

Nightmares Haunt us All

By GreenieFire

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The back-story to a Bleach fan-character of mine. Yes, she becomes a Shinigami, and yes, she remembers Samuel and the happenings. To an extent.

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1 - Nightmares Haunt Us All

The mahogany-haired girl had always liked the rain. The dark clouds when she awoke promised the coming of just that, and she smiled silently to herself because of it.

Time shifted into a nearly unmoving block, as the hot metal pressed to her forehead. Was this how things looked when Death stared you in the face? When her cold, clawed hands were wrapped around your throat, choking the life from you, making your breath hitch, her foul aura washing over you; when that happened, was this what it looked like? Was this the world through the eyes of the damned? For the briefest of moments, everything was in crystal clarity, everything to the tiniest details; the tiniest details that had never even come to mind before now. The grain of the wood door, the weave of a cotton shirt, the pattern of creases on a person's knuckle, clenched, the shimmer of light on metal, coming from that same object, held in that same fist, pressed against her forehead as she stared intently ahead at the weave of the fabric, seeing that same door in her peripheral vision. The coppery, metallic smell of blood, the heavy breathing coming from directly in front of her. The fluorescent light over head buzzing, the clock ticking, the thumping of boots coming up the drive....

The sound wave hit her milliseconds before the white hot pain flared up, and after she saw the door swing in, forcefully.

Just as Akane had walked into the kitchen for breakfast that morning, pulling a dark blue sweater over her t-shirt, her older brother, Lee, went storming through the door leading outside in a huff, slamming it behind him. She thought there was some sort of flicker of shadowy movement, something hovering over him, but when she shook her head that feeling of seeing something dispelled, and was soon lost from thought.

"Geez, what was that all about?" She questioned. Lee hadn't been quite himself lately, but that was just ridiculous. Akane's mother sighed, returning to a load of laundry she'd been folding. Her eyes were ringed with dark bags; the newest member of the family, a little infant named Lao, had obviously had her up most of the night. She was asleep now, though, the little dark-haired girl.

"God knows, he's been so strange this past week. He just stormed into the room and left without saying anything...."

Akane's father came in, sitting himself down at the table with a newspaper, adjusting the large-rimmed glasses he always wore (they reminded Akane of aviator's glasses), and brushing a bit of his gelled, salt-and-pepper hair back into place. "Ah, boys will be boys. He'll be back to his normal self in no time flat; don't get so worried over it." He scoffed; the man always had an admirable way of brushing even the bigger things off as nothing. "Besides," he looked meaningfully over the black-and-white newsprint. "You know it's just around the time when his little friend passed away."

The conversation ended there, essentially. Akane had seen photographs of the aforementioned friend and Lee together as children –Lee even carried a shot of the two in the park around the block in his wallet, and there was one on the shelf in the spacious living room adjoining to the kitchen –the friend had the sort of face you wouldn't forget. His family was from America, and his hair was a fair blonde-brown; this coupled with his icy-blue eyes made him stand out a bit in their uneventful Japanese town. She'd never really known the guy –Samuel was his name – and she was too young to remember him anyways, but she'd also never been clear on his cause of death. He'd collapsed one day on the street, and the paramedics had declared the small child dead before he even made it to the hospital. The biggest mystery their sleepy home had heard of and would hear of for a long while. No clues to give a cause of death; no poison, no abrasions, no cuts or bruises, nothing. Honestly, Akane had some empathy for her brother, but she'd never let him know that.

“Right, well I'm off to school then.” She stood, rinsing the cereal bowl and spoon she'd eaten out of in the sink and drying them off, putting them into the cupboard. “If Lee gets home from work before I'm back from school, then I say ‘Suck it up,’ ‘kay?” She waved casually to her parents, not looking behind her at them, and pranced out the doorway.

The mahogany-haired girl stepped out into the overgrown garden. It used to be well tended, their middle-of-the-town property, but since her mother had gotten pregnant again and been generally unwell, and her father had bad knees and no patience for that sort of thing (and her brother either too busy or too stingy), nothing got done and it had overgrown. Akane sure as Hell wasn't doing anything about it; she'd just end up killing the plant life. It would wait.

She sighed, and slung her pack higher onto her back. Looking left and right at the roadside, she forced herself to double take- had she just seen that? “Ah, Akane, you're going crazy again.” She reassured herself. But she had to look again; she could have sworn there'd been a fair-haired dude in a black outfit with a sword –a katana? –just there, in front of the corner store near their home. She was forever seeing things that weren't there. Her friends teased her about it when they were younger, and her family knew nothing of it. She couldn't really find many logical explanations; seeing things, imagining them, etc. Once, an annoying, nosy kid in her classes had overheard her, and claimed that what she'd seen was a ghost. That was out of the question; Akane didn't believe in the supernatural. She'd shut up long ago. She probably just needed glasses or something.

Akane jumped when, along the street adjoining to her own, a ringer went off in her pocket. Bells jingling up and down the musical scale, twice. Ah, she'd forgotten to turn the volume on that down.... She flipped open the sleek, shiny black and silver phone, checking the new text message. *'I see yooouuu =>'* the message said. She rolled her eyes. “Oh, what a coincidence. An anonymous stalker with the same phone number as my best friend. Aaaahhh.”

No sooner had she said anything than Akane was keeling over with the weight of a second body. “Falling- Maura, bad!” She struggled for a moment, and couldn't help but grin when she shoved the taller raven-haired girl off of her. Taller, but that wasn't such a difficult feat, considering nearly-sixteen-year-old Akane's five-foot-nothing. “Geez,” She exaggerated a sigh, picking up her previous, casual pace. “Didn't we go over not doing that already?” Akane motioned with her hands, emphasizing the ‘not’. Well, she didn't really care so much, but Maura needed the discouragement.

The girl shrugged, matching Akane's pace easily. "Old habits die hard? But besides. You," Maura poked her shorter companion in the back of the shoulder blade, gaining an 'Ow, stoppit....' from Akane, "Forgot a lunch again today didn't you?"

Akane stuck her tongue out. "Nope, I—" she paused, remembering the package left back in the refrigerator. "Oh, right. Well, yeah, guess so.... Ah well, no biggie." She was often forgetting small things like that; it didn't bother her much.

"What are we going to do with you, Akane?" She immediately produced a square shaped lunchbox from her over-the-shoulder messenger bag. "Tada."

Akane accepted it gratefully, rolling her eyes. "You're a life saver. Not the candy, I mean in the actual sense of the word." They prattled back and forth, talking about meaningless topics; answers to homework, gossip, guys, and other things the average teenage girl would. When they came into view of the school building, still two blocks down the street, Maura slowed her pace, mid-length jet-black hair bouncing and deep hazel eyes questioning.

The school building was about as humble and unobtrusive as a structure so surprisingly large could be. It was built, for the most part, from a smooth cinnamon coloured brick, accented in darker brown and cream. The sign at the roadside, which read the school's name, was lettered in the same off-white, on a black background, and if the sign hadn't announced it (as well as the flow of students going in and out), one wouldn't guess the building behind was a school. The yard was trimmed with shrubbery and tree life; to get to the sports fields and gymnasium the school proudly sported one either had to trek around the side of the tan building through the home grown miniature forest, walk around the block and take the gate out back, or go through the building itself, which was once again, mostly brown throughout. The front half of the building rose two floors, the first of which opened into a square lobby. But once past the lobby and offices, the school grew to include a third floor, which had numerous doors opening out onto both levels of the roof itself. At the very back was the one-floor gymnasium building, beside the sports fields which were often in use.

The building itself wasn't what made Akane's companion Maura pause in her step. It was a boy –or, rather, man- who stood beside the front doors, which were themselves four abreast. His light hazel eyes were scanning the area rather anxiously, obviously looking for something –or someone.

"Akane, isn't that your older brother...? Lee?"

Akane's own golden tan eyes snapped up from fiddling with the shoulder strap of her bag. "Wha..? Thought he was supposed to be at work.... He did leave in a bad mood this morning; I wasn't sure what that was about...." She approached him a minute later, casually. "Hey, weird-o, what's up?"

Akane and her brother Lee, senior by just over five years at 21 though he was still at home for the time, shared a couple of physical traits neither of their parents seemed to have passed down. Neither of them had the black hair their parents did, for one; Akane's shoulder-length locks were dark red, almost a brown-black colour, and while Lee's was different, it was still dark, chestnut dark and cavalier. They both also had the same light brown eye shade, sometimes referred to as Topaz. And they looked alike; no one could ever make the mistake that they weren't siblings.

There was a desperate, fearful look in his eyes when Lee loped forward and grabbed his younger sister by the shoulders, causing her to jump a little. "Akane, you've seen him haven't you? You've seen it? He was- I mean it- I don't know if-" He cut off, turning away and coughing into his fist. "You need to-" He was cut off by Akane now, frowning.

"What the hell's the matter?" She grabbed the hand that was still resting on her shoulder. "You look like crap, and you're talking gibberish. You have a fever, or what?" She reached up to feel his forehead, but Lee jerked away, reeling with an expression like a cornered beast. He really did look horrible; dishevelled and panicked. All the while, Maura stood by helplessly, and by passers gave them strange looks, or ignored the ordeal.

"No, I, uh, I have to go; be careful." He loped off in a hurry, towards the outskirts of town. Maura giggled nervously. "Be careful? That was kind of weird, huh? What's gotten into him? Akane?"

"No idea...." But she was distracted; now she was sure she'd seen some sort of... thing following her brother around, but it had passed too quickly again. Whatever it was wasn't the only thing there for Akane to think she'd seen. Turning back towards the tall and slimly built Maura, her eyes trailed past the front of the school, happening to pass over the roof. She was positive she caught a glimpse of the same black kimono-wearing, katana-wielding, fair-haired guy she'd seen that morning; he was gone in another flash. "Did you see...." Akane shook her head. "Er, let's get into class, it's probably nothing." She waved it off. Maura gladly accepted the 'nothing' excuse and the two prattled on again, though Akane's attention wasn't on the topics as fully as it had been before. At least Maura didn't pay so much attention.

Akane refused to believe she'd been seeing ghosts, though it would be a logical explanation as to what had Lee worked up, if he could see them too. Her mind kept running through scenarios and excuses, but they just kept getting wilder and wilder until she kept running back to the same conclusion; her brother was seeing something, and it wasn't quite human....

But whatever it was, they were both seeing them now. Or, she was kind of. But who was the weird dude with the sword? Was he following her, or.... She stopped herself, scorning the thought. There was no one following her or her brother. She was seeing things and he was delirious; probably sick. She'd have to remember to mention that to her mother after school. She let it slip from her mind for a time, concentrating on getting to class.

"OH my God, Akane, guess who just asked me out to lunch with him?"

Despite the repercussions she was constantly giving herself, Akane had been wondering about the strange events again, trying to remember who the glimpse of the black-suited man reminded her of. The face had struck a chord in her memory, but she couldn't quite place it. "Hmm?" She returned from her reveries slowly, realizing only now that Maura had wandered away from her desk when she'd become unresponsive. "Oh? Who's the mystery man?"

Maura seemed bursting to relay her news. "Shen Gisai." She said smugly. Akane drew a blank. "You remember... the soccer player? Come on Akane, you aren't that clueless." She giggled lightly, but then

her expression dropped a tad –only a bit. “Oh, but I’ll be ditching you, then.... I’m sorry, Akane....”

“Oh, right, him, I remember now.... Nice catch.” She didn’t remember any Shen Gisais, but played along for Maura’s sake. She looked so apologetic that Akane couldn’t help but laugh. “Hah, don’t worry about it, I’ll find some way to occupy my lunch hour. I think I’ve got some homework I never finished anyway.” No, she hadn’t had much homework to finish last night; she’d done it all in class.

Maura’s face lit up; she’d been hoping for an answer just like this, evidently. She was so uppity for the rest of the morning that Akane couldn’t help but be pulled into the endless talk, and forced to shove the thoughts of her brother and the mysterious ninja-man ungracefully into the back of her mind, dredged in forgetfulness.

When the two went their separate ways at lunch, Akane found herself, as if by accident, walking towards the badly lit library, the only source of light for which was the windows –it was a cloudy day –and the fuzzy, florescent lights, which seemed to be dying out. Walking into the large pentagonal room, unsure of what her purpose there was, she waved to the young librarian, smiling meekly.

As if guided there, Akane sat down at the bank of old, slow school computers. She logged onto the student network and waited for the entire thing to boot up, which took ages as far as she was concerned. She leaned back in the chair, rocking onto the back legs and staring out one of the windows, as if expecting to see her mystery kimono-man pop by out of thin air. She nearly screamed when she got a rap on the back of the head from the librarian, Mrs. Teri, passing with a pile of books. She stifled it, catching herself on the desk before she fell back onto the floor of the empty library.

“And that’s precisely why you shouldn’t be leaning back on the chairs.” A mocking smile danced across the young lady’s too-pink, over-make-upped face and she pointed to the sign beside the front desk which read, ‘Keep all four on the ground –you’ll thank me’ and pictured a cartoony chair and man, both sprawled out on the invisible ‘floor’.

“Eh heh....” Akane turned, embarrassed, back to the now loaded computer screen when the librarian walked away, the ghost of a smirk still present on her face, and her high-heeled, strappy sandals tapping against the floor. She shook her head in annoyance; she’d been really freaked for a second there. Now with some idea of what she was doing, Akane pulled up a popular search engine on the internet, tapping her own sneaker-clad feet against the chair leg in impatience. When she typed ‘man in black kimono, katana’ the screen brought up with millions of results. This, of course, took even longer to come up. Of course, all of the obvious results popped in, pointless to her search. Advertisements for movies and mangas, characters in TV shows, news articles, she skimmed over them all. A few of the links the search gave her featured long monologues about ancient Ninja or Samurai, though just a few. She clicked an interesting looking one for kicks, looking back to check Mrs. Teri’s progress, inching through the aisles with armloads of books. The clock announced there were still forty-five minutes until lunch ended.

‘Ninja’ wasn’t exactly what came to mind when she’d seen the man that morning. Nor was it mentioned much in the article she read following. It was some strange mumbo-jumbo about a big monster completely engulfed in shadow, a demon that came to eat souls; take them away to another dimension. She skimmed the article, less and less convinced, when she read the final lines. *“...Not to be mistaken for the Death god [See ‘Shinigami’] of a debatably similar description.”*

“‘Death god’?”

“Is something wrong, Akane?” She jerked back. She’d only muttered it but apparently the librarian woman had good hearing. She hadn’t been aware the woman knew her name. She didn’t read much, as a rule.

“Oh, heh, it’s nothing....” She said it a bit too cheerfully. It was about now, attention drawn away for a moment, that Akane realized just how bright the screen had gotten. *No, the room got darker....* She glanced out the window –the clouds were ominously dark, roiling. It was going to storm.

And, as if on cue, the rain started pattering down on the windows, ground, roof –every available surface. It fell, sounding its natural rhythm in tune with Akane’s typing. She searched up this Shinigami thing. Yup, it meant Death god, alright. She checked the time. Twenty minutes left, and no one else had even come by the library. There were a lot of different debates on the form Shinigami took. Some people believed they were monsters, taking your souls to Hell, others believed they were like angels. There were people who thought they were ghosts, guides, and some people who viewed them as people who wandered among everyday crowds, interacting in everyday life. But nowhere were there any more mentions of the black kimono.

Soon, thunder was cracking, followed quickly by flashes of white hot lightning in the distance.

After another fifteen minutes of searching, Akane gave up, just about ready to head back to class. What was the use, anyways? She was just being stupid. She sighed, closing her eyes, but reopened them to a few strangled shrieks and giggles somewhere in the hallways. She realized she was staring at the black computer screen, seeing the reflection of herself.

The librarian, Mrs. Teri, called over. “It seems the power’s gone out, I hope you weren’t doing any school work...?” A moment later, there was a faint glow as she set a candle on the desk.

“....You keep candles and matches in your desk drawer?” Akane scoffed.

“I always come prepared.”

“Ah....” *For what, a séance?*

Akane waved good naturedly to a couple of police officers who stood parked in front of the corner store. When she finally made it to the front door of her home that afternoon, she found most thoughts of everything blown from her mind. The girl had been piled with homework, and some friends had invited her out to the movies, too....

The thunder, lightning, rain and pellets of hail which had begun to fall rapidly dissipated, leaving a hot, humid feeling hanging in the air, a strange thing coupled with the now-melting piles of icy rubble. The calm after the storm. Everything was restored to a corporeal newness. Akane always found it refreshing. She loved the naturalness everything seemed restored to when the rain let up and the winds died down.

Things were quiet, almost eerily so.

The eerie silence carried on into the kitchen when Akane forced the door open –it had a habit of sticking, especially when it was wet. “Hello? Anybody home?” There were no answers. That wasn’t normal. Her mother should have answered, though her father would be asleep. He worked the midnight security shift. Akane had no clue about her brother.

The tranquility was broken the moment she stepped into the living room, on the other side of the kitchen. From that moment on, she would wish she’d gone home with Maura or another of her classmates to study. No chances now.

Stepping through the door-less frame, Akane froze when she heard a soft *click*; one she didn’t misinterpret.

For a very short duration, Akane’s father, Shuu, had been in the military. He’d been honourably discharged a low-ranking man not long after joining up when he was in a minor accident, injuring his back. He had a bad back and knees as a result, and now worked as a security officer, but he still had the pistol issued to him. It was kept locked in a safe, and old antique. But it was still usable.

The deadly weapon hadn’t even crossed Akane’s mind since she was a child, the last time she’d actually seen it, but her father had shown it to her many a time at her own request before then, and she knew the soft click it made when cocked back like her own heartbeat. Maybe even better. She didn’t listen to her heartbeat a lot. That might be a little strange.

She froze in place, finding herself staring at the barrel of that familiar weapon.

“Come on in, girl, sit.” Lee had a lazy expression on his face. It wasn’t at all like his usual sarcastic, cavalier look. The gun in his hand wavered between her and her parents, both on the couch.

“Akane- out—” Her father made as if to get up and step forward, but stopped when Lee made as if to club her over the head.

“No, man. Now, girl, didn’t I just ask you to come in and sit down?”

The newborn baby Lao wailed from somewhere upstairs. Akane couldn’t comprehend any of it. She didn’t comply. She refused to believe this was actual reality. She must be dreaming...?

Hadn’t she just seen two police officers outside? She debated breaking for it, but....

“Lee, what-what are you....” She finally choked out, still confused as ever.

“I thought it was obvious, wasn’t it? I was going to sh—” Only a couple of feet away Akane had made a grab for the pistol, intending on turning it on him while she backed out the door to get the cops. The plan backfired; Lee was both bigger and stronger than her, and he seemed to be anticipating it. He tossed her to the ground like nothing. Akane lay on her back, the wind knocked out of her, when he placed his foot in the middle of her chest, holding her down. Both parents ground their teeth, wanting desperately to jump up and stop him.

Lee's expression turned to disgust and disdain. "Don't do that, it's below someone of your spiritual pressure." The voice didn't even sound like Lee's now. It was raspy and hoarse.

"Spiritual –my what?"

He'd never been one of those guys who smiled at everything. He was happy, but he could be serious, too. When he chuckled now, his face didn't smile. Or even show any sign of amusement.

"No matter now. It won't be long before you'll be past caring about that." He played around with the gun for a moment, taunting the three. Upstairs, the baby ceased her crying only to resume a minute later.

Akane's father rose from where he was seated, slowly now. "Now, Lee, just hold on a minute here. We can talk this out, huh?"

Lee waved the handgun to remind him who was in charge. "Who do you think you are; Lee's evil twin brother or something?" Akane growled, still pinned under a sneaker-clad foot.

He crouched down, taking his hazel eyes off of the father to peer into her light brown irises. He sighed. "Lee isn't *in* anymore. I suggest shutting the Hell up." She squeezed her eyes shut tight and rolled into a ball, hands clasped over her ears when he fired of two shots in rapid succession.

When she finally found the will to look, she saw her older brother, who didn't seem so much like the older brother she knew, still standing, expression blank, gun still pointed towards the opposite side of the room. She turned, eyes wide, to see both of her parents slumped on the couch, and both clutching their sides, hands already slick with the same crimson liquid. She doubted she would have noticed they were still breathing had her eyes not been open so wide. She was, frankly, in shock, and still denying any of this could be happening, to her of all people.

Akane resolved then and there that she had to do something. She surveyed everything for a brief moment. Lee's expression was blank, and he wasn't paying any attention to her. During the process of throwing her down, he'd gotten himself closer to the kitchen doorway and as a result, outside –between her and outside –so making a break for it was out of the question. But the sound of the pistol Lee had fired was loud. Very loud. If the cops she'd seen just minutes before were still out there, they could burst in the door any minute. They might not, though.

Before she could really register what she was doing, Akane found herself grappling the gun out of her brother's hand –reminiscent of a small dog taking on a bear thrice its size –once again to be thrown to the floor, but with one key difference. She'd held onto the gun. Hands shaking like leaves in the fall breeze, she pointed it at her brother. *Oh, God, what the Hell?*

He smirked. "What are you planning on doing, shooting me?"

It had still only been half a minute since he fired the two shots, and the road was a good twenty feet from the house.

She thought she could hear confused shouts from out at the road, but her ears were still ringing from the resounding boom of the pistol. He tilted his head that way. Apparently *whoever* he was had heard it, too. “Better make it quick.” He sent a smug look her way. “They’re wondering what’s happening.”

Akane bit her bottom lip. Both her parents were struggling to rise. They both failed. “Who—what are you?” The brown-eyed girl’s tone was low and hesitant. But underneath the calm voice with its meek undercurrent, she was just plain pissed. Who did he think he was? Her brother wasn’t himself, this wasn’t Lee. She had to deal with it; either Lee had gone mentally insane over night, or he was being freaking POSSESSED right in front of her eyes. Either one was bad! She had resolve. She had to. She *had* to. Had to do something. “What the *HELL* are you?!?”

He laughed. “Wrong quest—” But he was cut off by the loud, resonating boom, identical to that previous. The un-Lee looked down, eyes shooting wide open, pupils dilating. “You little.... That hurt like a b—” He swore loudly, clutching the place sanguine liquid oozed from, staining his snow white shirt a crimson colour. “You little dog. For that, I take your soul slowly and painfully.” He seemed to shake himself, ignoring the obvious pain like it was nothing. The man who was no longer Akane’s brother, had a voice so filled with rage now, so husky and malicious that she was completely convinced it couldn’t be real.

Her *soul*?

Akane’s baby sister, alone and befuddled upstairs, had fallen into quiet sobs.

She fell backwards, the gun snatched from her grip by her non-brother, and caught herself at the last minute, stumbling forward onto her knees. This was inhuman. Much as she hated the thought, she had shot him *in the heart* and he had hardly been fazed. She gasped as the hot metal of the gun pressed a circle into her forehead.

She glared up into his eyes, shocked (though she guessed she shouldn’t have been) when ‘Lee’s’ eyes were no longer their old, warm brown, but a cold, hard black, like slate. Tears were beginning to sting her own irises.

“Shots fired! Shots fired! Move!”

She nearly broke into hysterics. The cops could come on in, for all she cared. He brother wasn’t going to be saved. Whatever the hell was wrong with him, she was pretty sure it was more than too late. Screw it.

Time froze. It was like watching a flashback in an old movie. Everything in her line of vision was desaturated, but yet it was all visible with a new, crystalline clarity. Nothing like she’d ever seen before. Akane didn’t appreciate it at all. Was this Death’s idea of a cruel joke? It must be; she imagined Death liked playing that sort of joke. It must get boring, watching people die all day, after all, so why not play a few little tricks here and there to ease that boredom.

She didn’t believe that crock about your life flashing before your eyes when you were about to kick the bucket. It was stupid.

Akane closed her eyes tight and cursed at him. Cursed whatever was possessing Lee’s mind and body.

Three things happened at once. The same aura the mahogany-haired Akane had thought she'd felt follow her brother around that morning made its presence known again, a dark and foreboding feeling; the door crashed open, forced in by the boots of a police officer; and Lee pulled the trigger.

The pain flared up for only a second before she knew no more and it all went black.

Akane Sharhei had never felt anything like it. Death. It was a weird thing, and it wasn't like anything she'd heard speculated before. There was an intense feeling of falling, a rushing noise, and her vision blurred for but a second, but when she came back to the here and now, the tableaux had changed. Her brother was on the floor, face down and rigid, three officers stood in the doorway, confused expressions painted on their features –she noted that their fingers were all off the triggers of their handguns; then the two final things. Her –her *body* lay there face down, blood pooling in intricate patterns on the carpeted floor, and above *her*, but staring into her eyes was a... a....

An ape. An ape with a white mask. A huge purple and black ape, with a white mask, and a hole no bullet could produce, running through its chest. The mask had no expression.

“What... the hell are you?!?” She gasped. The question was getting redundant.

“Your soul will be particularly tasty, I think.” The masked monster cackled, taking two booming steps forward, and ignoring the blatant question.

“My soul....” Akane shut her eyes tight, closing out the world around her, which itself was moving in a blur. The police, who just moments before had rushed in followed soon after by paramedics, evidently noticed neither her nor the brutish beast which stood crouched under the low ceiling. “This is a dream, a fracking nightmare.” She growled, nearly in hysterics.

“Sorry to have to say it, but it's not. Not a dream, I mean.” The voice sounded commanding and sure of itself. A man; and a voice she'd never heard before. It didn't belong to the people who had rushed in moments before.

Akane looked up curiously to see the monster's mask was cracked through the center, and from the center of the fissure protruded a sharp knife-like object. When the body thumped to the floor, the officers noticed it; or the sound at least. Behind it, a brazen, katana wielding man pulled the weapon he'd used to spear the creature with out of its skull, before the corpse simply vaporized into particles before her very eyes. He was garbed similar to the confusing man she'd seen earlier, in a black kimono and carrying a long, thin Japanese sword. Befuddled as ever, she stumbled forward a step.

“A 'Hollow'.” A stern but soft sounding voice explained from behind her.

She spun, the tears previously been threatening to fall gone like the wind. And there he was, the man she'd been so intent on figuring out. “'Hollow'?” The black-kimono, sword-bearing, fair-haired guy who'd stood on the corner of the road; the guy she'd kept seeing around town everywhere. “You –you're that guy... from before....” she choked out, voice hoarse.

“So you did see me....” He cocked an eyebrow and smirked in an expression she couldn’t really classify. It irked her how familiar his face looked. He couldn’t be much older than herself.

The man who’d stabbed the ‘hollow’ sighed. “Messy business this.” He looked apologetic. “A hollow’s a corrupt human spirit. We’ve been tracking this one a few days; he’s known as ‘Puppet Master’. He takes people’s spirits, possesses their bodies and then gathers the families together and takes all their souls. I’m sincerely sorry we didn’t get him before he took your brother.... Or before he killed you.”

The last line really brought her back to reality. A lone tear trickled down her cheek. Until now, she hadn’t noticed the paramedics taking both her parents out –the other two stretchers were covered over. Bodies. One of the cops walked up to a lone medical officer.

“How d’you think they’ll be?”

“The parents will be fine as soon as we get them to the hospital. Bullets missed the vitals, it would seem, but they’ve got some shattered bones, and they’re losing blood pressure.” The woman sounded snappish and unmotherly.

Then one more police officer; one of the ones who had been at the street corner came down carrying her little baby sister. She’d finally fallen asleep, swaddled in shockingly bright blankets the colour of bright sunlight. Akane choked back a sob.

When she made as to stumble forward, the fair-haired man behind her caught her around the waist, holding her steady. “Whoa, whoa, whoa,” His tone was obviously supposed to be comforting. Like Hell. “Calm down a second, there’s nothing more you can do. I’m sorry.” Considering he was a complete stranger, he sounded pretty sincere.

“Dead. A ghost. Hah, funny, I don’t look transparent....” She examined her hands with a half-hearted chuckle. “But... what about my brother!? What happened to him?!? He was fine this morning.... He tried to warn me....”

“He tried to warn you about the hollow just before it completely took his soul. He obviously had a high spiritual pressure....” The lanky man holding her released his iron grip.

The second man bent down to her eye-level. Damn tall people. “We’re Shinigami.” Her eyes shot wide. Death gods? “It’s our job to purify hollows, and send spirits to soul Society. In your culture, that would be ‘Heaven’.” He smirked at her furrowed brow. “It’s a nice place, don’t worry. And if you did really see Samuel earlier like you said, how knows, your spirit pressure might just be high enough to become a Shinigami yourself. Like I said, we’re sorry about-”

“Stop. Stop saying you’re sorry.” She snapped grumpily. “It’s not like you killed my brother.” She bit her lip. Police were moving in and out of the building now, and it was surrounded with yellow plastic police tape. Something clicked. “Hold on –your name’s Samuel?” She strode forward two steps and grabbed a picture frame from the mantle-piece. In it were two young boys, one fair-haired and curiously smirking, the other just grinning like a madman, with dark brownish hair. Her Samuel and her brother.

The second Shinigami took one look and broke into a bark of laughter. "Hah! Sam! It's you as a kid!"

He chuckled. "I guess I knew your brother in this world, huh?" He noticed her look of dismay. "Shinigami don't generally remember these things."

"Ah...." She breathed, setting the picture on the mantle, which was rather in disarray. "I will...."

"So you're ready?"

"So I'll see you there?" She turned to Sam and the unnamed, dark-haired Shinigami.

They both looked sceptical, but Samuel shrugged, raising his sword hilt to tap her on the head, "Sure, why not?"

Taking one resolute glance around the room, Akane left her human home one last time, in a gradual blue flash.

She had always loved the rain. The way it cleansed everything, the way it calmed her mind and everything it touched on, the way it cooled the air and how it felt when she ran out in it. It didn't rain much in Soul Society. Not usually. That was her motivation, or part of it at least. She wanted to be able to go back to the Real world and walk through the rain again, at her leisure. There was one way for her to be allowed to go back and still remember who she was. It couldn't be all that hard to become a Shinigami, could it?