

Gin and Rangiku: What Might Have Been

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Gin and Rangiku: What Might Have Been

by [ForeverRomantic](#)

Summary

After life-saving help arrives just in time, Ichimaru Gin and Matsumoto Rangiku finally have a chance to be together, but will the consequences of the former's perceived betrayal against Soul Society prove to be an impossible barrier to overcome?

This is a happy ending, but not in the way you think.

My wish fulfillment for my favorite BLEACH ship, exploring what could have happened if just a few events in the Arrancar arc were shifted around.

Notes

This fic was basically my love letter to BLEACH. I wrote this a few years ago and have been trying to work up the nerve to create a fanfiction account since. I finally did it! I haven't watched BLEACH in a while, but I used to be so obsessed. It was what got me into anime. Like, I used to be able to recite the Gotei 13 captains and their squad numbers by heart. I stayed as true as I could to the original and just altered some of the world's rules for the story, like with the Hogyoku.

It feels so nice to return to this story. Please enjoy!

Sorry if there are formatting inconsistencies and for the lack of italics; this is my first time on Archive and I'm still learning.

I do not own BLEACH or any of the characters.

Content/Potential Triggers:

sensuality, graphic violence, mild language, bullying, assault

PART 1

Hueco Mundo. Such an odd place, Orihime thought, to feel safe. And yet, Ichigo had left her there, because right now, Earth, her home, Karakura Town, was more dangerous than she'd ever thought possible.

“Sosuke Aizen,” she whispered, a spectral wind throwing sand around her long chestnut hair. She closed her eyes tight and leaned against one of the bleak gray desert trees, everything about the frightening world screaming “death.”

“You’re still worried about Ichigo?” Uryu asked.

“Of course,” she replied. “And everyone else. The captains and lieutenants, all the people fighting. I know I can’t fight, but I could at least...”

Uryu pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his pointer finger. “Ichigo would run me through with Zangetsu if I brought you back to Karakura Town right now.”

She looked at him, her dark gray eyes glistening with desperation. And just like when she'd begged him to bring her here, to the desert, when Ichigo had fought Ulquiorra, Uryu's resolve wavered.

Yes, it would be dangerous to return right now, but Orihime had a point. Though she lacked the grit to use Tsubaki, the “fighter” of her Six Flowers power, to his full potential, her Soten Kisshun—healing—was phenomenal. So much so that Aizen himself had kidnapped her by means of a complicated psychological trick: come to us, he'd ordered Ulquiorra to threaten, or we come for everyone you care about.

But her powers hadn't been nearly as valuable to Aizen as he'd thought. They would, however, be priceless on the battlefield. As long as she stayed hidden from Aizen and his Espada and the two traitor soul-reaper captains, Gin and Kaname, who'd plotted with him for a long time.

Sighing, Uryu muttered, “I feel captain-level spiritual pressure below, different from the Arrancar. Looks like reinforcements have arrived. Let's see if they know a way back. I don't want to get your hopes up, though. I'm sure they'll tell us to stay here and out of the way just like Ichigo.”

Despite the reality of the situation, Orihime's shoulders sagged with relief. “Thank you, Uryu.”

“Don't thank me yet,” he said, then channeled his Quincy energy into the platform that would take them back to the lower level of Hueco Mundo.

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Around one hundred years ago, after a fateful incident, Gin had fastened a mask to his face, the one he still wore today. Ever obedient to Aizen, now, he opened the Senkaimon, the gate

to Soul Society, with a practiced twist of Shinso, his Zanpakuto. To everyone who crossed his path, he wore a permanent smirk that teased “if I’m not already up to no good, I probably will be soon.” Yes, his pale-silver-hair-framed mask; he wore it well. Not even Aizen, whom he’d made a point to stay exceptionally close to over the decades, had a clue.

“Everything we’ve waited for, Gin,” Aizen murmured in that patient way of his, too calmly and pleasantly for a heartless power-desirer. “It’s coming to an end. A beginning.”

Gin grinned, an involuntary action he’d perfected over the years, as they stepped through the Senkaimon. “My, my. Aren’t ya gettin’ ahead of yourself?”

“No, Gin,” Aizen replied, staring at the real Karakura Town after having just come from the fake one the Gotei Thirteen had swapped. “I’m right on time.” Clever and a lot of effort, hiding the real Karakura Town in Soul Society, but not clever enough for Aizen. All that was left was to find the Oken, the key, as the Hogyoku ever increased his power.

They wove through bodies sleeping on the streets, the soul reapers’ way of protecting the innocent citizens of Karakura Town. Aizen smiled, the violet sclera of his morphed eyes reflecting light from nearby buildings. And yet, in all this stillness, someone screamed.

A group of teenagers came barreling out from an alley, one carrying an unconscious friend. They froze at both the sight and spiritual pressure of Gin and Aizen, the latter looking especially intimidating and otherworldly since his transformation. “Wh—who are you?” stammered the girl with the friend on her back.

Aizen, ever calm, stopped and considered the group. “Mere humans with a fragment of spirit energy; that must be why they’re not sleeping like the rest. Regardless, none of them are useful. Kill them, Gin, so we can be on our way.”

Gin’s gut twisted, as it always did, but like his mask, he’d mastered the art of ignoring his feelings. Aizen had a goal, but Gin had his own. And he would see it through: it was the only purpose he’d clung to for the past century.

As he drew Shinso, he recited to himself what had become his mantra: these were mere casualties of a war. They meant nothing to him. He knew, in a way, that that reasoning made him more heartless than Aizen. But he’d stopped caring about broader morals on that day a hundred years ago, the day that had turned his vision red and started the only war that mattered to him.

The war between him and Aizen.

The war Aizen didn’t even know he was fighting.

The grin-mask still plastered to his face, he angled his Zanpakuto and ordered, “Kill ’em dead, Shinso.”

A second before his blade extended, a blur darted in front of the quavering group.

A rare frown cracked Gin’s consistent mask.

“Rangiku,” he said, his guard dropping, leaking emotion for only a moment before he composed himself again.

Her shihakusho was torn in a few places, revealing red-dotted bandages, and sweat poured down her face, dampening her long golden hair. But she still pressed the blade of her own Zanpakuto against Shinso, hers having cracked from the force.

“I won’t let you hurt anyone else,” she insisted through gritted teeth, though she panted from the effort. The words pinched Gin’s heart; he knew she’d meant them for him just as much as Aizen.

“Ya shouldn’t be here,” Gin said through his grin as he retracted his Zanpakuto.

“Hello, Miss Matsumoto,” Aizen drawled. “A lovely surprise.”

“I want to talk to you,” she said to Gin, ignoring Aizen.

Inside, Gin hesitated. But his mask cast Aizen an apologetic glance. “Sorry for the hindrance. Better’d get this over with.” At least he wouldn’t have to kill the teenagers now. He still felt their feeble spiritual pressure nearby, but they’d run away the moment Rangiku had intercepted his Zanpakuto.

Struggling to remain indifferent despite panic and fear, he snatched Rangiku against his chest and flashstepped across buildings until he found one far enough from Aizen. He knew if he hadn’t, Aizen would have waited only a few seconds more before ordering him to kill her too. And that would have forced him to make his move prematurely. Not quite yet, he thought. Almost there, but just a little longer.

And that meant he couldn’t let Rangiku suspect anything either.

“Let me go,” she growled, pushing herself out of his arms and landing several feet away on top of the building in a pained crouch. Wincing, she managed to stand, but held the bandage wrapped around her ribs.

“Why’d ya come here, especially in that condition?” Gin asked as casually as he could muster, his grin forcing rising concern back down his throat. Forcing the memories of that day to the back of his mind, back to the driver’s seat where it fueled his ultimate goal.

“I felt your spiritual pressure,” she said, shaking now from the effort of standing. “I couldn’t stand it anymore. I just... Why? Why, Gin?”

“What are ya talkin’ about?” Gin replied carefully. “Why did I turn into the bad guy? I was always the bad guy, Rangiku. You just never saw it.”

“No,” she snapped. “There had to be a reason. In the hundred years I’ve known you, you’ve never done anything without a reason.” She averted her eyes, still panting, then added, “I just never knew what any of those reasons were.”

Gin took a step toward her. “Maybe you’re right. And maybe ya never will.”

Rangiku swallowed hard, her eyes glistening. Don't, Gin pleaded inside his mind, contrasting his cheerful exterior. Don't.

Sure enough, when she spoke next, she said, "The last time you left when we were kids, right before I found you again in the Seireitei, I asked why you were going, why you wanted to become a soul reaper. And you said it was so I wouldn't have to cry anymore. That was one of those reasons I've never understood. If you won't tell me why you joined forces with Aizen and the hollows, at least tell me what exactly you meant by that. What were you thinking? What are you thinking? I've never been able to guess. Maybe because you've never stayed long enough."

Once more, Gin's faithful grin collapsed. She was entering dangerous territory. Maybe he could tell her once he'd accomplished his goal. Maybe he couldn't.

But for now, that was what he needed to focus on, his lone objective. And first, he needed to make sure Rangiku was safe.

Wordlessly, he closed the distance between them and laid a gentle hand on the long necklace draped across her décolletage. She'd always been beautiful. So, so beautiful, the perfect hourglass picture of a woman both soul and body. But what did that matter? Beauty didn't drive his goal; something like that could only be appreciated as an afterthought.

Now, he thought about how she flirted with almost every guy she encountered just for fun but never meant it, how she loved to laugh and get carefree drunk on sake, how she found joy in the pettiest of things, how she furrowed her brows whenever she got serious enough to draw her Zanpakuto—and how she'd looked at him with a breaking heart in her eyes every time he'd left.

Though every time he'd left, he'd wanted to stay.

He bowed his head toward her hair, breathing her in. She stilled, her ragged breaths softening in anticipation, maybe fear. He wouldn't be surprised; his mask was scary indeed.

Renewing his resolve, he bared his teeth in a quiet snarl and warned, "Ya won't have to worry about questions like those much longer."

Gasping, she reached for her Zanpakuto to defend herself, but he was faster. She was only a lieutenant, after all, and he'd long since been a captain, having flown through the Soul Reaper Academy in record time, when he was still a kid, at that.

He watched her eyes close and her limp form fall to the cement of the rooftop. This would be the safest place for her right now. He couldn't wait any longer, because he was afraid Aizen wouldn't.

After taking one more moment to make sure the kido spell he'd used had truly knocked her unconscious, he whirled and flashstepped back across the buildings until he reached the alleyway intersection where he'd left Aizen waiting. Now, after having just left Rangiku—after having just touched her—his resolve blazed at the sight of him, telling him the time had come at last.

A hundred years' worth of painstaking calculation, the moment he'd waited and timed just right...

"Sorry, Captain," he said with his usual smirk and melodic Kyoto accent. "She was a bit more trouble than I'd thought."

Aizen looked at him disinterestedly. "Don't tell me you killed her?"

Gin's smirk morphed to his grin. "Of course, what else?"

"Ever my most loyal accomplice," remarked Aizen, seeming satisfied. "Let us continue, then." He lifted his Zanpakuto, Kyokasuigetsu, slightly in admiration. "Just think how much more powerful I'll become, and how much more powerful still after that."

Mentally, Gin braced himself as he eyed the gleaming blade.

Now.

Slackening his muscles even more, smoothly, he edged toward Aizen and rested his fingertips on the Zanpakuto. "Such dedication. Truly, ya inspire."

A breath.

"Kill 'em dead, Shinso."

Aizen made a horrible choking, gagging noise in time with the perfectly aimed squelch of Gin's Zanpakuto.

"Wh-what?" he spluttered, pulling at the blade in his chest.

"No use," Gin said, grinning his first true grin in a long, long time. "It's spirit poison."

"How?" Aizen managed, blood streaming from his mouth, staining his solid white garb, tangling with his newly long hair.

"How did I know how to break Kyokasuigetsu's hypnosis, ya mean?" Gin laughed.

"Patience, Captain. That's how."

Gin retracted Shinso. Aizen's gaze followed the small glowing orb that sat on the blade. In desperation, he clutched at it, but Gin was faster, putting several yards between them in less than a second.

"Do ya want to know the future?" he taunted, clutching the orb tightly. "The Hogyoku's gonna be destroyed, and so will the point of everything ya did."

A geyser of light spewed from the wound in Aizen's chest. His face contorted as he screamed in defeat.

After flashstepping to an alley a few blocks down, Gin opened his hand and studied the Hogyoku glowing in his palm. He'd done it. Finally, he'd killed Aizen. And it was worth the

time he'd taken, carefully studying, waiting for the perfect moment to render Kyokasuigetsu powerless against him.

At last, Aizen was paying for what he'd done, and he'd never have a chance to do it again.

Gin had accomplished his goal. Now, he could find Rangiku. And this time, maybe, he could stay.

A shadow caught the corner of his eye, giving him just enough time to gasp. He hadn't even sensed spiritual pressure.

Aizen stood there, morphing yet again instead of dying, his face twisted in swirls like melting rock, his teeth like a necklace of daggers. "Dear Gin," he began, the grinning one now, "don't you understand? The Hogyoku is loyal. More loyal than you ever were."

Aizen raised his Zanpakuto.

"Bankai," Gin spluttered. "Kill 'em dead, Shinso, Kamishini no Yari."

Once again, his blade met Aizen's soul, but this time, didn't pierce, only pushed Gin back inches before Kyokasuigetsu ran him through.

Aizen laughed slowly as Gin fell, shaking his head. "You were the last person I ever would have suspected. Not that you wanted to kill me, but why. You lied to me about killing Lieutenant Matsumoto; I feel her spiritual pressure nearby as I speak."

Gin gagged, blood pooling from his mouth. Aizen was right; Rangiku must have just woken up. He felt it too.

"You never grew up, did you? Aizen continued, his usual calm composure transforming into something hysterical. "Forever a child clinging to foolish grudges. Nearly your whole life wasted, why? Just because I hurt some random wretched bitch on my quest for the greater good? You deserve nothing less than a pathetic end for a pathetic cause."

Gin clutched Shinso, willing himself to fight, but couldn't move beyond that. The blood kept coming.

"Well, since you were able to dodge just enough so that I didn't destroy your soul chain," Aizen considered, "Maybe I should keep it intact and let you die slowly. And you won't be needing this anymore."

Gin didn't even wince when Aizen cut off his arm, the one that held Shinso. Shock paralyzed him more than the blows. So close... Maybe I waited too long, he thought. Maybe Aizen is unbeatable now.

"Sayonara, Gin," Aizen muttered, sheathing Kyokasuigetsu and turning around. Where was he going? Was he going to kill Rangiku? Or would he even find doing that worth his time at this point?

"Aizen."

Gin tilted his head toward the voice. He knew that voice, only, now, its owner looked much different. Ichigo Kurosaki stood yards away, glaring murderous intent at Aizen, taller, his spiky orange hair longer, his standard shihakusho gone and replaced with something dangerous wrapped in chains.

“Sorry to make you wait,” he growled, clutching what Gin assumed to be a transformed Zangetsu. “Ready to do this?”

Aizen laughed silkily. “I seem to be surrounded by amusing children today.” Aizen opened his mouth to add something else, but before he could, Ichigo flashstepped toward him and grabbed his face with one hand. Gin coughed as he watched them jet away through the sky.

Maybe you’re powerful enough to beat the bastard now, he thought.

Despite himself, he closed his eyes in relief. He was dying, but at least he knew, if Ichigo was the one to finally beat Aizen, that Rangiku would be safe forever.

As the world darkened, a familiar spiritual pressure crept into his senses.

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Rangiku flew through the sky, leaping from building to building, her heart racing. She should have known. Why would she even think for one second that Gin would try to kill her?

Dread pooled in her chest as she followed his weakening spiritual pressure. What had happened? Had Aizen turned on him?

She gasped when she spotted him in an alley below, lying on the ground in a blood-spewing heap.

“Gin!” she shrieked, soaring down to him. He lay so still, his head turned to the side, his right arm separated from his body.

“Gin,” she whimpered, cradling his head in her lap. “Gin...” Large tears jetted down her face. The irony. He’d become a soul reaper because he didn’t want her to cry anymore, but because of that, she now cried the hardest she ever had in her life.

“Don’t die,” she whispered, cradling him closer. “Please. Don’t die.”

Ever since he’d revealed his loyalty to Aizen, she’d hated him. At least, she’d tried to convince herself to hate him. Even now, she still didn’t know his motives, but she knew that, regardless, he’d protected her despite everything, and he’d always meant so much to her that it scared her; to love someone who always left was unimaginably frightening.

But the times he’d been there had carried her through her soul life. She’d always remember the silver-haired little boy who’d rescued her with a smile and persimmon fruit, who’d explained that she was only starving as a soul because she had spirit energy, special powers like him. And even though he’d distanced himself for whatever reason when they moved into the Seireitei as soul reapers, just the thought that he was near had comforted her.

But now, as his blood leaked down her arms, she feared he was leaving again, far away, and this time would never come back. Enemy or not, she knew she wouldn't be able to bear that. As long as he was alive, she could go on. If only Fourth Company were nearby, but she had no clue where to find them right now, and she wasn't the best at healing spells; she knew her feeble attempts at kido wouldn't be nearly enough.

“Gin,” she pleaded, sobbing, “stop leaving. Please. This time, stay with me.”

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“Santen Kesshun, I reject!” Orihime's shield saved her moments before she splattered into the pavement. Uryu had landed somewhere far off. She hoped he was okay—she hadn't had time to fully heal his previous injuries, after all—but figured his Quincy powers had kept him from crashing.

Though frightened, she was thankful to be here. Feeling useless had always pained Orihime. And now, especially, she just wanted to do something to help.

Closing her eyes, she felt for spiritual pressure and sensed Uryu's was still strong but a long way off, too far to rejoin him right now. She didn't know what sort of a battlefield she'd have to cross, though her surroundings were deserted except for the sleeping citizens of Karakura Town. It hadn't been especially easy getting here. Uryu had had to swallow his hatred of the mad-scientist captain Mayuri Kurotsuchi to ask for passage through the gate to The World of the Living, which he'd temporarily created to transport the battling soul reapers and even humans from Hueco Mundo as needed. Only, he'd told them about the real Karakura Town in Soul Society, and he'd heard that the fight was now heading there because Aizen had figured it out.

Regardless, she just wanted to be near Ichigo, even if that meant she couldn't see him, that she'd only be treating the wounded nearby. He was strong, she knew. But he'd also nearly died more times than her memory could bear, times when she didn't think she'd be able to heal him. And though she didn't sense his spiritual pressure, somehow, she knew he was here in Soul Society.

In fact, she found it odd how deserted the place was. Wouldn't a few soul reapers at least have chased Aizen here?

She walked a few moments and, finally, a weak spiritual pressure tugged at her senses, one she was sure she'd felt before but couldn't recognize, and near it was a stronger, more familiar spiritual pressure.

Her eyes widening, she bolted toward them, relieved to finally be able to help.

She found Rangiku only a couple of alleyways over, sobbing over a limp figure. Narrowing her eyes, she studied the white garb peeking through the blood. Was that Captain Gin Ichimaru, Aizen's closest accomplice?

“Rangiku,” she called, removing her flower pins from her hair and throwing them at the fallen captain as she ran. “Soten Kisshun, I reject!”

The pins burst into an oval of light that enveloped Gin and pushed Rangiku back. The latter gaped at the glow in disbelief.

“Orihime?” she called, looking up.

Orihime crouched down and held her palms over the healing light, channeling all of her energy into reversing the damage.

“Orihime,” Rangiku whimpered, collapsing onto her side in relief. “Thank God. Please heal him.”

“I’ll do my best,” Orihime replied, smiling at Rangiku reassuringly. Ichimaru was an enemy, yes, but Rangiku was her friend, kind of like the older sister she’d never had. And if Rangiku was crying because she didn’t want him to die, he had to have some good amidst all the betrayal. Plus, she recognized that look. Pain, disbelief, unacceptance, desperation. Only too recently, she’d been crouched over Ichigo’s all-but-dead soul, throwing all of her might into bringing him back.

As she watched Rangiku watch Ichimaru intently, realization struck her, an empathy she couldn’t deny: he was Rangiku’s Ichigo. The thought pushed her to channel even more energy into his healing, if possible.

For a while, they sat in silence, willing the wounds to heal, until finally Orihime spoke. “Did you see Ichigo here?”

“No,” Rangiku said, hope drying the tears on her face. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.”

Orihime and Rangiku looked down at the light. Gin’s pale-blue eyes had cracked open.

“Gin,” Rangiku breathed, moving closer though she couldn’t touch him through the healing barrier.

He coughed once, then added, “He was just here.”

“What?” Orihime pressed. “Now?”

Gin nodded, coughing again, his eyes unfocused. “He’s fightin’ Aizen.”

Orihime glanced at the sky as if Ichigo would suddenly appear, her face pinched with worry, though she kept her hands steady above the healing shield. Please be careful, she thought.

“He has a good chance,” Gin said, his eyes focusing a little, his wounds receding as he spoke. “I waited too long to attack, but I think he’s right on time.”

“What?” Rangiku put her hand on the barrier. “You attacked Aizen?”

He tilted his head to look at her, the thick blood drying on his mouth. “Your question earlier,” he began, “that’s why.”

Rangiku blinked, confused. “Which question?”

“Both of them.”

“You were working against Aizen the whole time?” Orihime asked.

Gin gave a subtle nod as if he were still hesitant to admit it, then his eyes closed and he fell limp again, but his breathing continued steadily.

“Gin?” Rangiku pressed. “Gin?”

“I think he’s stable now,” Orihime offered. “He just needs a little while longer under the shield and some rest, but I’m sure he’s going to make it.”

Rangiku slumped over, shutting her eyes tight. “Gin,” she whispered. “Thank you, Orihime.” Even his arm had almost fully reattached to his shoulder.

“Orihime!”

Uryu came barreling down the alleyway, his white cape flapping, still in bandages himself. “Thank God you’re all right,” he said, then furrowed his brows at the shield. “Is that Ichimaru?”

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Rangiku opened her eyes, blinking several times. Everything came back to her. She bolted upright, looking at the ground, but Gin wasn’t there. Had she dreamed everything? Her wounds didn’t even hurt anymore.

“Orihime?” Rangiku called. She was in the same alleyway she remembered, but no one was there.

“My, I thought ya were goin’ to sleep forever.”

Rangiku gasped and whirled around. Gin sat against the wall behind her, one knee carelessly bent, completely healed, not a drop of blood in sight.

“Gin,” she murmured. “You’re all right.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I understand why Aizen wanted to take that little healer. I’ve never seen a power like that before.”

Rangiku glanced down. Her bandages were gone. “She healed me too? Where’d she and that kid with the glasses, Uryu, go?”

“Probably off to congratulate Kurosaki.”

Rangiku’s eyes widened. “You mean…”

“He won.” Gin glanced at the sky, then back. “Didn’t kill Aizen, just sealed him with Urahara’s help. Of course Urahara would have to help him. He’s the one who invented the Hōgyoku, after all.”

Rangiku averted her eyes, trying to catch one emotion out of the swarm that plagued her heart, then looked back up. “When Orihime was healing you,” she said, “you tried to answer my question. Did you mean that you’ve been plotting against Aizen since we were kids?”

Gin’s smirk was long gone, his pale-blue eyes serious. “I wasn’t goin’ to tell ya,” he said. “Not without defeatin’ Aizen myself.”

“Gin,” Rangiku pressed, sternly now, “why?”

Slowly, he reached his hand out and brushed her face. “When we first met, when I found ya that day,” he began, “lyin’ on the ground in the middle of nowhere, bruised and starvin’ and left for dead, I’d never seen somethin’ so heartrendin’. And then, ya woke up, and, when ya weren’t cryin’, remnants of joy followed ya everywhere ya walked. I wanted to find the person who took that joy from ya, and when I did, I swore that I’d kill him myself, no matter how long it took or what I had to do. I pushed ya away and kept my biggest enemy closest of all in hopes of makin’ him suffer one day, just like you suffered for so long after he hurt ya.”

Gin sighed, studying Rangiku for a moment before continuing. “And in the process, I turned into a heartless snake, devourin’ everythin’ that stood in my way, just because I love ya so much, because you’re the only one in over a century I ever cared about. But now, I won’t blame ya if ya hate me.”

Rangiku’s lower lip trembled in incredulity. “Gin, you...” Her hands shaking from shock, she blurted, “I am fine. Because of you. When you were there, you saved me, and when you left, you made me save myself. The times you left hurt me the worst, but whenever you came back, I was always stronger because of that. And I... I love you for that.”

Gin froze, just for an instant, before his habitual smirk returned. “How can ya?”

Rangiku’s eyes glistened. “Because I’d rather for you to be alive as an enemy traitor than to face a future where you leave and never come back.”

More tears, the tears Gin had worked so hard to keep from falling, spilled from her eyes as she lunged forward and dove against his chest. She clutched the white garb he’d changed into during his time in Hueco Mundo as she cried, and after a couple of seconds, felt arms wrapping around her.

“Rangiku,” Gin murmured. “I never wanted to be the one to make ya cry.”

She was a little girl again, filled with that same dread of him leaving. And, like a little girl, she whimpered and pleaded, “Please don’t leave anymore. Please. Once Head Captain Yamamoto finds out your real purpose for joining forces with Aizen, I’m sure he’ll pardon you. You have no reason to leave again.”

“There he is! In the alley!”

Rangiku looked up as a group of soul reapers dashed toward them, led by Shuhei Hisagi, a lieutenant of the Gotei Thirteen. He'd been injured the last time she'd seen him, but no wounds showed on him now.

"Rangiku?" he remarked, drawing Kazeshini, his Zanpakuto. "So this is where you ran off to. I'm not surprised."

Another group of soul reapers closed in on them from the other side, led by the broad, wolf-headed Captain Komomura. "Step away from Ichimaru, Lieutenant Matsumoto," he ordered, "or we'll have no choice but to take you in too."

Rangiku stood, but didn't move away. "Wait, let him explain. He—"

"Now, now, Rangiku," Gin interrupted, standing, the mask of his smirk and melodic tone back, "I've been a very, very bad boy. Ya can't stop these gentlemen from doin' their jobs."

"But," she began, "Gin..."

"By order of Head Captain Shigekuni Genryusai Yamamoto," began Shuhei, sliding Kazeshini against Gin's throat, "you are under arrest and will be taken to the Council of the Thirteen Court Guard Squads where you will be judged for the crime of being an accomplice to Sosuke Aizen. Your sentence will be final once decided."

Gin's smirk broadened as if he were a little boy at an amusement park. "Is that all? Goodness, this whole ordeal has made the Gotei Thirteen soft."

"Shut up, Ichimaru," Komomura snarled, raising his Zanpakuto so that it crossed Shuhei's against Gin's throat. "If it weren't for you and Aizen, Kaname would still be alive!"

"Or maybe he shouldn't have taken things so far," Gin commented, his voice ever melodic. "I tried to tell him it wasn't a good idea, merging with a hollow."

"That's enough!" Shuhei shouted, pressing his blade tighter against Gin's throat, obviously still grieving over the death of his former captain. A small drop of blood welled and slid.

"He was plotting against Aizen the whole time!" Rangiku blurted, gripping Shuhei's arm. "He attacked Aizen, but Aizen cut him down, and Orihime healed him." Rangiku tensed, hoping she hadn't said too much; she didn't want Orihime to be arrested for helping him.

Gin looked at her, his grin revealing nothing, then turned to Shuhei and Komomura. "Please excuse her. I'm truly touched that my childhood friend would still lie for my sake."

"Gin!"

"Restrain him," ordered Shuhei to the lower-ranked soul reapers waiting patiently. Eight of them moved behind Gin and grabbed his arms.

"Bye bye, Rangiku," Gin said cheerfully. "See ya in the Seireitei."

Rangiku stood numbly, watching Shuhei's and Komomura's groups lead him away. Once more, he was leaving her, though she knew exactly where he was going this time. Dread nagged at her as she thought, What could you possibly be up to now, Gin?

PART 2

If Aizen were surprised to see Gin strapped to the chair beside of him in the center of the Council Room, Central Forty-Six, he didn't show it. But Gin knew he must have been, having killed his accomplice only to see him alive two days later.

"Aizen," Gin remarked in his melodic tone, grinning wickedly, "how are ya? Doin' all right since Kurosaki crushed your dreams? Poor thing. And you were so close."

Aizen glared at Gin, but remained calm as he spoke. "I commend you for surviving."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Gin commented with a chuckle. "I hadn't planned on it, but I also hadn't planned on dyin', so everythin's balanced now, wouldn't ya agree?"

"Silence!"

In the vast dim room, Gin stared up at the shadowed silhouettes of the council members, only mildly curious about their verdicts. Regardless of his sentence, his new plan would ensure he wouldn't be here long.

"We will begin with Sosuke Aizen, former captain of Fifth Company," called the echoing faceless voice. "For breaking Soul Society laws on multiple accounts, throwing the order between Soul Society and The World of the Living into chaos, and treason of the first degree among a limitless number of other unforgiveable crimes, we the council hereby sentence you to twenty thousand years in the Maggots' Nest and to wear a spirit-energy suppressant for the duration of that time. There will be no exceptions or chances to lessen this punishment, however, failure to cooperate can and will lengthen that sentence by thousands of years. By mutual agreement of the council, this decision is final."

A gavel slammed down. Aizen laughed darkly. "Fools. You'll learn the hard way. When you realize the truth of the Soul King, you'll know I was right all along."

"Another ten thousand years!"

The gavel slammed down amidst mutterings of approval from the other council members.

"My, my," began Gin in his singsong voice, glancing at Aizen, "I hope you'll be able to find a hobby to pass the time."

"Order!" The gavel slammed down again. "This assembly will conclude upon the assignment of the second traitor's punishment. Gin Ichimaru, former captain of Third Company and coconspirator in Aizen's Hogen agenda, for your crime of complementing his treasonous acts, you will hereby be sentenced to ten thousand years in the Maggots' Nest. This decision and all decisions made here today will be final with no exceptions. Since all suitable punishments have been declared, this assembly is now adjourned."

“Wow,” said Gin, “I’m touched. Only half of Aizen’s original sentence. How heartwarmin’ that ya realize I was only a meager accomplice.”

“The same goes for you, Ichimaru,” shouted the head council member. “Your sentence can and will be added to for failure to cooperate.”

Gin’s grin widened. “Sorry, your honor,” he remarked optimistically. “There’s just one thing I need to do before I can enjoy my downtime.”

“Ichimaru, I’m warning—”

“Bakudo Ninety-Nine,” murmured Gin. Not one, but multiple giant, spiked black boxes appeared from thin air, circling around the room until they’d fallen over every council member. None even had time to gasp.

This time, Aizen revealed surprise, his now-normal eyes wide, the violet sclera long since gone as well as the long hair. “How did you manage that?”

“I’ve been practicin’, of course,” Gin replied. “That, and I adopted your former pet. My, I hope they survive; otherwise, I’ll have to go to the trouble of draggin’ ya personally to the Maggots’ Nest.”

Gin concentrated on elevating his spiritual pressure until it snapped the dense kido barriers that restrained him. Casually, he stood, reached into his white robe, and revealed the Hogyoku on his palm.

“You forgot to pick this up back in the alley; don’t even think about makin’ a wish,” Gin mocked, tossing the Hogyoku up and catching it again as if it were a mere bouncy ball. “It might have ignored my poison, but I’m sure Kisuke’s detached it from your will.”

Aizen’s lip curled into an uncharacteristic snarl. “You bas—”

“Now, now, don’t go gettin’ ahead of yourself,” chided Gin. “I’m not nearly uncivilized enough to let my soul swallow this thing like you did. But it will help check off my to-do list.”

He took a step toward Aizen before continuing. “Now, Hogyoku, I would adore it if ya helped Shinso break that kido strap, the one right over Aizen’s soul chain.”

“Gin,” Aizen growled.

“What? I’m only carryin’ out the council’s sentence for them. In truth, they inspired me. I came here with every intention of killin’ ya good this time, but once they find out you entrusted me with the Hogyoku and ordered me to help ya escape without realizin’ I’d turn on ya, they’ll extend your sentence to eternity. You’ll spend forever no more powerful than the average district soul, a failure with big hopeless dreams.”

Aizen’s eyes blazed. “And how will they come to that conclusion?”

Gin reached into his robes again, this time revealing a note. “By my own handwritin’, of course, just what ya used to maneuver your gullible little lieutenant, Hinamori.”

Without another word, Gin silently ordered Shinso to slice Aizen’s soul chain. A long gash spilled blood from his chest all the way down his abdomen. Aizen spluttered. He’d done it.

“Oh, and in case ya thought I didn’t learn from my mistakes...” He removed two eye patches from his sleeve, identical to the one Captain of Eleventh Company Kenpachi Zaraki wore to suppress his outstanding spiritual pressure whenever he wanted to lengthen a fight.

“How does it feel,” he muttered darkly as he placed the eye patches on Aizen, “to have someone take a part of your soul and leave ya to rot? You’re the wretched bitch now.”

Gin spat on Aizen twice, first on his face and then on his gash, then kicked him so hard that he, still strapped to the chair, flew across the room, slammed against the far wall, and tumbled onto his side.

And then, with a century’s worth of satisfaction, he headed toward the doors of the council room.

Beaming, he murmured, “Finally, mission accomplished.”

~~*~*

In her room in Tenth Company’s barracks, Rangiku paced back and forth through the doorway, occasionally glancing at the moon. It had been nearly a day since Gin had restrained the council and escaped, leaving Aizen barely alive without even the smallest measure of spirit energy.

Anger and worry tangoed in her heart. Why hadn’t he listened to her? Why was he doing this? There was no point.

“Where are you now, Gin?” she whispered, finally sinking onto her bed on the floor. “Are you coming back?”

When she tucked her hand under her pillow, she frowned. It touched something smooth and warm.

She lifted her pillow. She gasped.

“Wh–what?” she stammered, snatching up the object.

The Hogyoku. In her hand, it swirled and glowed with power.

Trembling, she spotted a folded piece of paper at the edge of her blanket.

Not daring to breathe, she opened it. A brief note.

I got back what he stole from you. Sorry it took so long.

~~*~*

Two days later, there was no further sign of Gin. Rangiku tried to occupy her anxious thoughts by actually doing her paperwork, causing her captain, Toshiro Hitsugaya, to keep eyeing her suspiciously. Since Ichigo had taken Aizen down, both the Soul Society and Karakura Town had remained peaceful. She knew Ichigo was here, recovering after having given up his soul-reaper powers in order to defeat Aizen.

I wonder if he could help me decide what to do with the Hogyoku, she thought, leaving Toshiro's office after having finished the last of her paperwork for the day. She crossed her arms behind her neck and stretched, her muscles tense. The day was bright, warm, and beautiful, but she couldn't relax.

So she walked on, deep in thought.

“Rangiku!”

She glanced around until she spotted the captain of Fourth Company, Unohana, waving at her, her black hair meeting in her usual long braid down her chest. “We'll be holding our first Women's Soul Reaper Association meeting since the Arrancar battle tonight. Can you make it?”

“Oh, um...” Rangiku hesitated, then replied, “I'm not sure. I'll try.”

Smiling sympathetically, Captain Unohana walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “It's all right if you can't. I know you grew up with Captain Ichimaru. You must be going through a lot right now.”

Rangiku's heart skipped a beat, her nerves intensifying again. “Thank you, Captain.” With a bow, she excused herself, not caring where she was going, just that she was going somewhere. Briefly, she wondered if she was beginning to understand how Gin felt, the need to constantly leave. And yet, she liked it in the Seireitei and couldn't picture herself anywhere else. If only she could have both a permanent home and Gin there with her. Then, her heart would be full.

Yet, the harsh reality sank into her spirit like the sun's rays: she could never have both.

Of course she had friends. Fun meetings with the Women's Soul Reaper Association, spontaneous drunken episodes of sake drinking with Shuhei and Izuru, the latter formerly Gin's lieutenant of Third Company. There were a lot of people she cared about here.

But there was only one soul, she realized, who'd truly saved her life. Regardless of whether or not she'd ever understand his motives, she knew nothing would ever break their bond; it would have to break her heart first.

You always come back, she thought, trying to comfort herself. Is that because, every time you leave, you actually want me to follow?

Whirling, she ran in the direction she'd come from, past Toshiro's office. Relieved, she knew what she needed to do now.

She followed Orihime's spirit energy to Captain Kuchiki's place, undoubtedly with Ichigo. She smiled as she thought, That girl's got it bad. But who am I to talk?

When she got there, the front door was open, so she poked her head inside. Ichigo stood staring out a window, his shihakusho still black, retaining frail remnants of his fleeting soul-reaper powers. Orihime and Kisuke Urahara sat in a corner, watching him sadly.

All three looked up at her approach.

Ichigo arched his brows at her curiously. "What are you doing here?"

"Ichigo..." She looked from him to Orihime to Urahara, beyond grateful for her luck. Just the ones she needed. Was it possible that the Hogyoku could have arranged that? After glancing around to make sure no one walked nearby, she stepped inside and slid the door closed.

"Orihime," she continued. "Kisuke. I need to give you something, but you have to promise not to tell anyone you got it from me."

"Well, that's cryptic," Kisuke remarked, adjusting his hat. "What's up?"

Rangiku inhaled shakily, then reached up the sleeve of her shihakusho and pulled out the Hogyoku. All three gasped.

"Where'd you get that?" Ichigo asked, taking a step forward. "We figured Aizen had hidden it somewhere when we couldn't find it."

"That doesn't matter," she said, walking past Ichigo and offering the Hogyoku to Orihime. "Can you destroy this thing?"

Orihime glanced uncertainly at Kisuke and Ichigo, and when neither spoke, took the orb from Rangiku. "I can try."

"Can you do it right here?" Rangiku pressed. "I know it's asking a lot, but I want to see it gone with my own eyes."

"I think Lieutenant Matsumoto's right," remarked Kisuke. "Not a bad idea."

With a determined nod, Orihime knelt, placed the orb on the floor, raised both hands, and chanted, "Soten Kisshun, I reject!"

Her flower pins leapt from her hair and erupted into a small shield of light that enveloped the Hogyoku.

Layer by layer, minute by minute, the orb dissolved, until finally, nearly an hour later, its last particles evaporated.

Ichigo and Kisuke stared at the spot where it had been in amazement. Rangiku sighed with relief, her eyes glistening with emotion.

“I did it,” Orihime said as if surprised by her own power, standing. “It’s gone.”

Before Kisuke or Ichigo could comment, Rangiku hugged her and said, “Thank you.” Then, in a whisper by her ear: “Thank you for everything.”

Straightening, she turned her attention to Kisuke and Ichigo. “And thank you for defeating Aizen.”

And then she bolted from the building, the sun beginning to sink into afternoon. She wasn’t sure if her destination was right, but she had a strong feeling it was.

~~*~*

Gin took a bite out of a persimmon fruit and leaned against the wall of a rundown wooden building, the same place he and Rangiku had stayed as kids, somehow still standing though now shrouded in plants. In the middle of nowhere, miles from the Seireitei’s West Gate, it was the perfect hideout. Far and remote enough so that no one would think to look for him here, and close enough so that, after the chaos of his escape from the council died down and the soul reapers dropped their guard, he could, yet again, return to Rangiku.

If there was one thing he was good at, it was biding his time.

He’d shed his Hueco Mundo attire like a snakeskin the moment he’d stepped out of the council room, leaving the white garb for the soul reapers to find. And he’d left the Seireitei in the basic black soul-reaper shihakusho he’d started out with. No longer a captain, no longer pretending to be Aizen’s accomplice, he was free and, had it not been for Rangiku, may have even considered exiling himself to the World of the Living like Kisuke Urahara. Now that he’d accomplished his goal, there was nothing left he needed to do in Soul Society.

Lying on his back, he stared at a vine growing along the decrepit ceiling, wondering what month it was. Had Rangiku’s birthday passed? In recent years, he’d observed her stagger out of buildings on the date with other soul reapers, all laughing loudly and clutching near-empty bottles of sake. But when they’d been kids, she hadn’t even remembered when her birthday was, so he’d suggested celebrating every year on the day they’d first met.

He hoped that, from now on, she could celebrate in peace.

Familiar spiritual pressure flared in his senses the moment he heard a creak in the doorway.

He stood, frowning. The setting sunlight framed Rangiku’s shapely silhouette.

“How’d ya guess?” he remarked. “You’ve been very good at beatin’ me in hide-and-go-seek lately.”

Rangiku reached into her sleeve and revealed the note he’d left. She held it up for one, two seconds, then let it drift to the crumbling floor.

For a moment, she just studied him, her eyes intense, solemn, and then, finally, she spoke. “So Aizen was really the one who did that to me all those years ago? It didn’t dawn on me until I read that.”

Gin paused for a moment, hesitating. “Yes.”

Rangiku looked at the note on the floor. “The Hogyoku is gone,” she said. “I had Orihime destroy it. I don’t care if some of my spirit energy helped modify it. I don’t want it back after it’s been in Aizen’s twisted soul.”

“No need to explain yourself,” said Gin. “I left it for ya to do with it whatever ya pleased.”

Rangiku looked back up at him. “One more question,” she murmured. “Becoming a soul reaper, pretending to help Aizen, attempting to kill him, and then taking away his soul-reaper powers in the Council Room—did you really do everything just because of me?”

Gin smirked. “Of course not. I did it for me. I’m actually glad I didn’t kill him. If I had, Kurosaki and Urahara wouldn’t have gotten to add some bonus humiliation before I landed the final sufferin’ blow. I feel much better now, knowin’ the one who made ya suffer is goin’ to spend eternity in sorrow.”

“Gin,” Rangiku said, her voice shaky despite her smile, “you’re a little scary. Remind me to never get on your bad side.”

“Only a little?” he teased. “How disappointin’; I worked so hard at it.”

After a century of acting, it was difficult to break his mask; maybe it had become part of his real self. Or maybe it always had been. Regardless, he had nothing left on his to-do list, and that gave him a novel serenity.

“It hasn’t changed much,” Rangiku commented, glancing around their old home. “I’m surprised it’s still here.”

Gin reached into a pouch in the corner and removed a persimmon, then held it out to Rangiku. She took it and lifted it to her nose, breathing in its sweet nostalgic tang.

“Are you going to stay here?” she asked.

“Probably,” he said. “For a while, at least. I’m the number-one prize in Soul Society right now, after all.”

“You could just tell them the truth,” she offered unconvincingly.

“Not after the note I left.” He paused. “I hadn’t planned on stayin’ away forever, but I’m glad ya figured out where I was and decided to pay a visit.”

“I don’t know how long I can stay,” she admitted. “I might be the one leaving this time.”

“But you’re here now.” Ever grinning, Gin closed the short distance between them and touched her jaw lightly, his voice lowering. “I wasn’t teasin’ that day on Sogyoku Hill when I

said I wouldn't mind bein' your captive."

Rangiku inhaled sharply. He trailed his fingers down her neck to her collarbone. She may have been a self-assured unattainable flirt to everyone else, but he still saw the hesitant, reserved little girl he'd first met. "Gin," she whispered, closing her eyes.

The fruit she clutched fell to the floor.

~~*~*

He kissed her surprisingly slowly. For all his strength and terrifying calculation, he'd always been gentle with her, she realized now. Tender, affectionate. She'd just never seen it because she'd always been too busy wondering when he was going to come back.

His soft lips tasted like persimmons, like that same long-ago solace she'd found in his presence. She clutched his shihakusho in a daze, not quite believing this was actually happening. How long had they danced around each other, bonded yet apart? Her, afraid to get too close because he always left. Him, his love for her so strong it had nearly pushed him to his death.

His hand slid up the back of her neck, his long fingers interlacing with her hair. His other slid around her waist, drawing her closer. He meant worlds to her.

She ran her hands along his chest and over his shoulders to reassure herself he was still there, that she wouldn't wake up any second to find him dead, to learn that she'd only dreamt Orihime had healed him.

Pulling back a little, Gin murmured by her ear, "My, you're certainly not a little girl anymore, are ya?"

Rangiku swallowed hard. "And you're not a little boy." She stepped back. This time, she was the one to grin, tapping into decades' worth of flirting experience. Biting her lip sultrily, she tugged her sleeves off her shoulders and let her shihakushu fall to the floor, her Zanpakuto, Haineko, still strapped to the fabric.

"I've caught up on all my paperwork," she cooed seductively. "I'd better take a break and let it pile up again so Captain Hitsugaya won't think I'm an imposter."

For a moment, Gin's expression slackened, his pale-blue eyes unreadable. Then, his smirk returned and, slowly, he closed the distance between them once more and touched her necklace again. "I've always loved your vivacious side."

Standing on her tiptoes, Rangiku pressed her mouth to his and slid her hands inside of his shihakusho, working at the sleeves until they fell off his shoulders like her own had. Leaning back, she trailed a finger down his bare chest to his abs, for the first time realizing how beautiful he truly was.

"I'm warnin' ya," he said, wrapping his arm back around her waist. "I'm still not a good guy. Now's your chance to leave and turn me in."

“I can’t do that,” she said. “You’re my captive now, remember?”

Gin bared his teeth in a wicked grin and whispered against her neck, “Well, by all means, then, give me a long sentence.”

~~*~*

Gin and Rangiku lay across the shihakusho they’d shed several minutes earlier. The latter stared at the ceiling, her mind a unit of blank peace. Rest. Yes, she could rest now, because her Gin, after all, hadn’t turned out to be who she’d thought he was—he was so much more.

Turning, he folded his arms around her. She swiveled into his chest and closed her eyes, her quick breaths slowing. Stillness and silence lingered as night fell. How much time had passed since she’d first arrived here? She didn’t care; neither of them was counting.

After sometime, finally, Rangiku broke the silence. “I wonder what our lives were like when we were alive. Do you think we ever met? We were both the same age when we came to Soul Society.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” Gin replied, “because we’ll never remember.”

“More remarkable things have happened,” Rangiku countered. “You never know.”

“The World of the Livin’ was much different then than it is now.” Gin pulled back slightly to look at her. “It’s difficult to imagine.”

Rangiku smiled. “I can’t picture you as a schoolboy.”

Gin grinned. “How strange. I can picture you as a schoolgirl.”

Rangiku smacked his bare shoulder despite her giggle. “I’m serious.”

“If we died here at the same time,” Gin murmured, his grin fading, “and were then reincarnated back on Earth, I imagine we’d meet again.”

“But we wouldn’t know each other.”

“I’d remember. As soon as I saw ya again.”

“But you’re sentenced to ten thousand years here,” Rangiku teased.

“They won’t catch me.”

“How are you so sure?”

Gin turned onto his back and stared at the ceiling. “I was only thinkin’ about it before, but now I’m sure. I’m goin’ to The World of the Livin’.”

Rangiku gasped. “What? They’ll definitely find you there.”

He turned his head to look at her, resuming his grin. “It hurts, Rangiku, your pitiful level of faith in my capability. Any fool could acquire a spirit-energy-maskin’ gigai.”

She arched her brows, doubtful. “And who’s going to make one for you, Captain Kurotsuchi? I know he doesn’t exactly follow rules, but he’d still turn you in after convincing you to let him dissect you.”

Gin laughed. “Kisuke Urahara is still here, is he not? I’ll just catch a ride there with him.”

Rangiku’s eyes widened. “What in the world makes you think Kisuke would help you when you wouldn’t tell anyone the truth?”

“Not true,” he said. “The little healer knows, remember? I’m sure she’s told him everythin’ by now. Plus, I have somethin’ he’ll be interested in.”

“What?”

Gin reached over and grabbed the sack of persimmons. After digging around for a couple of seconds, he removed a small glowing orb.

Rangiku gasped. “The Hōgyoku?”

Gin nodded. “What I gave ya was Aizen’s prototype. He tried but failed to create one just like Urahara’s, usin’ your spirit energy along with many others’. Though he might say otherwise, I’m sure Urahara wouldn’t want to see his difficult creation destroyed, if only to file it away for his records. I’m also sure he wouldn’t mind me hidin’ out in his ‘candy store’ for a while.”

Standing, he put his shihakusho back on, then added, “Ya shouldn’t say yes to what I’m about to ask ya, but I just realized it’s been over a century and I never asked once.” He offered her his hand. “Do ya wanna come with me?”

Rangiku’s eyes glassed as she sat up. “I don’t know if I can. I mean, is it possible?”

“Ya have a life in the Seireitei,” he said. “Ya shouldn’t leave that behind and risk gettin’ a sentence for bein’ an accomplice’s accomplice.” Yet, he kept his hand outstretched.

She averted her eyes, smiling sadly. “Toshiro’s going to hit the roof.”

“Isn’t he always doin’ that?”

Rangiku looked back at Gin, his pale-blue eyes gleaming, his grin daring. Everyone she cared about in the Seireitei flashed before her eyes. But they were fine; they didn’t need her. Now that she had Gin back, she needed him.

Taking his hand, she let him pull her to her feet and, keeping his gaze, said, “You’re not getting away from me this time, Ichimaru.”

PART 3

A complicated plan, and yet, carrying it out was proving surprisingly easy. Rangiku took a deep breath, willing the meeting to end soon. She'd left as soon as she'd had the conversation with Gin about hiding out in The World of the Living. The more she thought about it, the more she realized how happy she was going to be there. She'd always loved the mundanity of it all, the parks and buildings and city life, and with a long-lasting spirit-energy-masking gigai, she'd be able to blend right in.

She'd decided to show up at the Women's Soul Reaper Association meeting just to evade suspicion, but mere moments before arriving, she'd tracked down Kisuke and explained everything, giving him the real Hogyoku, which Gin had sent along with her. To her surprise, he'd revealed that he knew the first one wasn't his, which was why he'd been willing to let Orihime destroy it.

As Gin had predicted, Kisuke had agreed to their request. Though Rangiku knew Kisuke had never been afraid of the law, she was still surprised he was actually going to help them. The only thing that worried her now was how they were going to slip past the guards to enter the Dangai Precipice. They would have to put on their gigai before that in order to travel undetected, and yet, they would have to use their Zanpakuto to fight their way to the entrance, which they couldn't do in gigai. Yet, Kisuke had reassured her that all she needed to do was show up at the gate after the meeting, and they'd go from there.

I'm trusting you, Urahara, she thought.

"If no one has any further points," Captain Unohana announced, jolting Rangiku from her thoughts, "this meeting is dismissed."

Trying to act casual, Rangiku took her time making her way to the exit, saying goodbyes to the other women soul reapers on the way. And then, finally, she was standing then running in the cool night air, toward the gate Urahara had told her to go to.

He was waiting in the bushes when, several minutes later, she arrived, panting.

"Hey," he said, crouching by a large zip-up bag. "You got here fast."

"So what now?" she asked, glancing at the unprotected gate. "Where are the guards?"

"I still have guys here who owe me favors," was all Kisuke offered, shady and chill as ever.

"Did you tell Gin?" Rangiku asked, finally catching her breath.

Kisuke looked up. "Yeah, he—"

"My, I never thought wearin' one of these would be so uncomfortable."

Gin stepped out from behind a tree, tugging at his wrist as if trying to adjust the humanlike shell he'd just put on. He looked just like himself, the only difference his clothes: sneakers, black jeans, and a silvery button-down shirt, the picture of an only slightly suspicious college-aged guy.

"Gin," Rangiku breathed. "You look... You look so nice."

He grinned at her. “You made it. Your turn.”

Kisuke unzipped the bag and revealed a body identical to her wearing a short ruffled dress and boots.

She arched her brows at it, muttering, “This outfit is horrible. Maybe Orihime has something I can borrow.”

“Sorry,” Kisuke said, not looking apologetic at all. “This was all I could find on short notice.”

Rangiku sighed. “I already miss my old gigai.” Sure enough, when she stepped into this one, she found it much heavier and more irritating than her other one.

“It’s a special coating I added to thoroughly camouflage spirit energy,” Kisuke explained. “You’ll get used to the feeling after a while.”

“How did you sneak these in here, anyway?” asked Rangiku. “And so quickly. I never expected to do this tonight, tomorrow at the earliest.”

“My assistant, Tessai,” Kisuke replied vaguely. She didn’t question him further.

“Thanks for this,” she said.

“Don’t mention it,” said Kisuke, glancing at the gate. “Ichimaru here is going to help me out.”

Rangiku arched her brows at Gin. “How?”

Gin smirked. “By lettin’ him examine my memory to retrace the steps Aizen took in attemptin’ to develop his own Hogyoku. Scientists can never do enough research, after all.”

“I’m hoping that seeing the details of how Aizen operated before I found out he was trying to hijack my Visored experiment will help me develop a new kind of shield,” Kisuke began, “one that will prevent the theft of spirit energy in the future. Miss Inoue has agreed to help as well. Her shield has the foundation for what I have in mind.”

“What are you scheming now, Hat-and-Clogs?”

Rangiku shifted toward the voice. Ichigo appeared from the trees, followed by Orihime and Uryu.

“What do you want with Orihime?” he added.

“It’s okay, Ichigo,” Orihime said. “He’s just going to study my shield in order to help soul reapers better defend themselves from enemies like Aizen in the future.”

“How noble of him,” Uryu muttered.

“By the way,” Orihime added, “that’s such a cute dress, Rangiku.”

“Are you all leaving now?” Rangiku asked, wincing at Orihime’s comment, making a mental note to politely disagree with her later. “I thought Ichigo would get a big hero’s sendoff.”

“I just wanted to go home quietly without a fuss,” said Ichigo. He paused, cocking an eyebrow at Gin. “I thought I was hearing things when Orihime and Kisuke explained about him.”

“Well done, Kurosaki,” Gin said. “For a moment, I thought ya didn’t have it in ya.”

“Yeah, well,” Ichigo began, “I still don’t believe you’re a good guy.”

“As well ya shouldn’t.”

Ichigo glanced around, running a hand through the back of his hair. “I guess I get why you would want to hideout,” he added, “but why is Rangiku coming?”

“Wouldn’t you believe?” Kisuke chimed in, beaming as he tossed a buddy’s arm around Ichigo, his tone like a game-show-host revealing a grand prize. “It’s none other than true love!”

Both Uryu’s and Ichigo’s faces twisted in shock and possible horror. “Wh–wh–wh–what?” they spluttered in unison.

Rangiku blushed, but Gin’s mask remained unreadable. Only Orihime’s quiet smile was genuine.

“But he’s so creepy!” Ichigo shouted in incredulity, turning to Rangiku. “Do you know how scary your kids would be?! And why is he in jeans?!”

“Keep it down,” Kisuke scolded. “We’re trying to sneak them out of here incognito.”

“Well, if you all want to stay and chat,” Gin began, turning, “I’ll go on ahead.”

Foolishly, Rangiku’s lungs clenched as she watched his back receding closer and closer to the gate.

“Why are you going to become a soul reaper?” she remembered asking as a little girl.

“Because I don’t want to see you cry again,” he’d replied as a little boy.

Panicking, she hurried after him and clutched his arm. “Wait for me,” she said.

With a smile rather than a smirk this time, he slid his arm out of her grasp and took her hand instead, then led her toward the gate.

Rangiku glanced over her shoulder at the spluttering sounds behind her and saw Ichigo and Uryu gaping, looking as if they were going to be sick. Beside of them, sweet Orihime winked and gave her a thumbs up.

Gin paused right in front of the gate, looking at Rangiku. “Ready?” he asked. She nodded, squeezing his hand as she thought, Goodbye, Soul Society.

~~*~*

The short journey through the Dangai Precipice went smoothly; they all made good time, Aizen having destroyed the Cleaner. And, if Kisuke's gigai worked, Gin's and Rangiku's spiritual pressure wouldn't be traceable.

Along the way, when Rangiku had panicked about the Department of Research and Development catching them on camera, Kisuke explained that these particular gigai also had a coating that made them invisible, but only in the Dangai Precipice.

"And they're much easier to take off than other gigai," he'd added merrily. "You just push your left palms like a button whenever you need to change back into soul reapers." Ichigo had then muttered something about how nice that would have been when he'd first started out.

Now, they stood in the middle of Karakura Town, which had been switched back with the fake one. The streets were quiet at this time of night, so no one had noticed the otherworldly gate that had suddenly appeared and spit the group out.

"Well, I'm going home," Uryu announced, still looking queasy at the concept of Gin's romantic side. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Orihime called, waving, then turned to the group. "Me too. It's been a long... It's been long."

"I'll walk you home," Ichigo offered. "I want to check on Chad on the way, too."

"O-okay," Orihime stammered, blushing. "Thanks."

"Night," Ichigo called to the others. "Uh... Good luck, I guess."

"Bye bye," Gin called with a cryptic wave.

Ichigo turned with a shudder, muttering, "That just gave me horrible déjà vu."

"Let me know if you need anything, Rangiku," Orihime offered sunnily. "Come over again for dinner sometime!"

"Good luck kicking Kon out of your body, Ichigo!" Kisuke teased.

"Shut up," Ichigo muttered as he walked away, then softened his tone. "Come on, Orihime." She trotted after him, leaving Gin and Rangiku alone with Kisuke.

"Well," Kisuke began, "I guess it's time to start your lives as fugitives. To the shop it is. Welcome to the club."

~~*~*

Rukia Kuchiki landed gracefully on a sidewalk in Karakura Town. It was great to be here again, the human city she'd spent so much time in and had come to think of as a second

home. She was grateful to have been stationed here again, if only short term this time. Plus, she hadn't gotten a chance to give Ichigo a proper goodbye after the Aizen ordeal.

But before she did anything, she needed to see Kisuke about her gigai, which he had given a tune up of sorts.

She surveyed her surroundings and realized she was only a mile away from the candy shop. Might as well get it over with tonight.

It took no time to arrive at the deceptive little building, an ordinary candy store on the outside but, hidden within, a sketchy under-the-table market for spirit goods.

When she knocked on the door, Jinta, the grumpy little boy who helped Kisuke run the shop, answered. "Oh," he grumbled. "It's you. The boss is busy at the moment."

Rukia arched her brows. "At this hour?"

"Yeah, he's dealing business or something with some creep," he muttered. "Seriously creepy."

"I would expect nothing less from Kisuke," said Rukia, unfazed, as she pushed past Jinta. "I'll just wait inside then."

"Wait!"

Rukia shifted toward the quiet voice and found Ururu, the timid little girl who also worked at the shop, standing in front of the door to the back room.

Hesitantly, Ururu added in a voice Rukia could barely hear, "The boss said to turn away clients tonight. You'll have to come back tomorrow, Miss Kuchiki. I'm sorry."

"What is going on?" Rukia murmured, walking toward her. "What are you trying to hide? Is he in the training room?"

"No!" Ururu spread her arms across the door.

"What's the big deal?" Jinta countered. "She's the boss's best customer. He didn't say not to tell her."

"He said not to tell anyone," insisted Ururu. Jinta then proceeded to pull her pigtails, making her whimper.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Rukia approached the door. But just before she could grip the handle, it slid open, revealing Kisuke himself, overly upbeat as usual.

"Miss Kuchiki," he sang, "what a lovely surprise. What brings you here at this enchanting hour?"

"I came to pick up my gigai," she said, "but now I'm interested in what you're hiding behind that door."

Kisuke laughed nervously, running his fingers through his shaggy blond hair under his hat. “Hiding? Me? What made you think that?”

Before Rukia could reply, a dull boom sounded from somewhere far away.

“Just an experiment,” Kisuke defended, looking extremely guilty.

“Kisuke,” Rukia began sternly, drawing her Zanpakuto, “you know I can’t turn my head the other way if you’re doing something more illegal than usual.”

~~*~*

“Aw, come on,” Rangiku whined, “why do I have to learn this now? I’m perfectly happy with my shikai.”

Gin stood next to Rangiku’s lifeless gigai as he watched her soul. “You can defend yourself better with bankai,” he insisted. “No offense, but I’m amazed that ya made lieutenant as much as ya slack off. Ya can’t rely only on giftedness to get by.”

“You’re lecturing me about defense?” Rangiku retorted. “I’m not the one who agreed to let Kisuke trap me in my gigai.”

“It’s not permanent,” Gin said, “and it was the only way he would agree to let me help train ya. For some reason, he still doesn’t trust me.”

Rangiku shook her head, mumbling, “I wonder why.” Sighing, she added, “You’ll really have to stay hidden until the timer on the gigai lock is up. If you ran into anyone from Soul Society like that, you wouldn’t have a chance.”

Gin stared at her intently and murmured, “You should know by now that, when it comes to you, I’m not afraid of takin’ risks.”

Rangiku averted her eyes and cleared her throat, a warm blush glazing her cheekbones. “Did you even consider that I might not want to learn bankai?”

“Of course,” he replied, “and I can’t force ya, but I strongly encourage ya to. You have the potential. Wouldn’t ya like to be a captain someday?”

She looked back at him, furrowing her brows. “You plan on going back to Soul Society?”

“Not immediately,” he said, “but ya never know what the future might bring.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you again,” Rangiku stubbornly insisted. Turning, she raised her Zanpakuto and said, “Bankai practice it is, then. Now growl, Hainecko!”

Her blade dissolved into a thick smoky cloud as sharp as needles, attacking the object nearest to it, which happened to be the side of a rocky cliff. Only Kisuke could figure out how to hide a desert-sized training room beneath a candy store.

She leapt back as the cliff caved in, a massive slice of rock crashing to the ground with a resounding boom, sending dust drifting across the room.

“Not bad,” Gin commended. “Now ya need to fight Haineko.”

Rangiku cocked her head at him in confusion. “Huh?”

“Bring her here from your inner world,” Gin explained. “It’s not hard.”

“Maybe not for you.”

“Actually, Shinso gave me quite a bit of trouble,” he said, “but that was a long time ago.”

“Please. You were a child prodigy, if I recall.”

“Not a prodigy,” he countered, “just a dedicated little boy with a grudge to avenge.”

Rangiku averted her eyes, lowering her Zanpakuto. “What do I even say? Something like that... If I’d known what you’d been plotting all of those years, I would have tried to stop you. I never would have wanted that. But...” She swallowed hard, looking back to him. “Thank you for caring so much.”

Before Gin could reply, shouts sounded from yards away.

“What the...” Rangiku muttered.

“It’s comin’ from the ladder,” observed Gin. “Perhaps someone’s payin’ a visit.”

“We need to hide,” Rangiku said. “I need to get back into my gigai.”

But there was no time. Despite the ladder’s massive length, a new figure leapt down it in seconds.

Or not so new a figure after all.

“What...” Rukia walked only a few paces before freezing, glancing between Gin and Rangiku. “What’s going on here?”

“Now, Miss Kuchiki,” began Kisuke, hurrying to Rukia’s side, “no need to be alarmed. There are perfectly good reasons for this.”

“I never would have thought you’d have gone this far,” Rukia snapped, pulling a device from the strap on her shihakusho. “I don’t care what your reasons are. I’m reporting this at once.”

She flipped open a phone, but Kisuke snatched it out of her hand before she could press more than a couple of buttons.

“Give that back,” she demanded, pointing her blade at him. “How... How could you?”

“I’ll explain everything if you promise not to report this to Soul Society,” Kisuke replied reasonably.

“No,” Rukia shouted, pointing at Gin. “That man is a sadistic monster, just as bad as if not worse than Aizen!”

“You’re not still sore at me because of our encounter that your big brother interrupted on Sogyoku Hill, are ya?” Gin asked, his usual mask fastened.

Rukia gritted her teeth, eyes blazing at Gin. “Killing me then would have been a mercy compared to what you did before that, breaking my acceptance of death by getting my hopes up that I would live.”

“Well, goodness, then allow me to apologize. I was merely toyin’ with a future casualty to keep myself on track. I very well couldn’t have accomplished my goal if I’d let myself care enough to rescue every poor kitten stuck in a tree.”

Rukia laughed in disbelief. “As cold a snake as ever. I suppose next you’re going to tell me that you’d planned to turn on Aizen all along. I’m not going to let you get away with escaping your sentence!” Rukia took a deep breath, positioned her Zanpakuto, and shouted, “Dance, Sode no Shirayuki! Suginomai, Hakuren!”

Her Zanpakuto chimed as it kissed the ground, bringing forth a beautiful eruption of ice aimed at Gin.

Rangiku gasped, jetting in front of the force. With Toshiro for a captain, she was all too familiar with ice-type Zanpakuto. And while Rukia had improved greatly over the past few months, she was still only a seated rank, and Rangiku, despite her bouts of laziness, was still a lieutenant.

“Growl, Haineke!”

The macroscopic spikes of Haineke’s smoke stopped Sode no Shirayuki’s ice torrent in midair before tearing it into countless tiny shards.

“Rangiku...” Rukia gaped at her. “Why are you defending him?”

“No need for that, Miss Kuchiki,” Kisuke said, clapping a hand on her shoulder. “Ichimaru here has kindly agreed to let me lock him in this gigai for a while in exchange for giving Rangiku bankai lessons.”

“Bankai?” Rukia blinked in disbelief, looking around at all three of them. “What exactly is going on here?”

“Long story short,” Kisuke said, “Ichimaru did turn on Aizen before the Council incident, started plotting against him as a child, years before you were even born, in fact. Ask Orihime if you don’t believe me; she’s the one who healed him when Aizen cut him down.”

Rukia gasped. “Orihime? I didn’t get to talk to her much after...”

“Please, Rukia,” Rangiku said, her tense posture relaxing. “I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s true.”

“Then why are you locking him in a gigai?” Rukia asked Kisuke.

“Because I still don’t trust him enough to turn him loose,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“You hypocrite,” Rukia grumbled. “Then what does all of this have to do with Rangiku learning bankai?”

“He wants lovely Miss Matsumoto here to be able to better protect herself.” Kisuke laughed. “Would you believe that snakes can fall in love too?”

Rukia’s jaw clenched. “Never. But…” She looked at Rangiku, her eyes softening. “I understand that childhood bonds can be hard to break.”

She sheathed Sode no Shirayuki and turned back toward the ladder. “I’ll hold off on reporting this to Soul Society, but know that I will talk to Orihime and get her account before making my decision final. I trust her more than anyone in this room.”

“Learnin’ from big brother Byakuya, are ya?” Gin taunted.

“Say one word against my brother and I’ll change my mind,” Rukia warned without turning around.

~~*~*

“Captain?”

Captain Mayuri Kurotsuchi swore at the interruption, whirling in his seat to face his lieutenant. “What is it, Nemu?” he snapped. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

On a table before him lay various samples he’d taken from Arrancar corpses after the battles in Hueco Mundo. This was an exceptional treat for him, having such a variety of specimens on which to conduct research to his heart’s content.

“We just got a signal from The World of the Living,” Nemu explained cautiously. “I think you’ll want to have a look at this.”

Captain Kurotsuchi muttered under his breath and reluctantly left his work, shoving roughly past Nemu to get to the series of large screens in the next room. After sitting down at the control panel, he pressed a few buttons. A couple of seconds later, the largest of the screens flickered and revealed a video.

“Miss Kuchiki,” Mayuri murmured thoughtfully, studying the frozen image of Rukia’s face. “What trouble have you gotten into now?”

He pressed another button, and the short video played on repeat, first showing Rukia, then someone knocking her phone out of her hand, and then…

Mayuri paused the screen on a blurry frame showing an arm clad in what looked like the sleeve of a shihakusho and, farther in the background, the side of a silver-haired man’s face.

“Well, Ichimaru, you miserable little twit,” he muttered, locking in the coordinates of where the video was taken. “Nemu, report this to the Head Captain. This might be just the thing to soften him enough before asking for a freer-experiment-range allowance.”

~~*~*

For the rest of the night, Rangiku threw herself into bankai practice, though she gained little progress. Destroying Kisuke’s training room helped distract her from anxiety about Rukia having seen Gin, but she was still too wound up to bring the personification of Haineko there via meditation.

After observing quietly from the shadows for some time, Kisuke finally stepped forward and spoke up. “I think you should call it quits for now. It’s almost morning, and you’re not going to get anywhere like that. Get some rest, and we’ll start with a fresh lesson plan tonight. Sound good?”

Panting, Rangiku wiped sweat and dust off her forehead and faced him, replying, “I can hardly wait.”

“Good,” Kisuke said, ignoring her sarcasm. “You can take a bath in the room behind that hill over there, the one you didn’t shatter. I’ll have Jinta or Ururu bring you down some breakfast later.”

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“Don’t mention it.” With a wave, Kisuke began the long ascent up the ladder to the shop.

Sighing, Rangiku turned to Gin. “You’ve been awfully quiet the last few hours.”

Gin smirked. “You’ve improved.”

“I didn’t accomplish anything,” Rangiku countered.

“But ya gained valuable experience through practice,” Gin said, “somethin’ I know you don’t do enough of.”

“You’re not worried that Rukia saw you?”

Gin’s smirk morphed to his grin. “Do I look like the type of guy to ever worry about anythin’?”

Rangiku’s shoulders relaxed a little. “No,” she said, smiling. “I’m going to go take Kisuke up on his offer.”

Feeling drained, she walked over to her limp gigai and stepped back into it. The same sweat and tiny cuts that were on her soul welled onto it. Technically, she could have stayed out of it, but even though Kisuke’s training room camouflaged any spiritual pressure within, having an extra layer made her feel safer, less exposed, despite its cumbersome weight and feel.

“The little healer was right,” Gin remarked. “Ya look adorable in that dress.”

“Shut up,” Rangiku mumbled. “We both know that your gigai got the stylish end of the deal.”

Gin’s quiet laugh followed her to the closet of a “room” Kisuke had indicated, only space enough for one cramped bathtub. Ordinarily, she would indulge in an hours-long soak, but since she was exhausted and couldn’t stretch out in the small tub, she just took enough time to wash the sweat away and soothe her collection of tiny cuts from stray bits of flying rock.

When she came out, on the other side of the little wooden building, she found a single bed with a note that read, Lovebirds don’t mind sharing, right?

“Kisuke, you pervert,” Rangiku grumbled, crumbling up the note and tossing it over her shoulder. She half expected there to be practical-joke cameras around the bed, but, right now, she was so exhausted, she didn’t care.

Half asleep already, she went to find Gin, who sat on the ground studying a stack of papers. “I’m going to get some sleep,” she said with a yawn. “The bed’s right beside of the bathhouse.”

Gin looked up from the papers. “I’m goin’ to stay up for a bit and do some practicin’ of my own.”

Rangiku arched a brow sleepily. “But how are you going to practice in a gigai?”

“There’s always a way to sidestep the impossible, dear Rangiku,” he replied cryptically.

She was about to ask what he was up to now, but decided against it and instead shook her head and turned around. “I’m not sure I want to know. Good night. Uh... Morning.”

“Sweet dreams,” he called after her in that melodic tone.

She smiled, her heart warm. As she crawled into bed, she hoped that Orihime would convince Rukia to stay quiet. This was a fresh start for both of them. And she hoped the cycle of Gin leaving had finally been broken.

~~*~*

When she woke up, it was afternoon. With both Gin’s and Kisuke’s guidance, she trained all night again. Though her reflexes marginally improved, she still couldn’t manifest Haineko from her inner world.

“This is pointless,” she whined, strapping her Zanpakuto to her shihakusho. “I’m starting to miss Toshiro’s paperwork.” On the spot, she sank to the ground and sprawled out on her back, throwing an arm across her forehead.

“Bankai doesn’t happen in a day,” Kisuke said. “The fastest I ever heard it taking was at least a few days. That’s what Yoruichi told me about Ichigo, anyway.”

“Well maybe Haineko would respond to her coaching better,” Rangiku grumbled. “They’re both cats, after all.”

“You’re really hatin’ this, aren’t ya?” Gin asked, sitting beside of her. “It’s got me wonderin’ why ya became a Soul Reaper in the first place.”

Lowering her arm, Rangiku turned her head to look at him. “So I could be near you.”

Gin frowned in surprise. “Really?”

“Aww,” Kisuke cooed from a few yards away, opening his fan.

Ignoring him, Rangiku added, “And I was curious about spirit energy. I wanted to know exactly what having it meant.” She laughed. “Turns out, it’s a lot more tedious than I first thought. Sometimes, I think life as an oblivious human would be bliss.”

“I’m sorry to inform you that that can never happen.”

Rangiku gasped and sat up at the eerie, gravelly voice. A voice she knew.

An indistinguishable liquid blob slid out from behind one of the boulders Kisuke had rebuilt, then rose and rotated until it formed Captain Mayuri Kurotsuchi in his usual eccentric getup.

Kisuke frowned. “Getting better at camouflaging yourself, I see.”

“Nice to see you again, too,” Captain Kurotsuchi said. “I sat behind that rock for the longest time trying to figure out what sort of scientific gain could come from this nonsense before finally giving up. Have you lost your dignity as a scientist, old friend?”

“On the contraire,” Kisuke replied. “I never have a day without a project up my sleeve.”

Mayuri shifted his attention to Gin and Rangiku, who had gotten to their feet. “No matter. I plan on a quick visit. I’m only here to retrieve that bone to bring back to the Head Captain; he’ll get off my case once he thinks that I’m a loyal dog.”

“That bone is currently helping me with an experiment,” Kisuke said, drawing his Zanpakuto and stepping in front of Kurotsuchi. “I’d prefer to not have to fight, ‘old friend.’”

“I feel the same,” replied Mayuri. “I’d much rather be in my lab, which is why I brought reinforcements to get the job done as fast as possible.”

From behind the same rock, more liquid blobs slid and took shape: Shuhei, Komomura, Toshiro, Nemu, Byakuya, and Rukia.

“I’m sorry,” Rukia spluttered. “I didn’t realize there was a camera on my phone. The buttons I pressed before Kisuke snatched it away must have sent coordinates to the Department of Research and Development. Even so, I believe Orihime, but... Ichimaru still went against Soul Society by acting on his own.”

“Rukia,” Rangiku breathed. “Shuhei, Toshiro...”

“That’s Captain, Rangiku,” Toshiro corrected as usual, his eyes sad.

Panicking, she glanced at the watch Kisuke had fastened around Gin's wrist to keep track of his timer. Just over ten minutes. Ten minutes too long...

Byakuya stepped forward, drawing his Zanpakuto. "This incident will most likely be resolved with a captain's execution ceremony. Be honored and proud should you be granted such undeserving respect."

"Execution?" Rangiku glanced at Gin, defenseless in his gigai, his smirk unreadable.

"Well, that's a hasty assumption, Captain," Gin commented melodically.

"Before, you said we were too soft," Shuhei growled, moving beside of Byakuya. "Or was that just because you knew you were going to get away?"

"Shuhei," Rangiku began, her mind racing, "please. You know me. I wouldn't be defending him if he'd really—"

"You can bat your eyelashes all you want," Shuhei interrupted. "It's not going to work on me this time. I do know you; everyone in the Seireitei knows you, how you've secretly been pining for that creep for years. I care about you, Rangiku, but I'm putting my captain first: this is for Kaname."

"You're outnumbered, Ichimaru," Toshiro added. "Will you come quietly?"

"Of course not," Komomura snarled, drawing his Zanpakuto. "It's going to be force or nothing. Even if he's in a gigai, we can't take any chances after what he did to the Council."

"I agree," murmured Byakuya, positioning his Zanpakuto.

It was true. They were vastly outnumbered, and even though Gin hadn't so much as made a move, none believed he would come quietly. And neither did she.

And...

An execution...

The horror flooded back to her, cradling his limp, bleeding form in her arms.

"Rangiku," Gin said, jerking her from her thoughts. "Get out of here."

As she studied the frown on his face, a frightening realization struck her: he wasn't planning to fight after all. No tricks left up his sleeve. Only acceptance.

An unfamiliar determination filled her—she'd have to pull enough tricks for the both of them, then.

Haineko, she pleaded silently, It's never been done before, but it can't be impossible. I need you now more than I ever have. Please, Haineko. Help me.

"Bankai. Scatter, Senbonzakura Kageyoshi."

Byakuya's Zanpakuto multiplied until the near vicinity glimmered with rows of blades, deadly shards like cherry-blossom petals floating around them.

"Okay, kitten," Rangiku heard a feminine voice say in her head. "Just this once. That bad boy means a lot to both of us, after all."

Rangiku gasped as Haineko's energy strengthened her soul. This was her only chance.

Thank you, she thought. Please guide me.

Leaping in front of the whirling shards, she screamed, "Bankai! Growl, Haineko!"

Once more, her blade dissolved, only, this time, the sharp cloud of smoke burrowed into the ground.

For a moment, she froze, terrified, afraid Haineko had played a trick on her for asking the impossible. But then, yards upon square yards of soil jetted into the air as if from an explosion beneath, each grain morphing to a macroscopic dagger. The massive cloud whirled around the group, trapping them inside even as it neutralized Byakuya's attack.

"What is this?"

"What?"

"What's happening?"

The group's frantic voices whirled along with the deadly dust cloud, which had imprisoned even Kisuke.

"Scream, Ashisogijizou!"

A horrible blend of a monster's roar and a tinny baby's cry erupted from the dust daggers.

The cloud dissipated, revealing the group of soul reapers, which had only been scratched.

"You learned Bankai?" Shuhei asked in disbelief.

Clutching her Zanpakuto, she glared. "I'm not letting him be executed!"

Shuhei charged first. Rangiku's blade met his with a clank. As they struggled, she kicked his chest then darted around him, slicing his arm as she went.

Gripping the hilt with both hands, she raised Haineko above her head, preparing to land a deeper blow.

But her swing was caught.

"You've been misled, Matsumoto," Komomura shouted, his massive arms restraining her in a headlock from behind, "just like Kaname. Don't make the same deadly mistake he did."

Desperately, Rangiku blurted, "Hado Number—"

She choked as his arm tightened around her neck, unable to gather enough breath to chant a kido spell, any kido spell.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kisuke's green hat flash, and another movement from the opposite direction.

Komomura howled in pain, releasing his grip. Rangiku fell to her hands and knees, clutching her throat and gasping for breath.

“Time's up.”

Another blur in her peripheral vision, and, two seconds later, she was standing at least a quarter of a mile away from the captains and lieutenants, all of them only specks. On her left, a blade stretched just as far, still embedded in Komomura's arm.

Shinso.

“Gin,” she said between gasps. He held her against his side, his right arm secure around her waist, wearing his shihakusho.

“Don't go gettin' yourself killed,” he said. “The little healer's not around right now.”

Tilting his head to look at her, he added, grinning, “But congratulations for achievin' bankai in record time. How scary.”

“Haineko said it was just a one-time thing,” she said, frowning. “How are we going to get out of this?”

Gin opened his mouth to reply, then whirled at something behind him.

Captain Kurotsuchi.

“Nitwit,” he said, holding up a suspicious-looking control of some sort, “you fell right into my trap.”

He pushed a button.

Rangiku spluttered, her eyes wide.

Gin gasped at the barbed-wire-like pole that had pierced her core. “Rangiku...”

Her eyes met his. She coughed blood. She collapsed. He reached out for her.

The same pole emerged from the ground and ran him through.

“Gin,” she spluttered. His body went numb. He collapsed, his face next to hers.

“You should have known that I continuously study the capabilities of every captain's Zanpakuto, past and present,” said Mayuri. “Therefore, I knew that your fighting tactic would be to gain distance, and I saw the perfect distraction in Lieutenant Matsumoto when I realized

that you have a vulgar sentimental attachment to her. I can think of no easier possible recipe for retrieving my bone. This poison rarely lets me down, and I've never been above sacrificing useless material in order to bag my prize."

"Ran...giku," Gin spluttered, struggling to move his arm. His face slackened, his eyes still open. His breath stilled.

A tear rolled down Rangiku's face as more blood spilled from her mouth, gagging her.

"Rangiku!" Muffled voices, footsteps, commotion...

Gin... she thought, Am I the only one in worlds who ever would have cried for you?

Silence. Darkness.

Absence of anything.

FINALE

EIGHTEEN YEARS LATER...

"No, wait, hold Mommy's hand!"

Orihime caught her breath as she stopped her son from crossing the street too early. Kazui was a perfectly balanced concoction of a little boy with Ichigo's spiky hair and her jolly smile.

"But I want to show Daddy what we made at the bakery today," he protested.

"He's probably not even home yet," she assured, laughing. "I know..."

She trailed off as a familiar silhouette caught the corner of her eye. A beautiful teenage girl walked along the sidewalk, head down, hugging her bag to her chest. And yet, though she looked younger, Orihime could have sworn...

"Rangiku?" she called as the girl drew nearer. No, that was impossible.

Still, as the girl passed her, she followed her and called again, "Rangiku? Is that you?"

The girl stopped and furrowed her brows at Orihime. "Are you talking to me?"

She even had Rangiku's voice, though it lacked the pep Orihime remembered.

Orihime blinked and shook her head. "I'm sorry. You just look identical to an old friend of mine."

"My name's Sakura," the girl mumbled, her eyes red like she'd been crying. "Sorry, I don't know anyone named Rangiku."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

“No problem,” said the girl, who then went on her way without another word. Orihime watched her until she disappeared into the crowd.

“Who’s Rangiku, Mommy?” Kazui asked, tugging on Orihime’s sleeve.

“She was a soul reaper,” Orihime said, smiling at him.

“Like Daddy?”

~~*~*

Sakura Takahashi chewed nervously on her pencil as she waited for the teacher to arrive. Another day, another class, more torment.

For as long as she’d lived, she’d always been an outcast. As a little girl, her interests hadn’t been normal enough for her to be accepted into any girl cliques, and none of the boys had wanted a “pest” tagging along behind them. Now, at eighteen, she’d long since been dubbed “Bait Beauty”—the girls hated her for her natural looks and the boys were always grabbing at her beyond-well-developed chest, and so she was the subject of petty abuse everywhere she went at school.

The only thing getting her through was her calendar; she only had to count down less than a year before she was free from this school and town forever.

Though she sat in the back corner of the classroom, students shot her dirty looks right up until the teacher walked in.

“Good morning,” the teacher said hastily as she set her things on her desk up front, her shirt only half tucked and a strand of hair sticking up at an odd angle. “Sorry I’m a bit late. It’s been a hectic morning, and on top of that, we have a new transfer student who will be joining us for the remainder of senior year.”

Great, Sakura thought miserably. A brand-new tormenter.

The teacher gestured at the open door. A tall guy who looked her age walked in, wearing a uniform like everyone else. Yet, at first glance, he was nowhere near like anyone else, with pale-silver hair and a suspicious smirk. And, Sakura thought it was her imagination, but he seemed to keep glancing at her.

“Everyone, please welcome Kyoya Sasaki from Kyoto.”

That’s not right.

Sakura gasped at the abrupt, strange voice in her head. No, not a voice, a thought. Just a stray thought. That had to be it.

But why would she think something like that?

Sasaki didn’t say anything, just bowed and took his seat at the front of the class. The longer the lesson went on, the more disturbed Sakura was by the emotion in her chest whenever she

glanced at the new guy's back. Maybe it was fear; that was it. She didn't know how he would treat her. If she were lucky, he would just ignore her. That would be better than what she'd endured all throughout school.

When the bell rang, she kept her head down and hurried out the door, relishing the relief of lunch, when she could sit by herself in her usual spot under a tree at the edge of the school grounds.

Sighing, she sat on the bench and opened her bento box, looking forward to her eclectic concoction of the day.

“What is that? Is that even food?” She jumped and gasped at the voice behind her. One of the guys from her class stepped out from behind the tree, followed by another guy and a girl. Her lungs seized with dread. She was used to harassment, but never at lunch. Lunch, at least, had always been her peaceful time.

Without a word, she closed the bento box and stood to leave, determined to find some quiet and solitude today. But the three students blocked her exit.

“Come on, Akio-kun,” grumbled the girl. “Just do it already. Everyone wants to know if they're real or stuffed.”

Sakura yelped in surprise as the shorter guy grabbed her from behind while the broader one grabbed her breasts.

“Damn, definitely real,” said the guy, his eyes wide. “Let's see what other treasures she's hiding under this uniform.”

“Stop, let me go!” Sakura shouted, trying to twist out of the guys' grips. A tear rolled down her face.

Don't mind me, a distant voice remarked in her mind, I just need to take something small and I'll be on my way.

Sakura gasped at the strong, clear scene that flashed through her mind: a handsome, patient-faced man with dark hair wearing glasses and a black kimono, also reaching for her chest, but removing something small and glowing instead of touching her breasts. A rustle from behind, several footsteps and jeering male voices, a sharp pain in her skull...

Waking up, vague memory, a blurry figure leaning over her... A muffled voice...

Hello. You're awake.

A new commotion jostled her from her eerie thoughts. The guys were knocked away from her. She stumbled backward against the tree from the force. Her hand over her racing heart, she tried to compose herself enough to see what had happened.

Sasaki, the new boy, stood between her and the other three classmates, his fists clenched, his teeth bared in a snarl.

“Next time ya touch her, I’ll break your necks,” he promised, taking a step toward them.

“He just came out of nowhere!”

“Let’s get out of here.”

The three students fled in terror, leaving Sakura alone with the new guy.

When he turned to her, his snarl morphed to a smile. “Are ya okay?”

Feeling cold air on her face, Sakura wiped away the single tear that had escaped her eye with a shaking hand and nodded. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Sasaki frowned, taking a step toward her. “I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry. She gasped at the blurred figure in her mind, uttering those same words to her. What was going on? Was all the bullying trauma finally catching up to her?

“Wh—why are you sorry?” she spluttered. “We don’t even know each other.”

His frown deepened for an instant, then his smile returned. “We will soon enough.”

She tensed, swallowing hard. Was this guy one of them after all?

“I’m not goin’ to hurt ya,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“Th—thanks,” she stammered, still shaken. “I’m Sakura Takahashi.”

“Nice to meet ya. You already know I’m Kyoya Sasaki.”

“Nice to meet you too, Sasaki-san,” she said with a bow.

Sasaki laughed. “Kyoya. We’re long past formalities.”

“We are?” Sakura blinked, taken aback, and yet, the statement, incredulously, didn’t feel untrue. Who exactly was this guy?

He was cute, she admitted to herself, but with the type of face and musical tone that said he was either always hiding or scheming something. Mischievous, maybe? No, something far beyond mischief, maybe something unnamed. Something dangerous.

Something we both adore.

She gasped. That voice again. This time, she was sure it wasn’t her own thoughts. It was a distinct voice, playful, feminine. A voice she’d heard before but couldn’t place... Oh, gah, was she hearing voices now?

Kyoya picked up her bento box, the contents of which had fallen on the ground, and set it on the bench before reaching into the bag slung across his shoulder. Still smiling kindly, he offered her a drawstring pouch.

“What’s this?” she asked, taking it hesitantly.

“A lunch substitute,” he said. “You can’t eat that off the ground.”

“Dried persimmons?” she murmured, removing one from the pouch. “They’re my favorite.”

“Mine too.”

Her heart fluttering inexplicably, she breathed, “Thank you,” and sat on the bench.

Kyoya sat beside of her, taking her by surprise. “It looks like you’ve had a hard life,” he observed.

She blinked, taken aback. “Um...well... I’ve gotten by so far, I guess.” What was with this guy?

He bowed his head, his silver hair falling into his eyes. “Looks like ya don’t remember yet. Maybe ya never will, but I hope ya do.”

“Remember?” Sakura studied him, confused.

He stood, adjusting the bag on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll look after ya from now on.” Like an impulse, he leaned close to her and brushed her jaw with the backs of his fingers. “I never thought you’d still be cryin’.”

Before Sakura could comment, he turned and started walking away.

“Come find me if ya remember,” he said cryptically.

Then, over his shoulder, he murmured, “I missed ya, Rangiku.”

~~*~*

Sakura lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling. What a strange couple of days it had been. The woman with the little boy, she’d brushed off as coincidence. But now, the new guy had called her “Rangiku” too. At first, she wondered if there was just someone who’d lived here that looked like her, but then realized that couldn’t have been it; they’d been so sure she was this Rangiku person. And the scenes that had been flashing in her head.

“So weird,” she muttered. “It’s all so weird.”

Trying to think logically, she retraced her steps back to the beginning, the woman. Now that she thought about it, she had seemed a little familiar, even the little boy, but how?

“I’ve probably seen her at a convenience store in town or something,” she reasoned.

I’m so glad you came over tonight, Rangiku. I never have anyone to share my cooking with.

She gasped. Another scene in her mind: the woman she’d seen yesterday, only, she looked like a teenager, and Sakura felt older. In her head, the kind-faced girl cleared away what

looked like dinner dishes and replaced them with heaping bowls of ice cream loaded with a medley of unusual toppings.

Oh, come on, kitten, commented another familiar voice in her head. Surely, you remember Orihime. A pushover, but a nice girl.

Sakura bolted from her bed and walked over to her mirror. She'd always worn her hair in pigtails, and yet, as she studied her reflection now, they looked new to her. Sliding the bands off, she shook her long golden hair out. This felt right. Why?

What was happening to her?

Feeling panicky, she walked over to her nightstand and picked up the bag of dried persimmons that she'd been too numb to finish during lunch. Her stomach growled. She reached inside and took a bite of one. Inexplicably, the taste, now, nearly brought her to tears.

You have spirit energy, like me. That's why you're hungry.

The same blurry figure flashed in her mind, the one that had been leaning over her after the scene with the handsome man in glasses.

The figure cleared.

It was Sasaki, same smile, only, as a little boy.

You poor thing. Come with me. I'll help ya.

After that, the scenes kept playing. All night. The sun rose, and they still didn't stop. The start time of her morning class came and went and still they didn't stop.

Around lunchtime, finally, the last memory surfaced:

Gin... Am I the only one in worlds who ever would have cried for you?

Her eyes burning from tears and lack of sleep, she stripped her pajamas, threw the first clothes on she could find, and jetted out the door, her now free hair streaming behind her.

He remembers, she thought. He found me.

She wasn't sure what time it was, so she headed to her classroom first. Her teacher was tidying papers at her desk.

"Sakura," she said. "I was worried when I noticed you weren't in class. You're not in your uniform. Are you all right?"

"Sasaki," Sakura blurted. "I need to talk to him. It's important."

Her teacher furrowed her brows. "The new boy? I'm sure he's at lunch like the others."

“Thanks,” Sakura breathed, bolting off again. Just to be sure, she quickly glanced at the cafeteria, but when she didn’t find him there, she decided to go with her gut next.

Sure enough, he sat on the bench under the same tree as yesterday, staring up at the leaves, appearing deep in thought.

She ran toward him, not stopping even when he looked up. And when she reached him, she crashed into him so hard that she knocked him off the bench.

Her poor eyes stinging with more tears, in the grass, she wrapped her arms around him and whispered, “Gin, Gin...”

“Rangiku,” he murmured, holding her back. “You finally remembered.”

“When did you remember?” she asked, sniffing.

“A couple of years ago,” he said. “It took that long for Kisuke and me to track ya down.”

“Kisuke,” she said. “The candy shop. Is he still there?”

“Yeah. As soon as I remembered, I found him and started workin’ with him to trace your reishi.”

Rangiku pulled back to look at his face. “My reishi? How is this possible?”

“You’ve heard of reincarnation before, right? The idea that, when a soul dies, they turn to reishi and are eventually reborn again in The World of the Livin’?”

“Yeah, but...” In truth, she’d never really thought about the concept.

Gin smirked. “After I convinced the Council I was guilty, I knew the Gotei Thirteen would eventually kill me, so I wanted to spend the time I had left with you; that was why I asked ya to come to The World of the Livin’ with me. But I wasn’t ready to give ya up completely, so I worked with Kisuke on a controlled reincarnation experiment. He was willin’, of course, because no one had ever tried that before. The idea was to use the Hogyoku to speed up the reincarnation, and Kisuke would then save samples of my dead soul as it morphed into reishi and, then, hopefully trace those reishi particles to my new body on Earth. Only, I suppose because of the Hogyoku, I remembered everythin’ and found Kisuke before he was able to get a grasp on trackin’ reishi. Thankfully, he thought to save samples of your reishi too and finally figured out how to find ya.”

Frowning, he added, “I never thought they’d kill ya. I never thought you’d defend me like that. I’m sorry for draggin’ ya into everythin’. I’d planned on regainin’ my soul-reaper powers as a human like Kurosaki once reincarnated so I could find ya again in Soul Society, but I was careless and let Kurotsuchi get the best of me.”

When Rangiku said nothing, just stared at him, he added, “Are ya goin’ to say anythin’?”

“We’re both human now,” she murmured. “We don’t have to go back to Soul Society until we die again.”

Grinning, he said, “When we do, we’ll be separated again. Will ya promise to meet me back in the Seireitei?”

“They won’t let us in unless we’re Soul Reapers.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Rangiku laughed. “We’re such old souls.”

Closing his eyes, Gin ran his fingers through her hair and kissed her softly. “The pigtails were growin’ on me. I always knew you’d be adorable as a schoolgirl.”

“I can’t believe I’ve let bullies get the best of me this whole life,” Rangiku muttered. “The old me never would have put up with that.”

“Well, then, allow me to help ya show ’em who’s boss.”

“I love you, Gin,” she murmured, bowing her head. “Now that we’re alive, we can finally rest in peace.”

Leaning closer, he said, “After everythin’, you can somehow still love me. I’m glad.”

~~*~*

Ichigo walked down the sidewalk on his way home from work. For a while, life had been blissfully dull. His days mostly consisted of waking up, going to work, fighting the occasional hollow, performing konso on a stray spirit every now and then, and coming home to smiles, hugs, and kisses from the loves of his life, Orihime and little Kazui.

But since, a few days ago, Orihime had told him she’d seen a girl that reminded her of Rangiku, he couldn’t stop thinking of Aizen and how many had died because of him, directly or indirectly, and in the battles that followed. He knew, no matter how much he’d wanted to, he couldn’t have saved everyone, but the thought still pained him. Rangiku and so many others hadn’t deserved to die, maybe not even Ichimaru, he thought.

He remembered the times the latter had fought him and had the chance to kill him but didn’t. At the times, Ichigo had thought Ichimaru had only been toying with him, but looking back, it was almost like he’d known all along that Ichigo had the potential to defeat Aizen, almost like, during those fights, Ichimaru had been kind of training him, trying to push him to his limits like Kisuke.

But that had been a long time ago. Ichigo had long since put the past behind him. He had a future and family of his own.

“Sorry,” he muttered after bumping into someone.

He froze. His eyes widening, he turned slowly.

Never in a million years...

“Ichimaru?” he called.

The guy he’d bumped into stopped and turned around. A silver-haired guy with a creepy grin and a familiar gorgeous girl’s hand in his. They looked like teenagers now instead of like twenty-something-year-olds, but there was no doubt.

“Ichimaru,” Ichigo repeated, “Rangiku...”

Keeping his grin, the guy replied in Ichimaru’s taunting melodic tone, “I’m Kyoya Sasaki, and this is Sakura Takahashi. I’m sorry, I don’t know anyone by either of those names.”

“B–but,” Ichigo spluttered, pointing.

The girl cocked her head at the guy, then looked back at Ichigo. “Sorry,” she said.

The two went on their way, but a few paces down the sidewalk, she looked over her shoulder and called, winking, “You’ve certainly grown into a handsome man.”

Ichigo gaped, watching them move farther and farther away. As they walked, the girl glanced at the guy with pure love glistening in her eyes, and the guy’s unnerving grin warmed when he looked at her.

“But...I...” Ichigo ran his hand through the back of his hair, dumbfounded. “Orihime’s not going to believe this. Reincarnation?”

Shaking his head, Ichigo continued on his way. “I think he’s even creepier as a teenager. Glad I never had to go to high school with him.” He thought briefly to when Rangiku had shown up at his high school in a gigai and school uniform years ago, looking completely out of place with a small group of other soul reapers in gigai.

Maybe Ichimaru was right for her after all, Ichigo thought. She was definitely a handful, that girl. And she seemed to be the only one able to tame Ichimaru.

Laughing quietly, Ichigo muttered, “Much stranger things have happened.”

GIN AND RANGIKU: WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

THE END

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