

a fish

by pyrat-xo

To stand back up every time life bowls you over; to be relentless and adaptive, unyielding in your conviction. Yachiru becomes a captain.

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1. Chapter 1

Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime.

i.

Ikkaku spends almost as much time fixing various things in the 11th Division quad as he does fighting and sleeping. When his repair sessions coincide with Kenpachi's afternoon naps (and they often do), Yachiru watches him work.

She helps haul around wooden planks, rolls of paper, nails, hammers and powertools from the 12th Division, and has long since learned to recognize his handiwork. Solid lines and even spaces; simple, but functional and enduring.

Ikkaku lets her do some of the hammering while he holds planks and nails in place, and other times they switch. He shows her how to repaper the sliding doors, oil (and replace) the hinges of swinging doors, replace floorboards, and fix wobbly chairs and tables. He does the work automatically, usually before anyone notices these things need fixing. It's easy, and Ikkaku likes to see things pull together, start working again, stand on their own.

ii.

When Ikkaku builds her a scooter for her birthday, Yachiru takes it apart and puts it back together before putting it through its paces. She knows how to build her own scooters now (though they're usually not as smooth or sturdy as her first) and doesn't feel so bad when they break. After all, Ikkaku always has wood lying around and she knows where he keeps his tools.

iii.

They started a treehouse together. Ikkaku only works on it when Yachiru is with him, though he's often tempted to finish it off himself. It's a long process; he intends to make it Yachiru-resistant and to teach her, at the same time, how to build herself a strong foundation, set up sturdy walls and a watertight roof. Yachiru is a fast learner; once he shows her how to lay down the planks, how to mark, score, measure and cut the wood, she plunges enthusiastically into the project.

Their blueprints are a mess of scrawls on the backs of old reports. Yachiru knows exactly what she wants, and made damn sure that Ikkaku understood too. Her demands are surprisingly reasonable: room enough for a chest of candy, a little table and a tatami mat (in case she wants to sleep in the treehouse), a stand to keep her zanpakutou on, and hooks to hang lights on.

All Ikkaku has to do is some scaling (she doesn't, after all, need a box two meters tall and three meters wide for candy) and additions that Yumichika had demanded (windows, shelves for books, and cabinets for candy so she can keep other things in the little chest he plans to make her).

iv.

Captain Zaraki knows about it, seems amused whenever he sees Ikkaku fix a mistake or straighten a plank Yachiru had put down and she doesn't start chewing on his head. Even if she gets frustrated, Yachiru doesn't take it out on Ikkaku; after all, they have yet to start the roof and she doesn't know how to do that. Besides, he might lose interest in the house (for weeks!!) if he got angry enough.

In all matters but the treehouse itself, Yachiru has the final say. Ikkaku double-checks and triple-checks every piece of wood, tests the soundness of each section they finish. He fits the windows with glass, knots a rope ladder (that Yachiru doesn't need, but had demanded anyway) that can be pulled up inside the house through a trap door in the floor, and makes damn sure that every hook is secure.

They finish the roof in a single day. Yachiru already knows how to build tables and chairs (the first time she tried, she failed, so she kept trying until she got it right, then never built another one) and Yumichika helps them drag up everything she wants. Ikkaku dozes off on the floor while Yachiru and Yumichika rearrange the furniture and when he wakes up, they're both asleep on top of him.

v.

Yachiru knows how to build treehouses; the thought fills all the soul reapers of Seireitei with a certain amount of dread.

Though she never did end up building another house, she *has* set up platforms in several trees in Seireitei. Some on Captain Kyouraku's favorite cherry blossom trees (though he does think the platform is easier to lounge on than a branch), and others in fairly random places. Ikkaku doesn't know when she figured out how to attach the platforms to walls,

but when he runs nose first into the struts of one in the training quad, he recognizes it easily as Yachiru's project.

Kenpachi orders her to take it down, and charges Ikkaku with the task of teaching her how to build obstacle courses so she could actually make something useful in her spare time.

vi.

They end up constructing a wooden castle complex in the main training grounds-- that is, in the space on the edge of Rukongai left clear for captains to spar with each other.

Yachiru claims it as her territory, sets Kenpachi, Yumichika and the rest of the 11th Division on defense while Ikkaku and anyone willing to fight alongside him lay siege to it. He had invited Iba and Renji to join his forces, and they arrived with their own divisions in tow.

To simulate actual battle conditions, of course.

vii.

Yumichika and Kenpachi intercepted Renji and Iba as they approached. Ikkaku, meanwhile, had made his way to the 'inner courtyard', where Yachiru promptly knocked out his entire squad and ran circles around him. By the time the sun had set, the castle was in splinters and every single member of the siege was bloody, bruised, high on adrenaline, and remembered that day as the best training session *ever*.

It's a tie. After all, the offensive forces could barely stand by the end, but the castle had fallen.

Yachiru clings sleepily to Ikkaku's neck on their way back to the 11th quad. He grumbles about it, but Yumichika knows that he secretly doesn't mind at all.

viii.

When Yachiru breaks a toy and, for the first time ever, doesn't demand that Ikkaku fix it (because she can do it herself), he takes a nap and congratulates himself. Renji and Iba buy him drinks that weekend, and he tells himself that he never has to fix another goddamn toy ever again (while they, for some reason, spent much of the night telling him that just because she can fix her own toys now doesn't mean that Yachiru won't want him around anymore). He doesn't remember much of what happened.

When she presses a sad-looking wooden doll and pieces of its broken leg into his hands and insists that he replaces the leg, Ikkaku complains that she can do it herself but can't quite squash the feeling that all is once again right with the world.

ix.

At least, until Yachiru discovers the swordsmiths responsible for crafting zanpakutou blanks and drags him off so they can learn to make swords together.

2. Chapter 2

Yachiru doesn't cry. Yachiru *didn't* cry, but she beat her fists against Ikkaku's chest until her fingers hurt and she cracked two of his ribs and then she curled up against him, burying her face against his shoulder. She didn't cry, but Ikkaku knew that she damn well wanted to so he sported the bruises for a week: deep purple marks that he wouldn't let the 4th Division healers treat until Yachiru tore a strip from Kenpachi's old haori and tied it around her arm where her old lieutenant's badge used to be.

The few days after Zarak Kenpachi's funeral had been tense, as everyone expected them to be. Whether the division would fracture, whether the captain-commander would have to appoint an interim captain, what Yachiru would do, what Ikkaku and Yumichika would do, what the rest of the division was planning.

Yumichika stumbles in on Ikkaku standing quietly in his room, as he'd taken to doing lately, with Hoozukimaru clutched so tightly in his hand that his knuckles are bone-white. He asks, because where Ikkaku goes, he'll go and he knows Ikkaku. Enough to know that he's wavering, that he thinks Yumichika likes Seireitei more than he likes him, and Yumichika knows that Ikkaku knows that despite everything he has, he'd drop it all without hesitation if he asked.

Yumichika knows Ikkaku isn't planning to ask, so he does instead. "Are we leaving?"

"Thinkin' about it."

"Then you know what I have to say."

And Ikkaku knows him well enough to know that that tone leaves no room for argument so he nods, slowly. "Alright."

Yachiru had held the division together like an old pro. With the lieutenants of two other divisions, the Shinigami Women's Association, and her own third and fifth seats throwing their support behind her, she efficiently and brutally squashed any complaints that had begun to stir in the ranks. Zarak Division men don't handle transfers of power well, and as much respect as they had for their lieutenant, they wouldn't stand for a captain that was any less than the strongest warrior in the division. Yachiru wouldn't have had it any other way.

Renji and Iba, at Ikkaku's request, had dropped by to help keep the division in line, though they had mentioned to him afterwards that they really didn't think they were needed; Yachiru had it handled all on her own.

Ikkaku decided after she had beaten down the fifth challenger to her position that she'd be fine. Everyone and their mother knew that he had only stuck around for Zarak Kenpachi, and that with him gone, there was not a chance in hell that he would stay long.

Yumichika tugs on his sleeve, after Yachiru's brushed the dust off her shoulders and headed back to the captain's office. "I actually was looking for you because... she wants to speak with you."

"I'll tell her."

Yachiru's sitting on the desk, kicking her feet, but she slips off and Ikkaku watches her absently adjust her white captain's cloak (newly commissioned, because Kenpachi's had been too wide across the shoulders and he had been too tall) almost as if she'd been doing it for years. He ducks his head in an informal bow, glances around the office to see it hasn't changed at all, then comes to a stop in front of her.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"About your ribs," she says with an unapologetic smirk, "sorry."

He prods at where the breaks had been the worst, now nothing more than an unpleasant memory and some phantom pains, and flashes her a resigned smile. "No problem."

She gets straight to the point, motioning for him to make himself comfortable so he leans against the edge of her desk. Yachiru had never had to navigate the bureaucracy of Seireitei, though the Shinigami Women's Association had refined her diplomatic chops. She knows better than anyone that Ikkaku *hates* small-talk when there are more important things at hand, like division reshuffling. "Aramaki good enough for a promotion?"

"Think he's a bit overdue, actually."

"And Isao for seventh seat."

They've already effectively retired the fourth and sixth seats, so Ikkaku just nods. He doesn't comment on her suddenly using her subordinates' names, but she'd been planning to surprise him along with the rest of the division. Yachiru cuts herself off halfway through a sentence to say, "You knew I knew everyone's names," already losing interest in the original line of conversation. They'll get back to it- Ikkaku knows better than anyone that Vice-Captain Kusajishi of the 11th Division never forgets, and never forgives.

"Yeah," he says, fingers drumming on his knee, "we were only sure about five years ago, though."

"So why'd you guys keep lettin' me use those stupid nicknames on everyone?"

Ikkaku remembers waking up alone in Soul Society and having no time to be scared or silly or lonely, or anything but unflinchingly strong. He remembers Kenpachi saying, not in so many words, that he'd tried to give Yachiru the luxury of a real childhood, for however long she needed it. He scratches the back of his neck and replies, "I didn't wanna grow up, either." Before she can ask him what he meant, he cuts in with, "Yamazaki for

ninth? He ain't bad."

They wrap up quickly. Ikkaku's satisfied with the list, but before she can dismiss him, he says, "Scouted two guys for Vice an' third."

Yachiru looks at him sharply, but without the surprise he'd been expecting. He realizes vaguely that she'd been braced for it from the beginning, and Ikkaku plows ahead. "I was only here for one reason. He's gone."

She inhales deeply, but nods. *Captain material*, Ikkaku thinks, because he's learned over the years that the mark of a leader isn't just power but strength- of mind, of body, of will. To stand back up every time life bowls you over; to be relentless and adaptive, unyielding in your conviction. Yachiru says, "Give me one more fight. Don't hold back, because I won't."

She learned Bankai years ago; had known for even longer that he'd already had his. What it comes down to, though, is that Yachiru's stronger than he or Kenpachi had ever been. More innate talent, more latent spiritual pressure, no hard years twisting and stunting her most important periods of growth. She'd grown up not fighting for her life, but pushed to elevate herself above the rest of the Court Guard goons. They've sparred a few times, but never seriously, and Ikkaku isn't the kind of guy who backs away from a challenge.

He wishes he'd paid more attention to just how quickly she had outstripped him.

Ikkaku puts up a good fight- forces her to use her bankai once he's used his own because it's one thing to be one of the fastest soul reapers in Seireitei and another thing entirely to be Zaraki Kenpachi's legacy. She'd never deprive him of an enjoyable fight, knowing he'd extend the same courtesy to her. They block more hits than they dodge, even though they could, and Hoozukimaru's breaking up in his hands when she finally shatters his last blade and brings her fist up from beneath his guard to smash into his chin.

He doesn't get knocked out but his vision goes black for a second and Ikkaku staggers backwards, falls on his ass and can't pull himself together long enough to stand back up. In the meantime, he's not sure whether he should be proud of the fact that she'd taken his fist-fighting lessons to heart or regretting that he'd taught her that finisher in the first place.

At least, he hears her say, I didn't use your signature headbutt.

He laughs, takes a second so the world is spinning more manageably and then pushes himself back onto his feet. She puts a hand on his shoulder to steady him and he's acutely aware of the bloodlust, the crackle of adrenaline and the high of battle still radiating off of her in waves. She takes a deep breath and a step back, visibly schooling her own spiritual pressure into something sharper, more focused, so at ease with the blood splashed up her neck and over her uniform.

Ikkaku feels his breath hitch at the familiar, searing lance of power. He eyes the sword in her hand, the serious set of her mouth and the way her eyes flash in the sweltering

afternoon sun. Hoozukimaru's elated snarl curls warm in the back of his mind, because he senses it too and knows even better than Ikkaku.

He lives.

Zaraki Kenpachi didn't die with his body, though he very well could have, and Ikkaku's berating himself for not seeing it sooner. It had taken a long fight, a broken bankai and quite possibly a concussion on top of all the expected scrapes, fractures and gashes for him to realize. Yachiru hadn't escaped unscathed, either, but despite her injuries, she sure *looked* and *acted* like she was in pretty good shape.

"I'll stay," he says, then spits out a mouthful of blood, staggering forward and dropping to one knee, using Hoozukimaru's scabbard to stay upright.

Yachiru nods once, runs her fingertips over the worn emblem on her Lieutenant's badge before she presses it into his bloody palm. "Thanks, Ikkaku."

It's the first time she's ever used his name. It's sharp on her tongue, and heavy; weighted by decades of fierce loyalty to the man who had meant everything to the both of them. It feels strange- but right. Something had changed, and Yachiru's painfully aware of it even as Ikkaku finishes tying the band on his arm and looks back up at her for orders. His expression holds none of that old irritation, and no teasing grin- just exhaustion and respect. Pain, not all of it physical.

She'd lost that warm, protective presence he'd always extended to her. Gained a powerful, dedicated lieutenant but at the cost of another piece of that family they'd spent so many years building.

He'll miss the dumb nicknames, and he might even miss the way she drools on him, but Ikkaku knows in his gut that all that's over, for all that she'd been doing it just last week. He'd stopped calling her a brat immediately after the news had first reached them, though 'monster' still slips in, affectionately.

She's got plenty of growing left to do, and an enormous haori to fill, and until she works out her own style of captaining, she'll lead with Zaraki Kenpachi's example. The day Zaraki Kenpachi truly dies is the day Kusajishi Yachiru grows into her own. Ikkaku thinks that he better keep an eye on her, in that case, and when he leaves, he'll do it without the shadow of guilt and his captain dogging his steps.

He'd find a good lieutenant for her, in the meantime. Guys who won't replace him and Yumichika, but who'll outdo the both of them. Maybe ones with kidou training, who could use it if they had to. Better guys than two toughs from the Alley. (Okay, one tough from the Rukongai and one very beautiful, very strong fighter who also just happens to be from the Rukongai.)

And they'll be good officers, and they'd damn well better earn their seats. Ikkaku looks forward to seeing a fifth-seat who can pull a bankai come out of his division.

Her voice pulls him out of his thoughts, with a different note of authority than the one she used to order him to get her candy with. "And Yumichika?"

Ikkaku inclines his head, expression thoughtful and already working out how to tell him they'd be staying- though he thinks Yumichika might have known from the very beginning. "He's always liked the number three."

There's relief in her voice, but he pretends not to hear it and Yachiru's grateful. "I'll be fine, you know."

"I know."

Of course, one of the many things Yachiru's learned from Kenpachi is that pity fucking sucks and she wants none of it. Her voice is cheerful, but the underlying threat is completely, utterly clear to him in a way that does nothing but cement his decision. "So why din'cha take off?"

Ikkaku's flare of spiritual pressure wars with hers for a second; he winces when she overwhelms him, sharp like a stake to the back of his neck, and then he grins as if that proves his point. "Got a pretty good reason to stay."

Yachiru extends her hand, and he grabs it to pull himself back onto his feet.