Stranger in a Strange Land
by cywscross

Summary

Ichigo lands himself in an alternate universe where the Gotei 13 rules with an iron fist, Aizen is actually not that bad a guy to hang out with, and both sides keep trying to recruit him. How is this his life?

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own anything from Bleach.

Takes place several years after the Quincy War. Ichigo is twenty-four years old.
The first four chapters are already posted on tumblr but I said I’d post them on FF and AO3 around Christmas so here they are. Fingers crossed for another chapter by Christmas.

The first thing Shinji became aware of after jolting awake was the headache pounding away behind his eyes. With a groan, he opened his eyes to blink blearily at his surroundings, squinting in confusion at the dark ceiling above him.

It took a few seconds for him to realize that he was in a cave of some sort. Or, more accurately, a cave-in.

He could still see though, even if everything was dimmed, which meant that there had to be a light source-

“Finally awake?”

Shinji jerked upright, and then started cursing up a storm when a lance of pain shot up his right side, almost making him black out again.

“Yeah, not a good idea,” The same voice drawled, sounding somewhere between sympathetic and concerned. “Most of your ribs on your right side are broken. You're lucky none of them punctured a lung.”

Shinji fell silent, pushing himself up slowly this time as he cast a sharp glance to his left to identify the speaker.

There, beside the glow of a flashlight.
Orange hair and amber eyes prompted an onslaught of memories that came back to Shinji in a rush. He had been fighting that crazy bastard Zaraki again, and through sheer bad luck on Shinji’s part, the Shinigami captain had slammed him into the side of a cliff, and that impact alone had shaken loose a landslide of rock and debris down on him. He had been just a little too late to move out of the way, and he had been sure that had been the end for him (after all these years of fighting, a freakin’ rocksride would do him in), but then someone had crashed headlong into him, covering him from most of the impending damage half a second before the wall of rubble had descended on them. Shinji’s head had knocked against the ground shortly after that, and now here he was.

Still wary but less so than before, Shinji took a quick inventory of his torso and noted the bandages neatly binding his ribs. He could also feel the bandages wrapped around his head. He was no healer but he knew a professional job when he saw it. A glance to the side eased some of the trepidation from his gut when he spotted Sakanade placed beside him, no worse for wear.

And then he looked back up, inspecting the man sitting several feet away from him. He was young, but then, Shinigami, Visored, and Arrancar alike could look like children and still be hundreds of years old. He wore modern-day clothing though, including a pair of jeans, a white shirt with a black coat thrown over top, and a simple pair of sneakers to finish the ensemble. For all intents and purposes, he could've been a regular Human out doing Sunday shopping. If there were still Humans doing Sunday shopping of course. Karakura was a ghost town these days, nothing but a warzone to them, and a haunted, unfit-for-habitation wreckage for the rest of the Human world.

Shinji couldn't see the man’s Zanpakutou anywhere either, and even though almost all the reports on him said that he usually entered a battle using a mix of Kidou and martial arts, Yoruichi had already confirmed several weeks back that she had spotted this newcomer wielding a daishou pair in battle.

Still, this was quite possibly the first time anyone on either side of this war had managed to get an up-close look at the maybe-Shinigami that had shown up two months ago out of the blue, never staying long enough for anyone to approach him, but lending his formidable strength to the Resistance all the same, always arriving to haul them – Hiyori that one time, Ishida that other time, Lilynette another, and Gin yet another; the list went on – out of trouble in the nick of time.

“You're... the guy who’s been helpin’ us in the war,” Shinji said at last, more to get a conversation rolling than anything else.

A grim smile tipped up one corner of the man’s mouth. “Yeah,” He agreed, too straightforward to be mistaken for mere arrogance. “You people looked like you could do with an extra hand.”
Shinji smiled back wryly. “Much appreciated. Do I get a name ta go with our mystery saviour?”

The man snorted but replied easily enough. “I'm Ichigo. Nice to meet you.”

“Just Ichigo?” Shinji enquired, gaze focused pointedly on the semi-stranger’s features. “No last name?”

_Is it ‘Shiba’?_ Shinji wanted to ask, because that was the other thing. Change the hair, change the eye colour, adjust a bit of the facial bone structure, and this guy could be Shiba Kaien back from the dead.

And the last thing they needed was another Shiba Kaien, the black sheep of the Shiba Clan who had sided with his captain in the end instead of his family. As things went, Kaien had been of the decent sort even though he had been part of the Gotei 13, but he had also been hellishly strong, and he’d taken his fair share of some of the stronger Arrancar with him beforeLisa, Hiyori, and Mashiro had managed to kill him.

Nevertheless, all the other Shibas had chosen to fight against the Gotei 13 so this guy could just be a relative, and not necessarily a spy sent to infiltrate them. Shinji didn't really believe that anyway, not with how the man had continued taking off by himself after assisting them instead of approaching them. Besides, Shinji couldn't recall any Shiba born with *orange* hair. Even Isshin and Masaki’s youngest daughter had her mother’s light brown hair.

“No last name,” Ichigo shrugged, a minute lift of his shoulders that gave away an inherent grace in even that simple an act. “Does it matter?”

Shinji hummed noncommittally. “Not really.” He paused. “Ya ain’t gonna ask for mine?”

“I already know you,” Ichigo tossed back carelessly, and something strangely akin to a bitter sort of amusement flitted across his face. “Hirako Shinji, head of the Visored team, former captain of the Gotei 13, and one of the leaders of the Resistance. You're pretty famous so it's common knowledge.”

“I'm flattered,” Shinji grinned, razor-sharp with the faintest hint of a threat. Ichigo either didn’t notice or didn’t care. “And what about ya? Ya have me at a disadvantage. I'm fairly certain I woulda remembered ya if ya’d been in the Gotei 13 when I was still a captain, and you're not one
Ichigo reached down and picked up a duffel bag that Shinji hadn't spotted before, as well as the flashlight, tapping a finger against the casing when the light flickered. “I'm not from the Gotei 13, and I'm not an Arrancar. I'm not really anybody around here.” He rose to his feet in one fluid movement, ducking a little so that his head wouldn't crack against the low ceiling. “Now, I want to take a look at your injuries one more time before we start figuring a way outta here.”

“Ya don't know any healin’ Kidou?” Shinji asked as Ichigo knelt down beside him. He appreciated the way Ichigo kept his hands in his line of sight at all times.

The man glanced briefly at him before returning to his task, carefully probing the bandages. “You’ve probably chalked up the effects as part of your injuries but—” He flicked a momentary finger up at towards the ceiling. “—there’s Sekkiseki mixed into all this rock. Just enough to dampen both our reiryoku. I can still use some of my reiatsu but I’d rather save it for an emergency.”

Now that Ichigo mentioned it, Shinji could feel the lagging depletion of his reiatsu, and he had to bite back another curse at their misfortune. Well, it could be worse. He would've preferred having full mobility but Ichigo seemed to know what he was doing.

“Are ya a healer?” Shinji pressed. This would actually be pretty good news, if he could convince Ichigo to stick around after they escaped their current situation. The Resistance had Ryuuken, Isshin, and Orihime as their main healers, along with a handful of others who weren’t specifically trained in the medical area but still knew more than the average person. However, the Gotei 13 had Unohana and an entire squad of healers at her back.

“I'm a doctor,” Ichigo confirmed, tugging up Shinji’s shredded left sleeve this time to check the bandages there. They were soaked through with blood, and with a frown, Ichigo began unwinding them.

“...Normally, only Humans use the term ‘doctor’,,” Shinji remarked offhandedly. Ironically enough, Ryuuken and Orihime were both Humans, and Isshin had spent enough time in the Human world to have gone native as well.

Ichigo curled a sardonic smirk in his direction. “I know.”

Shinji took in the man’s attire again. Perhaps a Rukongai resident with above average reiatsu, a
problem with authority, and curious enough to have somehow slipped into the Human world? Improbable but not impossible, although how that accounted for the Academy-taught Kidou that Ichigo had been seen using in battle, Shinji didn't know.

“Why are ya helpin’ us?” This, he thought, was a damn fair question.

Ichigo’s hands stilled in the process of rewrapping Shinji’s arm before absently brushing a wave of his reiatsu over the gash to clot the wound despite his previous claim on saving it for an emergency.

“...I don’t agree with what the Gotei 13 is doing,” Ichigo answered at last, resuming his prior efficiency. “And... well, I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Nothin’ better ta do than ta fight in a war?” Shinji asked rather dubiously.

Ichigo glanced up again, and this time, his eyes flickered with something older, a tired kind of awareness that Shinji had seen in his own eyes in the mirror, and in the eyes of his friends.

This man, this stranger from nowhere, was no rookie to war.

“I’m done,” Ichigo said, not replying to Shinji’s question as he stood up again. He extended a calloused hand. “Think you can stand?”

“My pride’s not that far gone,” Shinji grunted as he let Ichigo haul him up. He swayed alarmingly for a second before steadying himself. He realized – belatedly – that he had forgotten to grab his Zanpakutou on his way up, and he would have to bend down to retrieve it, which wasn’t exactly ideal for the throbbing migraine drilling a hole in his head.

“May I?” Ichigo glanced meaningfully at Sakanade, and after a moment, Shinji nodded his consent. Seconds later, he was sheathing Sakanade at his waist, already feeling safer.

“Alright, let’s go,” Ichigo slung his duffel bag over one shoulder before pointing his flashlight down the dark tunnel on their left. “I explored a bit while you were unconscious. There’s a breeze at the end of this thing so there’s definitely a way outta here but I haven’t found it yet.”
With Ichigo leading the way, strides shortening so that Shinji could keep up while hobbling pathetically along one side of the tunnel, they headed down the tunnel, alert for any trouble that might come bursting out of the walls.

It took them a while – going on thirty minutes by Shinji’s mental clock – but eventually, they found a glimmer of daylight in the ceiling, and Shinji could actually taste a cool gust of fresh air once they were standing beneath the crack.

“What now?” Shinji asked distractedly, flexing one hand as he tested his reiatsu. What with his injuries and the Sekkiseki, there was no way he would have enough control to carve a hole with Byakurai; he was more likely to bring the ceiling down on them, and because of the Sekkiseki, there was very little chance that anyone on the outside would be able to sense their reiatsu signatures either.

“Hmm,” Ichigo glanced around before returning his gaze to the sliver of blue sky taunting them. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to bust our way out.”

“And when everythin’ comes tumblin’ down?” Shinji reminded him skeptically.

Ichigo flashed him a grin that bordered on cocky but was still grounded with conviction. “Don’t worry; nothing will be coming down on our heads. I actually would've done this sooner but I hadn't found the weakest part of this ceiling until now. Trust me; I won’t let you get hurt.”

And before Shinji could point out dryly that he was already hurt, or even roll his eyes at the sheer audacity of that statement, Ichigo had already turned away, pocketing the flashlight and wandering off a few steps. And then he pressed a hand against his chest.

Shinji wasn't exactly sure what happened next – he heard Ichigo mutter something under his breath, the words indistinct but holding a certain power in them that informed Shinji better than anything else could have that Ichigo had just recited his Zanpakutou’s release command.

And then-

A surge of black reiatsu edged with red swept outwards, almost knocking Shinji off his feet with the sheer weight of it.
That wasn't what caught Shinji’s attention though.

It was the fact that this reiatsu was tinged with Hollow reiatsu.

There was no doubt about it; Shinji would recognize it anywhere – Ichigo was a Visored.

Shinji had no more time to think on it though as a glint of ink-black metal caught his attention a second before Ichigo brought the blade up in an arc and released an overpowering wave of energy up at the ceiling.

“Getsuga Tenshou!”

The ceiling of rock exploded outward above them, and Shinji realized why Ichigo hadn't been worried about a ton of stone coming down on them.

There was no stone left.

The red-edged black energy blast had disintegrated the rock, and the only thing that showered them was the dust it had been reduced to.

It also took care of the Sekkiseki in the vicinity, and Shinji wasted no time Shunpoing out of there, leaping up and through the large cavity that Ichigo had created even as he craned his head around to search for the man.

“Shinji!” Came a distant shout, vocally relieved even from that distance. Shinji recognized Kensei’s voice, and he raised a hand in response but continued looking for Ichigo.

“You’ll be okay from here,” The dust settled, and Ichigo waved at him from the base of a nearby tree, Zanpakutou gone once more. “I’ll see you around.”

“Wait-” Shinji started, and then heaved a sigh when Ichigo disappeared without another word. “Damn it.”
“Shinji, are you alright?” Kensei almost barrelled into him, already giving him a gruff onceover. “We’ve been looking all over for you after that entire cliff face fell on you. You- Where did these bandages come from?”

Shinji smiled ruefully in spite of himself. “Ichigo.”

Kensei frowned in consternation. “Who?”

Shinji clapped his long-time friend on the shoulder. “The new guy. He’s strong.”

Kensei’s gaze sharpened. “But he won’t join us?”

Shinji shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn't have time to ask before he took off.” He eyes flicked back to where Ichigo had been standing moments ago. “He’s like us though, Kensei. He’s a Visored.”

Kensei’s eyebrows rose. “Well then, at least that’s a guarantee that he’s not a spy for the Gotei 13.”

Shinji nodded. “Didn't seem like the type to me anyway.” He sighed again and rubbed the back of his neck.

Kensei’s hand came up to snag his elbow. “Come on, let’s get you back to base. You look like crap.”

Shinji snorted but followed along, too tired to argue.

Still, his thoughts lingered on the orange-haired Visored. Next time, Shinji would get around to offering an invitation before anything else. The Resistance could use a guy like Ichigo, and Ichigo... well, fighting alone was never a good idea nowadays. Giving the man a place to stay was the least they could do.

[To Be Continued]
Please leave a review on your way out.
Another week passed, then two, then three, then four. The Resistance saw Ichigo five more times within that month. The closest any of them got was Grimmjow on the third week when the Espada flung himself headlong at Ichigo in a confusing attempt to ‘see how strong this bastard is’, and promptly got his ass handed to him. Ichigo had evidently not reacted well to the ambush from behind and had slammed a foot into Grimmjow’s gut in retaliation, hard enough to propel the Arrancar through a dozen trees, five buildings, and into the Onose River at the edge of town. Nnoitra – who had also been on the scene at the time – couldn't look at Grimmjow for a week without cracking up into gales of gleeful laughter. Grimmjow had gone around half-pissed, half grudgingly impressed ever since.

On the fifth week however, things changed.

“Hey, don’t go leavin’ yet,” Gin called out as he made a beeline for the unmistakeable head of orange. Serenely, he ignored all the explosions going on in the distance.

“What the- Gin! Aren’t you supposed to be at the front?! What do you think you're-”

With a careless flick of his hand, Gin tossed the earpiece aside, outwardly smiling even as he kept his focus on the figure currently straightening after having cut down twelve Shinigami and twenty-seven drones.

(Good riddance, in Gin’s humble opinion.)

“Ichigo, right?” He made an effort to put an edge of honesty into his smile. It didn't seem to matter because the man in front of him stiffened warily anyway, though he didn't disappear like all the other times. Gin would count that as a temporary win on his part. “I'm Gin. Ichimaru Gin, though I'm sure ya already know that. Ya must be gettin’ thirsty after all the fightin’ taday. Want some tea?”

Ichigo’s eyebrows rose but he didn't seem anywhere near as surprised as one would expect, what with Gin extending a tray of cups and a teapot at him.
He hesitated though, looking torn between lingering and taking off. Gin busied himself with setting the tray down on a nearby slab of broken rock that he deemed suitable as a makeshift table. It would be Ichigo’s choice to stay or go; both Hirako and Aizen had been very clear in their orders that they could make friendly overtures to the Visored but that they weren’t to force him into doing anything against his will. Ichigo was evidently on their side for whatever reasons he had; it wouldn’t be wise to jeopardize that alliance in any way, not to mention none of them were certain of the extent of Ichigo’s capabilities – no need to pointlessly antagonize someone who could punt Grimmjow halfway across town with a simple kick.

A rustle of clothing reached Gin’s ears before Ichigo dropped down on one side of the improvised table.

Gin smirked triumphantly as he sat down as well. Even Hirako hadn’t been able to coax Ichigo into sticking around for a bit, and all it took was tea. He glanced up in time to see Ichigo roll his eyes.

“You're not subtle,” The man told him, setting aside the two blades that made up his Zanpakutou. “The tea’s just for throwing me off-balance.”

“No true,” Gin countered easily as he poured two cups between them. “I like tea.”

“I bet you do,” Ichigo muttered as he accepted the cup Gin handed him.

Gin peered at him. That simple statement held a puzzling amount of familiarity in it. Then again, Gin had picked up his partiality for tea from Aizen, and everyone knew Aizen liked his tea. The guy served it every time a meeting convened. It drove Hirako – who liked sake far more than tea – around the bend.

Aware of steady eyes on him, Gin connected the dots in a heartbeat, huffed out a pleased laugh, and obligingly took the first sip. “Ya know, for someone who’s on our side, ya don’t trust us very much, do ya?”

Seeing that he hadn't keeled over frothing at the mouth (although Gin knew a number of slow-reacting poisons that would give him time to reach an antidote, so either Ichigo was careless – unlikely – or he was confident enough to identify and counter whatever potential poison was used on his own), Ichigo also gulped down a mouthful of the liquid.

“Mm, to be honest, this place is kinda weird for me;” There was something strange in the way
Ichigo was watching him. “People I feel I should trust, I can’t, and people I feel I shouldn’t trust, well, it seems like I should. It’s a bit backwards for me.”

Gin mulled over those cryptic words before carefully tucking them away for further dissection at a later time. “Does it have to be?” He asked instead in an offhanded manner. “I can understand not trustin’ us ’cause ya don’t know us, so why not stick around for a bit ta see what we’re like?” His eyes slitted open. “Unless, o’ course, ya already know enough about us ta form an opinion.”

It was a baseless supposition but it paid off. Ichigo’s expression remained mild and relatively relaxed, but a minute twitch rippled along his shoulders and gave him away.

Gin hid a smile in his tea. Whatever this man was hiding, he had just come close to it.

“There are a lot of rumours going around about both sides,” Ichigo vaguely agreed. “Enough to piece together the truth about the motives for each, as well as what some of your people are like.”

“Hm, true enough,” Gin allowed generously, satisfied with what he’d managed to detect for now. “But it’s different if ya actually take the time ta meet us in person. Dinin’ and dashin’s not very polite, ya know.”

“Depends on the meal,” Ichigo shot back without missing a beat. “I don’t pay for bad service.”

Gin couldn’t resist a small, thrilled grin. It had been a long time since someone was willing to engage in a few verbal jousts with him, or heck, even just a conversation that lasted more than a few sentences. It was a pity most people stayed away from him, especially once they realized Gin had tricked something out of them that they hadn’t wanted him to know. Poor sports, the lot of them.

“What, nothin’ out there’s puttin’ up a strong enough fight for ya?” Gin drained the rest of his tea before waving the cup in the direction of the frontlines where the dimensional plains of Seireitei, Hueco Mundo, and Karakura Town merged. “I don’t blame ya. All those elite officers hidin’ in their offices, Central 46 literally hidin’ behind closed doors – it makes a person wanna puke just thinkin’ about it.” He paused to pour himself another cup of tea. “Of course, they do come out now and then – the officers I mean, not Central 46. Captain, lieutenant, seated officer – ya’d end up bumpin’ inta one sooner or later, if ya go up ta the front, that is.” He cocked his head. “Begs the question – why don’t ya?”
This time, Ichigo was prepared because he showed no discernible reaction. That, or it really was just a coincidence that the orange-haired Visored always helped out in the skirmishes on the outskirts of the main battle, the fights that comprised of assassins, stealth forces, and/or those who simply broke past their first line of defence, like Zaraki had just five weeks ago, and even then, from what everyone had managed to reconstruct of that battle, Ichigo hadn't confronted Zaraki directly then either, though that could just be because he’d been busy saving Hirako.

Gin’s never believed in coincidence though.

Ichigo shrugged in response instead. “Lots to do without going to the front.” A fleeting, cheeky grin appeared on his face, boyish in a way that seemed at odds with the cynical maturity in his eyes. “Or are your troops not enough? Need a hero to show up at the eleventh hour?”

Gin leaned back, one hand propping up his weight from behind as a sardonic smirk curled at his lips. “If we needed ta depend so heavily on somethin’ like that, then we deserve ta be wiped out.”

Ichigo blinked. “You think so?”

Gin inclined his head. “This is a war, and everythin’ s fair game o’ course, includin’ wild-card gambits like yourself, but all of us are fightin’ for our right ta exist, and it’s no victory unless we grab it with our own hands.” He raised his teacup in a toast that was three parts genuine and only one part mocking. “We ’preciate the help though. Then again, ya are a Visored, so I suspect ya’d want your freedom just as much as we do.”

Ichigo stared at him, features unreadable. It was just a little unsettling because Gin usually made it a point to be able to read body language.

“If you were anything like this,” Ichigo murmured after a thoughtful moment of silence. “I think we could've been friends.”

It was Gin’s turn to blink at this non sequitur. Even his quick mind couldn't decipher any meaning behind it.

“Thanks for the tea; it was good,” Ichigo continued before Gin could think of something to say. The Visored placed the cup back onto the tray before getting to his feet, hefting his Zanpakutou in the process. It was plain bizarre to see a man in jeans and a shirt wielding swords like some sort of cosplay.
“Ya won’t follow me home?” Gin already knew the answer but he figured it was worth a try. A sly grin flitted across his face. “You’ll get three meals a day, and I’ll have a doghouse built out back for ya. I promise ya can decorate it. I’ll even fork out for a plaque if ya put ‘Beware of Strawberries’ on it.”

Ichigo snorted. “Tempting, but I’ll have to pass. You couldn't afford me.”

Gin suppressed the inappropriate quip already on the tip of his tongue. No sex jokes until their next meeting. It was something to look forward to, but damn, it would be a riot to have this man living at the base with them. Gin would probably be able to convince Ichigo into pulling a prank or ten with him, and between them, the rest of the Resistance wouldn't know what hit them.

“Pity,” He said instead as he also rose to his full height. “Then at the very least, stop bein’ a stranger. Ya might hurt our feelin’s if ya keep runnin’ off when one of us tries ta talk ta ya.”

“Oh-huh, I’ll keep that in mind; wouldn't wanna break any hearts,” Another grin before the humour ebbed from Ichigo’s face. “I’ll see you around, Gin. My regards to your leaders.”

And then, in a flit of Shunpo too fast for anyone below captain-level to track, Ichigo darted away, disappearing through the nearby crop of trees and leaving only the whistle of the wind in his wake.

[To Be Continued]

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a review on your way out.
“I like ’im,” Gin declared as he breezed in through the door.

Sousuke looked up from the report in his hands and arched an eyebrow in his protégé’s direction.
“Oh? I assume you mean our elusive guest?”

“Yeah, let’s hear all about the tea party ya had with him when ya were supposed ta be lendin’ a hand up front,” Shinji snarked from his left, and like Sousuke, he was also buried elbows-deep in paperwork. Brilliant he might be but even Sousuke couldn't figure out why being an outlaw still generated this much paperwork.

“Did you learn anything?” Sousuke enquired. At Gin’s widening smirk, he smiled in return. “Then it is fine.”

“Depends on what he learned,” Shinji interjected grouchily but seemed willing enough to pay more attention to Gin than the paperwork.

“He liked your tea,” Gin continued glibly, setting down the tray in his hands on the far end of the table before taking a seat.

“That is good to hear,” Sousuke commented mildly, adjusting his glasses. “I am pleased that the last of my favourite tea was not wasted.”

Gin flashed an utterly unrepentant grin even as Shinji rolled his eyes. The blond evidently had no appreciation for good tea.

“The guy’s kinda weird,” Was Gin’s verdict. “I think he somehow knows more about us on a personal level than ya’d expect from a complete stranger. And yeah, with his looks, there’s no doubt he’s a Shiba, but there’s somethin’ else about him that reminds me of someone; just can’t think of who at the moment. And he said...” Gin tapped a finger against his chin. “‘People I feel I should trust, I can’t, and people I feel I shouldn’t trust, well, it seems like I should. It’s a bit backwards for me.’ Direct quote. Very mysterious.”
Sousuke clasped his hands together, turning over the words in his head. ‘Can’t’ trust? Not ‘shouldn’t’? Yet the man had used ‘should’ instead of ‘can’ when it came to trusting them.

“Go on,” Sousuke prompted.

“Mmm...” Gin rocked back in his chair. “I think there’s also a reason why he hasn't appeared at the frontlines yet, though I dunno what it is. From what we’ve seen, he should be more than a match for anybody lieutenant and below, equal ta a captain, and we don’t even know if he has Bankai but ya have ta admit, it’s a real possibility, yet he hasn't fought any of the elite directly. Pretty sure he’s not scared though; remember he deflected one of Zaraki’s attacks like it was nothin’ on his way ta playin’ white knight for Hirako-taichou-in-distress?”

Gin snickered and ducked as Shinji hurled a stapler at him. Sousuke shook his head in exasperation.

“Ya mouthy brat,” Shinji groused. “As I recall, ya were saved by Ichigo that one time too.”

“I wouldn't have died even if he hadn't cut in,” Gin dismissed.

“Yeah, ya’d only have lost an arm,” Shinji scoffed.

“Which Hime-chan could've fixed,” Gin pointed out smugly. “Ya on the other hand woulda been brained ta death.”

“Enough,” Sousuke sighed, feeling – as he often did – like the only adult in the room. “Gin, you would conclude that he is not a threat to us?”

Gin shrugged lightly. “As enigmatic as he is, he still seems like a pretty honest guy; not the backstabbin’ type. Besides,” His smile became a touch more genuine. “He can hold a decent conversation. It would be nice if he moved in with us.”

Sousuke’s gaze lingered on his protégé for a few seconds longer than strictly necessary before nodding his dismissal as Gin rose and headed for the door again, taking the tray with him.
There really weren’t many people Gin truly liked. He liked studying them and toying with them, but most of the time, he didn't like them, and vice-versa. When he said he liked someone, it normally meant that whichever poor soul of the day had provided some sort of entertainment for Gin, much like how a dancing dog would amuse the world after it had been successfully taught a trick by its trainer, except Gin would be both audience and puppet master.

So for Gin to take an honest liking to Ichigo, well, Sousuke suspected that their mystery Visored had made something of an impression on Gin. Most likely, the man probably hadn't retreated even when Gin was needling for answers and throwing out taunts. People who could tolerate Gin’s personality for any length of time were far and few in-between – Gin was the type to sink his fangs into you all the more deeply the further you tried to cower away from him, the type to take shameless advantage if you lost to emotions like anger or frustration when challenged by him – and Gin would definitely approve of someone who wasn't immediately put off by it, even more so if he couldn't figure you out right away, and you could give as good as you got in return.

Shinji obviously had the same thought, if his dry, “If Gin likes him, maybe we should rethink invitin’ him here; we might not have a base left standin’ within the week,” was anything to go by.

Sousuke chuckled at the mental image that produced. The mayhem would be... hm. Now there was a thought. Maybe he could point all of it at the Gotei 13. It would certainly be a new brand of warfare that even the Captain-Commander wouldn't expect.

His mirth faded as his attention reverted back to the report in front of him again. Another one hundred and sixty Arrancar dead; those drones that the Twelfth kept churning out were more trouble than they were worth, and if they continued advancing at their current pace, Las Noches would fall within the month. That place was one of their last strongholds, and no matter how good Starrk, Barragan, Harribel, and Ulquiorra were, they couldn't be expected to guard that fortress forever, especially if Yamamoto sent Kyouraku and Ukitake to secure it.

And there wasn't much assistance that the Resistance could spare for Hueco Mundo either. Yoruichi was in charge over there, with a third of the Visored also stationed close to Las Noches, but everyone else was needed in Karakura. It was difficult to fight a war on two separate fronts, especially since the Gotei 13 only had to defend one, but the main problem for the Resistance was the simple but worrying fact that they didn't have enough elite fighters.

They had many, many Hollows of course, Gillians to Vasto Lordes, enough to match the drones and foot soldiers that the Gotei 13 sent out, but that was exactly the problem – the majority of the Arrancar could only match up to lower-levelled officers. The Gotei 13 had a slew of seated officers, vice-captains, and captains – thirteen squads’ worth – and in all honesty, while the Espada were strong, those below Grimmjow’s rank could probably be beaten by a lieutenant, never mind a
Which left around seven Espada – give or take – who could fight on even footing against a captain, half of whom would have to work together to stand a chance at returning alive against the older ones like Kyouraku. The other Espada did the best they could, and so far, only Aaroniero had been killed, though not before putting Kuchiki’s sister into a coma. She hadn't been seen since so Sousuke assumed that she was either still unfit for battle or dead. Szayel didn't see much fighting either, instead working day and night – sometimes with Kisuke – to shore up their defenses with newer or more complex inventions.

Then there were the eight Visored, half of whom still didn't have Bankai, and though they were stronger than Gotei 13’s lieutenants, they weren’t at captain-level yet either. Yoruichi, Tessai, and Kisuke were formidable apart and devastating together but they were still only three people. Then there was Gin, who could probably take down two captains on his own, maybe three on a good day provided they were three of the younger ones and he had the element of surprise on his side, and Tousen, who could probably take two as well, though neither of them would come out unscathed. The problem with those matchups laid in tactics, because Yamamoto would never risk losing his strongest officers by sending them out alone. When captains arrived on the battlefield, they typically brought along several teams of Shinigami officers, largely ineffective against the Resistance’s best but still serving as a decent distraction.

Isshin and Ryuken tended to stay back as their main medical force, along with Masaki, Nelliel, and Inoue, with the twins, as well as Jinta and Ururu, doing the fetching and carrying. The other three kids who had been pulled into this mess – Uryuu, Arisawa, and Sado – were ordered to only defend the perimeter of their base in Karakura, never the frontlines. It was no place for children to be, and they weren’t strong enough to hold up against seated officers anyway.

And then there was Sousuke himself, and he was confident that he could engage five captains in battle at once and still win, but he was also one of the main strategists for the Resistance and therefore could not spend all his time on the battlefield, not to mention – unfortunately – the Gotei 13 didn't consist entirely of dim-witted, prejudiced warmongers. Since this war had begun, Sousuke had only been able to corner a handful of captains and lieutenants once, and most of them had managed to escape in the end. He had killed Hinamori and Iba though, and he’d taken Hitsugaya’s left arm, as well as permanently blinded Kyouraku’s right eye. Kuchiki, Ukitake, Sui-Feng, and Hisagi hadn't escaped without critical injuries either.

Still, that battle had been too much. Too much power clashing against each other, and it had created what was now known as the Crossroads, the place at the opposite side of town from the Resistance’s base where the dimensional fabric of three different worlds – Soul Society, Hueco Mundo, and the World of the Living – had ripped apart before collapsing against each other, no longer able to separate and repair themselves, and leaving the three plains of reality wide open. It had been fortunate that even the Gotei 13 had been taken off-guard back then, giving Kisuke and Szayel enough time to set up a wall of Sekkiseki to protect Hueco Mundo and Karakura from that end. Of course, Senkaimon and artificial Gargantas had still been able to get through but those took
more time, and they always gave off enough energy to serve as an early warning for a team to be sent out to combat whoever or whatever came through.

All in all however, they still numbered far less than the Gotei 13’s top officers. Quantity wasn't everything but it certainly didn't hurt, particularly since they also had quality – with a core group of five senior seated officers, one lieutenant, and one captain per division, on top of thirteen squads filled with hundreds of Shinigami each, it was a discouraging situation any way you looked at it.

Sousuke jerked back a little when something bounced off his forehead. He blinked down at the shogi piece in front of him before narrowing his eyes at his former captain.

“You’ll get frown lines if ya think too much, Sou-chan,” Shinji drawled, propping his feet up onto the table as he tucked his hands behind his head. “Relax.”

Sousuke smiled thinly in response. “On the contrary, that is not necessary. I have you to relax for me.”

Shinji snorted. “Is that a scoldin’ I hear, Sousuke? One of us has ta remember ta take it easy sometimes. Ya’d have worked yourself ta death the first year if I hadn't been around. Ya and Kisuke both.”

Sousuke sighed. He didn't want to admit it but Shinji was correct. The man had an annoying propensity for being correct most of the time. Technically speaking, the former captain wasn't a genius like himself or Kisuke or even Gin, but Shinji was the oldest amongst the entire Resistance, really only a few decades younger than the Gotei 13’s Eighth and Thirteenth Division captains. True, the blond couldn't map out a dozen various contingency plans in under a minute, complete with probabilities of success and so on and so forth, but he was far from stupid or weak, he could keep up and contribute both mentally and physically all the same, and he had the age-old experience to back up his authority and skill while still retaining his easygoing nature. He also tended to play mother-hen whenever one of them forgot to eat or sleep. It could be said that Shinji was their down-to-earth common sense, which – admittedly – most of them lacked half the time.

Looking back, Sousuke was glad that he had had the foresight to take a gamble on approaching Hirako Shinji when he had decided to defy the Shinigami government’s stringent, stagnant reign.

“You're thinkin’ again,” Shinji tapped a heel against the table to draw his attention once more. “Lighten up, would ya? When was the last time ya went outside for some fresh air?”
Sousuke actually had to think about it, which gave enough time for Shinji to shake his head before clambering to his feet. “C’mon, up ya get. Stayin’ cooped up in ’ere ain’t good for anyone’s health. Ya can afford ta take a fifteen-minute break.”

Sousuke had no time to object before he was being bodily dragged out of the office. A few minutes later, he was breathing in a cool summer breeze as he followed his former captain towards the edge of the Mitsumiya district.

“Place is goin’ down the drain,” Shinji muttered, kicking at one of the pieces of rubble scattered on the ground.

The entire town was a crumbling mess, what with all the battles taking place day in and day out. After the Humans had moved out, Kisuke had sealed the place. It was a forgotten town now, for all except those still residing inside it, but it also quarantined the damage dealt so that it didn't spread beyond Karakura.

Sousuke hummed noncommittally as he eyed the abandoned high school in the far distance. “How is the children’s education coming along?”

“Slow,” was Shinji’s opinion. The blond shrugged, slouching nonchalantly despite the tired edge in his expression. “A war’s not exactly ideal ta raise kids in but Masaki and Tessai are doin’ the best they can. Ryuuen and Isshin sometimes lend a hand when they aren’t busy sewin’ up someone’s guts, and Hime-chan’s been eatin’ medical texts for breakfast but there’s only so much she can learn at a time.”

Sousuke grimaced a little. Inoue Orihime’s unique ability to reject damage was invaluable but she did not have a large amount of reiatsu to expend haphazardly, and it was smarter for her to save her energy on more crucial injuries instead of gashes or sprains or even broken bones that could be patched up the Human way or healed with Kaidou. In the meantime, the girl was determined to learn as much as she could about other ways to assist Ryuuen and Isshin in the medical area. She was diligent if nothing else, and she always took the time to ask Ushouda Hachigen a variety of questions whenever the former vice-commander of the Kidou Corps left his post in Hueco Mundo and visited Karakura.

“Oi,” Sousuke glanced up upon hearing the note of brevity in Shinji’s voice, immediately searching for a threat. The blond muted his reiatsu signature completely even as he pointed towards the school. “I sense a Senkaimon about ta open. Come on; we can cut off whoever’s comin’ through.”
Expertly concealing his own reiatsu, Sousuke sped off after Shinji towards the school. The two of them together should be more than enough to hold back however many Shinigami unlucky enough to choose now of all times to attempt an ambush.

“Shinji-san, wait,” Sousuke all but hauled the blond backwards when he spotted an orange-haired figure striding purposefully across the roof of the high school. He smelled an opportunity – Ichigo shouldn't have sensed them yet so they could find out for certain here and now whether the person who had been assisting them for months was a Gotei 13 spy or not.

“Over here,” Shinji quickly directed them over to a shadowed alcove beside one of the school buildings, and Sousuke promptly threw a Kyokkou over the both of them just as the gates of a Senkaimon rippled into existence.

[To Be Continued]

Chapter End Notes

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Perched at the edge of the roof, Ichigo waited patiently for the Senkaimon to open. And here he’d thought that the fighting would be over for the day.

“Ichigo-sama, the energy output of the Senkaimon has risen twenty-two percent past our predicted yield,” Onibi announced succinctly in a bell-like voice. “Should I begin recalibrating the calculations of our original results in light of this new data?”

“Aa, that’d be great,” Ichigo glanced sideways at the blue, translucent, jellyfish-like Mod-Soul floating at his right shoulder. A sequence of tiny white numbers began racing through her yellow eyes as she initiated a scan. “Make sure to exclude the extra reiryoku of all incoming Shinigami, Bee.”

“Ichigo-sama, stupidity is not in my genetic makeup,” Onibi retorted in the same unruffled voice that somehow managed to convey *you idiot, don’t tell me things I already know*. Ichigo rolled his eyes and left her to it, focusing on the occurrence down below as the doors of the Senkaimon slid open and one person stepped through.

“Stay hidden,” Ichigo ordered before leaping off the building and dropping straight down towards the petite Shinigami on the ground.

Sui-Feng wasn’t captain of the Second for nothing, he thought with wry amusement as the woman in question disappeared on the spot and his hand closed on empty air. He didn’t hesitate to twist out of the way just as a gold stinger-like blade thrust forward at where his back had been a millisecond ago.

He flipped out of the way as Sui-Feng came at him again, more than familiar with the captain’s fighting style, not to mention this Sui-Feng was not quite as strong as the one he knew, so it was relatively easy to evade her.

“Hey,” Ichigo called out as he deflected a dozen high-speed consecutive blows courtesy of his newest opponent. “Mind leaving the way you came? I was just about to have dinner when you got here, and I’d invite you in and all but I only have enough for one. You can always come back
tomorrow.” He grinned, knowing his next words would infuriate Sui-Feng. “We’ll make it a date. I’ll even take you out for coffee if you promise not to slip poison into my drink.”

Sui-Feng almost tripped as she rushed in again but recovered without incident, eyes flashing with outrage instead. “I would never want anything to do with you!” She seemed to take a moment to get her emotions under control before backing off, stopping her relentless attacks. Ichigo blinked in surprise as she spat out, “You are the new Shinigami that the traitors have recruited? The one known as Ichigo?”

Ichigo cocked his head, crouching on a low-hanging branch a fair distance away from Sui-Feng. “Mm, I suppose you could say that, yeah.”

The ‘recruit’ part wasn't quite right but he could play along to see if this was about to pan out the way he suspected.

Sui-Feng looked like her next words was going to cost her but she forged on all the same and stated stiffly in a tone that suggested that her speech had been memorized, “Then on behalf of the Gotei 13 and Central 46, I, Sui-Feng, captain of the Second Division and Commander-in-Chief the Onmitsukidou, would like to extend to you an invitation to join our ranks. In recognition of your skill and as a sign of goodwill, no investigation into your past will be carried out, and you would be accepted into the Gotei 13 as a senior seated officer at the very least.” Her expression became slightly more animated as she urged, “Help us oppose the monsters who dare trample on the honour of the Gotei 13, and desecrate our world with their very existence!”

_Had the Sui-Feng he knew, Ichigo wondered. Ever been this bad?_

Maybe at the beginning, Ichigo decided. Back when he had just invaded Soul Society. But she had changed, especially after Yoruichi had re-entered her life. Even though she was still strict and no-nonsense when it came to work, and she was a bit of a workaholic, Sui-Feng had also loosened up and been more willing to think about the orders she was given. No outsider would ever be able to distinguish the near imperceptible differences but she _had_ changed.

This Sui-Feng had only gone downhill from the one who obeyed and carried out orders like they were the Holy Grail.

“Why do you think they're monsters?” Ichigo enquired idly.
Sui-Feng’s eyes instantly narrowed with hostility as if the very implication of Ichigo sympathizing with the ‘monsters’ was offending her. “They are abominations!”

“Why?” Ichigo challenged.

“They undermine the Gotei 13’s authority!” Sui-Feng snapped back. “The traitors side with corrupt Shinigami who willingly use evil power!”

Ichigo shrugged. “Power is power, like how a sword is a sword, and knowledge is knowledge; it’s neither good nor evil. What people do with those things though – that’s what counts; that’s what makes the difference between right and wrong and all the shades in between.”

Sui-Feng bristled, biting out accusingly, “They ally themselves with Hollows, and they use Hollow reiatsu-”

“Which you people injected their souls with,” Ichigo pointed out bluntly, observing with detached interest as Sui-Feng’s cheeks tinted red. “And when you all got scared of what they became, you decided to put them down like they were rabid dogs instead of comrades that you’ve been fighting alongside for decades, if not centuries. You hunt them down just because they want to live, even if it’s with the mistake your government made, and you try to kill them just because they’re different, and you’re too terrified to give them a chance. That, or you don’t have the spine to go against the majority who are terrified. Frankly, I think that’s worse.”

Four months in this world powered his words now that he was on a roll, and Ichigo bulldozed over whatever Sui-Feng was opening her mouth to refute. “It’s not a crime to be different. The Visored – they’re fighting back because the Gotei 13 forced them into a corner, and they don’t want to die. The others who’ve allied with them – they’ve got enough balls to call bullshit and do what they know is right, even if it means walking away from a life where they had luxuries and status. Have you even asked yourself why you’ve labelled them all as the bad guys? Have you thought about it yourself instead of just settling for a half-assed ‘because the higher-ups said so’? What makes them the bad guys anyway? Have they been going around murdering innocents or something?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they were!” Sui-Feng shot back venomously. “They are corrupted! They must be put down for the greater good!”

For a long moment after that, the two of them regarded each other with the knowledge that neither would capitulate to the other.
Sui-Feng moved first, raising her stinger Zanpakutou with clear threat. “It’s unfortunate that they’ve filled your head with nonsense. Since you've sided with them, you’ll die with them too!”

She lunged forward.

Even in his world, complete with Bankai, Sui-Feng had been no match for Ichigo. It was practically child’s play to fend her off here.

“Go home,” Ichigo ordered as he tossed her into the side of what used to be a dango shop. “Or I’ll kill you.”

This only seemed to enrage her even further, which, okay, wasn’t exactly unexpected.

“You do not even have the resolve to finish off your enemy!” Sui-Feng bit out, picking herself up off the ground. “You are wea-”

Ichigo flash-stepped behind her before his afterimage could fade entirely from in front of Sui-Feng, and before his opponent could even finish flinging her latest insult, he reached out and neatly broke both her arms, delivered a chop to her neck before she could scream in pain, and then bound her with a Bakudou right before her body slumped to the ground with a wince-worthy thud.

Ichigo heaved a weary sigh, staring idly down at the Shinigami at his feet as her Zanpakutou shimmered back to an innocuous wakizashi. The sudden silence around them was almost deafening.

“Bee,” Ichigo called out without raising his voice, and the jellyfish Mod-Soul was whizzing down from the roof of the school before he finished forming the syllable. “Did you get enough data?”

Onibi exuded an air of disgruntlement, her large pale gold eyes peering distastefully down at Sui-Feng as she bobbed in place beside Ichigo. “I will need a few more samples, Ichigo-sama.”

Ichigo sighed again but nodded, unsurprised. “No doubt, you’ll get them.” He glanced down at Sui-Feng once more. “They’ll keep coming until this godforsaken war ends.”
Onibi turned a semi-curious gaze on him. “Are you going to kill her?”

Ichigo scrubbed a frustrated hand through his hair. He should, he really should. It wasn't like this Sui-Feng was even his world’s Sui-Feng; getting rid of her shouldn't be giving him so many hang-ups.

Still, he’d never been one to kill in cold blood either, plus he was a doctor now.

“I’ll drop her off at Kisuke’s place,” He decided at last. “Yoruichi-san might want to try her hand at talking her old protégé around.”

Onibi trilled in acknowledgement. One of her tentacles brushed against Ichigo’s cheek. “You shouldn't fret so much, Ichigo-sama. You have no obligation to anyone here; you should simply do whatever you wish.”

Ichigo quirked a lopsided smile even as he bent down and scooped Sui-Feng up, hefting her small bulk over one shoulder. “I guess I can’t argue with that.”

Onibi sniffed as she latched onto his shoulder a second before Ichigo took off at a lazy Shunpo. “By now, it should be obvious that you should never argue with anything I say.” Ichigo snorted, but then tilted his head when the Mod-Soul continued blithely, “And on a side note, you and this Shinigami had an audience earlier. Their reiatsu signatures identified them to be Hirako Shinji and Aizen Sousuke.”

Ichigo almost tripped over thin air even as his mind backtracked over everything he had said and done. “And you couldn't have given me a heads-up sooner?”

Onibi gave him a long-suffering look that expressed really, what do you take me for, you moron perfectly. “There was no intent to harm coming from them, and giving them a front row seat to your monologuing only raised their opinion of you. I saw no reason to interrupt a good thing.”

“I wasn't monologuing! Don't make me out like I’m some cartoon villain or something!”

Ichigo skidded to a stop outside Kisuke’s shop turned the Resistance’s main base, careful to stay
out of the cameras’ lines of sight. He couldn’t decide if he was more exasperated with the Mod-Soul or resigned.

“This is what I get,” He grumbled as he lowered Sui-Feng to the ground again, released a sharp burst of his own reiatsu, and then took off once more towards the abandoned high school. “For giving you a personality.”

“Indeed,” Onibi agreed blandly. “As my creator, you are entirely to blame for any perceived defects in my genetic makeup. Shame on you, Ichigo-sama.”

Ichigo rolled his eyes hard enough to nearly strain himself. It was a bit too late to take out that sarcastically deadpan wit, and if he was honest, he’d gotten too attached to Onibi anyway to change her personality even if he had the time or desire to do so.

“You're lucky I like you,” Ichigo huffed at her, keeping a weather eye out for Shinji and Aizen in case they hadn’t cleared off yet, though it seemed that they had. “Otherwise, I’d have taken you back to component parts ages ago.”

“Rest assured, master,” Onibi sassed serenely. “I am properly terrified.”

Ichigo gave up.

[To Be Continued]

Chapter End Notes

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