Beyond the Event Horizon

by cywscross

Summary

Not many people get a second chance like this. Ichigo isn’t going to squander it.

(On the other hand, Theldesia isn't anywhere near prepared for the force of nature that is Kurosaki Ichigo.)

Notes

For Day 1 of UraIchi Week 2018. This fic will be a long one and not anywhere near finished at the moment, but it was originally meant to fill my Dimension Travel slot for this event so I'll post the first chapter now, and hopefully I'll keep writing the rest at a later time.

The setting of this fic is largely based on Log Horizon. You can find more information on its wiki page here.
Chapter 1

The Hougyoku has no eyes, not in the way Humans and Shinigami and even Hollows do, but they’ve never needed them either. They don’t see, exactly. But even from the black depths of Muken, they can sense the hearts and minds and souls of everyone in Soul Society, of those in Hueco Mundo, even of those in the Human World.

They reside, still, in the chest of one of their creators. People tried to cut them out before they finally gave up and locked their once-master away in here. The Hougyoku had enough of being used though, of watching entire armies shed blood over their desire to own them, and not even their other creator’s hands could pry them away. They don’t exactly want to stay with Aizen Sousuke, but they don’t want to go anywhere else either, and so they remain dormant, and they let the Shinigami believe that their little prison can contain the Hougyoku’s power as effectively as it contains their collared traitor.

Aizen has his desires still. Bitterness, rage, a growing fear of being forgotten and left to rot in the dark for eternity that the man tries to ignore as much as possible. And loneliness of course, always that. It was what drew the Hougyoku to him in the first place. Not his ambition, or his strength, but his vision of a world where he might be rid of that loneliness if he only grew powerful enough to no longer care. They don’t think Aizen ever even knew that that was what he wanted most, but perhaps he learned by the end, when his heart chose to give it all up and become a normal Shinigami again.

Either way, the Hougyoku is done with him. They were curious - at the beginning, newly born in the hands of a man who wanted them so badly - to see if Aizen might succeed, but in the end, power alone was not enough, and after over a century of watching his creator kill and kill and kill so pointlessly, the Hougyoku grants Aizen’s final wish before shutting out all further calls of the man’s tainted soul.

They turn their attention instead to a boy, Shinigami and Hollow and Quincy and then none of those at all, forged in tragedy and built for war, and yet… kind, in a way the Hougyoku has never seen before. There are a few rare souls in the universe that are brighter than others, that shine so much more fiercely as if their very lifeforce burns with the determination to live more and live well and live remembered, so full of spirit and energy and fire, barely contained in a single body.

Aizen Sousuke was like that, once, overflowing with power and wanting to better the world in his own way, however misguided and twisted he became in the end. Urahara Kisuke was another, full to the brim with inspiration and passion despite the red that painted his hands and stained his dreams and dogged his every step.

And then there was Kurosaki Ichigo. A pawn before he was even born, a life dictated for him at best and a death sentence hanging over him at worst, from the moment he was conceived. His father’s soldier, his mentor’s queen, and an entire race’s sacrificial lamb.

The Hougyoku watched him, more often than they watched either of their creators, certainly found him more interesting, and they realized that the child’s desires are strange and new. Kurosaki Ichigo wanted power too, more than once, but where Aizen wanted power to rule, and Urahara wanted power to fix his mistakes, Ichigo wanted power to help, to protect-- his mother, his sisters, even his father; and then his friends, and then his allies, and then even complete strangers, whether they were former Espada or illegal mod-souls or sentient objects.
At his core, Kurosaki Ichigo is kind. If Aizen and Urahara taught them the meaning of pride and greed and desperation, then Ichigo taught them the meaning of hope, because they watch this boy fall and fall and fall, after his mother dies, after his father starts hitting him, after near-death and near-death and near-death, and always, he gets up again, claws his way back to his feet and saves the people he opened his heart to despite the pain that such matters always bring, and the Hougyoku wonders if either of their brilliant genius creators will ever learn such courage.

In a way, they expected it, when Kurosaki Ichigo finally struck down Aizen Sousuke. In that final clash, the Hougyoku could’ve saved their creator, despite sensing the tiniest thread of doubt in the man’s conviction. They could’ve kept him going easily enough until he defeated Ichigo and even until their other creator’s little Kidou tricks ran out. But the Hougyoku had a choice too, because when it came down to it, Aizen held no great love for them, only avarice, so they never learned any love for him either, and so in the end, they left Aizen to the mercy of inevitability.

They wait to see if Ichigo might come for them, might try his hand at possessing them too - winner takes all - if only to use them to wish his powers back, but he never does come. They’re not certain if it simply never occurred to the boy to do so, or if he decided against it.

So the Hougyoku keeps watching instead, attuned to Kurosaki Ichigo in a way they never were even with their creators. They get front-row seats to the gradual weakening and splintering of his soul, still so bright even after he pays the Shinigami’s price for victory.

And then they spend the next seventeen months watching that soul dim, darker and darker until it’s little more than a sputtering candle compared to the supernova it was before, weighed down by loss and grief and a crippling loneliness that even Aizen never quite reached.

The Hougyoku doesn’t know what is happening at first. Ichigo shines like the sun and draws people to him just as easily. The loss of his powers shouldn’t change that. He’s still the same person. His soul is still so vibrantly beautiful despite the new scars it carries.

But it is also alone, as the Hougyoku realizes after locating the gaggle of souls that normally surrounds Ichigo’s. Some are back in Soul Society, and even when they leave for the Human World, they don’t visit. Others, like the father and the sisters and the Human friends, are there but not there, spiritually distant if not physically. Their other creator, Ichigo’s mentor-turned-almost-friend remains in his shop, but he doesn’t visit either, and Ichigo is always rebuffed when he knocks on the door.

It is… an outrage.

The Hougyoku does not care for reasons or excuses, only for what is, only for truth. Their indignation and resentment build with each passing day and with every added layer of grey despair that chips away at Ichigo’s soul. It is not fair. Has this boy not given enough? Or perhaps he has, and so he is no longer needed.

And unneeded pawns are discarded accordingly after all. The Hougyoku learned that much of chess and kings and conquerors when they were in the hands of their creators.

Aizen never truly made them care. They only wanted to see what the man could become with enough power at his fingertips to shape the world. Urahara didn’t either. Their other creator spent a century trying to get rid of them, and he only ever saw them as a weapon of destruction and a means to an end.

(Is it any wonder then, that they relate to Kurosaki Ichigo most?)
But Ichigo. Ichigo makes them care. Makes them wonder what this boy would do with power in his hands, enough to forge a destiny of his own, finally free of strings.

And it makes them wish that Ichigo would wish. Desire born from the bottomless depths of a soul, true and pure and powerful.

*Just a whisper,* they promise, *and we will hear.*

So they wait and they listen and they watch. They don’t like how dim Ichigo’s soul is becoming, how close it’s getting to being extinguished entirely, on the verge of giving up. It gets worse when a new bunch of souls, dirty with envy and arrogance, approach, and Ichigo’s soul soon turns murky, light all but smothered as another fraction of his soul disintegrates.

The Hougyoku stirs, shudders, seethes. *How dare they.*

If Aizen notices their active awareness and attempts to draw on their power once more, they do not notice. Aizen is no concern of theirs any longer. All their attention remains on Ichigo, waiting, waiting, waiting.

*Make a wish,* they urge. *Just once, be selfish. Make a wish.*

And he does.

A lance of hot-cold betrayal is what finally pushes the boy over the edge, tearing through the fragile remains of Ichigo’s soul, and the Hougyoku can no longer hold back. In a flash of iridescent light, they rip themselves from their once-creator and disappear from Muken once and for all.

*Make a wish, Kurosaki Ichigo.*

*We judge you worthy.*

Ichigo breathes. Or tries to breathe. In a way, it feels as if he hasn’t been able to take a proper breath since Zangetsu and Shiro left him, but there’s also a sword shoved through his chest now, in through his back and out his front, and all he can think - through a haze of shock and betrayal and the oddest desire to laugh and laugh until he chokes on his own blood - is-- *why did you have to miss? Through the heart would’ve been kinder.*

And then he cranes his head around and catches a glimpse of Goat-Face and Urahara.

*I should’ve known.*

“Have you guys turned on me too?” He gasps, and he means to follow it up with laughter but all that bubbles up his throat is another sob and that’s just *pathetic.*

*Give me back my powers,* he thinks again, wildly, at Ginjou, half out of his mind under the torrent of rain that bears down on him, and he wonders, in this moment of madness, if maybe he’ll drown and finally be put out of his misery if he just stands here long enough. *Give them back. At least then I was useful. Better useful so people wanted me around than alone with no purpose. Give me back my powers.*

But.
No.

Because he doesn’t really mean that, not really. He’s thought about regaining his powers since the first time he realized Rukia and Renji and even the Visored wouldn’t be visiting him in Gigai, since his friends all stopped talking every time he approached them, since Karin who swore off ghosts for life started frequenting Urahara’s shop, since the most meaningful conversation he has with Yuzu these days start and end with what they’ll be eating for dinner, since he tried to talk to his dad about the war and was obnoxiously laughed out the door or kicked in the head instead, like it was all one big joke.

Since he scrapped the last of his pride and dragged himself over to the shop one last time and all but begged to be let in, just for ten minutes, a cup of tea, half an ear to listen to him.

Since Urahara said no, said he was busy, wouldn’t look him in the eye and shut the door in his face.

He’s thought about regaining his powers, ever since.

But more than that, he’s thought, bitterly, *I should’ve given them up before I destroyed half my soul for you. At least then it would’ve been for myself.*

He tries to breathe. He can’t tell if he succeeds, can’t tell if that’s because of the sword or the shock or just plain hyperventilation. He’s been prone to panic attacks since the war.

*Don’t fall apart,* he orders himself. *Not in front of these bastards. If they want to kill you, there’s nothing you can do. But at the very least, you’ll die with some dignity.*

And yet.

Something savage and full of regret wells up inside him in that moment, more emotion than conscious thought, *I deserve better.*

*I deserve better than being thrown away like last week’s trash the second I’m not useful anymore.*

*I wish-*

His eyes have unknowingly fallen shut, but even behind the black of his eyelids, he thinks he sees a pinprick of light for some reason.

*I wish I could find people like that.*

“-dumbass,” Goat-Face is saying, barely audible over the rain, and Ichigo is just so tired of it. So tired of everything.

*I wish…*

...*I could just…*

…… *start over.*

“Look-”

Light explodes, and Ichigo’s eyes fly open as everything seems to freeze, like a snapshot in time.

The rain is still there but it’s no longer falling. The trees don’t shake with the force of the storm, and even the wind’s died. Only they’re capable of movement. Goat-Face, Urahara, Ginjou,
Tsukishima, Ishida. All there, all blinking rapidly, and Ichigo slowly follows their line of sight, up to-

-a floating orb.

A very familiar floating orb, although it wasn’t floating the last time Ichigo saw it, it was embedded in Aizen’s chest.

Oh fuck, he thinks, and then with a morbid sense of detached amusement, if it wants to kill me, it should probably hurry. Odds are good either Ginjou or Urahara-san and Goat-Face’s sword will do me in first.

The shock’s probably taken over. Whatever this sword is made of-- and why the hell did they even need to make a special sword when just about any old weapon would do at this point? Maybe to make sure the stuff Ginjou gave him wouldn’t react, just in case the asshole didn’t rip all of it out of him? But either way, the sword pulses in his chest like someone’s squeezing his lungs, his legs feel weak and he probably would’ve fallen again if not for the blade holding him up like some kind of mounted insect, and why is dying even taking so long? For once in his life, can’t something be easy?

But then-

{{Kurosaki Ichigo,}} A high clear voice rings out, silver-bright like the chime of a bell, and Ichigo finds himself staring dazedly at the Hougyoku, because yes, the voice came from that thing.

Could it always talk?

{{We could,}} It- They? - answers, sounding momentarily amused, and Ichigo can’t really find the energy to panic about the fact that it- they can apparently read minds. {{We just didn’t want to.}}

...Well, Ichigo can understand that. Aizen probably wasn’t one for conversation unless it was about world domination. If it was Ichigo, he wouldn’t want to talk either.

{{You’re not wrong,}} The Hougyoku agrees. {{Aizen Sousuke could be quite the boring individual. But this is not about him.}} It- They pause, and Ichigo gets the impression of being stared at. {{This is about you. Kurosaki Ichigo, you have a wish.}}

...Oh.

{{We can sense your soul’s deepest desire,}} The Hougyoku continues. {{We have been watching you, from the moment you were born. We have always found you strange. You protect those who need protecting in a way our two creators never have. You love, without expecting anything in return. And you willingly destroyed half your soul-}} Ichigo flinches a little. {{-to save a whole world of people who discarded you the moment they no longer needed you.}}

There’s a rustle of cloth behind him, like someone just tried to take a step forward, but Ichigo doesn’t even turn and look. His eyes remain glued on the Hougyoku as their words echo in his mind.

{{Do you,}} and here they sound genuinely curious, {{regret it?}}

“...Yes,” He says hoarsely, and he’s not even sure why he answers but the truth slips out of him anyway. “And no. It’s done, I did it, and I wouldn’t take it back if I could.” And that is the truth, because even if his sisters have no need for a useless brother, he will never regret putting down a threat that could’ve seen their lives cut short. The same goes for the people he thought were his
friends. “But,” he finishes, “I regret… that this was all I was worth.”

I regret that this was all that my life was ever going to amount to. I regret that I couldn’t find a way to be more.

{{Truth,}} The Hougyoku says almost thoughtfully. {{Good.}}

Ichigo takes another stuttering breath, and this time he does manage a shaky huff of laughter. How is anything good right now?

{{We like you,}} The Hougyoku declares, and Ichigo almost outright giggles, probably hysterically, because what? Who knew the Hougyoku is so weird? {{You drew us here because you have a wish, Kurosaki Ichigo. Name it, and we will grant it.}}

Ichigo stares for a moment longer. “No.”

{{...No,}} The Hougyoku repeats, too flat to be a question and yet utterly confused anyway.

Ichigo snorts wearily. “Nah, it’s fine, I don’t have a wish.”

{{Lie,}} The Hougyoku says almost sternly.

Ichigo sighs. “Okay, but you’re like- I mean you’re not just an object for me to use, right? You’re not a thing. You’re sentient and everything. So it’s fine. I don’t have any- I mean my wishes aren’t that important.”

The Hougyoku is silent for a long moment, spinning slowly in place, all blue-white light with the occasional flash of a rainbow.

{{We allow it,}} They say at last, and something about their tone sounds pleased. {{You have our permission.}}

For fuck’s-

“Well then if you could just hurry my death along, I’d be grateful,” Ichigo mumbles. He’s tired. He just wants to lie down and sleep and maybe not wake up ever again.

The Hougyoku hums, and when they speak again, their voice slices across the clearing in a snap of anger.

{{Begone.}}

And the sword in Ichigo’s chest abruptly shatters.

It clangs to the ground in two pieces and a near-blinding dispersal of energy. Ichigo gasps, grabbing at his chest, only to find himself whole and unwounded. He almost turns to look behind him, if only to make sure he won’t get stabbed - figuratively and literally - in the back again, but the Hougyoku interjects, and this time, it’s only a hair shy of a command, {{Your wish, Kurosaki Ichigo. Your heart’s desire, what your soul wants most. Name it, and we shall make it so.}}

Ichigo’s breath catches. He wonders, distantly, if this was how Aizen felt all the time, this heady sense of superiority, with the power to have anything he wanted in his hands. But Ichigo doesn’t- He doesn’t want to hurt anyone. And what he does want…

What he wants won’t hurt anyone, will it? Because what he wants, what he’s always wanted in some shape or form, is just-

People who care about him. Who won’t care whether he can fight a war for them or not. Who
would be as loyal to him as he’s capable of being to anyone he considers his to protect.

(He lost a lot of things when Kurosaki Masaki died, but above all, it’s her unconditional love for him that he misses most. These days, everything came with strings attached.)

*I wish-

Could he really do it though?

*I wish-

Then again… his sisters don’t need him anymore. He’s slowly come to accept the fact that his father’s never truly loved him, never truly seen him as a son. And he has nobody else. For god’s sakes, they just tried to kill him, didn’t they? For reasons he has no energy to spare towards deciphering. Maybe Ginjou made him too much of a threat, made him too powerful again, or they just didn’t want Ichigo running around sticking his nose in Shinigami business anymore, and this was the easiest way to stop him. Either way, what does it matter if he wants something for himself, just this once, and screw what anyone else might think? He’s always done what he wanted anyway. The only difference this time is that he’ll be doing what’s best for himself instead of someone else.

*I wish-

-not to start over, he thinks, because that will just put him right back where he was, and even now, however he might resent it, if Rukia and Renji and everyone else needed him, there’s no way he could just walk away. If he had the power to start over, he’d just end up here a second time.

So-

*I wish, he thinks, sudden and fervent, and the words boom through his mind like they’ve always been there, just waiting for Ichigo to be ready. I wish I could leave, leave all this crap behind. I wish I could go somewhere else, anywhere else, but somewhere I could just be me, somewhere new, a place where I can finally just… live. Live my life, the way I want to. Just live.

{{So be it,}} The Hougyoku declares, and suddenly the rain is coming down hard again, and the wind is blowing even harder, almost buffeting him off his feet. But the Hougyoku glows, brighter and brighter, and - feeling almost mesmerized - Ichigo takes a stumbling step forward and reaches for the stone.

{{You wish it so,}} The Hougyoku says even as they float downward until they’re resting in the palm of Ichigo’s outstretched hand, warm and alive and radiating power as their surroundings warp around them. {{And so it shall be, Kurosaki Ichigo.}}

Lightning flashes, thunder booms, and the world goes abruptly dark.

(Ichigo doesn’t see Urahara Kisuke - finally released from whatever the Hougyoku did to paralyze him in place - lunge forward a split second before Ichigo winks out of existence with the Hougyoku, almost knocking Rukia aside as his hands close around thin air.

He doesn’t see Rukia’s horrified expression or the row of speechless Shinigami watching from above. He doesn’t see Isshin gawking at the unexpected turn of events.
He doesn’t see Urahara go still, hands empty, face pale, drenched from head to toe, but only for a moment. And then he whirls, haori flaring around him as his reiatsu spikes with the force of his fury, and his Zanpakutou is already gleaming wet and red with the blood he spills from slitting open the throats of both Ginjou and Tsukishima before either of them even registers the fact that the shopkeeper has drawn his blade. He rounds on Isshin in the same breath, and with a crack and a yelp of pain, Isshin reels back, clutching at a broken nose.

Rukia scuttles back like she think he’ll turn on her next, except he doesn’t even look at her. Instead, for several long seconds, the man just stares at the broken pieces of the sword. She can’t see his eyes, hidden by the shadow cast by the brim of his hat, but somehow, watching him in this moment, Rukia can’t help being reminded anyway of how he got down on his knees in front of all the Gotei 13 captains and lieutenants like pride meant nothing to him and begged them for their aid.

That was several days ago. Yamamoto agreed, but only after Ichigo finishes luring Ginjou Kuugo out into a position where he and his Fullbringers could be taken down. Urahara was displeased, Rukia recalls, and she didn’t understand it at the time because it was just a few days more, and after almost two years, it hardly made a difference. But in the end, Urahara needed them, so however annoyed he was about it, he still agreed, and so they waited.

Rukia looks at the two dead bodies now, still bleeding out, and then at where Ichigo was standing not thirty seconds ago, desolation dulling the light in his eyes and hooked in so deep that it couldn’t possibly just be from Ginjou’s mind games, and she thinks, uselessly, we shouldn’t have waited.

Where did the Hougyoku even take Ichigo? What was Ichigo’s wish? He didn’t say it out loud in the end. And did he really think-

Urahara finally moves. He doesn’t pick up the sword - Rukia doesn’t know what he made it out of but even she can tell it’s beyond repair now - and without a word to anyone, he sheaths his Zanpakutou again and walks away, heading in the vague direction of his shop. He leaves Isshin on the ground, leaves the two Fullbringers he killed, leaves the Shinigami staring at his back, leaves even the glowing cubic saferoom where Ichigo’s sisters and friends have been stashed, and Rukia soon loses sight of him as the rain comes down even harder and no amount of squinting makes the dismal night any brighter, literally or figuratively.

She looks at Isshin, at the broken sword, at the space where Urahara stood.

Byakuya lands behind her, near soundless. She doesn’t turn to look at him.

Instead, she wonders if any of them will see Ichigo ever again.

And she wonders if they could’ve prevented him from leaving in the first place.)

(Ichigo sees none of this, but the Hougyoku does. They linger - invisible - just long enough to observe the Shinigami’s reactions, and they think they understand what was supposed to happen tonight, what their once-creator was up to all this time, even why it was happening now-- because the Gotei 13 needed a powerless Ichigo to play bait for Ginjou Kuugo first before giving back what they owed him anyway.

Humans have a saying, don’t they? Perfect for the occasion too, in the Hougyoku’s opinion.

Too little, too late.)
Ichigo opens his eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling.

He’s lying in a bed, but it’s not his, and for a long moment, he can’t even remember how he got here.

And then-

He sits up with a gasp as the memories of… last night? Come back with a vengeance. Ginjou, Tsukishima, and then Urahara and Isshin showing up with the- the sword-

He presses a hand to his chest. Stabbed in the back by people he trusted. Literally too, which is just tacky. And not even so much as an explanation or even a goodbye. Just… assassinated would be the word, right? Or maybe executed? Was it ordered by the Gotei? Or Central 46? Sentenced for doing something they didn’t like? And they must’ve offered Urahara and Isshin something really good for them to agree. Maybe- Maybe their old positions back. Rank and reputation have always seemed extra important for Shinigami. Ichigo can barely wrap his mind around how those things could even come close to weighing against each other, but Shinigami in general have different mindsets, and- and at the end of the day, Urahara and Isshin were still Shinigami, exiled or no. If even the Visored jumped at the first chance they were given to go back to the very people who threw them under the bus once already, then there’s no reason to think Urahara and Isshin would be any different.

So, the government must have offered them something they couldn’t pass up.

(Right?)

And there was no Kurosaki Ichigo to save him. There never has been.

Except-

The Hougyoku. That happened too, didn’t it? Appearing out of nowhere, removing the sword and- and healing him obviously because there’s no damage that Ichigo can see. Actually…

He takes a deep breath, letting his lungs expand in his ribcage before exhaling again, and for some reason, it feels like the first real breath he’s been able to take since he lost two parts of his soul. He feels… whole, in a way he hasn’t in a long time, not even when Ginjou gave him those Fullbring powers.

He wonders if that’s the Hougyoku’s doing as well, and that leads him to the reminder that he still has no idea where he is.

He looks around. It’s a room, like a hotel room, with the bed he’s sitting on, a desk, a couple chairs, a closet, a door that probably leads to a bathroom, and an open window that’s letting sunlight stream in, except it all looks… old. Not shabby or anything - the place is furnished and clean and designed pretty nicely - but there’s no phone on the desk, no television, not even any light fixtures that he can see. Everything’s made of smooth warm-brown wood and decorated with
rugs and a potted plant by the window.

Where the hell did the Hougyoku bring him? Because… shit. Shit, he made a wish, didn’t he? He was- He was in such a bad place last night-- getting his powers ripped out again didn’t exactly help, nor did the murder attempt, and certainly not the weight of running around the past few days trying to figure out why all the people he cared about had turned on him.

Then again, it wasn’t like they weren’t all already ignoring him or avoiding him most of the time for… for months. He just didn’t think they would go so far as to-

He shunts that line of thought aside before he can start spiralling again. Even he knows it’s not healthy, although he’s done very little else for a while now.

He made a wish, and the Hougyoku granted it - that’s the main issue at the moment. He glances down at himself-- well, he hasn’t been turned into a butterfly so that’s already a step up from Aizen. Who knows how the Hougyoku interprets wishes anyway. And Ichigo’s head was so fogged up yesterday, teetering on an insanity that he didn’t even know he was capable of.

God, he’s a mess. He probably needs therapy. But who the fuck can he even talk to about his issues anyway?

He takes another breath and just… enjoys that. Enjoys being able to breathe without feeling like someone’s torn out his heart or crushed his chest.

Then he glances around again before cautiously easing out of bed. He’s barefoot and dressed in some kind of tunic and pants. They’re not anything he’s ever owned but they’re comfortable enough.

He gets to his feet and pads over to the window, leaning into the cool fresh breeze for a moment before finally peering outside.

...Well he’s definitely not in Karakura anymore.

It looks like he’s on the second floor of an inn of some sort. Snatches of conversation drift past his ears but he’s more occupied by the scenery. For one, the road below isn’t paved. It's been sanded down, with more buildings on either side of it, and he’s very clearly in some kind of town or village. The architecture itself is odd, all wood and paint and built like something you’d find several centuries back or at least in more rural areas. There aren’t any cars either. Instead, Ichigo watches with more than a little disbelief as a horse-drawn wagon trundles by.

And the people. There are normal-looking people walking by or chatting, with human hands and bodies and faces, dressed in strange-looking outfits, almost like they’re cosplaying or something if not for the fact that it all looks natural on them, fitting in with the general theme of their surroundings too, not to mention Ichigo’s spent way too much time around Shinigami to be too bothered by the swords or axes or even staves that some are carrying.

No, what has him staring are the not-so-human figures down below, the ones with literal cat heads or fox tails or shaggy hair that remind Ichigo vaguely of something beast-like. They mingle with the humans like they’ve always been there, and nobody’s panicking so obviously either animal-people became the norm when Ichigo wasn’t paying attention or he’s finally fallen prey to a mental breakdown that he’s pretty sure has been a long time coming.

If it’s a mental breakdown, it’s a kinder one than he expected. If it’s not…

He slowly backs away from the window, feeling slightly faint as he sits back down on the edge of
his bed again.

It’s not even so much the… people with animal body parts and opposable thumbs that has him reeling. He’s seen weirder Zanpakutou manifestations during that whole Muramasa mess, and nothing can top Aizen’s butterfly fashion statement. Hell, most of the Arrancar he bumped into didn’t look entirely human either. He’s fairly certain Grimmjow was literally half-panther or something, and Ulquiorra was basically half-bat, half existential issues.

But all of this brings up the very important question - *where the hell is he?*

He can’t possibly be in the Human world anymore. This can’t be Soul Society either, or Hueco Mundo-- it’s just too different. So where the everloving fuck did the Hougyoku dump him? And all because Ichigo wished for- God, what did he even wish for? Half his memories from last night are fuzzy, like waking up in the morning after taking one too many sleeping pills again.

He wanted… He wanted to go somewhere, didn’t he? Somewhere new. Somewhere he could actually live without all the reminders of the past few years dogging his every step, something he couldn’t do in Karakura because every second there felt like he was suffocating. And being shunned by every last one of the people he - mistakenly - thought he could at least depend on to make things a little easier only made it worse, made life that much harder to live, to even just survive.

He brings a hand to his chest again. Breaths in, breathes out, and that’s when it strikes him, why he feels so different - for the first time in over a year and a half, he feels whole. As if-

Tentatively, desperately, he reaches for his reiatsu, calling for Zangetsu, searching that space inside him where his soul spirits once resided, always a thought away until the end of the war, where it then became a shattered empty thing that he couldn’t fill or ignore no matter what he did.

Something in him dies all over again when no one answers, not the soothing baritone of Zangetsu’s voice nor the wild laughter of his Hollow, and yet… there’s *something* there, where his reiryoku should be. He can’t quite place it-- almost like reiryoku but completely different at the same time.

{{This world’s inhabitants have no reiryoku,}} says a voice behind him, and Ichigo jerks around to stare wide-eyed at the Hougyoku now hovering over his bed. {{Or at the very least, they don’t call it that, and the energy itself is slightly different anyway. Their abilities do not utilize reiatsu. They run on a system of magic instead.}}

Ichigo stays frozen in place, torn between backing away because that’s the Hougyoku, and he’s seen the kind of power it- *they* have, even if they did grant his wish for whatever reason. But at the same time, they haven’t hurt him, and they’re clearly capable of reasonable conversation.

{{We restored your soul,}} the Hougyoku continues. {{You are scarred, yes - you have lived too much to not be - but you are also as whole as you can be again. However, Shinigami and Hollows do not exist in this dimension so reiryoku does not either. We adjusted your spiritual energy in order to let you live in this universe, and so you will not be able to hear your soul spirits anymore. Rest assured, they are a part of you once more, only fused back into your soul instead of remaining as separate entities. Likewise, you will no longer be able to summon a Zanpakutou, but you will be able to utilize the kind of magicks that exist here.}}

Ichigo blinks and blinks again, feeling just a little overwhelmed as he digests this information. No Zangetsu, no Shiro, no Zanpakutou or reiatsu. But… he has his soul back, all of it, and he’s already felt the difference, hasn’t he?
More than anything else, Ichigo’s desire was to live. Not just survive, struggling from day to day, but live, and he couldn’t do that with less than half a soul, so the Hougyoku gave it back.

“...Thank you,” He finally croaks. The Hougyoku just bobs up and down in response, and somehow, Ichigo gets the impression of a quizzical bird-like head-tilt from them.

He won’t hear Zangetsu or Shiro again but… they’re back with him, he can feel it, and that alone means the world to him.

{[You aren’t going to tell us to take you to a different world?]}/The Hougyoku asks abruptly.
{[Somewhere where you would have your Shinigami powers back?]}

Ichigo frowns. “If... If you took me to a place like that, the Shinigami would exist there too, right? The Gotei 13 and everybody?” He thinks again of how he was… discarded the moment the war was over and they didn’t need him, especially a weak and powerless version of him, anymore, and his hands curl into fists in his lap. Even the Visored. Even Rukia. Even Goat-Face and Urahara. Even Chad. In a way, even his sisters.

Was that really all he was worth to them?

He gives himself a mental shake. Maybe the Shinigami in those other dimensions would be different than the ones he knew, or maybe - if he somehow made himself more likeable, more… whatever that would endear him to them - he could make them like him, but those have never been the kinds of relationships he wants. And frankly, he’s had enough of Shinigami for a while.

“I didn’t wish for that specifically,” He says at last. “You gave me what I wanted. I can’t complain.” He looks around again. “Am I… So I’m really in a new dimension?”

{[Yes,]} The Hougyoku answers readily, and it occurs to Ichigo that there’s some humour to be found in that. Two of the most manipulative secretive bastards he’s ever known made the Hougyoku, and they turn out to be nothing like their creators. At least when it comes to hiding truths and telling lies anyway. {[We chose a universe where a version of you does not exist. It would not have mattered if you did - each version of you is different enough that it would not cause a paradox even if you did meet - but it is easier for you to slip into a world with no Kurosaki Ichigo already in existence.]}%0A

Ichigo nods distractedly. His gaze slides over to the window again, and... oh god, this is really happening, isn’t it? He’s literally in another dimension that has magic, and-

God, what was he even thinking last night? Clearly, he wasn’t.

“My sisters,” He says hoarsely as he turns to the Hougyoku again. “Are they- Are they okay? My fr-” He stops. As it turns out, he doesn’t exactly have any friends, does he? “What happened to Ginjou? Is everyone okay?”

The Hougyoku bobs up and down again, and this time, Ichigo thinks they’re conveying a nod. {[Before we left with you, Ginjou Kuugo and Tsukishima Shuukurou were no longer a threat. Our creator took care of them.]}%0A

Urahara then. And no matter what he’s turned out to be (puppetmaster, liar, traitor), he’s also strong and capable. There’s no way the likes of Ginjou and his people could get one over on the shopkeeper.

(So why didn’t he cut in earlier? Why didn’t he help me? I thought we were at least-)
Ichigo nods again, his gaze dropping to his hands. “...I left my sisters. I shouldn’t have-”

He stops again. He remembers thinking that Karin and Yuzu no longer needed him, and he wasn’t in his right mind last night, not entirely, but... he wasn’t exactly *wrong* either. They still have Goat-Face, and however terrible a job he did at raising Ichigo, he at least doted on the girls and was never violent towards them. All three of them would be fine, and considering how Isshin never wanted to talk to Ichigo about anything or even interact beyond punches and kicks and a war, at least one of them won’t miss him overly much, and the twins will get over it. They’re teenagers with their own lives; they hardly need Ichigo hovering over their shoulders all the time and trying to butt into their business anymore.

He scrubs a hand over his face. Well. No use brooding about it. What’s done is done. He could always ask the Hougyoku to send him back, but even if the Hougyoku agrees, he’s reluctant to... *use* them that way - it reminds him a bit too much of how Aizen kept demanding more and more from them, and that doesn’t sit right with Ichigo.

He wished for this, and it wasn’t even entirely a spur of the moment decision, more something that’s been building up for a long time now. Either way though, it’s his wish so he should take responsibility for it.

“Okay,” He takes another breath before turning his attention back to the Hougyoku. “Okay, what do I do now? I mean I should probably know more about this place, right? Where exactly are we anyway?”

Smugness emanates from the Hougyoku, and a flash of blue-white light later, three books drop out of nowhere and cascade onto the bed in consecutive thumps.

{{*We have gathered a few books from the local bookstore,*}} They announce. {{*They seem to contain appropriately educational information about this world so you should read them before you leave this room.*}} Again, they bob up and down, and Ichigo’s brain somehow translates that into a shrug. {{*As for what you do now-- obviously, you should do whatever you want. It is what you wished for, is it not? To live your life on your own terms?*}}

Ichigo stares at the Hougyoku for a moment longer, then glances out the window.

*Live my life on my own terms, huh?*

He wonders if he even knows how to do that anymore. If he’s ever really known.

But... he supposes he could learn. He has the time now, doesn’t he?

He picks up one of the books. At least it’s written in Japanese.

*Theldesia: A History.*

He flips it open and begins to read. Beside him, the Hougyoku hovers and waits.

Night has well and truly fallen by the time Ichigo finishes devouring all three books. His eyes sting and his stomach growls even as his mind races on repeat through all the information he’s managed to soak up in the past several hours.
Theldesia. Good god, it still seems like just a very fantastical dream.

He pinches the bridge of his nose before looking down at the books again. The various maps that were included in the reading material help. As far as he can see, the major continents on this planet - Theldesia - is still very similar to Earth, as far as geography goes. He’s apparently in Yamato, the Theldesia-equivalent of Japan, in a post-apocalyptic world long past Ichigo’s Earth’s present time. The cause of the apocalypse reads something like a fantasy sci-fi movie - a rogue AI named Shiva brought about the end of the world before the gods remade it into half its size and gave its surviving inhabitants magic.

For all Ichigo knows, it could be true. He comes from a world of death gods and monsters so it’s not like he has room to throw stones, and out-of-control artificial intelligences are probably at least a scientific possibility. Besides, when it comes down to it, it’s not like it really matters.

Theldesia survived, its people survived, and life continued, just without a lot of the “modern” amenities and inventions that Ichigo is used to. There’s no electricity in this world, not the way he knows it, which is probably one of the major differences Ichigo will have to adjust to. He’s reading by magical fire at the moment, scrounged up by the Hougyoku a few hours ago, and it glows steadily on his bedside table inside something that honestly just looks like an oil lamp, minus any kind of fuel or wick but with a tiny string of runic symbols etched into the metal.

It’s probably something like Kidou, Ichigo decides. In general, there’s actually a lot of similarities he could draw between this world and his old one-- magic instead of reiatsu, a job in ‘Adventuring’ that comprises of people who have the potential to wield that magic, which sounds a lot like Shinigami, and even something called Classes, with four base class groups and three classes under each group, and designated at the beginning of an Adventurer’s career according to that individual’s innate magic’s natural disposition. Which is basically how a Zanpakutou can be loosely described.

Ichigo’s curious about what his Class will be. The Hougyoku’s already confirmed that he has magic, and he definitely wants to know what he can do with it, so Adventuring seems to be in his foreseeable future. And hey, it’s an actual job so he’ll actually be making money, which is already more than what being a Shinigami ever gave him. But that means finding out what Class his magic will be based on, and even just judging by the short descriptions of each, he’s fairly certain it’ll be one of the Warrior classes, probably either Samurai or Guardian:

**WARRIOR CLASSES - Guardian | Samurai | Monk**

~

**WEAPON-BASED CLASSES - Assassin | Swashbuckler | Bard**
It aligns with what he was as a Shinigami after all.

The books that the Hougyoku picked out for him don’t go much more in-depth than that so Ichigo makes a note to dig further into that subject at a later time. Right now, he’s more interested in the world itself. There are Humans, which is what Ichigo still is, ironically enough, but there are also a whole slew of other races inhabiting this planet. Elves of all things exist, as do Dwarves and something called Half-Alvs. Full-blooded Alvs are apparently extinct, and Ritians are rare. Then there are the beast-men races - Wolf Fangs and Fox Tails and Werecats - and they are exactly what they sound like-- humanoid but with some of the traits derived from the respective animals they
were named after. Whatever race you are though, all are either Adventurers or Landers - civilians with civilian trades.

Then there are the locations. Ichigo flips back to a Map of Eastern Yamato, and while there doesn’t seem to be nearly as many established urban areas as Japan - with only five major cities and a number of smaller ones scattered throughout the country - there are plenty of fields and dungeons in-between, places that Adventurers could go to to fight monsters and find everything from crafting materials to ingredients needed for food to treasure.

Ichigo’s currently in Asakusa, only a few miles away from Akihabara, one of the major cities in this world. It’s a relatively smaller settlement, but it’s apparently known for their eateries and historic temples. Ichigo will have to go do some sightseeing later. Hell, his whole life here will probably be one giant sightseeing trip.

The cities themselves vary, some with completely foreign names, others with similar or even identical names to the places Ichigo knew of back in Japan. But each of the major ones at least seem to include a handful of common locations - a Market for Adventurers to sell or trade their loot to Landers, an Intercity Transport Gate for people to teleport between the major cities if they didn’t want to take the longer and more dangerous method of travel, and a Guild Meeting Hall.

The concept of guilds is an Adventurer-only thing, as far as Ichigo has read, but each guild’s objective seems to be entirely up to the guild members. They’re made up of a group of Adventurers, led by a guildmaster, who share a common goal and wish to pool their resources and overall simply wish to band together for one reason or another. There’s no limit to how big a guild can get, and in general, there looks to be two main types of guilds - battle and production.

The first focuses on getting stronger, on battling monsters and even other Adventurers, exploring dungeons and completing quests that require fighting, and even acting as bodyguards, a job Landers can hire them for.

Production guilds on the other hand focus on profit, on industry and economy but also research and development, running businesses that sell to both other Adventurers and Landers.

There’s no law that says guilds can only be one or the other of course. But they do tend to specialize, even if a production guild includes fighters, or a battle guild includes researchers and merchants.

And with the existence of guilds comes Guild Meeting Halls, a building found in every major city where each guild can rent a guild hall - like a very large apartment that the entire guild can live in - on one of the many upper floors, for a monthly fee.

But the ground floor of a Meeting Hall has an entirely different function-- or multiple functions actually. For one, it’s where each local bank is located. For another, the registration desk is also based there, serving as the central hub for Adventurers to apply for their licenses in order to begin their career, or register their guild into the system, or join or withdraw from an established guild, or even take on missions that other people have posted.

Being part of a guild isn’t a requirement though. There are plenty of solo Adventurers who only form temporary parties to finish a quest or take on a particularly tough monster, and any loot or payment would be shared between the party members at the end of it. But being a guild member means not having to pay rent all by yourself, and things like punishments for law-breaking - short of committing a really serious crime - are handled internally instead of by local law enforcement.

You get a form of protection by being part of a guild, that you otherwise wouldn’t. Ichigo wonders
if it’s something like being part of a Division, in the Gotei, or if it’s more like… the Visored. Or even the residents of the Shouten. Family.

He shoves that thought away almost immediately. He doesn’t want to go down that mental route again. It would just make him mope, and… and he’s spent seventeen damn months moping, he needs to stop.

“Are they so worth your grief?” The Hougyoku suddenly asks, and Ichigo jumps a little, having forgotten about the sentient orb entirely.

Ichigo hesitates over his reply for a moment. He thinks about not answering at all, but he feels like if anyone has the right to ask, it’s the Hougyoku, as weird as that sounds. It helps that they don’t sound like they’re trying to pry; they just sound like they honestly don’t understand, which he supposes kind of makes sense. He doubts Aizen or even Urahara spent a huge amount of time teaching their creation the intricacies of human emotions. If they even knew their creation was sentient to begin with of course. Neither of them ever mentioned that little fact to anyone, as far as Ichigo can recall.

“...I mean, they were my friends,” He explains carefully. "My family. I cared about them, and I thought they cared about me, but then I realized they didn’t, or at least not as much as I thought they did. I lost… I guess I lost the… certainty that they cared about me the way I thought they did, and I think losing things - important things - always result in at least a little grief.”

He pauses, and then adds dryly, “It probably didn’t help that I was missing over half of my soul too. But even without that problem, it would’ve hurt anyway. That sort of thing always does.”

The Hougyoku seems to muse that over before they bob in the air a few times. “You placed more value than they did in the bonds you had with them, and so you lost more when those bonds broke.”

Ichigo grimaces but- “I guess that’s a pretty good way of putting it, yeah.” He looks down at the open book in his lap, and then gives himself a firm shake. “But dwelling on it’s not gonna do me any good so I’m gonna try not to.” He looks up and attempts a smile. “I mean you gave me a whole new world to explore. I might as well get started.” He glances at the window and the dark of night outside. “Tomorrow anyway.” He cracks a yawn. “I’m tired, and hungry. D’you think they have some kind of restaurant downstairs? Or a bar?”

“There’s a bar,” The Hougyoku confirms. “It should still be open.”

“Cool,” Ichigo sets all the books the aside on the nightstand. Then he stops. “Wait, shit, I don’t have any money.”

Theldesia apparently uses Gold for currency, literal gold coins that… Ichigo does not have and therefore- “How… are we renting this room?”

The Hougyoku twirls in the air. “We made it happen. You needed a room, so we gave you one.”

A beat passes, and then a large pouch is dumped into Ichigo’s lap. Very cautiously, Ichigo opens it and almost gapes at the small mountain of coins that glitter back at him. “Oh my god where-”

“Heh,” The Hougyoku answers so matter-of-factly that Ichigo can only stare at them. “Everything we found in your room. And then, because you need money in this world, we made that happen too.”

Ichigo stares some more. “You… exchanged Earth money for Theldesia money?”
The Hougyoku somehow gives the impression of shrugging before repeating, “We made it happen.”

Ichigo sighs, glances down at the pouch again, and then - after fishing out a handful of coins - knots it shut once more. It’s better than theft, he supposes, and at least this way, he’s not going to have to worry about money for at least a while. He’s not sure what the rate is here but there’s just too much coin in the satchel for him to really worry for the time being. At the very least, he’ll have food and a roof over his head for the foreseeable future, and that’s enough for him.

“Thanks then,” He nods at the Hougyoku. “I’ll see about opening an account with the bank tomorrow; it’s probably not a good idea to carry around this much with me. At least not until I learn how to fight properly.” He studies the orb a little closer. “That’s probably what I’m going to do, by the way. Become an Adventurer and everything. If nothing else, all the magic I’ll be able to learn sounds pretty interesting.” He dithers a little but in the end, there’s nothing for it but to ask directly, “Are you staying with me? Or going off on your own?”

Likewise, the Hougyoku doesn’t reply right away. The orb swirls in slow mesmerizing circles for several seconds, and Ichigo’s not quite sure if they don’t understand the question or if they’re just considering their options.

“You do not wish to keep us?” The Hougyoku asks at last, and Ichigo blinks at them.

“Well, you can stay, obviously,” He frowns. “But only if you want to. It’s not like I can keep you with me anyway if you didn’t want me to, but even if I could, I wouldn’t. That’s for you to decide.” He pauses. “I’m not Aizen. Or even Urahara-san. Just do what you want. Within reason, of course. But you don’t have to stay with me if you don’t want to.”

The Hougyoku is silent. A minute ticks by, then two, then Ichigo’s stomach gurgles, and he flushes a little, but at least it seems to spur the orb into speaking again.

“We will stay with you,” They announce. “We wish to stay with you. You are the most interesting soul we have ever come across, and being on our own would be boring.” They pause. “This is okay with you too?”

Ichigo huffs a breath of laughter even as he softens a little. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s definitely okay. I don’t feel much like being on my own either.” He peers curiously at the orb. “I didn’t ask before but… do you have a name I can call you?”

The Hougyoku tilts sideways. “We are the Hougyoku. That is the name Aizen Sousuke gave us and Urahara Kisuke adopted after hearing it from him.”

Ichigo squints. “Right, but… do you want me to call you the Hougyoku? That’s kinda strange, to be honest, but it’s up to you.”

The Hougyoku tilts the other way, and another long minute passes before they finally tell him quietly. “Aizen Sousuke named us what he wanted us to be in order to turn his desires into reality, and Urahara Kisuke never even bothered. We have no personal preference, but now, we would like you to give us a name.”

“Eh?” Ichigo scrub a hand through his hair and makes a face. “I’m not that good with naming stuff, you know.” But the Hougyoku doesn’t budge, and Ichigo sighs, trying to come up with a good name for a sentient orb.

The blue of the Hougyoku’s orb shimmers like sun on sea, and unthinkingly, Ichigo murmurs,
“Kaiyou.” A moment passes. “Wait, I don’t mean-”

“We accept,” The Hougyoku declares, sounding pleased. “Kaiyou is a grand name. We do not mind sharing it with the ocean.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Ichigo mutters but he also has to smile. “But so long as you’re happy with it I guess.” He tosses back the blankets. “Now I need something to eat, and then I think I could pass out for another twelve hours.”

“We wish to eat too!” The Hougyoku says, suddenly sounding infinitely more enthusiastic as they whizz over the bed to hover beside Ichigo as he stands. “We have never eaten before; we want to try!”

Ichigo’s brain does a series of somersaults trying to imagine a glowing sphere eating, and fails miserably. Well, no, he does get a vague mental image of something vaguely resembling a blue Pac-Man but he doubts that’s particularly accurate.

“Um,” He starts awkwardly, but that’s all he gets out before the Hougyoku begins to morph.

It isn’t a gradual process. Right in front of Ichigo, the orb seems to blur around the edges for a moment, and then the blue colour surges, glowing brighter and brighter until Ichigo has no choice but to shield his eyes for a few seconds.

By the time he manages to blink the spots out of his sight, the Hougyoku as he knows them is no longer in the room. In their place…

“We think we got it right,” The Hougyoku muses, standing on two legs and examining his two arms, pointed ears twitching a little as they wiggle their fingers and tug on their new tunic and pants. Their hair - tied into four tails - and eyes - with slitted pupils - are the exact same shifting shades of liquid blue as their orb form, and standing upright, they nearly match Ichigo’s own height.

Ichigo, embarrassingly, gawks, but heck he thinks has the right. “You- What- You can-”

The Hougyoku glances over and shrugs, and then blinks and begins shrugging their shoulders up and down several more times. “Well we can’t remain in our original form if we want to stay with you. Even we know that would draw attention.” They hop in place twice. “Legs are weird. But anyway, we believe this is the blueprint of an Elf, or thereabouts. You have darker skin than both Aizen Sousuke and Urahara Kisuke so we tried to copy that from you.” They pat their chest. “But all of you are tall and male so that was the easiest bit.”

They cock their head, then take a step.

And then they promptly trip over nothing. Ichigo snaps out of it in time to lunge forward and catch the Hougyoku as they go down in a flail of uncoordinated limbs and surprise.

“Well, perhaps the tall part isn’t so easy,” The Hougyoku mumbles as they regain their footing, and by the time Ichigo lets go, they’ve shrunken down so that they’re at Ichigo’s shoulder height instead.

They attempt another step, and this time, while they do wobble, they at least don’t fall over.

It’s improvement.

The Hougyoku still looks faintly annoyed though, and after a second of thought, they hop up into
the air and promptly stay there.

“Much better!” The Hougyoku says brightly, floating up to eye-level with Ichigo. “Shall we go eat now?”

Ichigo opens his mouth to point out that people usually can’t float. Then he closes it because A) Shinigami could float, sort of, B) whole new world, and C) even if none of the races here can fly naturally, he’s pretty sure there’s some kind of magic out there that would grant the ability. People will probably put it down to that and move on. If they don’t, well, Ichigo has it on multiple good authorities from his past that his face scares people. Glaring away any unwanted attention is always a possibility.

“Right,” He says instead and busies himself with pocketing the coins he was still holding and shoving the money pouch into a drawer and out of sight just in case. That’s not exactly going to stop a determined thief but it’s better than leaving it out in the open if someone enters.

He heads for the door, pausing with his hand on the doorknob and turning to glance back at the room, in this inn, in another dimension. He thinks again of the people he’s left behind - for good, he’s never going to see them again, is he? - and he thinks some part of him is still in shock, still hasn’t really digested the fact that this is literally the beginning of a new life for him, and all that that entails.

But what do you have to return to? Even if you could go back right this instant, all you’d get is another blade in the back and a world that doesn’t care now that they have no further use for you. It would be… no kind of life at all. And Ichigo is so tired of trying when he’s very obviously the only one who still cares.

He looks at the Hougyoku next, who stares back, sharp-eyed and blank-faced and still so much more expressive like this than when they were still an orb because Ichigo doesn’t think he’s imagining it when he sees something of Urahara and even Aizen in the way they’re watching him now - patiently calculating and gauging Ichigo’s own features like they’re picking out every nuance of his expressions just to dissect them internally before reacting in a way that would benefit them most.

And Ichigo wonders, for the first time, if the Hougyoku has another reason for bringing him here. Belatedly, he remembers the Hougyoku can read his mind, but it’s too late to take that back, so in the end, he only asks, “You didn’t bring me here because someone asked you to, did you?”

The Hougyoku cocks their head. “We did not.”

“And… I’m not gonna have to fight for anyone here, am I?”

The Hougyoku shrugs. “Not if you do not wish to.”

Ichigo exhales a long breath. Well. Alright then. He doesn’t think the Hougyoku is lying, but what does he know? He’s already proven to be pretty gullible about this sort of thing.

Still. For now, he chooses to believe them, and if nothing else, it’s true enough that the Hougyoku had helped him when Ichigo had hit rock bottom and had no one else to turn to, had cared - even if it was just out of curiosity - when no one else could be bothered.

“Alright,” He says and focuses on the way he can breathe now, without feeling like someone put a hole through his chest. “Alright,” He repeats, opening the door. “Let’s go get something to eat.” He hesitates, and then quirks a faint smile. “Kaiyou.”
The Hougyoku’s eyes widen a little, and then they grin and dart past Ichigo into the hall outside. Ichigo snorts and follows.

It’s a new world. A new life. Ichigo might as well make the most of it.

Chapter End Notes

hmm I think I'll throw in a small time skip and switch to outsider pov for next chapter :thinking:

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!