

My therapist told me that fantasy is one way we can cope. I think she called it escapism.

Then again, she wouldn't understand what I was trying to say. Soul society isn't really high key information, what with them erasing memories and trying to stay on the down-low. Heh, doooowwnnn loooowwww.

"Orihime, what's so funny?" A woman with spiky black hair leaned over as I cracked my eyes open. Her nose barely touched mine.

"Eh? Hehe, nothing." She returned my response with an arched brow, seconds later giving way to a smile.

"Silly Hime. Your husband said he would be home early today for your birthday, right?" I nodded and poked Tatsuki's nose with the tip of my pointer finger. My reward was the soft tinkling of laughter. The warmth that is her was comforting, blanketing me with a sense of security and love. "By the way, Happy birthday, Hime."

"You already said that this morning Tats, and during our lunch break." She spared me a brilliant smile and climbed out from the driver's seat. The door was opened wide enough for a gentle fall breeze to waltz through, mixing in the smell of crisp leaves and asphalt with a lemon-scented freshener.

I stayed where I was, eyes looking out the passenger window, noticing Tat's shadow passed by like the hands of a sundial. When she opened my door, I tried my best to pout with hands stretched out and fingers spread.

"Hime, c'mon!" she grabbed my wrist and pulled me out of the chair and into the quiet alleyway with grey and white walls. Tatsuki completed one last look through and patted down my errant locks. She and my husband are my rock. The source of my strength through all the trials and tribulations.

We walked forward through a brick pathway and towards a cedar-colored door. Fumbling clumsily for the keys and unlocking the front door became a chore. Tats didn't acknowledge it, but I knew with the tapping of her foot and her eyes staring ahead at the door. Once opened, she held my hand tight as we wandered to the dining room. Not once did she look back, her figure always forward.

The room was pitch dark until suddenly it erupted in a blinding light. I squinted, slowly backing away sideways, shielding my eyes from the overhead fluorescent light. Then there came the sounds.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY ORIHIME!!!!" Multiple voices chorused together as one.

A loud bang like high-pitched balloons exploding filled my surrounding. I jumped in the air as my heart thudded loudly in my ears. Tiny flecks of red, blue, white, and green danced in the air, fluttering about aimlessly with the lack presence of a current.

My friend's beaming smiles and laughs paused as if time suddenly stopped. Tatsuki's bright eyes were full of adoration, Ichigo's face was warm with affection, and Rukia's cheeks were pink and puffed out with joy.

The people I love are all around me. Some had their arms raised in the air as they let their poppers loose. Others had them at their side after throwing confetti in the air. Nobody was tight with apprehension; crossed arms or turned backs did not exist in this scene.

*"Why do you ask? They've come to save you."*

Each of the confetti was distracting, bright as they were. I can't help but think of another day when tiny flecks floated in the air and loud bangs reverberated through a hollow world.

Deep breaths, Orihime. Ignore that voice. Deep breaths.

*"Why else would they choose to come here? They have no other reason."*

The third breathing exercise cycle brought back time to normalcy, as arms went down and the smile returned to neutral-shaped lips. "Oh wow, thank you, everyone! This looks amazing."

"I told you she would like it. We got you good, Orihime! I saw you jump," Rukia wrapped her arms around my shoulder, her voice giddy and smelled slightly of sake.

"Ah, you guys didn't have to," the muscles in my cheeks ached from holding the smile. I walked cautiously towards a pile of presents lying on top of the dining table beside a vase of flowers. The morning glories were beautiful, with deep hues of blue and purple with petals gracefully spreading outwards like a trumpet. Someone randomly stuck a white one in the middle, making it a stark contrast to the others.

"Did you know the center of a morning glory looks like a star? I would have never made that connection," Ichigo walked from behind Tats, a corner of his lips lifting slightly. He landed a fleeting peck on my cheeks, his eyes holding mine as I looked up from the flowers. "Happy 23rd birthday, Orihime."

I'm a lucky woman, I know that. After all these years, my friends cherished and bathed me in an afterglow of affection. Yet, how could I not think of it so when they have time and time again rescued me?

A bitter taste filled my mouth, and I gulped it down hurriedly before the aftertaste kicked in.

"You guys are amazing! These flowers are gorgeous. Did you get them, Rukia?" She nodded when I turned to her. "Gosh, everyone. You guys are the best! I love all of these and all of you! Hahaha."

*Ha. Ha. Ha.* Indeed.