

The Longest Shadow

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The Longest Shadow

by [junko](#)

Summary

After his little spat with Byakuya, Renji comes to an uncomfortable epiphany....

Notes

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

When their Third Seat, Nanako, saw Renji stumbling into the lieutenant's office, she flashed him a kind of grimacing smile: "It took you that long to get from the gate? How drunk are you?"

"Pretty fucking drunk," Renji admitted, lowering himself carefully into the rolling office chair. Truth was, the little snarl he'd at Byakuya had sobered him up quite a bit. Adrenaline did that to him--probably due to all those years in service at the Eleventh. He let out a little sigh, and said, "I don't understand nobles. You're the Kuchiki liaison, right? Explain them to me."

She was seated at her desk, which, since she took over from the previous Third, had become a lot more cluttered. Despite the mess, Renji found her to be a lot more organized than their last one ever was. Maybe that previous guy had been too busy being a spy for auntie Massey to focus on actual work.

Nanako steepled her fingers and tapped the tips against her lips. "I take it I don't have to brief you on the situation?"

Renji found Thunder Goat's resignation/transfer request and held it up to show her, "Nope." And then, for good measure added, "I know all about the theater fire, too."

"So....," she asked cautiously, "What do you want to know?"

"Like, what the fuck. Yeah," he nodded, "That's what I want to know: the fuck, man?"

She watched him as he dug around in his desk drawer for the lieutenant's inkan, the signature stamp, and the little red ink blotter that went with it. After a long moment, she said seriously, "Clan wars are brutal, Renji. Always. Didn't you ever get caught in the crossfire of one out in the Rukongai?"

"In Inuzuri?" He laughed at the preposterousness of the idea. Then, he sobered, as it occurred to him that there was something similar, in its way. "Yeah, but we did have to duck and cover a lot when the yakuza went at it. So.... you saying noble clan heads are like glorified yakuza bosses? And this clan war is like a turf war?"

She looked like she was trying to deny it, but Renji nodded vigorously. In fact, he couldn't believe why the connection had never hit him before now.

"Okay, okay, I get it now," Renji said. "Byakuya's like the big boss man, so he's got to be a shit to keep on top of the pile."

"Um... I wouldn't exactly say it like that," Nanako said, but Renji noticed she didn't offer a better way.

Unlocking the inkan from its box took several tries with clumsy fingers, but soon enough Renji had it laid out on the desk. The tiny rectangle of marble was his proudest possession and it wasn't even his. Unlike Byakuya's which was ornate, complex and individual, Renji's really didn't signify himself so much as his office. Still, it was the finest thing he could claim

ownership of outside of Zabimaru--which he didn't really possess, as such either. Both were just borrowed, both an honor bestowed upon him.

Damn sssstraight, the Snake Tail hissed.

The Baboon King merely grunted in agreement sleepily.

Renji set about signing the transfer papers and then started other paperwork piled on his desk. All the while he thought about how stupid nobles were, because--fuck it, even if he'd finally found a proper analogy, the yakuza were stupid, too. They owned everything, they demanded respect without doing anything to earn it, and they bullied and killed people for no good reason. Their wars were all about posturing and proving who was the most brutal and bloodthirsty.

Well, wasn't that just fucking lovely.

But on the other hand, it did help Renji make a weird kind of peace with Byakuya's actions. To seize all those properties seemed like overkill and the dumbest possible way to achieve any kind of 'real' peace. But, if that wasn't the point--if the point of it was to make a big-ass show of power, well then, yeah, job well done.

It still irritated Renji that Byakuya hadn't bothered to even give him a warning about the fire this morning though. What if the Captain-Commander had wanted to know about the clan war?

But, when Renji thought about it in terms of 'what would a yakuza boss do?'--even that asinine move made sense: plausible deniability.

Fuck, he'd basically been dating a yakuza boss for the last almost-year.

"You okay, Renji?" Nanako asked, coming over to perch on the edge of his desk. "You look kind of forlorn."

"'Forlorn,' I don't even know what that is," Renji joked. He rubbed his face, banishing his mood, and then began to stack the papers into an orderly pile.

She gave him a little side-eyed look and said, "Yeah, you do, Mr. Top-of-His-Class." When he shrugged in response, she asked, "Is this clan war stuff really getting to you?"

Renji set the papers aside. Cleaning off the inkan with his sleeve, he considered her question. "You know, I really fucking hated the yakuza. Rukia was the one who could tolerate them guys. She knew how to play the petty ones off each other and negotiate her way through all those crazy mind games you had to play." Carefully, he put the carved stone away in its box and locked it up and returned the key to the little slot hidden in the underside of his desk drawer. A few of the upper level seated officers knew where the key was 'hidden,' but having a hidey-hole was a procedural precaution--required by regulation. "I dunno," Renji said once everything was stowed in its proper place, "It's just another one of those things that I suck at when it comes to him." Renji jerked his chin in the direction of the estate, as if Nanako couldn't guess who 'him' might be. "And there's already so many."

Nanako laughed a little, kindly. "Are you really surprised? I mean, you two... you're not even cut of the same cloth--not even close."

Renji let out a sigh.

And was promptly horrified by how much his breath smelled of soured sake. He waved a hand in the air to try to clear away the stench of himself. "Yeah, I know. It's just... soldiering, right? It's the one thing we have. Now I come to find out he's got this whole other side to him in the field...?" Renji let this train of thought go with a little shake of his head. He wasn't even sure how to articulate this strange sense of loss he had, why he suddenly felt like some part of Byakuya was forever out of reach...and growing ever distant, because, for the first time, Renji didn't want to scramble after. In fact, this clan war/yakuza stuff was a part of Byakuya's life Renji actively wanted to turn away from.

And that was a first.

"Eh, I'm probably making too big of a deal out of it. It really isn't something I need to stick my nose into, anyway. In fact, it seems pretty clear Byakuya wants the Division way out of it." Renji frowned at his desk blotter for a long time, scowling at the doodles and notes he'd scribbled on it over the years. "How the fuck did they deal when it was Kuchiki all the way down?"

"You mean, when the captain and lieutenant were both Kuchiki?" Nanako played with the ink brushes in the tin can at the edge of Renji's desk, organizing them loosely by color of the stem.

"Yeah," Renji said. "Or is this the first clan war in ages?"

Nanako shrugged. "I'd be surprised if it was, but I think that usually the Kuchiki have political in-fighting instead of out-and-out bloodletting. Wasn't the last big kerfuffle over the captain's marriage?"

Renji crossed his arms in front of his chest and tipped his head back. The chair creaked as the springs shifted. "Yeah, I suppose. And I suppose that's part of why the captain is being such a dick about this clan war. Probably he's got to prove something, you know, to all the haters who felt justified ganging up on him or something. Because from what I can tell, I think they used that marriage to leverage so much out of the captain over the years, he's got to come on strong or lose all respect... maybe? Eh, I ain't sober enough to make excuses for all this crap."

Pushing himself up out of the chair, Renji let out a big yawn.

"I'm going to go sleep it off for a few hours," Renji said. "I'm expecting my brother to show up at the gate with another punk from the Eleventh around dinner time. Tell the guards it's okay to wake me. Hell, it's okay wake me if anything comes up."

Nanako stood up when he did, and now she gave a smart bow.

Renji headed for the main door, moving down the hall to the break room. Seeing a pot on, he stopped in to help himself to a cup of tea. He pulled down his favorite mug from the cabinet and filled it up. The room was unusually empty, and Renji stopped to look out the window and enjoy the sun on his face.

And, by chance, caught sight of Byakuya coming out of his office. Byakuya stood at the railings' edge and scanned the practice yard, as if looking for someone. It was strange to see Byakuya in a plain uniform, like any other soldier, and his ragged hair still bare of the kenseikan. He looked so much younger... and less imposing... and a little... sad?

Renji hated that they'd fought, even though, as their fights went, it wasn't much more than a little spat. Part of him wanted to rush outside and run up those stairs and apologize or do anything that would make Byakuya's expression look less alone and... heh, 'forlorn,' maybe.

But, he didn't. He leaned against the wall and sipped his tea.

"Keep your fucking turf war," Renji muttered to Byakuya through the window. He hated how much this revelation about the similarities between a yakuza and clan made him feel like Byakuya was nothing more than a big bully with a chip on his shoulder. He hated how easy it was to recount other times Byakuya had acted just like one of them--all the taking without asking, the privilege, the desperate need to be the tough one, to be given all the respect.

But Renji especially hated how, all of a sudden, it seemed like a choice.

All this time Renji had been willing to roll with so much bullshit because he'd believed Byakuya wasn't like anyone he'd ever known before. That so much of it wasn't Byakuya's fault that he'd been raised with certain expectations, restrictions--cultural differences Renji couldn't hope to ever understand.

All of that was still true for many things, but... well, fuck. Here was something Renji did understand. Something he'd watched played out a thousand different times, a thousand different ways.

And most of them were bullshit.

Up on the double loggia, Byakuya turned and headed along the walkway, in the direction of the estate. Renji watched him go, as he finished his tea. Washing out the mug, he set it in the dish drainer. Drying his hands on the nearby towel, Renji looked at the callouses on his palms and all the various nicks and scars and thought about all the blood he'd spilled.

He'd done some pretty shitty things for Aizen... hell, for all of the Gotei. But, that was all stuff he'd done under orders. And he'd do it again, too, not because it was right, but because saying 'no' would only have meant that someone else--someone smaller or weaker--would've had to take his place.

That was the difference, wasn't it? Between them.

Who was Byakuya protecting with the clan war? It sure as shit wasn't the little people.

And, that was going to piss Renji off for awhile. Good thing Seichi and Fuzz were coming because Renji really need to pound this feeling out of his system, because there was no point in fighting with Byakuya over this shit.

Before heading to his own bed, Renji stopped by the captain's quarters. Byakuya hadn't been sleeping here for months, but Renji knocked before entering anyway. He wanted to hang up the haori properly and he knew Byakuya had a peg especially for it. Sliding the door open cautiously, Renji poked his head in. Even though the room was empty, Renji still felt like an interloper, so he tiptoed into the darkened room like a thief.

Despite being unused, Byakuya's scent still permeated the space. Memories flooded Renji's brain at the smell of it. He was particularly struck by it all when he reached around the little dressing table to put the haori in its place. Renji remembered his first time in this room, standing in front of this mirror, so attracted to Byakuya and so unsure what to do while struggling to help Byakuya out of his kenseikan.

He couldn't pretend those were simpler times, though.

Hanging up the haori, his eyes lingered on the empty spot where the lacquered box that used to hold the kenseikan had been. Renji glanced around, looking for other reminders of the night he'd destroyed this place, but the plaster had all been smoothed over, the walls repainted, and furniture and artwork replaced.

Suddenly, getting all the way to his own room seemed too difficult, and so Renji went over to the low bed and crawled under the covers on his side of the bed.

It smelled right and felt familiar, and Renji was out in a second.

#

But Renji didn't sleep well. With all the thoughts about yakuza, his dreams drifted him back to Inuzuri, to raised voices and raised fists, and being chased for no other reason than some thug wanting to see him run.

Piled on that was this room with all its memories and Renji jerked himself awake screaming for Byakuya to stop, begging to let him take Katsuo's place... or maybe Seichi's... or Zabimaru's... or Rukia's....

His heart pounded as alcohol-scented sweat dripped from his pores. Clutching the sheets in shaking fists, Renji was certainly sober now. In fact, he was pretty sure he was going to throw up.

He scrambled, barely making it to the chamberpot in time. There he heaved and heaved and heaved, expelling... everything. The tears, he told himself, were impossible to control, a reflex related to puking, but he sat on the floor with tears dripping down his nose long after he had anything left in his stomach.

"Fuck, man, get ahold of yourself," he muttered. It was the tiniest damn fight. Why the fuck was it hitting him so hard? Maybe it was because Renji could never seem to leave Inuzuri

behind, no matter how hard he tried. It always seemed to be lurking there, its long shadow somehow reaching up finding ways to touch him, despite the distance and the time. Maybe this connection between Byakuya and the gangsters he used to know shouldn't be that big of a deal, but it was like some kind of ghost--a shade of that long, inescapable shadow, drifting just a little too close to the surface, freaking him out, making his stomach clench and unclench like he was some scared little pup again.

Pulling himself to his feet, Renji decided the best way to work this out was the traditional way: throw himself into training until he couldn't think straight anymore.

#

Fuzz and Seichi showed up about an hour into it. The dojo was crowded, the weather having kept most people from the windy practice yard. Renji had spent some time stretching out Zabimaru in the empty yard, but finally even his iron skin couldn't take the chill. So he'd headed indoors and joined a group of others going through various sword forms.

Of course, it didn't take long before someone asked him to lead them in a more complicated form. He was halfway through when he saw Richiki waving from the dojo's doorway.

Telling everyone to take a quick break and practice what they'd already been over, Renji went over to where Richiki, Fuzz, and Seichi waited.

"These guys said..." Richiki started.

Renji waved off the rest of the explanation, "Yeah, it's okay, Richiki. I said they could come here."

Richiki looked over at the two Eleventh Division soldiers and his nose unconsciously crinkled in... jealousy? Disgust? Renji had to admit that Seichi and Fuzz couldn't look more ragged and out of place. Their stained and rumpled uniforms stood out in contrast to the meticulous dress code of the Sixth.

Dojo etiquette wasn't really stressed at the Eleventh, so Renji grabbed Richiki before he could take off. "Oi, can you teach these two how to bow in and stuff?" Richiki looked a little taken aback so Renji quickly added, "It'd be a big favor to me. I'll be over to take care of them in a minute, but I can't leave the guys hanging with only half a form, you know?"

"Yeah, okay, Renji," Richiki said though he still looked a little dubious.

"Look, we're going to need a fourth," Renji noted. "You could join our little private lesson, if you want."

"Oh!" Richiki looked excited finally. "Yes! I'd love that! Thanks!"

Renji gave him a companionable pat on the shoulder, and went back to the demonstration. It took a little longer than Renji would have wanted, given that he had to stop and help a couple of soldiers who struggled with the mechanics of a 'tornado-kick.' But, when he turned back,

he was pleased to see Richiki, Seichi, and Fuzz all sitting in a semblance of seiza at the edge of the ring, all proper-like, watching patiently.

Kinda warmed Renji's heart a little.

Renji waved them in, and they all made smart bows before entering the dojo's ring.

Seichi was easy to teach because Renji knew the kind of fighting style he'd be use to: hand-to-hand brawling. Introducing what amounted to a cudgel was fairly straightforward to someone like Seichi. But thinking properly about edge and steel was going to take some doing, so Renji got Seichi started in a corner with basic sword form and light sparring with Rikichi, while he puzzled out what to do with Fuzz.

Besides, watching Seichi's going in for the brawling moves was bringing something ugly back up for Renji again, and it didn't help that the hems of Seichi's hakama were ragged and torn. With that fighting style and the way the street still seemed to cling to him... yeah, Seichi could've been a double for Renji a hundred years ago. Renji had a hard time looking at him, because of it.

Fuzz, it turned out, came from a district where knife fights were how people settled scores. Renji had to admit that his only real experience with knives was getting his ass handed to him by Iba on a regular basis... when shikai was disallowed for whatever reason.

"It's definitely an advantage in certain combat situations," Renji said to Fuzz. "People 'round here don't know what to do when you come in up inside their defenses and go in close like that. But if you're going to pull off that Iba schtick, you really got to own it. And... uh... it helps that he was..." Renji started to gesture for someone tall, but pulled back and said, "...erm, imposing."

Renji glanced around the dojo hoping to spot someone with the requisite skill set. Kinjo might have it, being from a similar rough-but-still-affluent-enough-to-have-steel district, but Renji didn't want to ask him for a favor, not when it was something maybe a little outside of the regulations, like teaching people not in the Division.

"How about I just keep coming at you until something works?" Fuzz asked.

Renji had to laugh. "That's pretty much how I learned."

#

Like any good Eleventh Division soldier, Fuzz was almost impossible to exhaust. Even though Renji's fighting skill far outclassed him, Fuzz would have kept at it all night. Eventually, he set Seichi and Fuzz against each other so that they could figure out how they were going to keep training themselves back at their own division. He let Rikichi ask for anything he wanted help with for as long as he had the energy and the interest.

So, by the time Renji made his way to the estate, it was late.

In the kitchen, he asked where he could find Byakuya and was told that Byakuya was dining with Rukia and Shinobu. “But, uh,” Miki said, looking chagrined and embarrassed all at once, “We’re suppose to tell you to wait in the master bedroom.”

Renji let out a snort. “Sent up to my room without supper, huh? I guess he’s angry at my little snap, after all. Should’ve figured.”

Miki clearly didn’t know what to say to that.

When she seemed to be looking around for something to offer him, Renji turned back to the door. Over his shoulder, he told her, “Mess is still open for an hour. I’ll be back after I grab a bite.”

#

Renji stood sullenly in line at the Mess Hall.

The shit deal with going to the Mess right before close was that all the stragglers had the same idea at approximately the same damn time. Peering around the shoulders of the soldiers in the queue in front of him, Renji wondered if he was going to end up with anything more than scraps at this rate.

The smells were making his stomach growl, too.

Well, there was nothing for it, he thought with a sigh. At least there was food, and he could probably snag something at the estate, or even the Division’s kitchens once they’d closed--if he really felt like pushing his weight around.

Which he didn’t.

What he really wanted was not to be so damn mad at Byakuya for five minutes today. But it was such a dick move to have so pointedly excluded him from dinner. Yet, Renji couldn’t entirely blame the guy for shutting him out, since he’d basically told Byakuya to shove any evening plans together earlier.

It was times like this, Renji thought, when he really felt should’ve picked an easier lover. Someone less prickly. Someone who was just a fucking fun-ass roll in the hay.

Finally at the front of the line, Renji picked up his tray and started blindly putting things on it. He picked quantity over quality, so he made his choices entirely based on what had enough left over that he could take two of without ripping off the guys behind him--which is how he ended up with a lot of rice porridge, bunch of dried fish, and pickled onions.

When he sat down at an empty spot, the woman next to him looked a little horrified at his choices, but he shrugged. His palate had never been sophisticated to start with, since back in Inuzuri it mostly consisted of: does it make me sicker to eat it or not to eat it? So he shoved food in, workmanlike, until he felt full.

The Mess was clearing out by then, the very latest arrivals being told the kitchens were closed and they’d have to use their own money at the quartermasters if they wanted snacks.

Division curfew wasn't for hours yet, however, and food trucks were never far from hungry soldiers.

Stifling a burp, Renji put his tray away. The kitchen worker who took it from him, thanked him and gave him a vaguely disapproving look as she said, "You didn't have to come down here, you know. Captains and lieutenants do have privileges."

"I'll remember that," Renji nodded. Although he hadn't interacted with anyone in the Division, Renji thought it was good for one of them to be seen rubbing shoulders with the rank and file now and again. It could never be Byakuya, so it might as well be him.

At least yakuza bosses could hang out in seedy, low-class places. With Byakuya, it was like Renji got all of the drawbacks and none of the benefits.

With that depressing thought, Renji headed back to the estate.

#

Renji moved through the kitchen and up the back stairway to the master suite like a ghost. A few passing servants gave him a nod of acknowledgment--one even dropped into a deep bow--but not one spoke to him. Reaching out with his reiatsu, Renji checked to make sure the bedroom was empty before sliding open the door.

He hadn't even taken a step across the threshold before a voice stopped him.

"Alone?" asked Aunt Masama, as she peered out at Renji from her own doorway. "Could it be you were also banished from dinner for some reason?"

Renji glanced over his shoulder at Byakuya's aunt. Just when Renji thought maybe he could turn this day around... she had to go and show her face. He let out a long-suffering sigh. "I was busy today, all right? Stuff still needs to get done around the Division, even if you Kuchiki are too busy killing each other in some stupid-ass clan war."

He hadn't really intended for that last bit to slip out, but there it was. At his words, Aunt Masama paled and looked a little like he'd jumped across the hallway and slapped her face.

"Look, I didn't mean..." he started, but she raised her hand to stop his half-formed apology.

"No, don't embarrass yourself by backtracking on something you clearly meant," she sniffed. "Besides, I don't entirely disagree with the sentiment. I don't care to see Kuchiki lives wasted, despite what you might think of me. Byakuya must do what he must do, but I don't need to pretend to like it."

Hand still on the door, Renji stared at her with his mouth hanging open in amazement that they actually agreed on something for once. "Goddamn posturing," Renji nodded, once he'd pulled himself back from the initial shock. "I only hope Byakuya knows what he's doing and nips this in the bud, and fast."

Masama gave stiff nod in agreement. "It is my fervent hope as well."

“Huh,” Renji said with a little smile. “There you go, then, eh?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Since we wish for the same thing, I hope I can count on you to counsel a steady, calm hand? He might not listen to me, but you must warn him not to overuse the boy. Shinobu is not well-suited to be baptised as heir in the blood of his kin.”

Renji stared at her with raised eyebrows. He was kinda taken aback to hear that Byakuya was using the heir, but, given that he was housebound by the arrest, it wasn't all that surprising. The thing that was really shocking Renji, he could hardly even articulate: “Are you... asking me to pillow talk Byakuya over to your agenda?”

Aunt Masama's face turned bright red, but she didn't look away. “If I were, would you do it?”

“Uh... well, on general principles, no, but since we agree... why not?” Renji said, and he couldn't help smiling at her genuinely. What was that thing about politics making strange bedfellows? This was the closest thing they'd come to a truce in a long, long time.

She coughed and shifted a little under the scrutiny of his smile, so he turned away from her and stepped through into the bedroom.

“Goodnight, Lady Kuchiki” he told her as he slid the door shut. Muffled, he heard her almost astonished-sounding reply, as if she, too, were struck a little dumb by their fairly pleasant exchange, “Goodnight, Lieutenant Abarai.”

#

The bedside lantern flicking on surprised Renji awake.

“You're here,” Byakuya said in that way that seemed more like a brusque command than a question.

Renji pulled the hair from his face and blinked the sleep from his eyes, “Where'd you expect me to be?”

“Sulking in your own quarters,” Byakuya said plainly, sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to Renji. His position gave Renji a lovely view of the back of Byakuya's sleeping yukata--a gray-silver silk painted with white cranes with a skill that made it seem as if the long, elegant birds peered out from a foggy lakeshore. “I didn't think I'd see you at all tonight.”

Renji let out a dark chuckle, “Whelp, if you really wanted to see me earlier than this, you could've extended an invite to dinner.”

Byakuya's head turned slightly in Renji's direction, “What do you mean?”

Propping himself up on an elbow, Renji said, “I mean I arrived here and was told to go straight up, that crashing dinner was a no go.”

“Oh, yes,” Byakuya said. “I did leave that order. I was hoping to talk to Shinobu about clan matters. It's best if you don't overhear such things.”

Renji rolled over to face the wall. “It’s cool, oyabun. You have your hush-hush behind-closed doors meetings. Just let me know when you need your lieutenant.”

“What did you just call me?”

When Renji peered over his shoulder, he noticed Byakuya had twisted all the way around to glare at him. “Aw c’mon, Byakuya, you used to troll Inuzuri teahouses. You telling me you managed that without greasing a few ‘good neighbor’ palms? I think you know exactly what I said.”

Angry reiatsu rolled off Byakuya like a wave. Through tight lips, he said, “Very well, let me rephrase. Why would you refer to me as a yakuza boss?”

“‘Cuz I had an epiphany,” Renji said, still only giving Byakuya a glance over his naked shoulder.

“An epiphany?”

“Yeah, you know, one of them lightbulb moments.”

“I know what an epiphany is, Renji,” Byakuya said, sounding progressively more pissed off. “I would like to know what yours was, because I believe it is very misguided.”

The threat in Byakuya’s voice was undeniable, yet Renji refused to be cowed by it. Deliberately, he fluffed up his pillow, taking time to settle onto his back and lace his fingers across his chest. “I don’t think it’s misguided. You’re acting exactly like them guys I hated with your turf war, pissing all over everything, posturing with violence, covering it all with a thin veneer of righteousness... yeah, I’d say that’s pretty much exactly the same.”

Byakuya’s fist smacked his own thigh. The sound was hard enough to make Renji flinch. Byakuya stood up. “Get out.”

Flipping back the covers, Renji pulled himself from the bed. He was naked, of course, having expected to spend the night. Scooting the width of the mattress, he said, “That’s it? That’s your whole counterargument? ‘Get out’?”

His arms crossed in front of his chest, Byakuya resolutely stared at the floor. “There is no constructive ‘counterargument’ for bald-faced insults. And if you’re only here to snarl rudely at me, I’d rather you weren’t.”

Pulling on his hakama, Renji bit back a snarl. After all, Byakuya did have a point with that. It was only going one place if Renji kept hitting low-blows. “Fine,” Renji said, his teeth holding the ties. “But you know what else I’m figuring out? How much of your romance talk is bullshit. You got no intentions of making me any kind of equal partner.” Finishing with his hakama, Renji grabbed his shitagi and kosode and threw them over his shoulders. “We need to stop lying to ourselves about what the fuck this is, Byakuya. Because if you really wanted to ‘marry’ me, you can’t just fucking kick me outta your house, ‘cuz it’d be my house, too.”

With that, Renji grabbed his tabi, and headed for the door. The rush of shunpō brought him up short. He stopped just in time to avoid colliding with Byakuya at the door. “This argument has escalated too quickly for me to allow you to storm off. Are we discussing my clan business or your proposal?”

“I kind of think it’s all the same,” Renji said, crossing his arms over his naked chest. The loose kosode and shitagi hung off his shoulders. “You blanking me on the clan stuff--” Renji stopped and shook his head, because, fuck it, it wasn’t like the yakuza wife ever knew what the fuck was going on. “Yeah, you know, maybe it is different. Maybe I just don’t wanna be the Kuchiki ane-san, okay?”

“Are you breaking things off,” Byakuya sounded absolutely shocked at the idea--or maybe he was pulling that face at the image of Renji as a yakuza wife, “Simply because I’m at war?”

“No, it’s just I ain’t got no place at this war table,” Renji said. “I know why you’re shutting me out: you’re trying to keep me from getting dirty with it, keep me safe, keep the Division out, but that ain’t me, okay? I’m an all or nothing guy. You know that.”

“This will be brief, Renji, can’t you be patient for once?” Byakuya sounded, for him, absolutely exasperated. “You’re not being fair. This will be, if I do it right, a once in a lifetime event. Kuchiki do not scuffle in the dirt like mobsters, despite what you seem to think. We are not prone to this sort of thing. It will not last. Not if I have anything to say in the matter.”

Renji hated that Byakuya was making sense. It sucked the wind out of his sails and made him feel deflated and stupid for getting all worked up--and yet, he was still mad. “Well... how long am I supposed to be patient? A month? Two months? Three? Because I can’t do this for months. I know I ain’t being reasonable--don’t fucking look at me like that--I’m trying to be honest here.”

Byakuya's shoulders dropped as did the constant, trembling hum of his reiatsu. “Oh. I see. Yes, very well.”

Which Renji took to mean: ‘Oh thank gods. We’re not breaking up.’

And Renji had to nod, because they weren’t. Even if he pushed Byakuya aside right now and stomped off, he’d be back. Renji let out his own tension with a long breath. “Look, I know you’re not going to like this, but... how ‘bout you call me when this shit has blown over? You can just do your little machinations and whatever and come back to me once it’s all over.”

Byakuya’s reiatsu spiked up again. “You want to sleep apart?”

“Maybe? Kinda?” Renji didn’t really want that, but he also didn’t want this constant vaguely pissed off feeling every time he thought about this stupid clan war. “Look, what I don’t want is for me to get any madder at you. I wanna be with you, always. But, this stuff? I dunno, it’s like I’m back in Inuzuri again and I can’t even control how I fucking feel about it. It makes me so goddamn angry, but it’s kinda not even really about you, you know? But if I hang around here... fuck. I’m gonna end up saying more shit I don’t mean, and you’re gonna hit

more than your own knee, and it's gonna be some kind of putting me in my place kind of thing, only not in play, and that's going to be the very last thing we ever do--see what I'm saying?"

"I do," Byakuya said solemnly. Renji could feel the angry undulating of Byakuya's reiatsu, but he was clearly fighting to keep a cool head. For that, Renji had to give the guy props. He was really trying not to knee-jerk react, and that all-being-rational shit was hard on the both of them.

Byakuya took several deep breaths and then stepped away from the door. "Very well. You highly motivate me to put a swift end to this clan war."

"Right," Renji said, feeling really sad about it all, all of a sudden. So he gave Byakuya a longing look and said, "You'll come for me soon, right?"

"As swiftly as I can," Byakuya promised, and then he grasped Renji's hand and brought it to his lips.

The feeling of Byakuya's cool lips on his knuckles almost undid Renji. But, he was able to not capitulate because he knew his instincts were good on this. Yeah, maybe he'd gone too hardcore, too fast, but he was absolutely certain that if he stayed around all this clan stuff, it'd completely trigger Inuzuri and he'd get weird and bitter and start poking Byakuya until he pushed so hard they fell right off the fucking cliff.

"Well, this fucking sucks," Renji said as he walked out the door. "Nuke those motherfuckers and get back to me, right?"

"Just so," Byakuya agreed before closing the door with a solid thud that echoed in Renji's heart like a drum.

Well, he hadn't exactly counseled the 'steady, calm hand' Aunt Masama had wanted, but Renji'd lay bet that this clanwar was going to be over in a hurry now.

End Notes

gulp I can't believe I did this. Don't kill me!

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