

Good - Better - Best

ByaRen/RenBya

Von whatever

Kapitel 3: Best

Their relationship lasted around five years. Never had they said „I love you“, not even an „I like you“ had passed between them. They both weren't the types to openly communicate feelings like love. Annoyance, yes, even anger and sometimes sadness, but never love. It was too fragile an emotion to be said so easily, too deep a feeling to just lightly express it. And sometimes they wondered: would it have changed something, anything? Three simple words and both – though strong warriors they certainly were – could not get over themselves and say them out loud. Sometimes they wondered. And sometimes they wished.

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It had started with alcohol, back then. Rukia had told Renji of her relationship with Ichigo and him harbouring secretly feelings for her had led him to drink himself into a stupor. That evening, their division had held a party and miraculously their taichou had decided to participate. They'd had sex that night, Renji and Byakuya. Both didn't know why it had come to it, but neither regretted their actions. And, being lonely as they were, they started to pursue this strange thing they had. It went well, to their surprise. Dividing private with work life was a bit difficult at first, but they handled it fairly well. Keeping it secret wasn't that big of a problem too. With Byakuya being noble and they being taichou and fukutaichou they hadn't even needed to discuss that particular part of their relationship, it was clear to them both. Simple sex with no strings attached, a stress reliever much needed and wanted.

Sometime later it had started to get complicated. Feelings arose, feelings that made the lines blur. At first, it had made everything feel brighter. Every mission done separately was the longest hours or days they had thus far experienced, every second spent together made breathing that much easier. Everything was better, everything went better. But somehow, things had gone downhill somewhere. Working got more exhausting than ever, every disagreement they had in the office directly transferred into their private life. Gone was the stress reliever, gone was the relaxation – they were more exhausted, both in private and at work, than they ever were before. They needed to cut it off, for their own sake and for the division's sake. And so they did. Sober and clean, they discussed it one evening, deciding like adults what was best. It was awkward at first, going back to the way things were before, but it got better.

They missed each other, of course they did – often one of them found himself waking up in the middle of the night reaching for the other's warmth, only to discover that it was no longer there. In Byakuya's case, he spent the lonely nights with stargazing and remembering. Renji however covered everything up through going out with his friends and drinking sake like there was no tomorrow. With time, the pain got less and less. Byakuya started working late again, Renji discarded his nights out and changed them to training till exhaustion took over. He got better and better still, until Central 46 decided it was time for him to undergo the Captain's test. He succeeded with flying colours and accepted the white haori of fifth division.

And that was the moment where everything started changing again.

Sighing, Renji lay down his pen to stretch his stiff back. Paperwork had never been his forte and – in his humble opinion – it would never be. He grinned down at his scrawl, imagining the exasperated sigh of the poor person who had to read his report. It didn't matter how much he wanted to, he simply couldn't change the way he was writing. No amount of calligraphy lessons would ever change that. He knew that, and everyone else knew it, too. That didn't stop them from complaining, however. Just another thing Renji had gotten used to.

He closed his eyes, letting his thoughts wander. He knew he should stop working and go to sleep for it was late. The candle scarcely lit the room, flickering ever so often because of the wind the open window left through. No sound could be heard but the slight shuffling of the guard out front trying to stay awake. To no avail, Renji noticed, as soft snoring was heard shortly after. "Ah, those were the days," he thought grinning, fondly remembering his own beginnings. Many a time he was kicked awake by his superiors, always being screamed at, never listening. And now he was here, an officer himself, leading a division. Sometimes even he himself could hardly believe it, no wonder others stared incredulously at him when he was walking the streets in full attire. Especially some of his old teachers had unbelievably shaken their heads when they had heard of his promotion. Renji didn't care about those old douchebags; the ones who mattered always had known he would someday make taichou. And they had gladly celebrated along with him. Even Byakuya had congratulated him and participated in the celebration, though it was only for a short while. It...had stirred up some old memories best forgotten, memories both good and bad – memories that still hurt once in a while.

Renji's grin faded. Though it had been some years ago, the wound was still fresh from that day, and thinking about their break-up still hurt. Badly. For a long time Renji never admitted it, not even to himself, but now he believed he had loved his Captain. Maybe he still did. But it was over now, never to be talked about, never to be started again. He hardly saw Byakuya these days, with both of them being busy with their divisions. The threat of Aizen was long gone and no one even closely as dangerous had shown up, but nowadays it was more the citizens of Soul Society itself who caused problems. Fighting against them was harder, in a way; hollows you could just cleave through, but shinigami had to protect the other souls and not kill them. Killing shinigami, however, didn't seem to pose much of a problem for their enemy.

silently, comfortably, when everything else was just too much. A strong shoulder to grab onto when everything seemed to fall apart, equally as strong hands to reach for in times of need.

And now, nothing.

Seemingly calm, Byakuya placed his tea upon the table and reached for his haori to exit the office, fleeing one place full of memories to reach another. But there he could at least escape reality to dream of better times.

It was as if fate had carefully planned out the meeting that night – placing thoughts of each other in their minds, letting it hurt just that much, making them go home at the same time. If fate were a person, it would happily be smiling now. Everything went as planned.

It was on the first corner Renji needed to take on his way home. He could sense his former captain's reiatsu, but somehow doubted Byakuya could sense him – he seemed lost in thoughts, oblivious to his surroundings. It didn't come as a surprise to Renji, then, that Byakuya bumped into him quite forcefully. To Byakuya, however, it was a surprise, big enough for him to lose his balance. The very hands he had been thinking about that night were the ones which now steadied him, saving him the embarrassment of landing on his fine bottom.

"Are you alright?" Renji asked, worry clearly visible in his eyes. Byakuya seemed tired, more so than when he had last seen him during the captain's meeting a few days ago. His normally regal composure seemed slumped, almost defeated. It made Renji's nerves stand on end.

"Renji..." Byakuya breathed astounded. He caught himself, however, and nodded his head. "Yes, I am fine. Thank you."

"You don't look so fine to me," Renji disagreed, furrowing his brows.

"I am fine," hissed Byakuya. "Now will you be so kind as to let me go. My presence in the office will be needed as soon as the sun rises, and rise it will soon." The noble began trying to get out of Renji's grasp.

"No."

The simple response, spoken with such resolution, stunned Byakuya into halting his efforts. "No?" he asked; maybe he had heard wrong?

"No," Renji confirmed, tugging Byakuya in direction of his own home. "You are not fine, and you will not go home. You will talk."

Surprisingly, Byakuya didn't object and simply followed Renji – maybe he was too perplexed by this obvious act of insubordination (he still viewed Renji as his fukutaichou in a way, though they were now equals), maybe it was because he was too tired. Renji didn't care, he was just glad he didn't have to fight Byakuya any longer. Neither said anything, for fear it might be overheard, and silently they reached Renji's home where Byakuya sat on one of the cushions while waiting on Renji who made the tea. The furniture and decorations were different now than they were back then, and Byakuya couldn't help but wonder if Renji had had help in furnishing his new home. It was tasteful, elegant even. It somehow didn't fit the redheaded, short-tempered Renji – on the other hand, it fit him perfectly. During their time together Byakuya had made many a discovery about his fukutaichou which had left him wondering – such as the redhead's love for bonsai, or his quite interesting though small library. Apart from the almost obligational books on fighting and tactics, including the musings of the greatest generals of time, one could find small jewels on meditation, astrology and even some lovely romance novels on the shelves. And from what the noble could see from his position, the collection had grown notably. Before he could muster up the courage to rummage through the books, however, Renji entered with the tea and pastry, ready to question his former taichou.

Strangely, though, the silence continued to hang heavily in the air. Only the small sounds of porcelain scrapping against porcelain when setting down the tea were heard, or the faint crumbling of eating pastry.

"Look," Renji finally began, "I don't know what happened to make you look like this, nor do you have to tell me if you don't want to. But you do need to get some serious rest – you look at least five decades older than you are with those bags under your eyes." He took a break to sip his tea, ignoring Byakuya's incredulous looks. "And I, for one, would gladly kick the asses of those scumbags who made you look like this. It's fine, though, if you want to do it yourself. I strongly suggest it."

"You do not cease to amaze me, Abarai-taichou," Byakuya murmured quietly, placing his cup upon the table. "It surprises me how well you have learned to express yourself – with some exceptions, of course."

"Ah, well, can't help but pick up something or other from all those formal meetings now, can I?" Renji dismissed the topic with some sort of hand gesture, almost making his tea spill. Some quiet curses escaped his sinful mouth, granting a smile of Byakuya's appearance. Still the same at heart, I see. "However," Renji continued after saving his cup, "my newfound eloquence is not the matter at hand." Suddenly, he threw his hands in the air. "Oh, for the love of... I know this is a serious matter, taichou" – Byakuya couldn't help the small smile from appearing once again – "but ya know me an' talking like tha's not my style. So please jus' tell me who made you work so hard tha' ya're visibly tired so I can beat the shit outta them."

It might be quite difficult to do that to yourself, I fear. But Byakuya just shook his head. "That will not be necessary, especially since you are no longer part of my division." At that, Renji flinched slightly. If Byakuya hadn't paid so much attention to the redhead, he'd have missed it. "You may have noticed this yourself, the incidents within Seireitei are increasing and so is the amount of reports we..."

"Don' shit with me, taichou," Renji rudely interrupted. "Paperwork's not tiring ya out so fast. Ya sometimes even did my share when I screwed up again, an' ya always did it as effortlessly as everything else. I know, I know," he added when the noble made to protest, "'s not as easy as it looks. Am a captain myself now, yanno? I know this shit." A deep sigh escaped him. "But 's not the paperwork, that I know. Ya can talk to me, Byakuya. We're equals now. At least in title and in the Gotei 13. Whatever's bothering ya, I can probably somehow relate if it's not clan-related..."

With this, silence once again reigned. Not for long, though.

"The reports written by Sugita-fukutaichou are comfortable to read. His handwriting is excellent, as is his structure. He is an intelligent fighter and a master of kidou."

"Hey now, if ya only want to insult me..." Renji protested heatedly, knowing of his weaknesses as well – if not better – as his former taichou.

"I miss it," interrupted, for once, Byakuya.

"Eh?" The redhead stared intelligently at the noble. "Sorry, might have heard ya wrong. What didcha say?"

"I said," Byakuya impatiently folded his hands in his lap, "I miss it."

"Um, sorry, 'm afraid I still don' quite follow." Renji felt stupid and useless and lost and whatnot not understanding what his once-lover wanted to tell him. Him – Byakuya – missing something? What could that possibly be? And what did that have to do with his new fukutaichou, or Renji?

It was Byakuya's turn to sigh. "I miss your scrawny handwriting," he silently confessed, "and those annoying ink stains and creases you always got on every single paper."

"Wha? But I thou..."

"I am not finished, Abarai." The accosted quickly shut his mouth. "I miss your horrible structure, your endless nagging, your impromptu outbursts, your tardiness. I miss the way you made me tea, our quiet conversations, how you always went over the top while training, your sudden chatter about random, unimportant things. I miss the life you brought into my office, and the fire you bright into my life." Never once did the noble raise his voice, letting his confessions silently float the room. Sometime during his monologue he had grabbed his tea, watching the ripples form on its surface. "I miss your hands, your hair, your voice, your presence. I miss you." Only now did the raven raise his head to meet Renji's gaze. It didn't shock him to find the redhead speechless – he himself did not really know why he had said what he did. But he felt better now, like a weight was lifted of his shoulders. Regret would make itself known come morning.

"I'm a bit at a loss here," Renji finally murmured, lowering his gaze. "Didn' expect tha'."

"You are not alone in that aspect, Abarai. I will turn in for the night. Thank you for the tea." With that, Byakuya made his way to the door, intent on leaving the house and forget this ever happened.

"Oh, for fuck's..wait, taichou, waitwaitwait!" He had learned the art of ignoring Renji quite fast and quite well, so it did not take much to do it now and open the door. "Hey, I said to wait!" It did not help, however, to ignore the hand now firmly holding the door closed, strong as it had always been. "Don' be a fucking coward!"

How dare he...! "I am no coward!" Byakuya hissed turning around, eyes dangerously narrowed. Steel grey met reddish brown, one heated in anger, the other still confused but determined.

"Well, you jus' attempted to flee from my reaction, right? Tha' makes ya a coward!"

"You already reacted and now let me through!"

"Tha' don't count and no, I won't!"

"You stubborn, irritating..." Lips met, successfully silencing whatever insult may have been on Byakuya's tongue, the very same which was now entangled with Renji's. Effortlessly they fell back into their old rhythm, grasping whatever came into the vicinity of their hands. Clothes were shed, skin met skin, passion erupted once again. It had been too long, too lonely. They simply could not take this slow. At least not the first round.

Morning came and though they both had not slept one minute that night, neither had felt so rested and refreshed in a very long time.

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Sugita Kou was confused, to say the least. His taichou, known as an unemotional, stoic leader, had a fairly agreeable air around him, his normally stiff form looking almost relaxed. His pen just seemed to flow over the reports, the stack of completed paperwork growing unusually fast. Even a semblance of a smile – a smile! By the Kuchiki Byakuya! – appeared irregularly throughout the day.

It had already begun weird that morning. When Kou entered the office, already fearing a reprimand because he was slightly later than normal, he had been shocked to find it empty. It had worried him greatly and he had looked for his taichou throughout the whole division but nothing. Kuchiki-taichou had not even been in his quarters. Deciding to wait some more until he continued his search in a more serious manner, he had begun his share of work. Some time later, the noble had appeared, nodding in his direction, not losing one single word about his tardiness. Kou had been set on brushing it off, had his taichou not looked slightly...ruffled, in a way. Well, as ruffled as a Kuchiki could look. His level of worry had gone up a few levels, but having worked under the raven for a few months already he knew when to keep quiet. And so he did.

He was glad, now, that he had decided to keep quiet. Kuchiki-taichou seemed to be in a good mood and unnecessary questions might have destroyed that. Kou had to silently confess that he liked this atmosphere way better – even his already fast working seemed to be slightly faster.

Afternoon came and with that the time for tea. Before he could get up to prepare some, however, his taichou stopped him with a gesture.

"Keep working. A friend of mine has decided to come over to discuss some work. He will bring the beverage. You can make some for yourself though, if you want to do so."

"Not necessary!" Startled, both shinigami turned their heads toward the door, where a bright grin greeted them. "Hullo there, busy people! I brought some distraction with me!" With that, Abarai Renji entered the office as though he owned it, paper bags in hand. And somehow, Kou got the feeling he would never have to make tea again. The smile on Kuchiki-taichou's face said it all.