

Inoue-san, You're Coming With Me
by debbiechan

Disclaimer: I don't own the characters of Ishida and Orihime; Kubo Tite invented them.

Description: PG13. Written in nail-biting anticipation of an IshiHime reunion in the Hueco Mundo arc, this fic starts around chapter 280. It was inspired by these two beautiful fanarts of Orin:

“IshiHime--Sort of” <http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/53909448/>

“Ishida, White Knight” <http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/53910330/>

Warning: Spoilers for Hueco Mundo arc, ambiguous ending

Thank you to my lovely new beta, ray blu, lacegeisha, or niji_no_uta. What should I call her? My savior? You can check out her art at <http://raiy-kun.deviantart.com/>

for Orin

She is suspended mid-air over her fear. Is it shock? During the hours that rocked her senses and sealed her thoughts, Orihime stood, doing nothing while her friends and enemies bled.

She saw Luppi stabbed with a fist and then shot into fleshy splinters.... She saw Chad's silhouette spurt a fountain of blood.... Rukia hanging, impaled on a trident.... Rukia crawling over her own blood and calling *Inoue, Inoue*.... The two Arrancar girls kicked and broken to pieces.... Kurosaki lying with a hole in his chest and blank eyes.

Is it shock or is it a lull to steady her resolve? She doesn't come to the conclusion that in order to save her friends, she must ignore her friends. The idea floats inside her the way she floats over her fear.

“Kurosaki-kun, Kurosaki-kun.” The sound of her own pain hurts her throat.

Realizing she's naïve and wishing she weren't, she escapes into a fearless dream-self:

She is important in her unimportance. She is loved by unrequited love. She is elevated by sorrow. Look at the princess rising beyond the world: a golden purpose drenches her flowing clothes and hair, modesty bejewels her ankles and fingers, her eyes shine with beneficence and mercy.

No one, not Kurosaki-kun, not Ulquiorra with his cool green eyes, sees her for who she is.

Tears fall. No one sees her. How could they? She's not there on the battlefield, but here--suspended in mid-air over her fear.

She wants to destroy the hougyoku, but she can't lift her own hand.

She wants to save the world, but her feet won't land on its solid earth.

Her eyes cloud. Her earrings tinkle. She prays to her ancestors, the kami, and the King.

Save me, save me, save me.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Ishida snaps at Renji. "Her reiatsu--" He gestures with his head. "She's over there."

Renji's determination mirrors Ishida's. "Rukia," he says and drops to his knees. His obi darkens with fresh blood.

Ishida is all at once ashamed. He offers his hand.

"I can't walk," Renji says. "Get on, go."

"Kuchiki-san?"

"I'll crawl to her if I have to." Renji places his hands on bloody thighs and breathes hard. "Bring that Inoue girl back this way because ... I can put her to work."

"But--"

"Go!" barks Renji, and Ishida goes.

Pesh follows, and Donchaka wails, "No, no, no, don't follow him! He's running right into the mouth of Eviiiiiiil."

It's not the mouth of Evil; it's a lit space at the end of the hallway. Ishida steps into a room that, like all rooms in Las Noches, is ridiculously over-sized. As if giants live here. Everywhere is white--the ceiling, walls, and floor. Ishida feels conspicuous in his white clothing stained with brown blood. He runs towards nowhere, into the whiteness, the wind stinging the cuts on his face, and he tries to sense her.

She *was* here. He knows that.

An explosion. Ishida senses the huge reverberant energy before it knocks him off his feet and against a wall.

It's nothing, he tells himself as blood trickles into his eye. He pushes up his glasses. He didn't lose his glasses. The source of the explosion must've been far, far away.

He's been afraid every moment of this journey. He was afraid when the first monster roared. When he shouted, "Tell Aizen that a Quincy is here," his chest was cold with dread. Chad fell, and Ishida stopped running to grieve and fear. When he shot through the walls of Szayel Aporro's laboratory and stood there, smiling and triumphant, Ishida figured himself as good as dead if the Espada numbered any higher than nine. "That's a relief," he told Number Eight, and his voice was as haughty and cool as the hard blade of fear in his soul. "That doesn't seem like a very strong number."

What warrior doesn't know fear? Only unthinking maniacs like Kurosaki don't know how to channel it to good use, to ride it like a sheet of ice over a treacherous river. Enemies saw a poised opponent, and Ishida lacked no confidence in his abilities. But *fear*--it tore reishi from the air and fed Ishida's strength. It reminded him to be cautious. It told him to respect every possibility. Without fear, he would be blind. Without fear, he would be passionless.

Fear that he wouldn't find her, that he would find her but it would be too late, that he would die or lie crushed and incapacitated like Renji. Fear charged his heart, and fear cleared his mind.

The closer he was to her, the more afraid he felt and the more aware he became of his human body in an inhuman place:

His shoulder where the Cirucci's whip sliced still hurt. There were minor cuts on his face and hands. He'd been lucky. He'd been fast. Renji had blocked an oncoming deathblow by jumping in front of him. Every other turn led to Death and every decision invited it. One wrong step and he'd be over the precipice. Shamed the way he had been over and over in his father's training.

Shame was worse than death but, being a Quincy, he could avoid both.

He would not be lost to over-confidence or weakened by vanity but disciplined by fear.

Ishida speeds through Las Noches knowing who he is and what his power can do.

Nothing can hinder his purpose.

Find her, find her, find her.

“It’s too danger-wus here!” Nell grabs Orihime’s skirt. “We’s got to move further away.”

“Where?” Orihime’s voice sounds distant, even to herself.

“Anywhere! Better yet, leth makes a run for it.”

“He’ll stop us.” Orihime looks towards the battle she can’t see. “Grimmjow won’t let us go. He’ll use us against Kurosaki-kun again.”

Nell tugs the white skirt harder. “I doan understand. You healed him. If you let Grimmjow stay hurt, Grimmjow couldn’t chwase us.”

“Kurosaki-kun needs...”

“They’re busy wid their fight! C’mon! They won’t notice us!”

“I--I can’t go. There’s something I need--”

“Arrgh!” Nell tugs so hard that she loses her footing and brings Orihime, in a wave of white fabric and ginger hair, down too. Both girls *oomph* as they hit the ground.

Nell gets up, rubbing her posterior. Dust flies around Orihime’s face. She gathers her skirt, puts her hands in her lap, and sits there, looked towards the battle again.

“I doan understand,” Nell says. “You’re supposed to run. Why don’t you run?”

It was a question Orihime can’t answer. It not that she’s afraid--she isn’t. She is suspended in mid-air over her fear.

He startles her at least.

From a distance away he sensed her paralysis and the will that kept her hands from trembling. Her reiatsu was dim and strained. She was hardly there.

But her *being there* was all that mattered.

“INOUE-SAN!” Skidding through a white resonating wind of hirenkyaku, he landed between Orihime and Nell. Another triumphant appearance.

Both girls screamed, and that was quite horrible. Ishida had never made girls scream before.

“Ishida-kun?”

She’s awake now. Her reiatsu isn’t fighting itself.

He doesn’t remember her being this beautiful.

“Inoue-san, you’re coming with me.” There is no other option, but he already senses her resistance.

“You’re a mess,” she says staring at him. “You’re hurt. Let me--”

“Ishida! Don’t take her. She’s Ichigo’s friend.”

Ishida notices Nell and commands, “I’m taking you too.”

A cero thunders not far away. Another blast answers it.

“But,” says Nell. “I have to stay here with Ichigo.”

Ishida looks to Orihime to see if that’s her excuse too.

“Do you want to *die*?” he asks sharply.

Her eyes grow sad, her pale face flushes, she brings her clenched hands to her mouth. “What’s happened to you? Are you hurt badly? Look at you--even your clothes.”

Ishida lowers his eyes. Even his clothes?

“This is all my fault,” she says and sits on the floor like a stubborn mule. A *gorgeous* stubborn mule.

He lowers himself on one knee to look her in the eye. “That’s *Kurosaki*’s fight out there, not yours. There’s only one way for you to escape, and you have to come with me.”

“One way?” She blinks her tragic eyes at him. “How can you say there’s only one way? Don’t you ever watch that *Mythbusters* show? It’s all about science? You seem like you would watch a show like that, Ishida-kun. Last week --was it last week?-- you had to find a marble in the sand--no it was a needle in a haystack.” Her words spill over one another. It’s familiar babbling. “There were some cool ways to do the job, and someone put the hay in water so that the needle would sink to the bottom, but I was thinking the whole time--why not a magnet? Why not a little magnet? It would be simple and cheap and it would do the job.”

Nell and Ishida are staring at Orihime.

“I’ve got a magnet,” Orihime says.

“Huh?” says Nell.

“Aizen,” she says. “I--” She looks around in case anyone is eavesdropping. She decides not to speak further.

Ishida’s fear turns to terror. She’s not going to leave. She has a plan. Is she going to talk to Aizen and ask him to be merciful? What? She thinks she can fight them and win with her powers, her goodness, her magnet, whatever.

“I can heal you,” Orihime says with a slight smile. “And I can even fix your clothes. I can do things like that now.”

Ishida is lost for a moment. He lowers his eyes, and he is standing behind his fear.

Her savior would wear a mantle of righteousness, epaulettes of hard brass courage, gloves brightened by Quincy silver filigree. Her virgin knight, wielding a spirit bow and holding high the rare spirit weapon that bears a sword’s edge. Her hero should be an avenging Galahad who would rather fight and die than fail and live.

He’s not a knight. He reads a book under a tree, apart from the world. He reads a lot and listens for her. Sir Walter Scott, Tennyson, Fowler. He knows that he wants to be a Quincy when he grows up, but he doesn’t yet know what he wants to protect. *If love may so invite/ King Arthur's virgin knight, /Then love indeed must far exceed/The rhymes that poets write!* (Edgar Fawcett, 1885) Pride and ambition may be the death of him. Hesitating may

mean the death of her. He wants his father's approval, he needs to cast weapon aside and escape with her, he needs, he wants--

He wants her to goddamn stop sitting there and stand up.

Still a few steps behind his fear, he offers his hand. Surprisingly, she takes it.

And if so be that I rescue her, where shall I keep her? (Sir Thomas Malory, circa 1450)

He can tell by her eyes that she's not going to come with him. What's the use of being the smartest in his class if he can't think his way out of this one?

Nell looks from one to the other. The boy in tattered, bloody clothes holds his hand, palm up, mid-chest, and the girl in glistening white has placed her hand, palm down, on his. She rises with him and they stand looking at one another.

"I can't leave," she says.

"I can't leave without you," he says.

They're both outside themselves. Ishida still stands a few steps behind his fear, and Orihime floats high above hers. Because they're fearless and stunned for the moment, they can move no other part of their bodies but their eyes. Hers lower in a guilty look. His narrow into anger.

"Inoue-san, you're coming with me."

Nell gasps when he grabs Orihime by the arm, and then Ishida grasps Nell by the arm.

No one sees the cero or knows what's happened until the blinding light leaves their eyes. Their eyes are sore and winking. There a caustic, sickening smell in the air.

Orihime is sitting on the floor again, and Nell is sitting beside her. They were thrown a great distance--he must've known there was a chance they'd break their skulls. But they're safe. The bottoms of Nell's clothes burned off when she landed, and Orihime's sleeves tore into ribbons from an unknown force.

"Where is he?" asks Nell.

Orihime puts her hand out, her fingers stretch wide, she can't sense him. She looks horrified.

“Where did he go?” repeats Nell. “He was right here between us and--” She looks around.

There’s not even a body.

Orihime can’t detect the merest piece of reiatsu. This is worse than when Tsubaki was hit. Tsubaki had fallen into pieces so tiny she couldn’t gather them.

“He’s gone,” Orihime says. The horror leaves her expression; no expression replaces it.

“What do you mean?”

“I think,” she says in a plain, unemotional voice, “that the cero hit him and he’s dead.”

“What? No!”

Nell falls into Orihime’s lap, and Orihime’s fearless dream-self hits the floor. Golden hair, sorrowful purpose, shimmering mercy--these things dissolve the way Ishida-kun did and are no more. Both girls are sobbing. The battle roars some distance away.

“Heal him,” whimpers Nell. “You can do that, can’t you?”

“I don’t--there’s nothing to heal.” Orihime wipes her eyes with her skirt. She turns her head in the direction of the fighting and her mouth drops open in true, human shock. Another danger, another grief.

That’s not Kurosaki-kun.

“What do we do now?” Nell asks.

“We have to run,” Orihime says. She picks up little Nell. “We have to run.”

Her fault, her fault, she left and they followed her, she tried to save them and she killed them. There is no where to go, because even if she destroys the hougyoku, there will never be any atoning for what’s she done.

Chad’s alive. He has to be, but she can’t sense him. She stopped sensing Rukia a long time ago. Renji? Where is Renji? Kurosaki-kun is alive but he’s changing--his reiatsu grows dark and inflexible, a mountain of cruel jagged power in the center of Las Noches.

There is no worse Hell. The hallways are empty. No one tries to catch her or kill her.

“Ichigo?” Nell wants to know. “Why did we weave him? You need to heal him in case--”

“He’s not Ichigo anymore,” Orihime says. She’s holding Nell close to her chest with both arms. They’re not going anywhere because Orihime isn’t running fast--but that doesn’t matter. *Just keep running.*

She’s not running away from her fear this time. She feels it in every cell of her body. The terror punishes her, and still it’s not enough. She will never be punished enough, so she flies in the opposite direction of that expectation. *Give me someone to care for, someone to save. Having someone to save will save me.*

“Don’t worry.” Orihime pats the mask of the little Hollow in her arms. “We’re going to get out of here.”

She turns a corner and there’s Pesh. She reacts in time and catches herself before hurling herself into the other Hollow.

“Nell!”

“Pesh!”

They’re friends. Orihime is glad for that. There’s someone else she can save. Then Pesh says, “give her to me,” and for some reason, Orihime hands Nell over. She doesn’t know who to trust anymore. Ishida-kun is dead. He said, “Inoue-san, you’re coming with me,” and she didn’t trust him. She didn’t believe that coming with him was the right thing.

But she had always trusted him. Why did she stop? Kurosaki-kun would’ve wanted her to go with Ishida-kun. Kurosaki-kun would’ve said, “Run, get out of here.”

She wanted to save them; she didn’t save any of them.

“Why did you follow me?” Nell is asking Pesh.

“I was following Uryuu--no wait, at first I was following you, but this last time I was following Uryuu.”

Orihime looks at her feet. What sort of person is she turning into? Is what’s happening to Kurosaki-kun happening to her? No, no, Kurosaki-kun tries to control the dark presence inside himself but Orihime--she has no other self to blame. When she killed everybody, she was just being herself--all good intentions, all love for the world.

“Where’s Uryuu?” Pesh says.

Nell startles and covers her mouth.

“I tried to follow him but he’s too fast.” Pesh is breathless. “I’d forgotten he was so fast. It wasn’t long ago I saw him being fast in a fight--it was only *teeny bits of time later* that he was running to find you, so I don’t know *why* it is I didn’t remember--oh he’s so fast. I hope I don’t forget other important things--like what door we came through. We might need to go back.” Pesh stops blabbering and looks at Orihime. “He found you.”

Orihime stares.

Pesh cocks his head and looks at her with his insect eye.

Orihime feels her heart slowing, her head clearing, she has hope that this odd Hollow might make sense. He has a lively, happy voice. She trusts him.

“He wouldn’t tell me why he’d come to Las Noches, but I have very good ears. The best in the land, I must say. I heard him muttering about you under his breath and--oh, it was a terrible battle!” Pesh throws up his hands. “I was certain that Uryuu was going to be killed, but he looked so determined. He said, *find her, find her, find her*. You’re *her*, aren’t you?”

Nell turns to Orihime with a face full of hope. “Maybe he was so fast that he ran away before the cero and we just didn’t see him?”

“No,” says Orihime. “That doesn’t make sense. He wouldn’t leave us alone.”

It also doesn’t make sense that Ishida-kun was saying things under his breath. He’s not like that, Orihime thinks. He must’ve been ... afraid.

“You don’t know where he is either?” Pesh asks. “He’s *fast*. I wonder where he’s gone to?”

There is an ominous silence.

“Cero?” Pesh’s voice is afraid now. “A cero?”

Orihime sobs. It’s too much. She turns from the two Hollow and runs.

Even if she ran into her own grave, nothing would be fixed. Ishida-kun--he had her by the arm. He was going to take her against her will. If only she had agreed a minute before, a second before--

What power? What realm of God? Whatever her abilities, she's served Aizen since coming here. Look at her clothes, look at what she's done. Aizen doesn't have to kill her friends; she kills them for him. She's his servant. One of his own. Aizen's servant, body and soul.

Why did she follow Ulquiorra here? Where's her power now? It can't bring Ishida-kun back. It can't undo the pain her friends suffered for her. Why did she follow Ulquiorra?

Orihime's lungs hurt she is breathing so hard and running so fast. I should've killed myself when he told me I was free for twelve hours. I shouldn't have believed Ulquiorra and believed in my friends.

Hutch had told her to believe. She could heal anyone if she believed? Was it *that*? Or did he mean something else? Realm of God, all dreams come true. Then why, when she put her hand out, why couldn't she have brought back every spirit particle that was once Ishida-kun?

Find her, find her, find her.

She imagines Ishida-kun saying that and still, her heart does not stop. She keeps running. She does not drop dead from the shame and the horror.

He died a good person, and here she is living as a bad person. Aizen's servant. A traitor, a traitor. She betrayed them all. Body and soul, she's betrayed them all.

I'm not going to live like this.

There's peace somewhere--I have to find it. I have to ... keep running.

Orihime is the verge of collapsing this time, but she doesn't allow herself to fall. Her will to live runs into something soft; it surrounds her and keeps her standing up.

Save me, save me, save me.

“Inoue-san, how did you get here?”

Ishida-kun is wearing a mantle that shines blue and white like water in sunlight. His arms are around her.

“I was running,” she says. She looks up at his face. “And I ran into you?”

There's no blood on his face and no tension or deep concern in his expression. He looks like Ishida-kun but not quite like Ishida-kun. Like a benevolent prince. Like an angel. He smiles and tightens his embrace around her. Since when does Ishida smile?

The whiteness around them is not Las Noches. No Hollow or Arrancar run out to capture them. How long was she running through empty rooms? When did she lose her breath and keep flying forward out of sheer will?

She trusts him to save her.

"Inoue-san," he says softly. "You're coming with me."

END

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