good to have you, Kurosaki. "Good to have you, Kurosaki."

"Just Ichigo is fine."

Tanaka pats him on the back as they reach the others. "Then Kyosuke is fine as well."

The other retainers are surprisingly friendly as they welcome him to their practice group. Ichigo takes the same stance as they do. Kyosuke is not shy about wacking his right foot farther out. It's for better balance, he tells him. They practice simple forward swings.

Perhaps... Here, with nothing else to do... Ichigo can focus on himself for a change.

A Whole New World, Part Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 12

A Whole New World, Part Two

Ichigo realizes for certain that he's not in the Soul Society when he meets his first spirit.

She's young, or, was young, when she passed. Only eight or nine years, it looks like. She looks familiar, but Ichigo can't quite put his finger on it. He first spots her while helping a servant carry a basket of linens twice her size. She's standing on the edge of the property, underneath one of Ichigo's favorite cherry blossom trees, brown hair an extension of the branches. At first, he pays her no more than a passing glance, simply a child of one of the many workers here.

He sees her again a few days later, in the same floral purple kimono, in the same spot. She hasn't moved, her gaze still fixed on the manor. She doesn't react when Ichigo and the other retainers start their drills. Ichigo finds himself sore more often than not, the repetitive motions tugging on muscles he didn't even know he had. He can't keep his eyes from drifting to the little girl, and Kyosuke makes him pay dearly for it, repeatedly smacking the back of his head with his wooden katana.

At the end of the practice, Kyosuke asks him what has him so distracted.

"That girl over there... who is she?"

Kyosuke frowns and looks over to where Ichigo is gesturing. He turns back around and smiles, "Ah, Ichigo, I think you might have mixed your words up again. There is no girl over there."

His friend pats him on the back as he heads inside, leaving Ichigo to wonder about the mystery girl under the cherry blossom tree.

The next day comes a storm so savage that servants are running around securing doors and windows, lighting lanterns, and heating towels. The panels and walls rattle, the ground shakes from the force of the thunder. Ichigo helps where he can, secures items that others are too short to reach, and passes out blankets and the warmed towels.

He kneels before Kawahara's room, knocking on the screen door. A soft 'enter' comes from inside, and Ichigo slides the door open, head bowed.

"Kawahara-sama, I have some extra blankets."

"Ah, Kurosaki, please come in."

Ichigo lifts his head, looking into the lord's room for the first time. It's twice the size of his own, but not so large as to look exuberant. There's a large bed, some bookshelves, as well as

a table where Kawahara is currently sitting. He's likely looking over taxes or correspondences from other lords. He puts down his brush on the inkstone as Ichigo enters.

"I haven't had any of my guests bring me towels before," he says, laughing softly. "I apologize for my lack of presence about the house, but you know how things can be. I hope the staff have been accommodating to you the past few weeks?"

Ichigo sets the blankets next to the bed and nods. "Yes, they've been very hospitable."

"That's good..." Kawahara falls silent for a few moments. "I've heard that you've been practicing with the other swordsmen. They seem to have become quite fond of you in the past few weeks. I'd like to extend you another offer of employment, since it seems the workers have put you to work anyhow."

Heat rises to Ichigo's face and he scratches the back of his neck sheepishly. "It's no trouble at all, I am staying here rent-free... could I have some time to think about it?"

Kawahara nods, "Of course. Take all the time you need."

Ichigo bows and leaves the room, sliding the door shut behind him. There's a loud crash outside and his hand instantly goes to Zangetsu, only to find empty space. That's right, he left him in his room. Ichigo takes a deep breath. It's probably just nearby lightning. He's been in this strange world for three weeks, and he has yet to see anything even remotely resembling a hollow. Unlatching a nearby door, Ichigo heads outside.

The rain is pelting sideways, the heavy raindrops hitting the side of the home with large snaps each time. Shielding his eyes, Ichigo looks around, but even then he can barely make out the garden. Resigning himself, he takes a deep breath before he steps out from under the cover of the roof.

Just like needles, the raindrops are cold and biting where they hit his skin. The strong winds yank on his own clothing, making it difficult to walk. It reminds him of a storm he and his sisters had braved while Isshin picked up a shift at the hospital. They rode it out by making a tent out of the couch in the living room, watching movies and eating popcorn till they fell asleep. Once Isshin came home, he scooped each of his children up and tucked them into bed. Ichigo had only been eleven or twelve then, but even now, he still aches for his sisters' comfort in a storm like this.

Ichigo's foot catches on a twig. He looks down to see it's not a twig, but a whole branch, attached to a limb, attached to half of his favorite cherry blossom tree, which had been split by lightning. The wood is still sizzling. It probably caught fire but was instantly doused by the downpour. Looking at the blossoms, he thinks of a familiar purple kimono.

Looking around the other side of the tree, he finds her in her usual spot, unfazed by the destruction beside her.

"What are you doing out here? You're going to get hurt!" he practically screams over the booming weather around them. If she can hear him, or even notice him, he can't tell. He

grabs her wrist and starts pulling her towards the house. She tugs on his hand, but he doesn't let go until they're inside, door sealed shut behind them.

Ichigo's thoroughly soaked and he's quickly creating a puddle in the middle of the hallway. He walks to a nearby linen closet and pulls out a few towels. When he comes back, the girl is still where he left her, but now her steely green eyes are focused on him. Ignoring her for the moment, Ichigo covers himself with a towel and drops another at his feet, rubbing it around with his foot in a poor attempt of drying it. Taking the last one, he begins drying the girl's hair.

Neither of them speak, but Ichigo doesn't mind the silence. Rain and thunder continue to cascade outside and with every lightning strike, Ichigo and his new companion are silhouetted in light, even through the screens. He finishes her hair, and then begins to dry his own, making short work of it. Both of their clothes are still soaked through, however, so they haven't made too much progress. He begins to walk towards his room and she follows soundlessly behind him,

Ichigo is well versed in tending to grumpy, angsty children. If Karin and Toshiro come to mind, well... he has no control over that. Once inside his room, Ichigo's eyes immediately seek out Zangetsu. Mounted on a katana display above his bed, he looks like just another blade. Even though the other pieces of his soul have remained silent, he still clings to the cold steel. If he couldn't do that, then the entirety of his life until the last month would be nothing more than a fever dream. All of his battles and pain, nothing more than nightmares he's made into reality.

But with Zangetsu, he's grounded. He has physical proof that he's not crazy. He has family and friends that are depending on him, waiting for him somewhere.

Ichigo just needs to find them.

"We don't really have any clothes for kids around here, at least, not that I've seen... So... I think my old t-shirt might fit you, well... cover you at least. I'll have to find it, it's buried around here somewhere..."

He does find it, tucked away in his closet. He kneels next to the girl and starts helping her untie the strings of her kimono, but the rain has acted like glue, melding the fabric together impossibly tight. It's slow work, Ichigo's hands are too large for such an intricate task, but he pushes on. After getting them undone, he helps her step out of the heavy, sodden fabric and into his shirt.

In this room — on her — the grey band t-shirt looks sorely out of place. He's never even listened to one of their songs, but Isshin had gotten it for him for his birthday because it was one of those "*hip* music groups that teenagers listen to these days." So, Ichigo wore it anyway. And now he's glad that he did.

Ichigo stands up to get his own change of clothes, but a small hand on his sleeve stops him.

"Thank you."

He assumes she's talking about the rain and change of clothes, but when she starts crying, he knows it's about something else.

They're loud, wailing sobs. The kind that gets stuck in your throat, that clogs your sinuses and fills your lungs. Snot is running out her nose, spit sliding down her chin. He's seen these kinds of tears before, with Orihime, his father, his sisters, and with himself. It's grief, so strong and unyielding that it tears you asunder.

So, he sits on the floor and waits.

And waits.

And waits.

It's almost an hour later before she finally begins to calm down. Hiccups become sniffles and although she's still crying, it's subdued and mostly silent.

She sits down on the floor too. "You're the first person that's talked to me in months."

It all finally clicks into place. Why she always stands in the same spot, even when it's struck by lightning; she ignores everyone and everything around her because *they ignore her*. Kyosuke thought he had mixed up his words because — to the retainer — there was no girl by the tree, there never was.

This little girl sobbed because she's grieving the loss of her own life, one she probably doesn't even realize she's lost yet. And with those realizations comes another, perhaps the most important.

If this girl is a ghost, and the others can't see her, then that means that everyone else is alive. They're human. And that means he has to be in the Living World, there's no doubt.

This creates more questions than answers. If he's in the Living World, that means they won, right? But that still doesn't explain why he has Zangetsu or why his badge doesn't work. It still doesn't explain the strange time he's found himself in, or why he still can't find anyone he knows or anyone that knows him. And, perhaps the biggest question of all, one Ichigo has been avoiding asking.

Why has no one come to look for him?

If their side has won, why hasn't anyone tried to find him? It's been weeks. Sure, Soul Society needs to regroup and rebuild after such a devastating battle, but three weeks? They went after Orihime in less than a day. Perhaps, now that he's played his part, he's won their battle, they no longer need him. And if not soul society, then his father? His sisters? Nothing about what's happened makes sense.

But right now, there's a crying little girl in front of him who needs help.

He pulls her into an embrace, ignoring that he's still sopping wet and that he just ruined all his work in drying her off. She falls into it easily, as any lonely child would. Her fists clench

the fabric of his kimono, and her grip around his neck is punishing, or would be, if she wasn't so overwhelmingly small. The young ghosts are always the hardest to send on their way.

"What's your name?"

"H-hana."

He smiles, "Just like your kimono and our favorite tree?"

She pulls away from him and nods, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "Yeah. I used to have a swing there, but right after everyone stopped talking to me, Father took it down... They must hate me."

"Hana, do you know why no one talks to you, other than me?"

She snuffles and shakes her head. "No, but I must've done something terrible."

Ichigo ignores the way his heart stings, "Nothing you did could ever be terrible enough that your family would abandon you. C'mon, I think I know who your dad is. Let's go talk to him."

Her eyes light up as he stands up and she follows behind him through the house.

Before he knocks on his door, he leans toward her. "Hana, your father can't hear or see you, but remember that I can, ok?"

She hesitantly nods, so Ichigo knocks on the door.

"Come in."

Ichigo opens the door, letting Hana enter before shutting it behind him.

"Ah, Kurosaki, back so soon — oh, you're sopping wet."

"Apologies Kawahara-sama, I went outside to check on a loud noise. The cherry blossom tree by the pond has fallen, struck by lightning I'm afraid." Ichigo explains.

The lord's face visibly falls. He's still at the table working, only being an hour since they last spoke. "Oh. How upsetting... is that what you came to speak about? Or have you come to accept my offer?"

Ichigo sits a respectable distance away, Hana to his right. "Actually, I was wondering if you had any children, or if you were married? You already seem to have a lot of retainers, and I'm curious why you would need more? Unless, of course, you have a family that's traveling at the moment that I just haven't met."

"Just myself, I'm sorry to say," Kawahara admits, his tone wistful. "I did have a wife, and she was with child. She died during labor, but at least she was able to bring our beautiful daughter into the world. My girl, Hana, was always a sickly one when she was younger. She seemed to grow out of it with age but... during the winter she caught a terrible fever and

never recovered. It's still only a few months yet, and I can still barely bring myself to leave my rooms. Everytime I do, I'm reminded of her. That tree you just mentioned, it was her favorite. She used to climb it, and we even put a swing on it, but after she passed..."

He sighs, "I just couldn't bring myself to look at it anymore, so I made the staff take it down, I couldn't bear to look at it any longer. It's sad news that the tree has fallen, and yet, a part of me rejoices in that there isn't a reminder outside the windows everyday... I've tried to distance myself from her... how cruel of a man you must think me to be, that would banish the memory of his only daughter."

"I think you're a grieving father. Thank you for telling your story to me, you did not have to."

Ichigo takes a moment to look over to Hana. She's staring, wide-eyed at her father. Such a horrible thing... the expression on her face. He can't let the story end like this.

"Actually, Kawahara-sama, I have a confession to make."

The lord raises an eyebrow, but does not say anything, so Ichigo continues.

"I've... always had a sensitivity to spiritual matters. I've seen your daughter since I've been here. At first... I thought she might've been related to staff, but hearing your story now, I can say for certain that it's her soul I've seen. I see her now, in fact, here, with us. You may not believe me, but she has something she'd like to say to you."

Hana takes the opportunity as what it is. She stands up and walks around the desk in order to sit next to her father. She holds one of his hands and although Ichigo knows that he can't see or hear her, he also knows that Kawahara can sense her the way he breaks eye contact to look at his hand. Hana tells Ichigo her message, and he relays it.

"She forgives you, and she asks you to forgive her for leaving you alone. She... she wishes that she could've been stronger."

Ichigo knows it's a delicate and intimate moment, here, now, in this room, so he turns his back. He pretends to not hear the emotions behind him. He does not offer condolences, nor try to be reassuring, for either of them.

This is not his experience to interfere with.

Eventually, Hana walks into his line of sight. "What do I do now?"

Ichigo stands. He bids the father next to him a respectful 'goodnight' before he leaves the room, Hana once again at his side. They head back to his room. Inside, Ichigo crosses to his bed and picks up Zangetsu.

"It's time for you to move on."

She looks at him timidly. "Move on where?"

“I’m not sure anymore,” Ichigo admits. “But if it’s like I remember, then it’ll be somewhere you’ll be seen and heard... and you’ll get to pick a new family.”

He looks at the hilt, and the seal is still there. He doesn’t even know if it will still work, but it’s worth a try.

The shinigami presses his zanpakuto to her forehead.

Her skin begins to glow.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Preview Next Chapter;

Ichigo realizes for certain that his entire world has slipped from his fingers when he meets Death.

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