

Multiverse 197

Chapter 197: Encounter! Who Are You?

"Current Fifth Division Captain Sōsuke Aizen was killed by current Third Division Captain Kaiser."

"All Captains of the Gotei 13 have been ordered to apprehend Kaiser."

"The execution date of Rukia Kuchiki has been moved up."

"The restriction on carrying Zanpakutō within all areas of Seireitei is lifted. All Shinigami are now permitted to carry their blades anywhere in Seireitei."

As these announcements spread through Seireitei, everyone was stunned.

"Captain Kaiser killed Captain Aizen?"

"T-That's impossible!"

"Rukia Kuchiki's execution date has actually been moved up?"

"Blade-carrying permission... is that true?"

Countless people who heard the news, whether they were Shinigami or not, were overwhelmed with shock, plunging all of Seireitei into clamor and unrest.

Especially those from the Third and Fifth Divisions—upon hearing news about their Captains, they either shouted in disbelief or stood dumbfounded, falling into chaos.

"H-How could it be..."

Inside the Third Division's barracks, Momo Hinamori, who had fallen asleep from exhaustion, shot to her feet the moment she heard the news.

"This can't be true! Captain... there's no way Kai-kun would kill Captain Aizen!"

Momo Hinamori simply couldn't believe what she was hearing.

But shortly after she received the news, the Tenth Division—serving as the patrol unit—arrived at the Third Division's barracks and took control of everyone.

Leading them was the Tenth Division's Lieutenant, Tōshirō Hitsugaya.

He was accompanied by the Tenth Division's Third Seat, Rangiku Matsumoto, as they entered the Captain's office.

"...Sorry, Momo. From this moment forward, we will be taking over supervision here."

Tōshirō Hitsugaya tried his best to speak with a formal tone, but couldn't help closing his eyes, unwilling to look at Momo Hinamori's now pale face.

"Shirō-chan!" Momo Hinamori, as if clinging to a lifeline, quickly ran toward Hitsugaya, pleading, "There must be some mistake, right?"

Hitsugaya did not answer that question.

He wished it were a mistake too.

After all, Kaiser had once been his mentor. He truly did not want to see Kaiser become an enemy of the Gotei 13.

Unfortunately...

"This order came directly from the Captain Commander, Momo," Rangiku Matsumoto said, a bit pained. "There were many witnesses to Captain Kaiser killing Captain Aizen—witnesses from other Divisions, even."

"Captain Aizen's body is currently at the Fourth Division, and Captain Kaiser immediately fled afterward. He hasn't been seen since."

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's the truth. Several Captains have already been ordered to hunt down Captain Kaiser. I even heard the Captain Commander himself is ready to step in at any time."

Momo Hinamori trembled all over, nearly collapsing.

"I don't believe it... I don't believe it..."

She murmured in a daze, face pale.

"Captain... there's no way Kai-kun would do something like this..."

That was exactly what Hitsugaya wanted to say.

He had a bit of a bond with Kaiser and knew very well that he wasn't someone who would casually kill others or commit major crimes.

That man wasn't a saint, but unless someone provoked him, he would never recklessly kill.

Could it be that Captain Aizen did something to him that caused him to lose control?

But wasn't Captain Aizen known for being gentle and kind, never one to offend others?

"Momo," Hitsugaya couldn't help but speak, "you're Captain Kaiser's Lieutenant, the one closest to him. Did you not notice anything unusual before this?"

Momo Hinamori froze.

"Unusual..."

Her eyes flickered slightly.

If she had to say—there had definitely been anomalies, and very obvious ones at that.

For instance, even before Rukia Kuchiki's crime had been exposed, Captain Kaiser had seemed to know about it, instructing her to monitor Rukia's movements.

Also, when Rukia was captured and imprisoned by the Sixth Division, it was as if he had already known she'd be sentenced to death. He even did some strange things to her.

Later, he argued with the Captain Commander at the Captain's meeting and appeared highly concerned about the arrival of the Ryoka and the current state of Seireitei—almost as if he already knew everything in advance.

It was as if everything happening now was within his expectations, as if he had already seen it all.

All of this, by Hitsugaya's definition, was abnormal behavior.

Even at the time, Momo had been confused by Kaiser's actions. Thinking back now, it seemed even more certain—he must have known something beforehand, and that knowledge led him to act, which brought him to his current situation.

With that thought, Momo Hinamori could no longer sit still.

"I'm going to find Captain!"

She stood up again.

"No," Hitsugaya refused flatly. "According to the Captain Commander's order, from this moment on, every member of the Third Division will be under surveillance."

"Especially you, Lieutenant Hinamori. From now on, you're not allowed to leave the Third Division's barracks."

Momo Hinamori was stunned.

"Matsumoto," Hitsugaya turned away, unable to look at her expression, and addressed Rangiku, "I'm leaving this to you."

"Yes," Rangiku nodded and accepted the task.

Hitsugaya left the office and the barracks, but the Tenth Division Shinigami surrounded the area, allowing no one in or out.

"Momo..."

Rangiku looked at the stunned Momo Hinamori and stepped forward to embrace her.

"Rangiku-san," Momo sobbed, tears filling her eyes, "Captain must've had an important reason for doing this..."

"...I believe you," Rangiku said, holding her tightly, her expression complicated. "Men are like this. They never tell those closest to them what's on their minds—they just act on their own and end up doing things that get them misunderstood, never thinking about how worried we are for them."

Thinking of the man who, even after becoming her superior, still always avoided her, Rangiku couldn't help empathizing with Momo.

"Seriously... what a bunch of bastards."

She cursed aloud, and Momo's sobs grew louder.

Similar situations were unfolding in the Sixth and Thirteenth Divisions.

"That bastard... what the hell is he trying to do?"

Renji Abarai, already agitated because of Rukia Kuchiki's execution being moved up, clenched his Zanpakutō and rushed out of the barracks.

"Something's definitely wrong!"

Izuru Kira also didn't believe Kaiser would do something like this. If it weren't for Jūshirō Ukitake assigning him to lead the unit, he would've rushed out to find Kaiser himself.

"What the hell is that bastard planning?"

Elsewhere, Suì-Fēng, who had been searching for a black cat, felt the weight of this news fall squarely on her shoulders.

If only she had stopped Kaiser and prevented him from leaving the Third Division, then maybe Sōsuke Aizen wouldn't have been killed.

Feeling responsible, Suì-Fēng gritted her teeth and turned around, abandoning her search for the cat and instead tracking Kaiser.

The other Captains had varied reactions to the news—some indifferent, some in disbelief, some changing their course, some standing their ground—plunging all of Seireitei into an atmosphere of looming turmoil.

And at this moment, Kaiser was swaggering across the sky above Seireitei.

"Shun!" "Shun!" "Shun!" "Shun!" "Shun!"...

With every step of Shunpo, Kaiser's figure zipped forward like teleportation, moving so fast that it produced the faint sound of tearing through the air.

"Not here?"

Landing atop a rooftop, Kaiser rested one hand on the hilt of his Zanpakutō and closed his eyes, seemingly sensing something.

"Not here either..."

He checked several directions, but found nothing.

"That guy... sure is better at hiding than I am."

Opening his eyes, Kaiser muttered to himself.

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, Kaiser sensed two unusual Reiatsu.

"Whose Reiatsu is that?"

He was surprised.

One of them fluctuated wildly—sometimes as strong as a Captain, sometimes as weak as a third- or fourth-seated officer—completely unstable. The other was extremely faint, but gave Kaiser a feeling that it was not to be underestimated, as if it was intentionally concealing something.

If his Reiatu-sensing ability weren't so sharp, he might not have noticed anything strange at all.

"Shun!"

Kaiser activated Shunpo, flashing toward the source of the Reiatu.

Soon, he landed atop a wall and saw the owners of the two Reiatu.

"That's..."

When he saw them clearly, Kaiser froze for a moment.

It was a combination of a Shinigami and a black cat.

"Hey! Ishida! Chad! Inoue! Where are you guys?"

The Shinigami was running along a main road, shouting loudly while running, drawing attention with his bright orange hair and ridiculously large Zanpakutō.

"Idiot! You're a Ryoka now! If you keep yelling, the Gotei 13 will find you!"

The black cat running alongside him yelled in exasperation, visibly startled by his recklessness.

"What else can I do? There's no signal here! I can't text them to come over!"

"You're the one who told them to run ahead! I told you all not to get separated in Seireitei!"

"What else could we do? That bald guy and that sissy girl blocked our path, and you said they weren't people we could fight! Of course I had to let them run!"

"Couldn't you have just run with them? You didn't have to fight!"

"Huh? Are you kidding, Yoruichi-san? If I didn't take them out, how were we supposed to escape?"

"You little punk..."

One man and one cat argued while running at high speed, clearly trying to avoid the surrounding Shinigami.

"So it's them?"

Now Kaiser understood why those two Reitsu felt so strange.

Because the owners themselves were unusual.

Especially that orange-haired Shinigami. Kaiser stared at him for a moment—then suddenly smiled.

"Shun!"

In the next instant, Kaiser used Shunpo to disappear—and reappeared right behind the man and the cat, less than a meter away.

"———!"

At that moment, both the orange-haired Shinigami and the talking black cat turned pale.

"Ichigo!"

The black cat let out a high-pitched scream.

Without thinking, the orange-haired Shinigami grabbed the hilt of his Zanpakutō, letting the bandages wrapped around the blade unravel as he slashed toward the figure behind him.

The oversized Zanpakutō released chaotic Reiatsu as it slashed toward Kaiser, sending gusts strong enough to blow his bangs.

"What a violent slash."

Kaiser simply tilted his head slightly to dodge the blade, letting the sharp winds graze his body.

The man and cat took the opportunity to leap far back, standing off against Kaiser.

"Who are you?!"

The orange-haired Shinigami stared at Kaiser and demanded an answer, while cold sweat poured down his face.

He didn't know why, but he instinctively sensed that this man was incredibly dangerous—so dangerous that even his instincts were screaming at him to run.

He had never felt this way before—not when facing powerful Hollows in the World of the Living, nor when clashing with Byakuya Kuchiki or Renji Abarai.

This was, without a doubt, the most terrifying, powerful, and invincible person he had ever encountered!

And that thought was quickly confirmed.

"The boy in the Third Division Captain's haori...?!"

The black cat at his feet narrowed its eyes and shouted loudly.

"Run! Ichigo! You absolutely cannot fight him! You'll die!"

Hearing the rare panic in the black cat's voice, Ichigo Kurosaki broke into a strained smile, sweat pouring down.

"So he's a big deal, huh... Yoruichi-san, do you know who he is?"

The answer came without hesitation.

"He's the Captain of the Third Division, the greatest genius in Soul Society's history. He's broken numerous records and accomplished unbelievable feats!"

"He became a Captain before the age of twenty, defeated the Eleventh Division Captain just six months after becoming a Shinigami, and now, decades later, he's only grown more unfathomable!"

"Among the potential enemies we feared encountering, he's one of the worst! Right now, there's no chance you could win against him!"

"Run! Run as far as you can! Don't fight him!"

"You'll die!"

As Yoruichi's warning turned into something close to a scream, Ichigo's sweat poured more profusely.

Kaiser looked at the man and cat before him—and smiled.