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The Beautiful Game

by SunAndMoonFanfictions

Summary

Ulquiorra is a nihilist seeking meaning in life, Grimmjow is on the path to self destruction in his quest to win. They will discover a deeper meaning to soccer through love and the beautiful game of life.

Notes

This story wouldn't have come to be without the dedication and love of the GrimmUlqui community.

I owe my sudden burst of inspiration to Blackstorm Von Pendragon (Blackstorm on Deviant Art, and one of my favorite Grimmjow artists) for her beautiful artwork for 6/4 Day; Contentment. Seeing such a beautiful piece reminded me of how much I loved these characters and how much they inspired me.

I honestly thought the well had run dry in terms of my inspiration for this pairing but when you have an OTP, it is your OTP for life.

Thank you for giving this story a chance. This is new territory for my in terms of story telling but it is great to revisit these amazing characters again.
Enjoy the ride.
-SunAndMoonFanfictions

(P.S - I am open to any constructive criticism and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this venture.)
June 7, 2016

"Good morning, Japan! This is Urahara Kisuke and Tessai Tsukabishi bringing you all the latest sports coverage live from Karakura Town! We've got a lot to cover this morning, but let's start first by talking about the roster for the 2015 FIFA World Cup. A lot of talented players were chosen to represent our country, and many of them grew up in Karakura Town, isn't that right, Tessai?"

"Yes, Urahara-san."

"Among those chosen were Ichigo Kurosaki and Renji Abarai of our own home team, the Soul Reapers! It's about time Japan took notice of the talent in our small community! They played a great game against Pantera last season, 2-2 with a penalty kick that won them the game. Kurosaki-san was Captain of the Soul Reapers. I'm sure they'll miss him."

"Yes, Urahara-san. Great talent, great guy."

"Abarai's a talented guy. A bit of a firebrand though, wouldn't you say? He's been shown the red card more than anyone else in the Soul Reapers."

"Yes. He's a great defender. Very aggressive, very good at reading the opposing team, but he does let his emotions get the best of him at times."

"Indeed! On the subject of Pantera, one of their own was also chosen; Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez. Ah, do you hear that? I can hear the women screaming their delight through the cameras at me! Ladies, ladies, calm yourself!"

"Indeed, Urahara-san."

"What can you say about Jaegerjaquez-san? That name, firstly: it stands out, it catches your attention, and if his name didn't do it that blue hair and his attitude on the field certainly would do the trick."

"Apparently there was some controversy when people heard he was signed. The guy hasn't got any discipline."

"Yes. Shinji Hirako, goalkeeper for the Vizards, left team Japan. He'd played against Jaegerjaquez back in 2011 and these are his exact words, "He's a pain in the ass. I'll play against him, but I ain't playing with him." Now, those are some choice words and I'm not saying I agree with him, but he and Jaegerjaquez have some history, don't they?"

"Yes, Urahara-san. They got into a fight during the game after Jaegerjaquez tried to head a goal. Hirako-san claimed Jaegerjaquez purposefully threw the ball into his face. Jaegerjaquez's reason; "His teeth were fucked up, so I fixed 'em." Oh my!

"That was something. And we've heard similar reports of this kind of behavior from him for years now! He's been fouled, suspended during games, but he's never gotten the message. It's the kind of person he is, it's the kind of image he wants; the bad boy on and off the field. Do you think anyone else with his record would have made this team?"

"Urahara-san, if he were mediocre, he wouldn't be worth the bad press. He has excellent heading accuracy, he's got great pace, and he excels at tackling. He's won more games for Pantera than any other player before him. It must have been hard for them to let him go."
"Indeed. He was signed to them for four years. That's the longest he's been on a team and if history is any reminder, we all know how picky Jaegerjaquez can be about the team he's signed to. He must have liked playing with them. How many teams has he been with?"

"I can't say, Urahara-san. He was with Arrancar for a year, then they started losing and he left. Who else?"

"He was with Seireitai for a while! Two years. Those were the best years for them, well, until they started losing games during his third year with them, then he took off. Interesting, isn't it? He is truly driven to play with only the best. Pantera was the longest he's ever been on a team. What a great run they had with him!"

"Indeed, Urahara-san."

"He's a great player, in fact, I'd say he's one of the best defenders in Japan. But he's...ahh, it's so hard to say especially about a defender...He's not a team player. There have been quite a few fights during games and practices because of his behavior. He's a frustrating guy to work with."

"Yes. A shame."

"He's a talented young man, but the World Cup isn't just another ball game. If he wants to secure his team a spot in Germany, he has to have his teams support. A team is supposed to be your family, people you can rely on and trust. If he thinks he can win by himself, he's going to be too worn out to continue! Now, onto another well-known player selected for the World Cup roster from team Espada. He is only 5'6½ but he's well known for using that to his advantage, scoring over 30 goals, more than anyone on the team."

Scowling, Grimmjow turned off the television and his heart flew into his throat as his phone vibrated against his knee. His heart pounding, Grimmjow cursed as his heart settled into a frantic pace, his fingers digging into the knee of his jeans.

God, I need a fucking fix.

He'd been off coke for a month and half in preparation for the tryouts in order to pass the drug test, and he'd gone through the last of his stash in two weeks. Gilga was out of town and though he said he'd be back by tonight, Grimmjow was craving a fix he couldn't have.

He snatched up his phone with shaking hands and checked his messages, sniffing longingly and breathing in the stale air of his apartment. He'd been sent a message from his aunt Nelliel.

Nelliel: Congratulations on making the team!

Grimmjow: Thanks. Knew I would.

Nelliel: Do your best. I'm proud of you. Stay off the drugs. You're one and a half months clean; use this as a chance to turn things around. I'm always here if you need to talk.

Grimmjow felt bad for lying to his aunt. She'd looked out for him after his mother and father abandoned him, she'd put food in his belly and a roof over his head. He'd barely known her yet she'd wasted her time on him and how did he repay her? By lying to her.

He tried to ignore the guilt. Lying was kinder than the truth; she'd been so happy when he told her he'd stopped using. He would only disappoint her. He set aside his phone, too bitter to reply, and waited, though he wasn't sure why.
He opened up his Facebook, wondering if he'd missed a notification, he double checked his messages. Nothing. Why wasn't he surprised? What had he been expecting; Shawlong, Elforte and D-Roy had never been his friends. They were teammates, nothing more.

_I played with those fuckers for four years... Least they could do is send some kinda acknowledgment_…

He could remember the day he'd first joined Pantera. He'd just left Seireitai after the loss of their best forward. The new guy they'd brought on had crippled the team and cost them games so, just like with Arrancar, he'd packed his bags and moved on. He couldn't afford to play on a losing team.

Grimmjow had his eyes on Pantera for a few months before leaving Seireitai when he'd realized they would lose in their season. They were doing much better by comparison; winning nearly all of their 38 games, topping the Soul Reapers. Anyone who gave the Soul Reaper's an ass kicking was good in his book.

He tried out, joined, and made a name for himself on the first day of practice when a blond, bucktoothed stutterer named D-Roy sauntered up to him. D-Roy introduced him to his friends, Shawlong and Elforte, and they'd shown him respect, believing him to be the player they'd been waiting for to lead their team to glory. As they went on to play and win games together, D-Roy began to come to him for advice on his defense, Elforte complimented his hair, and Shawlong provided a voice of reason when things weren't going in their favor.

As he played alongside them, watched their backs like they watched his, Grimmjow felt camaraderie between them. They respected his abilities on the field, they followed his strategies, and they were down to grab drinks after a hard won game. If that wasn't friendship, then what was it?

Looking back, he wondered if he'd assumed too much. There was a difference between people who respected you as their better and people who called you friend. Friends weren't superior or inferior; it was a balance where you were respected as an equal. Grimmjow couldn't say for sure if anyone would ever place him in that category.

If Shawlong, D-Roy and Elforte were his friends, they would be contacting him to congratulate him; they would have stayed in touch after he left Pantera. Now that he was reflecting on it (instead of shoving his thoughts and feelings into the back of his mind like he always did when he left a team) he felt bitter anger stirring inside him.

Grimmjow scowled and turned off his phone. Fine. He didn't need them anyway. Pantera was the past. Team Japan and the World Cup was his future. Excitement set his heart racing and he grinned. They could have chosen anyone else to compete, but they'd chosen him. This was his big chance to finally prove himself to everyone who'd doubted him.

He would win himself a spot on the road to Germany. It would be the hardest challenge of his life to play that many games for so long, but he could do it. He had his skills as a defender and he had coke. There was no way in hell he was backing down and he wouldn't settle for anything less than to hold the World Cup trophy in his hands. His mother would regret walking away from him, his father would eat his words and he would solidify his place in soccer history as the best of the best.

They didn't call him King of the Field for nothing.

Grimmjow slung his legs out of bed and went to the dresser to change. Outside his floor-to-ceiling windows, he could see the city of Tokyo sprawled out below him. The clouds were gray but rain wasn't in today's forecast. He took a moment to admire his view of the Shinjuku ward; the streets below him illuminated by flashing, blinking advertisements and bustling streets, and was struck by
the fact that after so many years, he was here.

He'd spent his childhood hating Karakura Town, the town he'd grown up in after his family relocated from France. He'd hating his school, hating his classmates who bullied him for his French heritage, his home and his neighborhood. He'd gone to sleep at night dreaming that one day, he and his mother would leave his abusive father and move into an apartment in Tokyo, far away.

Well, his mother wasn't here, but he was. He had no idea where she'd gone or what she was doing now. He didn't know if his father was still alive but he wanted to say no, he wasn't. Grimmjow snorted to himself. He'd left Karakura years ago, but people from the past were still coming back to haunt him; Kurosaki, Abarai…

"At least I'm not a junkie like you." Kurosaki's brown eyes had never looked so condescending.

He gnashed his teeth. *How's it feel to know a junkie made the World Cup roster, Kurosaki?* *Bet you never imagined that, did you? I'll show you who the better player is. Mark my fucking words.*

Grimmjow dressed, throwing on some sweats and a tee-shirt. Today was going to be a great day; he'd go to tryouts, piss off Kurosaki and Abarai, and then he'd come home and get high. What could be better?

He walked to the subway, weaving through the usual morning crowds. He caught his train and rode it down to Tokyo Dome, a stadium in the Bunkyo ward. The stadium, well known for its signature egg-shaped design, was vacant this time of day. Grimmjow had played a few games here in the past. He'd played his first game here with Seireitai. He could remember the crowds chanting for him as he shot the ball offside to keep it out of the attacking team's hands.

"All hail the King! All hail the King!" they'd cried. He remembered Kira Izuru slapping him on the back, his usually glum face alight with glee. He remembered fist-bumping Byakuya Kuchiki even though the man claimed he hated such immature displays. He had good memories with that team. It was a shame they'd gone downhill. For a short time, they'd almost felt like family. Almost. But he'd fallen out of touch with the Seireitai team the moment he moved on, so perhaps they hadn't shared his feelings.

"Oh shit…" He turned and saw not one shade of orange, but two. Kurosaki Ichigo stood behind him; Inoue Orihime was beside him, her hand in his.

"Grimmjow-kun?" Orihime said, tilting her head at him. Kurosaki looked like someone had shoved shit under his nose. Grimmjow smiled at the sight of Kurosaki's discomfort.

"Well, well…long time no see, Kurosaki."

"Not long enough." Grimmjow barked laughter. It felt good to know Kurosaki hated him as much as Grimmjow did.

"I'm surprised they even let you on the team, Kurosaki. I guess they're just letting anyone in now, huh?"

"Guess so. I thought they were doing drug tests these days. I guess not." Grimmjow figured Kurosaki must have seen his twitching fingers bouncing up and down against his knee. Grimmjow's hand clenched in his pocket. Kurosaki was giving him that look he despised so much; like he wasn't worth his time.

Kurosaki’s nostrils flared. "Kurosaki-kun, don't listen to him." Orihime touched his arm, "Leave him alone, Grimmjow-kun." Grimmjow snorted. Did this bitch seriously think he was going to listen to her?

Kurosaki’s fingers clenched around her hand and he tried to walk around Grimmjow. Grimmjow cut them off. He wasn't letting Kurosaki walk away unruffled.

"So what? You two are an item now?"

"Move it, Grimmjow. I'm not wasting my time on you."

"No, I get it. She looks like your mom, Kurosaki. I can understand it."

Ichigo's lips formed a thin line and Grimmjow's stomach did backflips.

"Ichigo, man, what's up?" A flash of red tore by Grimmjow and Abarai slung his arm around Ichigo’s shoulders.

"Hey, Renji. Congrats on making the team!"

"Go, Japan, go!" Orihime cheered and Abarai led them around Grimmjow as if he weren't there.

"Hurry up, you idiot!" Rukia Kuchiki hollered. "Practice starts soon!"

Renji rolled his eyes and swept the smaller girl in close to kiss her forehead. "Love you, too."

Grimmjow stared after them. What the hell had happened to Kurosaki? A few years ago, a comment about his mother had been enough to get the man to challenge him to a game after school.

Kurosaki said goodbye to Inoue with a kiss and he and Renji hurried inside, arms around each other's shoulders. Orihime and Rukia walked off together and Grimmjow watched them leave, unable to figure out what had just happened. Anger curdled in his gut and he balled his fists.

Did Kurosaki think he was above Grimmjow now? Why, because he had friends, because he had a girlfriend and Grimmjow had no one? He was mistaken. None of that mattered on the field. Grimmjow would make him see that.

Scowling, he pushed open the glass door and proceeded through the hallway to the field. Reporters were flocking to take pictures of Renji and Ichigo.

"Kurosaki-san, is it true that you have a girlfriend?"

"Abarai-san, how do you feel about playing in the World Cup with Kurosaki-san?"

Grimmjow smirked, thinking he could slip by, but to his chagrin a group of five reporters broke away from the crowd accosting Abarai and Kurosaki and rushed at him.

"Jaegerjaquez-san, back in June you were accused of driving under the influence! Is that why you left Pantera?" Grimmjow raised his brows in disbelief. Were these people stupid? The incident generated bad press, but he'd announced he was leaving Pantera before the incident so he hadn't particularly cared.

He couldn't remember that particular night; he could hear girl's laughing, smell their dope and perfume, and he could vaguely recall a head of blonde hair between his legs. Then he'd come to in the police station and had Nnoitra bail him. He'd lost his wallet, too; one of the girls had run off with it.
"Jaegerjaquez-san, you were seen leaving a club with a man! Are you homosexual?"

"Jaegerjaquez-san, Karakura Celebs is saying you have aids because you've lost a lot of weight! Is that true?"

"Jaegerjaquez-san, will you be able to play in the World Cup with your deteriorating health?"

Grimmjow shoved through them and made a beeline for the doors out into the field. He had no idea where people got these ideas from. So what if he was thinner than he once was? When he snorted coke, his appetite was none existent. He felt like a machine and he was as healthy as the next man.

So far the press had no idea about his occasional gay fling and he planned to keep it that way so he wasn't going to worry about it. Grimmjow stepped out into the stadium and looked at the mountains of seats that rose up towards the domed ceiling. He remembered throwing his arms around Elforte and Shawlong's shoulders after they won a game here, jumping up and down with them in their euphoria.

His hands shook and he sniffed longingly, clenching his jaw. Would he be at his best today without coke? It had been so long since he'd done anything on the field without it. He felt tired without it, and his stomach rumbled with hunger. He hadn't eaten today, he'd forgotten to. Usually he didn't have to; coke sustained him for practice, then he grabbed a quick bite afterwards.

He didn't know how anyone played without it. How could they? He played 38 games in a season, and practiced for four hours four days a week. He didn't trust himself to get by without it anymore. He was aching for it now. What if he wasn't his best today and the press noticed? What other things would they say about him?

When the magazines began spreading rumors and when it was reported that he'd been driving under the influence, his fans had come out to express their disappointment and their support. Majorly, their messages had been full of disappointment. They'd looked up to him; they'd thought he was better than this, etcetera, etcetera.

His stomach churned. He would turn things around. The World Cup would affirm his place in soccer history.

The shrill scream of the whistle made him jump. He turned and saw a tall, muscular man stepping onto the field. His hair was done up in sharp spikes with little bells attached to each spike. A scar ran along his face. He looked less like a coach and more like a war veteran. Maybe he was.

"Get your asses over here, all of you!" He hollered and from all sides of the pitch, team Japan assembled. Ikkaku Maderame the defender from Seireitai, stood with a grin, his bald head shining under the lights; Yumichika Ayasegawa, the fashionable midfielder from Gotei 13, tossed his bob haircut and glided across the field; Uryuu Ishida, striker for the Quincies, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He saw Kurosaki and Abarai quit horsing around and hurry over to join the group, Kurosaki's eyes blazing with that determination Grimmjow hated so much. Shuhei Hisagi, goalie of Seireitai, marched out to meet the coach, his 69 tattoo caught Grimmjow's attention. Toshirou Hitsugaya the striker from Gotei 13, and a few others whose names he didn't' know went to meet Kenpachi.

Their coach announced, "I'm Zaraki Kenpachi, and I'm the one that's gonna get you sorry assholes to Germany, or bust. I saw a few of you horsing around when I came in, and I'm gonna tell you right now; you don't dick around on Kenpachi's time, not if you wanna go to Germany. Clear?"

He got a collective yes from the team. Grimmjow was quiet.
"I don't care what winning team you're from or how many games you've got under your belt. The World Cup isn't your average ball game. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I'm gonna do my damndest to get us there, but you've gotta put in an effort. That means; you come to practice on time, you follow my instructions, you dedicate yourself to this team. No horseshit."

The team agreed and Kenpachi scowled. "You in the back, you've been pretty quiet. Maybe you should meet blueberry over here who also thinks he's too much of a big shot to answer me when I'm talking to him." He beckoned. "Come on. I'm not putting up with this crap. I want a clear yes from both of you so I know we're not gonna have any problems here."

"I'm sorry my silence gave you the wrong impression, coach." Grimmjow's breath got stuck in his throat. A prickling feeling raced from his neck to the base of his spine. He knew that voice. How could he not; hadn't he heard his name moaned into his ear on the breath of that voice?

It was monotonous, and cold like the winter winds, and it had been twelve years since heard it, but there was no mistaking that velvet voice. Grimmjow turned and, just like he thought he would, he saw Ulquiorra Cifer glide through the crowd behind him.

He looked nearly identical to the teenager Grimmjow had shared lustful nights with in the Karakura Rose so many years ago; from his messy raven locks framing his heart-shaped face, to his slim, athletic stature. Looking at him, Grimmjow felt like he was back in the locker rooms with him the first day of practice, exchanging banter while the thrum of arousal ached between his legs.

At the sight of him, Ulquiorra stopped walking and Grimmjow was astonished when Ulquiorra didn't react. Not one eyebrow quirked upwards, dual-colored lips remained in a tight frown, not even a slight inhale of breath was heard. Ulquiorra Cifer's emerald eyes looked right through him just like they'd looked through him the day this man ruined everything for him.

The first night Grimmjow tried cocaine, he'd been eighteen years old. Ulquiorra had been there with him. He'd implored Grimmjow to quit. Grimmjow wanted to, but he'd had a game tomorrow and worried he wouldn't be able to play without it.

He didn't get a chance to play. He'd come home to his parents fighting, his mother stormed out of the house, never to return. The school found out he was using and expelled him, but only after they told his parents. Because of Ulquiorra, he'd lost his mother, his father abandoned him to live with his aunt, and his reputation had gone down the drain. After all these years and all the games he'd won, the name he'd made for himself, he still wasn't worthy of Ulquiorra Cifer's attention.

Grimmjow would never forget the last time they met. In the school yard, blinking at him through furious tears. He bloodied Ulquiorra's nose. How could he forget the day his first love became his first hate? Ulquiorra betrayed him. Yet what made him more furious was that Grimmjow knew he alone was to blame for everything.

Ulquiorra's eyes barely lingered on him for a second before that dead, empty stare passed through him to Kenpachi and he continued without a stutter or tremor, "I was listening to every word you said. I thought my silence made that clear." Grimmjow's blood boiled, his fingers curled and he gnashed his jaw so tightly it hurt.

"You're still an addict to me, Jaegerjaquez." Those dead emerald eyes said, "You're unworthy of even looking at."

He saw red. His hand shot out and closed around a bony wrist so small, his hand completely covered it. Grimmjow could feel the eyes of everyone in the crowd on him for the first time today but there was only one person whose attention meant anything to him. Ulquiorra turned his head and even as
they stood close enough for Grimmjow to smell his aftershave; Ulquiorra looked in his direction but his eyes were fixated on a spot above his head.

The silence hung like a guillotine above their heads. Grimmjow didn't know if he wanted to let loose at him and scream every insult he'd ever imagined hurling at him if they'd met again, or if he wanted to start swinging for all the damage this man had done then to dare act like he was above him.

Instead he smiled, baring his teeth as he imagined sinking them into the moon-white skin of Ulquiorra's throat. "Too good to say hello, huh, Ulquiorra?" He tugged on his wrist and brought him closer, forcing Ulquiorra to turn his body to face him. "That's rude of you. Go on. Don't be shy." He wrenched on him, digging his nails into the underside of his wrist. His breath grew shallow and he sniffed in his agitation. "Come on. You fucking ruined everything for me. The least you can do is look me in the fucking eyes when you see me. Or are you pissed off someone like me made it big?"

He'd barely finished speaking when Ulquiorra said, "Let go of me." There was not an inflection in his voice to indicate any memory of their past encounter. It was as if they'd never tumbled over in the mud together, as if his fist hadn't shattered Ulquiorra's nose and turned his pale skin crimson, as if Ulquiorra hadn't destroyed his family and gotten him expelled.

Grimmjow was nothing to him. Not worth a look, not worth a shred of impatience or dislike. In his disbelief that set his blood pumping rage throughout his body, Ulquiorra wrenched his hand away and Grimmjow stumbled forward. He tucked his hand back into his pocket and turned his back on Grimmjow as he went on his way to greet Kenpachi.

Seeing Ulquiorra Cifer again was the beginning of Grimmjow's spiral into the conclusion of his addiction. Nothing mattered except knocking Ulquiorra Cifer off his high horse and down into the filth with him.

Sometimes people have to hit rock bottom before they realize how far they've fallen, and Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez wouldn't just hit the bottom. He'd keep on digging until he'd worn down the stony surface of his misery to the dirt at the bottom.

And he wouldn't stop until it was too late.
Ulquiorra Cifer was surprised when he was added to the World Cup roster. Surprised because although he'd been aiming for the World Cup since childhood, he'd never kept his hopes high enough to assume he'd make it.

He was also surprised because there'd been a time when he was certain he would never play another game again. He'd been a teenager, naïve and in love, and he'd had his heart shattered. As the blood dried on his nose and he watched Grimmjow ran from the school yard never to return, he'd felt numb to his surroundings and to his own pain. He stopped hearing the concerned chatter of his classmates, and didn't feel their hands on his arms or shoulders.

As he played the first game of the high school soccer season, he hadn't heard the roars of the crowd and he hadn't been able to focus on the game. He hadn't cared whether he won or lost. All he'd felt was regret and all he'd wanted to do was take it all back but he knew there was no point because Grimmjow would never forgive him for telling the principle about his drug use. It was for the best anyway. Grimmjow had chosen drugs over Ulquiorra. Their relationship was finished.

Grimmjow had become his life, his meaning, his reason. Soccer had once brought meaning into his confusing, empty life, but without Grimmjow by his side, the field was no longer an escape. Instead, when he was on the pitch, he was swallowed by memories of the one he'd loved and lost.

So, after playing the first game of the season, he stopped and instead of feeling better knowing he would no longer be in a place that hurt him, he was left feeling lost. The two things that had brought meaning into his life were gone. Fortunately, his father had other plans for him.

"It's good you're no longer playing. Being an athlete is an uncertain career, Ulquiorra."

"What should I do?"

"My business will need an heir once I retire. I would like to start training you once you're in college."

Ulquiorra didn't argue. He wasn't passionate about running a business but what did it matter? His opinion certainly didn't, nor his feelings. Not to his parents who'd always put themselves first. So, his father and mother made plans for his future; once he graduated high school, he would go to Karakura School for Business and his parents would begin mentoring him.

"Ex-c-excuse me, Ulquiorra-kun."

One day, warm gray eyes came into his life. He'd never truly appreciated them until now that he was in need of support. He'd looked up from his textbooks and found Orihime Inoue looking down at him, her hands clasped beneath her ample bosom.

"What?" He'd seen her passing, gazing longingly across the classroom at Kurosaki. She was popular and well liked. He didn't know why she wanted to have anything to do with him.

"It's just occurred to me that Ulquiorra-kun looks so much lonelier than he used to."

He was silent. What was her point?

"You seemed nonchalant before, but after Grimmjow-kun...sorry," Ulquiorra's felt something in his chest clench at the mention of Grimmjow's name. "After...he came into your life, you were so happy. You were like a completely different person. You must have been very lonely before. I never
knew. I'm sorry."

Ulquiorra didn't know why she was apologizing. It wasn't like he'd expected her to know. He hadn't known himself how lonely he really was. Being neglected for what's felt like your whole life will do that to you.

"If I'd known, I would have invited you out to lunch or to see a movie. So, how about I do that now? Let's go see a movie together."

"I'd rather not."

"But won't you be sad to be by yourself?"

"I'm better off that way. And you're better off not getting involved with me."

A gleam came into her eyes and she puffed up her chest. She snatched up his hand and said, "Too bad for you. Nobody tells me what I think. I like to form my own opinion!" Ulquiorra had been too tired to argue and they'd walked home together, her cheerful voice filling in the quiet around him. He hadn't listened to everything she'd said, but he hadn't told her to be quiet, either.

He hadn't realized how much he'd hated the quiet until he'd had someone in his life to fill in the empty spaces. So, he let her walk him home and it became a tradition. He didn't talk very much, saying only goodbye when they went separate ways, but she didn't ask any more of him.

As the months flew by, before he knew it, the chatty, orange-haired girl had slipped her way into his life and walking home alone didn't feel right anymore. This was what he disliked about people; after a while, part of him became dependant on them. He could live without them, but he didn't want to.

"Why are you always staring at him?" Orihime dropped her onigiri when Ulquiorra spoke one day at lunch.

She blushed. "What do you mean? Staring at who? I'm not staring at anyone!"

Ulquiorra pointed across the field at the goal post where Kurosaki was playing, his shirt off and his toned body gleaming with sweat.

"I was just admiring his skills! He's such a good player!" Orihime said, her cheeks flaming red.

"You have feelings for him. You always have." Ulquiorra remembered Orihime cheering for him during games. He remembered the longing looks she cast his way from her seat in class. "It's pitiful."

"Hey!"

"Stop fawning over him. It's unbecoming." Despite the girl's ditzy personality, her liking for unusual homemade sweets, she had strength of spirit Ulquiorra found irritating. Her optimism and her love for life and everyone in it bothered him. If he was going to be a nihilist, he would say her attitude bothered him because there was no point in optimism when life was meaningless. If he was going to be honest with himself, he was envious because she saw the world in a way he couldn't.

"Ulquiorra-kun," he'd stopped asking her to call him that but she insisted, "Should I ask Kurosaki-kun out?"

"I tell you to stop fawning over him, and you take that to mean you should be his girlfriend?"

"I've been thinking about it. I feel like he likes me and if he does, I would feel terrible if I let him get
away. Should I ask him out?"

"No."

"What? Why?" she looked hurt.

"Love is meaningless. All it does is end in heartbreak. So why bother?"

Orihime stood up. "That's not true!"

"Yes it is."

"Alright, Ulquiorra-kun…maybe there is some truth to that. But so what? If I die tomorrow, I don't want to have any regrets. If something happened to Kurosaki-kun before I could tell him, I would never forgive myself."

"You're better off alone. People are too complicated. They aren't worth the time or effort of a relationship."

"So why do you hang out with me? Ulquiorra-kun, I don't think you believe what you're saying. Maybe your relationship with Grimmjow didn't end well," Something dropped inside Ulquiorra at the mention of his name. "But that doesn't mean you should close yourself off."

"It does. I don't need anyone in my life. I don't want them. Once was enough."

"That's how you feel, but that isn't how I feel. I'm going to do it. I'm going to ask Kurosaki-kun out. I'm going to prove you wrong!"

And she did. Two years after Ulquiorra graduated high school and began his journey as a business major, Ichigo and Orihime were still together. At least, for now. Ichigo continued to play soccer and Orihime invited Ulquiorra to his games but he refused her invitations. After so much time away, he made up excuses that he wouldn't remember how the game went.

It was a blatant lie to himself and the couple. In the same way you never forgot how to ride a bike, Ulquiorra would never forget how to play soccer. Hearing Orihime tell stories of Ichigo's games made longing ache inside him; longing for the feel of the ball under his feet, the wind in his hair, the smell of the pitch.

He couldn't go back. He'd left it behind him. It was time to focus on his future as successor to his parents business. Ichigo and Orihime must have known his true feelings. One day as Ulquiorra was leaving school, his feet were knocked out from under him and he was hoisted over Ichigo's shoulders and carried to the bleachers.

He tried to leave and Orihime tied his feet together. "No, Ulquiorra Cifer, you're not going anywhere!" she cried, grinning triumphantly. "The day has come to stop hiding from your past! We will stop you!" She thrust her fist into the air and laughed maniacally. Ulquiorra resigned himself to his fate and watched as Kurosaki and the other players marched onto the field.

He hadn't expected to feel anything but when the kickoff commenced and the crowd roared their excitement, his breath was stolen as a wave of memories washed over him and brought him back to a time when all he needed was the ball beneath his feet to let him know what his goal was.

Even if life was meaningless, in the time he passed until he reached his expiration date, soccer brought purpose into his life. Having purpose didn't mean he'd finally found meaning in his life, but through soccer perhaps he'd find an inkling of that illusive meaning.
He couldn't imagine his parents would be happy, but Ichigo and Orihime, delighted their plan worked, pestered him until he had no choice but to confront his parents.

Ulquiorra went to his parents and thanked them for the money they'd invested into his education, but he wanted to play soccer. His father put on his glasses, as if he thought he'd hear better with them. "What?"

He explained to them that he didn't want to take over their family business and watched their eyes grow wider and their lips thinner. He thought they would shout at him. Instead, his mother interrupted his father before he could go off on a tangent and said, "Honey, maybe you need a change of scenery. That's it, isn't it? How about you come with me on my business trip during summer break?"

Ulquiorra had nearly run out of breath telling them in no uncertain tones that he wanted to be play in the big leagues. He didn't know what else he could say to convince them. So, he agreed to go with his mother when she left for America in early summer.

They traveled to NYC, a city where the lights were always on, even in the dead of night; the streets stunk of stale piss, dead cockroaches lay belly up next to bags of garbage on the side of the street, holes chewed through the bags by the rats scurrying about inside. The subways were overcrowded, the trains were slow, crazy people ranted and raved on every corner. It was easy to see why New Yorkers were miserable.

The sports scene was thriving and, though she couldn't tell a baseball from a basketball, Ulquiorra had to take his mother to see a Mets game. Home to immeasurable museums, NYC boasted artistic blood that pumped through the heart of the community. There were more restaurants than Ulquiorra thought anyone would ever need that made food from countries around the world.

At home, his mother talked finances with his father or with her coworkers she invited over for dinner, so Ulquiorra was surprised when his mother took him to see Broadway show after Broadway show. She loved revivals of old musicals and could talk for hours about her favorite singers and the roles they'd played.

Ulquiorra had no idea about this side of his mother. After one of the shows, his mother rushed to greet the actors outside the theater. She greeted all of them as she left, congratulating them, and her reverie flattered one of the male actors. To Ulquiorra's disbelief, she accepted his invitation to dinner and they'd gone off together so quickly, Ulquiorra nearly got lost in Times Square trying to keep up with them.

During dinner, Ulquiorra was forgotten as his mother and the actor talked the evening away. They stayed and talked while the rest of the diners headed for home, and Ulquiorra felt hopeless as he realized that his mother had fallen out of love with his father. As the staff began to clear up for closing time and his mother laughed until she cried at one of the actor's jokes, Ulquiorra excused himself to their hotel.

He tried to sleep, but he couldn't, not when he wondered if he would return to Japan with his mother. As he lay awake, he heard the door in the living room open and close and twin voices, muffled by the wall but not enough, began to moan and groan. He never confronted his mother about it and he was relieved when they left New York. It was just a phase, he told himself; his mother had been so caught up in being in a new place far away from work and her husband that she'd let herself go. Once they returned home, things would return to normal.

He knew they wouldn't, but he was still unprepared for when things fell apart.
His father found out. His mother, guilt-ridden, felt she owed him the truth as her last favor to him in their miserable marriage. Before the year was over, his mother was gone from the house and what followed was two years of what Ulquiorra could only describe as love without the frills.

His parents stopped talking and began yelling; about work, about their relationship, about who got custody over Ulquiorra, about Ulquiorra's future, about Ulquiorra's school work. Ulquiorra didn't want to stay with either of them. He hated both of them for putting him in the position where he had to choose between them.

His father got custody and Ulquiorra never saw his mother again. She moved to New York to be with the man she'd destroyed what remained of their family for. Ulquiorra and his father were left to pick up the pieces. His father stopped caring whether Ulquiorra took over the company or not, he shut Ulquiorra out and buried himself in work.

In a way, Ulquiorra supposed that it was a good thing his parents divorced. It was a learning experience; a perfect example of why he should never fall in love. He'd been lucky to get away from Grimmjow while he could.

For years, love had hurt his mother who'd felt like she had to trap herself in an empty relationship for her son; love had hurt his father who had given his mother everything; love had hurt him for making him believe that just because you cared for someone, they would change for him. He would never fall victim to it again.

So instead he played his games and made a name for himself as one of Japan's best strikers. He joined team Espada and his goal scoring abilities launched the team into the winning spotlight during the four years he played with them. His purpose was clear even while life and its meaning was muddled; to win, to reach the highest he could go until he could go no more.

The World Cup was in his eyes the highest point he could reach in his career. Once he got to Germany and saw Japan hoist the trophy into the air, he thought it likely he would retire. If, during this journey, Japan did not qualify for entrance into Germany, he would retire anyway.

But for now, today marked the first day of his practice and his goal was to ready himself, so he packed his soccer kit. He pulled on a hoodie before he left home, not wanting any reporters to bother him on the walk over.

When he arrived at the stadium, Orihime called out to him as she skipped away with Rukia to work. "Have a good day at practice, Ulquiorra-kun! Congratulations!" At the mention of his name, the reporters flocking by the door turned and before Ulquiorra could think of how he'd slip around them, a bulky body shifted in front of him.

"Go on, Ulquiorra. I'll distract them." Ichigo's grinned over his shoulder at him, brown eyes alight with sincerity.

Ulquiorra said, "I never asked you to."

"Who says you needed to? Go on, hurry up." Ulquiorra didn't understand why Kurosaki and Inoue wasted their time on him. Arguing with the pair was pointless, so he slipped past the reporters as they rushed at Abarai and Kurosaki and hurried out onto the field.

As he felt the softness of the pitch beneath his feet and looked around at the seats rising up above his head, Ulquiorra felt something still inside his soul. His role in the world was certain, a player on the field who had to do whatever it took to win. He wasn't a useless bag of bones, blood and arteries unworthy of anyone's time, meandering through life towards an uncertain conclusion for the sake of
it. He was a forward seeking the goal. That was all that mattered.

Then he saw hair and eyes as blue as the Pacific Ocean. His breath caught in his throat and a chill traveled from the top of his skull to the tips of his toes as his world was shaken to the core. As his coach called him to the front and, like a puppet, he came when called; he kept his eyes fixed on Kenpachi.

Ulquiorra didn't need to look at Grimmjow. He knew he wouldn't like what he saw. So many years had passed but that didn't guarantee the man had changed. Bony fingers dug into the skin of his wrist and he was whirled around and forced to look into Grimmjow's face.

Ulquiorra thought the man whose love had inspired him to see the world in another light had died, leaving a stranger in his place. Now, looking into Grimmjow's gaunt face, Ulquiorra realized he had only just been deteriorating. Grimmjow's cheekbones jutted out from his face, his eyes were baggy and sunken, his hair translucent as it thinned. The blue eyes that had once lit a flame of lust and love in Ulquiorra's soul were full of savage fury.

Ulquiorra realized he must have expected differently, because the disappointment he felt fueled revulsion inside him. Grimmjow had fallen so far from the man he once knew that he was unrecognizable. He wrenched his hand out of Grimmjow's grasp as his skin crawled and even as he turned his back, those dead blue eyes were burned into his memory.

*I'm the one who is supposed to look dead inside, he thought, it was never supposed to be you.*

Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez was well and truly dead to him. Nothing could bring him back. He was unworthy of Ulquiorra's time, even if they were playing on the same team. Ulquiorra decided he would tolerate him if he had to but he would not waste a second of his time or his thoughts on Grimmjow. He wasn't worth it.

His stomach churned and his jaw clenched. He never thought he would think this way about Grimmjow. When they'd been together, their future together as major league players was certain. Now, as he walked away from him, he felt as if a cold stone were sitting in the pit of his stomach. His hands, in his pockets, trembled, and his heart raced in his chest.

Love had made a fool of them both, but the cold, callous hands of reality had shaken him awake and he was wiser now to know that Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez would never get the best of him again.
Storms on the Horizon

Japan would play their first game in the second round of the World Cup in two weeks. They were set to play against China as the away team in Beijing.

In June, the six winners from round one last year would join forty teams in round two where the teams would be split into eight groups of five teams each.

Groups A to H would play games against each team in their group until a winner was confirmed. Each group winner would progress to the next round while the third-ranked best teams and runners-up would progress to playoffs. The games would go from June until November.

The groups were drawn and Japan was set to play against China in June as away, Korea in August as home, Saudi Arabia in October as home, and Iran in November as away. It would be their final game of the year until March in 2017.

Training camp would last for 2 weeks. Four days a week, they were to report in for four hours with Kenpachi. For the first two hours, they worked on footwork, weaving in and out between cones, and practiced catching and passing the ball under Kenpachi’s watchful eyes.

Grimmjow was thankful he’d gotten his fix before practice. Coke kept his energy up even if it made him jumpy and short of breath as his heart raced in his chest. He felt like he could tear around the field in under a minute on this stuff. The one thing he didn't like about coke was what it did to his eyes; it dilated his pupils, a tell-tale sign of cocaine high, so Grimmjow wore contacts to practice.

Grimmjow ignored Ulquiorra during the two hours on the pitch. He didn't make any passes to him, he didn't look at him. He suspected Ulquiorra was doing the same because even if Grimmjow was in range, Ulquiorra passed the ball to Kurosaki. It made Grimmjow gnash his jaw in rage.

Grimmjow didn't get it. What gave Ulquiorra the idea that Grimmjow was beneath him? Didn't he know what Grimmjow had done over the years?

The next two hours were spent in the gym in the stadium basement with their fitness trainer, exercising their glutes and core muscles with stretches, leg lifts and presses. Grimmjow balanced the ball on the sole of his foot, wrapping his leg around his lower body as he kept the ball suspended against his abdomen.

His muscles kept twitching and the ball often fell from his grip. When it did, he picked it up and started over again. His high was wearing off. He needed more. He'd wanted to bring some with him but he'd been too cautious. He wanted to slap himself. How stupid was he? No one would find out. He was untouchable.

As he balanced, he glanced over at Ulquiorra who was across the room working on his balance. The sweat gleaming on his forehead brought to his mind a memory of their nights together, whispering dirty French into his ear. When they were horny, hormonal teenagers, Ulquiorra rented them a suite in a luxury hotel in Karakura Town called The Rose. It was there they’d gone to escape the insanity in their homes and enjoy one another. They’d never gone farther than mutual masturbation, but to Grimmjow at that age, their nights together were like something out of a porno.

While Grimmjow watched him, he noticed Ulquiorra's dull emerald eyes remained fixed on a spot above Grimmjow's head. Grimmjow fought the urge to kick the ball across the room into his face. He wasn't about to tolerate being treated as inferior. He'd had to put up with his father's shit for years.
He was above it.

The ball slipped from Ulquiorra's sole and bounced at his feet. It rolled to a standstill in-between them and Grimmjow figured out how to get Ulquiorra's attention. As Ulquiorra knelt down to retrieve it, Grimmjow snatched it up, bouncing his frantic fingers against the smooth surface.

"Want it?" Grimmjow's shaking hand held the ball far out of Ulquiorra's reach. "Ask me nicely and maybe I'll give it to you." He watched as Ulquiorra craned his neck to look at the ball, quivering in his upturned palm. He grinned even as his irritability surged inside him.

"The fuck is with you? Huh, Ulquiorra?" He sniffed. "You can't even stand to look at me. Are you pissed off someone like me made it to the World Cup? Well I did, and I'm not fucking going anywhere!" He hurled the ball over Ulquiorra's head and it flew across the room and into the wall.

"Hey, Jaegerjaquez, Cifer, is there a problem over here?" The trainer called, looking suspiciously over his shoulder. Grimmjow hadn't realized he'd raised his voice. What did he care? He could do whatever he wanted, who was to stop him? He didn't give a damn what anyone thought unless they thought he was below them, because he wasn't.

"I'm gonna get us to Germany and I'm not putting up with any of your shit." Ulquiorra continued to stare through him. Grimmjow's hand became a fist. The high was wearing off just enough for him to wonder if he should hit Ulquiorra in the same room with his coach. The part of him that was still high thought he could do all that and more and get away with it because he was the best damn player on this team.

Ulquiorra turned his back on him, huffing under his breath. The sound cut right through him. Whether it was a huff of annoyance, as if Grimmjow was no more than a fly under his nose, or a soft, dismissive laugh, Grimmjow didn't know. He lunged into his fist and Ulquiorra swerved to the left and Grimmjow soared by him. Grimmjow threw himself into Ulquiorra and a wave of vertigo swept over him as they plummeted to the floor.

His vision spinning, Grimmjow felt with clawed hands for Ulquiorra's frame and as he plunged back his fist to sock him in the back of the ribs, his jersey constricted and the world spun as he was wrenched to his feet. "Jaegerjaquez, Cifer, go sit on the side, now!" Kenpachi bellowed.

Ulquiorra said, "Coach, I didn't—"

"Do you wanna argue with me, or do you wanna stay on the team? On the side, now!" Grimmjow didn't know which side of the room he meant; the room was spinning before his eyes and his eyes and head throbbed. He doubled over, pushing his fingers against his eyes until the pain in his head rose to a shrill scream. He blinked, clutching onto a machine for support, and his vision stabilized enough for him to wobble over to a bench.

Grimmjow sat on the other side of the bench from Ulquiorra. Ulquiorra was scowling down into his lap. Grimmjow's chest shook with suppressed mirth. He'd gotten in trouble, but at least he'd pissed Ulquiorra off. Kenpachi's footfalls quivered the floor mats and Grimmjow looked up as the man loomed over them, thick arms folded over his barrel chest.

"What the hell was that?" He curled his lip at them, single eye blazing. "Let me make something very clear, you wanna fight, you fight on your own time. Hell, invite me. I'll pick a side and watch. But when you're in this stadium, you're fighting on my time and I haven't got time to waste lecturing children."

Grimmjow snorted. This guy was a hardass. Kenpachi reminded him of his high school coach.
Kensei cranked up to a ten. What did he think this was, military school?
"Was something I said funny, Jaegerjaquez?" Kenpachi leaned over to look him in the eye. Kenpachi's remaining eye told him he needed to think carefully about what he said next.

"Not at all. Whatever you say, sergeant." Kenpachi's lips formed a thin line.

"You started it Jaegerjaquez. I want to hear an apology from you for wasting my time."

"I'm not."

"Say that again?"

"I'm not sorry."

He was hoisted to his feet by his jersey and forced to look into Kenpachi's face. Grimmjow held Kenpachi's piercing gaze.

"You wanna fight me, boy? I could kick your ass in under a minute."

"I'd give it my best shot."

Kenpachi bared his teeth in a grin that set Grimmjow's heart racing. "Let's put that to the test sometime, then. Unless all you're good for is shit talking." Grimmjow didn't have to wonder if Kenpachi was serious or not. The smile on his face told no lies.

"How about right now? It'll be over quick." Grimmjow heard whispers around him, growing louder and frantic.

Kenpachi said, "What the hell? It's lunch break now, isn't it?" he glanced at the clock. "Alright. You're on, Jaegerjaquez." He took a step onto the mat, palms raised. Feeling his teammates' eyes on him, Grimmjow stepped onto the mat with him and grasped Kenpachi's palms. He bunched the muscles in his arms and was uncomfortably aware of how stick-like they were compared to Kenpachi's.

Kenpachi grinned like a mad man as he bent Grimmjow's body to the right. He threw all of his weight into his palms and tried to steer him into the ground. The breath went out of Grimmjow's body and his knees buckled. Grimmjow lunged forward, charging into Kenpachi's bulky body and forcing the man backwards into the wall.

Grimmjow rocked himself to the right and Kenpachi stumbled, knees buckling and a wave of adrenaline washed over Grimmjow as he forced his coach to his knees. His teammates cried out in astonishment. Grimmjow saw Kenpachi's eye widen in shock, then his smile broadened. He rammed his head into Grimmjow's chest and Grimmjow flew backwards.

Kenpachi rammed him and forced Grimmjow to the ground and the breath flew out of his lungs as Kenpachi's weight crashed down on him. Grimmjow tried to roll out from underneath him but Kenpachi pinned him, suffocating Grimmjow's face in his chest. Grimmjow struggled and thrashed and he could his teammates' muffled cries of delight.

Horrified that he was going to lose in front of them, Grimmjow hooked his leg along Kenpachi's hip and tried to rock his coach off onto his back but the man was like a stone. Kenpachi was laughing and Grimmjow heard someone slap the mat three times. Kenpachi's chest came off his head as the man threw his hands in the air with a roar, grinning ear to ear.

Grimmjow was too exhausted to be angry and fell back against the matt. "Now that was something,
Jaegerjaquez! You almost knocked me on my ass!” Kenpachi boomed and Grimmjow was surprised to see the glee in the man's face. He'd been expecting ridicule. "We've gotta do that again sometime!" Grimmjow, panting, managed a grin.

"Next time I won't go easy on you." He said and Kenpachi barked laughed.

"Cocky son of a bitch…Alright, go grab water and food, all of you. Break's over in five!"

As Kenpachi sauntered away, Grimmjow realized what he felt for his coach was something he didn't feel for a lot of people; respect, and if Kenpachi's excitement was anything to go by, Grimmjow thought it was mutual respect.

Grimmjow deeply regretted not packing more coke with him by the time practice was over. The trembles got worse and as he showered, he jumped when he heard distant laughter in the locker room. Every time a stall door slammed or the door to the shower room opened, he tensed, his heart in his throat.

The showers were tight and enclosed; the perfect place to be cornered. As he showered, his heart rate quickened, his ears straining to hear the slightest sound, and his hair was still soaking as he wrapped his towel around his waist and he stepped out into the locker rooms. He jumped, his heart flying into his throat at the sight of Ulquiorra. He was half naked, a towel around his hips as he gathered his shampoo and soap for the showers.

They were alone. Ulquiorra looked at him, that is to say he acknowledged his presence with a tilt of his head in his direction. His eyes never met Grimmjow's. Grimmjow slammed his arm against the wall before Ulquiorra could walk by him into the showers.

"Move." Ulquiorra demanded. Grimmjow rotated his body, cornering Ulquiorra against the lockers. The silence suspended between them as Grimmjow's hand shot out and seized Ulquiorra's chin. He tilted Ulquiorra's face to his level and forced Ulquiorra's eyes to meet his.

They stood close enough for Grimmjow to feel his body heat and smell his sweat. He grinned, wondering if Ulquiorra was uncomfortable or annoyed to finally meet his gaze.

"I'm tired of your fucking attitude, Ulquiorra."

"I don't care." Ulquiorra gripped his arm and his touch was rough, nails digging into Grimmjow's skin as he pushed against Grimmjow's arm. Grimmjow couldn't remember the last time they'd stood so close, but his body must have because his touch sent a rush of heat to his cock.

"I fucking do." Grimmjow shoved him in the chest and the lockers rattled. "Fight me. I'll put you in your fucking place. No one looks down on me."

"Then stop giving me reasons to."

Grimmjow's blood boiled. "If you hate me so much then do something about it!" In his fury, Grimmjow slammed his fist against the locker beside Ulquiorra's head. Ulquiorra didn't flinch. It was as if Grimmjow were a phantom.

"I will not waste a second of my time on you."

"You're a fucking coward! What's wrong? Afraid a junkie will kick your ass?"

Ulquiorra shoved Grimmjow in the chest. Grimmjow stumbled, the breath knocked from his lungs.
"It isn't my fault you're pathetic. Maybe if you were someone worth my time, I'd consider it."
Grimmjow was speechless. He wanted to strangle Ulquiorra. There wasn't a hint of anger in
Ulquiorra's voice, only indifference and Grimmjow refused to let loose on him. He wouldn't give
Ulquiorra the satisfaction.

He was shaking and he couldn't tell if it was from rage or his body's way of begging for his next fix.
Maybe it was both. He didn't move as Ulquiorra turned his back on him and opened the shower
room doors. "Go home," Ulquiorra said, "You look like you need another fix."

"Fucker! Meet me after practice tomorrow! I'll kick your ass!" Grimmjow bellowed as the door
closed. He didn't care if Ulquiorra heard him. He dressed, gathered his things, and left the changing
room.

As he walked home in the rain, moving swiftly towards his usual subway, he heard familiar voices to
his left. He turned and his breath hitched, fingers curling at the sight of Ulquiorra holding an
umbrella. Ichigo walked beside him, his hand in Inoue's as she stood under his umbrella. Behind
them, Ikkaku, Uryuu and Abarai leaned over Yumichika's shoulder at his cellphone.

Grimmjow stopped behind a bus stop and watched them, unable to believe it. Ulquiorra looked
down at Inoue as she said something to him, his eyes alight with a gentle glow. She said something
that made him shake his head, looking away in mild exasperation. Before his eyes, a smile lit up
Ulquiorra's face. It was like a dim ray of sunlight shining through dark, heavy storm clouds.

Grimmjow watched them walk off to God knows where and wondered how it had happened that
Ulquiorra Cifer of all people had friends. Is this why Ulquiorra was so full of himself, because he
had Kurosaki's little group watching his back?

Grimmjow's fingers curled into a fist. If Ulquiorra thought he was above him just because he had
people to walk home with, Grimmjow was going to show him he was dead wrong. A scheme
unraveling in his mind, Grimmjow began the walk home, smiling to himself.

Yet as the former Captain of Pantera and star player, he had to wonder how it was that he was left
with no one to walk him home at the end of the day. Why Ulquiorra and not him?
Chapter Notes

Nearly every song by Mumford and Son's makes me think of this story. This song in particular reminds me of this chapter and the one to follow.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWNq89joPrI

As their second week of practice arrived, Ulquiorra set aside some clothes, shampoo and an extra toothbrush for the flight to China. The enemy team was composed of some of the best players from last year's season and Ulquiorra wanted to make sure he was up to par. So he ignored Grimmjow at practice and focused on following Kenpachi's advice as they trained. Grimmjow was a husk of a man, not worth any attention and Ulquiorra hated looking at him.

Ulquiorra didn't know if he was to blame for Grimmjow's downfall. He'd done everything he possibly could to help him, given him more chances than the man deserved. Yet when he looked at Grimmjow and saw his twitching fingers and heard him sniffing, anger roiled inside him.

He was angry at Grimmjow for refusing to change. He was angry at himself for feeling like he was responsible. He couldn't convince himself he wasn't to blame, because he was sure if he'd been enough for Grimmjow, things would be different.

Ulquiorra hated going to practice. He hated seeing Grimmjow glaring at him from across the room. He ignored him to the best of his abilities but Grimmjow, like he always had, had a way of getting under his skin when he cornered him in the locker rooms and stole the soccer ball from him. Sooner or later, Ulquiorra feared something would have to give and he'd be forced to confront the shadow of the man he'd once known and all the guilt and bitter memories associated with him.

Ulquiorra wished they'd stayed apart. He didn't believe in fate but if he did, he would say fate was a cruel son of a bitch to bring him into the highlight of his soccer career and force his old, bitter love onto the pitch with him.

Ulquiorra wasn't walking away. He'd be damned before he let someone like Grimmjow drive him out of the World Cup.

"Well, if you don't punch him out, I will..." Ichigo grumbled as they ate their early dinner in the café a few blocks from the stadium. "I swear, if that bastard makes one more comment about my mom... Doesn't he have anything else on me? For fuck's sake, at least be creative, you know?"

"He's an attention-seeking piece of shit. If you ignore him, he'll go away. He's like the bully in the playground all over again." Renji said.

"I'm sorry, how am I supposed to ignore him when he's right next to me whispering shit like 'How's mommy? Still dead?' in my ear?" Ichigo seethed, his balled fist squeezing out the insides of his sandwich.

"And what's he got against you, Ulquiorra?" Renji asked.

Ichigo said, "You weren't there? He got Grimmjow expelled for using."
"Oh, shit...yeah, that would do it. I mean, that's a bit much, right?"

"I didn't know what else to do. he wouldn't listen to me when I told him to quit. I thought he'd get himself killed unless I stepped in."

Ichigo ran his fingers through his vibrant hair, frustrated. "What do we do with the guy? He wasn't always like this, was he?"

"No, not when I first met him," Ulquiorra explained. Everyone at the table leaned forward.

"You've known him longer than high school?" Ichigo asked. That was when he'd known Grimmjow and Ulquiorra. They'd shared classes.

"We met as children in Karakura Town right after he'd moved. He was bullied by our classmates for being French. I myself was a bit of an outsider, so I reached out to him. We became friends and he'd fend away my bullies. I believe on one occasion, he took worms they'd dumped in my food and dumped them right back into my bully's lunch." Ulquiorra's chest tightened at the memory, running through the hallways hand in hand with Grimmjow, his bully's enraged roars echoing after them. He'd never felt more alive, or valued.

"Grimmjow, standing up for someone? Man, I wish we had that version of Grimmjow on our team."

Renji grumbled.

"He'd encourage me to leave the house for late night movies, and we were on the same soccer team. But Grimmjow got mixed up with a boy named Nnoitra Gilga. After a while, I became secondary to him, and whenever we met, Grimmjow would smell like the garbage he smoked with Nnoitra. My father disapproved of our friendship, he thought Grimmjow was a bad influence, and he was, I refused to stop seeing him, however. My father transferred me to another school after our first game together. Then we ran into one another in high school and we became reacquainted." Ulquiorra ended the story there. Orihime was the only one who knew about his and Grimmjow's relationship in high school.

"Yeah, I remember the first day of practice in high school. Grimmjow challenged Renji, Ikkaku and me to that game after practice. You helped him win." Ichigo murmured. "Wow. Didn't know you guys had such a history."

"The guy needs a hobby." Ikkaku replied.

"Indeed. Grudges are so ugly..." Yumichika sighed.

"The guy's had a hard life," Ichigo said, "I'd feel bad for him but he's such an asshole. I can't do it. If he doesn't stop, though...Maybe I'll take a leaf outta Kenpachi's book and speak his language."

"What language?" Renji asked.

"Words don't get to him, maybe my fist in his teeth will..." Ichigo mused.

Ulquiorra's phone vibrated in his pocket. It was a text from Orihime. Maybe she would explain why she was nearly an hour late. He opened the message and his mouth went dry.

Grimmjow: Hey Ulqui. I got your woman. Meet me at Fujimido Pavilion in Koshikawa Garden. We're settling this.

Ulquiorra lunged across the table and shoved his phone under Ichigo's nose. Ichigo's mouth fell open. "Oh shit...That son of a—!" Renji ran around the table to look and Ikkaku and Yumichika
hurried over. Ulquiorra stood up. The gardens were a block or two away from their location, just past the Dome. Ulquiorra didn't know why he hadn't suspected something like this. Grimmjow could only tolerate so much and his patience, short as it was, had reached its end.

Ichigo raced by him. "I'm gonna kill that asshole!" Renji and the others hurried out the door after him and Ulquiorra stood up, breathing out a low sigh. He wasn't looking forward to this but maybe Grimmjow would finally leave him alone if Ulquiorra put him in his place.

If he wanted a fight, Ulquiorra would give it to him. Ulquiorra hurried after Ichigo and his friends and caught up with them as they ran a red light, just narrowly avoiding the oncoming traffic. "What the hell is his problem? Using my girlfriend to get to you!" Ichigo vented as they ran, his voice ragged.

As they ran it began to rain in a light shower. They ran to the gardens and took the entrance closest to the pavilion. Up a spiral stone staircase on a small hill sat a little wooden gazebo and as Ulquiorra jumped the stone steps, he saw a flash of blue. He looked up and saw Grimmjow stand to his feet, fingers tapping against his leg. Even from here, Ulquiorra could see his black eyes, swallowed up by his dilated pupils. His stomach churned at the sight.

Behind him Orihime stood up and waved, a surprisingly cheerful smile on her face. "Ulquiorra-kun, Ichigo, everyone! You came!"

"Shut up!" Grimmjow barked and she jumped, her smiling falling from her face.

"Grimmjow," Ichigo growled, fists trembling, "What the hell is the matter with you? Couldn't confront Ulquiorra on your own? If you hurt her—,"

"Your bitch is fine, Kurosaki." Grimmjow, higher than a kite, was grinning ear to ear."I haven't got a bone to pick with her." He placed his hand on the small of Inoue's back and shoved her. She hurried down the steps to Ichigo and he put his arms around her and led her away, frantic questions spilling from his lips.

Grimmjow fixed his black eyes on Ulquiorra and he clapped his hands together. "Couldn't come alone? What, you think your friends will protect you, Ulquiorra?"

"I saw no reason not to bring them. If you wanted to deal with me, maybe you shouldn't have kidnapped Kurosaki's girlfriend."

Grimmjow snorted with laughter. "You're afraid of me. You can't stand me, can you? You think you're so much better than me because you've got a little group that lets you tag along with them? You're wrong."

As the wind howled against the gazebo and the rain fell thick and fast around them, Grimmjow cried out to the group below with an air reminiscent of an announcer before the game of the century, "I'm gonna tear through each and every one of you! If Ulquiorra can't fight anymore, then I'm coming for Kurosaki, then Abarai. I'll cut through all of you by myself! Unlike you cowards, I don't need anyone at my back to win."

He rolled up his sleeves and rounded on Ulquiorra, nostrils twitching as he sniffed, teeth bared in a grin. "I'm tired of your fucking attitude, Ulquiorra. You think I'm weaker than you, you're dead wrong. I'm gonna snap your scrawny neck."

Ulquiorra was silent. He was looking into Grimmjow's sunken face, noticing how baggy his clothes were on him. Ulquiorra had always been the smaller of the two, but he felt like a powerhouse
compared to the skeletal man standing above him.

Grimmjow’s brows furrowed. "The hell's with that look? I kidnapped your friend and you don't look like you give a damn. What, you think you're above even showing me how much you hate me?"

"I don't. You're not worth my time. If fighting you means you'll leave me alone, then I'll do it. But don't mistake me. I'm not doing this to gratify you."

Grimmjow’s fists clenched. "You're full of shit. You can't even look me in the eyes, you ignore me every chance you get. You can't fucking stand me and I'm gonna make you show it."

"Ulquiorra-kun, don't—" Orihime began but Ulquiorra walked up the steps to meet Grimmjow. He felt calm as certainty swept over him. He could win this. Grimmjow was no longer the man he once was; he needed coke to get through four hours of soccer practice. He didn't know how Grimmjow would react to losing and this worried him. Maybe this would be good for him. If Ulquiorra could somehow get him to understand that he just wanted to be left alone, then Ulquiorra would do whatever it took.

Ulquiorra couldn't imagine he would back down as much as he would like to believe so. This was more than just Grimmjow venting out his anger at Ulquiorra's behavior. This was about who of the two of them was top dog and Grimmjow couldn't afford to lose even if he was running on fumes.

Ulquiorra stepped under the gazebo and the rainfall over his head ceased. Silence engulfed the men as they sized the other up, the only sound being the frantic fingertips of the rain drumming against the roof. Grimmjow raised his fists and stood with his legs a shoulder-width apart and Ulquiorra mirrored him.

"Last man standing wins." Grimmjow said, sniffing as he bore his teeth in a snarl. Ulquiorra kept his eyes fixed on Grimmjow's fists, waiting for whatever came next. Grimmjow lunged, throwing his weight into his fist as he hurtled Ulquiorra's way. Ulquiorra ducked beneath his fist and Grimmjow threw his body into him. Ulquiorra was thrown backwards and his back collided with the gazebo wall.

The space was tight and as Ulquiorra shuffled to the left, dodging Grimmjow's second swing, he collided into the bench built into the wall and tumbled over. He looked up in time to see the bottom of Grimmjow's sneaker and covered his face in his hands as Grimmjow's foot attempted to shatter his nose.

Ulquiorra tensed the muscles in his stomach but Grimmjow's kick still knocked the breath from his lungs. Ulquiorra felt clawed fingers tear into the skin of his chest as Grimmjow wrenched him to his feet. Grimmjow drew back his fist, eyes wild and wide and teeth bared. Ulquiorra threw the heel of his palm into Grimmjow's nose. A burst of blood spattered Ulquiorra's shirt as Grimmjow's head was thrown back, his nose pouring blood.

Grimmjow staggered but his expression was one of glee rather than pain and there wasn't a second delay as he swung at Ulquiorra with the back of his hand. Ulquiorra's cheek burned, his nose ached as Grimmjow's knuckles bounced off the bridge of his nose and he flew into the wall and caught himself.

Grimmjow had the advantage in his high, numb to any pain Ulquiorra could inflict, and Ulquiorra felt cornered as he advanced, the blood from his nose painting his teeth red as he grinned. Ulquiorra lunged, wrapping his arms around Grimmjow's waist and propelled them from the gazebo. Ulquiorra's body was shielded by Grimmjow's as they fell and Grimmjow's grunts of pain resounded over the rainfall as the pair tumbled down the stone steps.
He could feel each of Grimmjow's ribs beneath him. Ulquiorra tumbled off Grimmjow as they rolled to a stop. The world was spinning and Ulquiorra struggled to stand. Beside him, Grimmjow, gasping, heaved himself onto his elbows and Ulquiorra was on his feet while Grimmjow crawled onto his knees.

Ulquiorra hurled his foot into Grimmjow's face and the man toppled onto his back with a grunt, his face twisted in pain as his head collided with the stone step beneath him. "Done?" Ulquiorra panted, hoping Grimmjow had had enough. He could barely stand. Ulquiorra remembered the day he and Grimmjow had faced off against Kurosaki and Abarai. Grimmjow hadn't broken a sweat. Even as a teenager, he'd been well built and strong.

The man at his feet was nothing but skin and bones. "Ulquiorra, he's had enough." Ichigo called, his soaked orange hair sticking to his forehead. Ichigo's companions were drenched through and Ulquiorra could feel the rain pelting through his clothing. He looked down at Grimmjow, his face contorted in rage as he sucked in shallow breathes, and concluded that they were finished.

He turned to leave and something closed around his ankle. He fell and had no time to shield his face as his head struck the stone steps. His vision turned white and he was paralyzed as pain wracked his skull.

"We're...not...finished!" Grimmjow's voice seethed and Ulquiorra felt himself being rolled onto his back. He opened his eyes and closed them again as blood rained down upon him. He squinted, his vision scarlet, and saw Grimmjow looming over him. His blue hair hung in his face, soaked through, and his eyes blazed.

"I'm not letting you walk away, Ulquiorra! Not after what you did!" Pain wracked Ulquiorra's jaw and his head was snapped to the left as his jaw ached and his cheek burned. "You know what you did? Do you?" Grimmjow roared and he plunged back his fist. Ulquiorra rolled to the left and Grimmjow's knuckles struck the stone. He doubled over with a cry and Ulquiorra threw his fist into Grimmjow's ear. Grimmjow toppled off of him and flew into the ground.

Ulquiorra scrambled to his feet and backed away as Grimmjow stood up, seething through clenched teeth. "After my parents found out I was using, my mother left me." Something cold and heavy dropped inside him. "After she left, my father did, too. I had to give up school and get a job to support myself and my aunt. Between my jobs, I started going to tryouts; I made a name for myself in the big leagues. I came from fucking nothing and I led Pantera as their best player!"

Grimmjow latched onto the front of his shirt and wrenched him in close so Ulquiorra could stare into the endless void of his black eyes. "So I'm not taking your shit, Ulquiorra! I'm not taking shit from any of you! I'm the King of the field!" The wind went out of Ulquiorra's stomach as Grimmjow's fist plowed into his abdomen. Ulquiorra stumbled backwards as his stomach clenched and Grimmjow charged at him.

Ulquiorra ran to meet him and sunk his fist into Grimmjow's stomach. Grimmjow was stunned out of his run and Ulquiorra knew he had to end it now. Ulquiorra threw his elbow into Grimmjow's temple and the man crashed to the floor, tumbling over the steps and rolling to a stop at Ichigo's feet.

"No, Grimmjow. You're a husk and I'm not wasting any more time on you. I don't hate you. You're below the attention that would require. We're finished."

Grimmjow, even on the brink of passing out, curled his lip and his chest rose and fell in his fury. To Ulquiorra's disbelief, Grimmjow tried to stand up. Ichigo's foot rammed into him and Grimmjow grunted as he rolled onto his back.
"Enough, Grimmjow." Ichigo insisted and Ulquiorra thought in this moment that Ichigo felt badly for him. "No one here hates you. Just leave us the hell alone. We want to play and win China. That's it."

Grimmjow lunged for him and Ichigo threw his foot into his chest. Grimmjow snarled up to Ichigo like a cornered animal, shame and fury blazing in his eyes as his face contorted in rage.

"We're done with you. Come at us and we'll ignore you. Just stay away. Got it?" Ichigo turned and Grimmjow slumped over as Renji, Uryuu, Ikkaku and Yumichika walked around him.

Ulquiorra didn't know if he'd ever seen such a bitter expression of defeat on Grimmjow's face as he lay on his back in the rain, too exhausted to move. Grimmjow stared up into the sky, unblinking as rain pelted his face and some deep, dark realization settled into his face. He went limp on his back, closing his eyes, and he didn't speak as Ulquiorra walked around him.

Ulquiorra left his old friend and lover lying in the rain and if he'd finally deterred Grimmjow, he felt no satisfaction for it and the shame, hurt and bitter frustration in Grimmjow's black eyes haunted him the whole way home.
Self Destruction

Chapter Notes

It was always my idea that Grimmjow is actually a very lonely character. He wants to be the best he can be, but people either look down on him or treat him as their superior rather than a friend. Due to his primal instincts to be at the top of the food chain so to speak, he destroys anyone and everything in his path, leaving no room for companionship in his life. I've tried to capture that with an AU interpretation. I hope I've succeeded. I enjoy his character very much. He and Ulquiorra's character dynamics are always so fun to explore.

As Grimmjow dragged himself home, his body aching and the blood crusting on his upper lip, he accepted the truth. Ulquiorra was untouchable and it was because of Kurosaki and his friends. Regardless of his social awkwardness, Ulquiorra had built a fortress around himself Grimmjow couldn't penetrate.

Ulquiorra had people in his life who cared about him and who he cared for, and Grimmjow had no one. For all the games he'd won, the goals he'd scored, the media attention, he was alone and he couldn't do anything to fix it. Winning China wouldn't change a thing, and neither would winning the World Cup.

All he had at the end of the day was cocaine and for all of himself he'd invested into it, it had left him a sack of skin and bone, paranoid as people stared as he passed, isolated and an outsider in his own team. He wanted to quit. Never in his whole life had he wanted to quit more than he did tonight as these realizations washed over him.

He was going to quit tonight. He couldn't stand to see himself this way anymore.

As Grimmjow's shaking hands fumbled with his keys, he heard a whistle behind him. "Wow. You look like shit." He turned and found Nnoitra Gilga standing behind him. Grimmjow cast his mind back, trying to remember.

Nnoitra grinned and shook a paper bag at him. "You forget? You were running low, asked me to stop by. Where the hell would you be without me, huh?" Grimmjow didn't want to answer Nnoitra's question. He'd been using since he was ten. He had no idea what kind of person he'd be without drugs. Nnoitra shoved his way in and waited for him on his floor.

"Hurry the hell up and let me in."

Grimmjow opened his mouth. He could do it. He could tell him to piss off for tonight. He could go one night without coke. He didn't know part of him said, "Let me get my keys." He hadn't wanted to. Why did he always let Nnoitra and his sweet, white powder in? Grimmjow stumbled in, flicking on the switch and the light stabbed his eyes. He went to the bathroom and his shaking hands splashed water over his face. Grimmjow looked himself in the mirror and didn't recognize the man staring back at him.

Sunken, black eyes. Cheekbones jutting out. His hair looked translucent in the light. His bony hands dug under his shirt and raised it, revealing a jagged ribcage stabbing through his stomach. This body
wasn't his; it was cocaine's. Cocaine owned him and under the lash of its whip, his body cried out for more even as his stomach churned at the sight of his own body.

It was no wonder Ulquiorra looked down on him. Grimmjow hated himself. Even high, he hadn't been able to fight Ulquiorra. His own body was failing him. If he couldn't win in a scrape, how could he win against China? Even if he did quit he was beyond saving. He wasn't worth saving not to himself, not to anyone. No one in his life cared if he wasted away. Who did he have to preserve himself for?

Fear and doubt swirled inside him and the whip lashed in his back. Grimmjow walked back to the living room and snatched the paper bag from Nnoitra's hand. He ground up the white chunks and lined them up. It was as natural as breathing at this point. He grabbed his metal straw from his bedside table. Behind him, Nnoitra chuckled and refused when Grimmjow extended the straw. "Ladies first."

Grimmjow inserted the straw into his nose and his nostril stung and cried in protest. He breathed in a sharp snort and then another to disperse it, then he did the same for the other nostril. His throat went numb, his eyes burned and then he was beautiful and his life was beautiful.

Grimmjow didn't know how he got through the last day of practice; his throat was raw from running and his ankles felt tight. He was noticing he needed larger doses to get through the day. His fix had worn off an hour ago and his mood had dropped from high to low.

Even if he'd decided to ignore his teammates, every sound they made grated on his ears. At least he couldn't smell their sweat but then again, he couldn't smell much of anything. The hunger he'd staved off with cocaine had come back and was kicking him like a mule, amplifying his foul mood.

He stood up, rubbing his shoulder. He'd fallen during practice and strained it but he was sure he'd play just fine once they got to China. If not, he had an extra package of coke he'd set aside for China. He couldn't wait to snort it before the first game. He wasn't even excited about playing.

Something slammed into his injured shoulder and pain wracked his arm. "Shit, sorry!" Grimmjow saw orange and then he saw red. Grimmjow had been trying so hard to ignore Kurosaki and his friends, and now he was ignoring them they decided to give him a hard time.

Grimmjow whirled around and his fist collided into whatever part of Kurosaki he could reach. "Leave me the hell alone!" Grimmjow bellowed, his voice shrill and bordering on hysteria. Footfalls shook the earth beneath his feet and he turned in time to see a flash of red. Then the wind went out of him as Abarai sunk his fist into Grimmjow's stomach.

Grimmjow flew to the floor and his head struck the ground. He had no time to recover as Abarai seized the front of his jersey and Grimmjow turned around in time to see Renji's fist soaring towards his face. He raised his hand to block but Abarai's fist collided into his face before Grimmjow could stop him.

"We're tired of your shit, you hear me?" Abarai bellowed. "Go curl up in a hole where you belong and die, you fucking asshole!"

The whistle sounded and Grimmjow squinted through his eye, already swelling, and saw Kenpachi wrestle Abarai off of him.

"Enough, all of you! Kurosaki, Abarai, in the lobby, now! Jaegerjaquez, go see the nurse! Cifer, take him."
If Ulquiorra tried to protest, Kenpachi ignored him. Grimmjow's heart was racing in his chest. Kurosaki and Abarai would tell Kenpachi about the cocaine. He'd gotten this far and he would be expelled from the team. Fear caught his breath and held it and Grimmjow tried to stand. "Wait..." He panted, sitting up and cradling his aching jaw.

He realized playing still mattered to him. He didn't want to lose his chance at playing in the World Cup. He couldn't. He'd worked too hard to get here. "Get up." He smacked away the pale hand extended to him.

"Fuck off, Ulquiorra! I don't want your help." He was wrenched to his feet and he swayed. Ulquiorra shoved him in the back and Grimmjow stumbled forward, looking over his shoulder at Kurosaki and Abarai.

"They're gonna ruin everything..." He felt sick. He should have quit. Everything he worked for would go up in smoke.

Grimmjow could feel Ulquiorra watching him and he hurried ahead. He was quitting today. He'd come too far to be expelled. But he would be expelled; Kurosaki and Abarai hated his guts, they'd tell Kenpachi everything. Grimmjow collapsed on the nearest bench and slumped over as his breathing became frantic gasps.

"Fuck...I'm done for." He cradled his face in his hands, nails piercing into his skin. "Why couldn't I fucking ignore him? I'm quitting today. I'm fucking quitting, I can't do this shit anymore..."

He felt eyes on him and he looked up at Ulquiorra standing over him, waiting. Grimmjow wasn't going to the nurses' office. She'd figure out he was using in a heartbeat. "Go away."

Ulquiorra didn't speak as he turned his back and walked away. Grimmjow slumped over and sat in silence, waiting for Kenpachi to find him and give him a verdict. He heard footsteps and his heart sunk when he saw Kenpachi towering over him.

"Having a bad day, Jaegerjaquez? You look like hell." Grimmjow clenched his jaw.

"Just shut up and do it."

"Do what?"

"Expel me. Get it over with."

Kenpachi quirked a brow. "For what?" Grimmjow didn't believe his ears. Hadn't Kurosaki and Abarai snitched on him?

"I'm gonna give you a warning. You start a fight again and you're not gonna play the first game against China. No more. Fight on your own time."

Grimmjow slumped over with a shaky sigh, his heart racing in his chest. He hadn't told him. He was scared to know why because by all means, they had no obligations to cover for him. Grimmjow assumed they felt bad for him and chose to lie to make themselves look good. What other reason could there be?

"Now, get up. I wanna have a talk with you." Grimmjow's stomach churned. Maybe he wasn't out of the woods yet. Kenpachi said, "Get dressed. Meet me outside the stadium." Grimmjow met Kenpachi outside the stadium and followed him down the street. Kenpachi accompanied him to a nearby bar and grill. Sitting at a bar running the length of the main room was team Japan and their trainer.
Kenpachi called, "Take your pick of the menu, boys, it's on me!" Kurosaki and the others cheered. Grimmjow pulled up a seat at the end of the bar away from the team and Kenpachi annoyed him by sitting across from him.

"Get as much as you want and that's an order. If you don't start gaining weight after China, I'm gonna have to cut you loose." Kenpachi said and Grimmjow's stomach rumbled approval. He ordered a bucket of fried chicken, Kenpachi added on mashed potatoes and a salad and beers. Grimmjow heard raucous laughter and looked over to see Ichigo ruffle Ulquiorra's hair, shoving him into Renji's shoulder. Orihime laughed and touched Ulquiorra's shoulder.

Grimmjow wanted to hurl his water glass at them. His food arrived and Grimmjow dug in, dunking the chicken in the potatoes. Kenpachi gulped down his beer.

"Jaegerjaquez, I'm not one for big, heartfelt talks so I'll put it simply; I'm your coach. You have problems, you need to tell me. You're gonna have a hard time winning if you're mind is focused on personal shit."

Grimmjow nodded, drinking his beer to avoid talking. Like he would tell Kenpachi anything; it wasn't the man's business what was going on in his life. But he surprised himself by wanting to confide in him his feelings of inadequacy. In this moment, he felt the weight of the past two weeks pressing against his chest, longing to escape. Kenpachi punched his shoulder and said, "Jaegerjaquez, you look like hell. If something is going on, you need to tell me. I've heard it all, probably seen it all. Nothing can surprise me anymore."

Grimmjow's lips remained locked. He was sure Kenpachi would think differently if he knew drugs played a role in his behavior. Kenpachi said, "Listen; you're a good player, so tell whatever going on in your head to shut the fuck up. The moment I heard you were selected, I had high hopes for our team. I know what you're capable of."

Grimmjow looked away, unable to meet Kenpachi's gaze. If he cracked and told Kenpachi about his addiction, his coach would be disappointed in him and Grimmjow was surprised by how sickened the thought made him. He didn't want to disappoint Kenpachi. He respected him as a coach and as a person, and Kenpachi respected him, too. He couldn't stand the idea of losing his coach's trust; Kenpachi was one of the few people who still believed in him.

"I have some shit I'm working through, that's all. I'll get over it." He wanted to quit. He never waned to touch cocaine again. He wanted to have his body and mind back. Kenpachi didn't ask him anymore questions and Grimmjow was silent for the rest of his meal. He ate everything Kenpachi ordered and when he stood up to begin the walk home, he wondered if he was too full to make it.

He needed to start working out again outside of practice. When he was high, he got the adrenaline rush of a good workout, but the state of his body told him he was running on fumes. As he stepped out into the rain, someone brushed by him and uttered a hasty, "Sorry." It was Kurosaki.

Grimmjow couldn't stop himself. "Why didn't you tell him? You sure as hell don't owe me a damn thing." Kurosaki stopped walking, brown eyes fixed on the sidewalk.

"Kurosaki, we're not friends. We won't ever be. So don't start doing me any favors now."

"I didn't do it for you. Get yourself kicked off the team, Grimmjow. I'm not gonna have that hanging over my head. So stay out of my way and I'll stay out of yours."

Even if he loathed Kurosaki, today had at least affirmed something to himself. He wanted to play. It still mattered to him, though he didn't know why. He swallowed down the idea he should be
appreciative and began his walk home.

Grimmjow arrived home, tripping over the trash on his way in. He walked over dirty clothes and empty take-out boxes and collapsed on his bed. He was emotionally and physically exhausted and he kept seeing things out of the corner of his eyes.

The paranoia would go away if he snorted coke but he was too tired to stand up. He was going to quit. He could have lost his job today, for all it was worth. He reached for his phone and unlocked it. He had a new message.

**Nnoitra Gilga:** Hey, the bartender's got something new for you. A cocktail; half coke, half something else. I'll let you guess. It's supposed to be mind blowing! BTW, you still owe money, dipshit.

**Grimmjow:** I'll have the money after my game in Beijing. Chill the fuck out.

Grimmjow went on to check the messages on his Facebook. He had lots of Facebook friends, all of them fans and they often asked him questions, expressed their admiration to him, and tagged him in their posts.

He'd been tagged in dozens of posts early this afternoon and more posts were rolling in. Videos were attached to these posts, taken on cell phones by fans hiding in the stands. One of the videos captured his fight with Kurosaki. A few more videos showed today's practice and he was the main focus.

Of the footage and pictures taken of practice, his fans had this to say;

**Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez,** you don't look good. I hope everything is alright. We believe in you!

**Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez** looks seriously out of it. I hope he isn't doping. There's no way he can win against China in this state. Get better, man!

**Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez** was my favorite player but I'm seriously disappointed in him. Look at how thin he is. He's only 26, what man at his age looks so terrible?

**Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez** is getting into way too many fights; seriously what did Kurosaki do to him? He's totally on something; cocaine, meth, heroine. So disappointed. As a defender on my soccer team, I really looked up to him.

The list went on and on and Grimmjow's stomach tied itself into knots. He felt sick and was sure he'd throw up everything he'd eaten. So many people were disappointed in him and he understood why. When he looked at the videos and saw how out of breath he was and how frail he looked, blowing up at people over the smallest of things, Grimmjow hardly recognized himself.

But it was the people who believed in him that got him the most. He wasn't touched by their support; he was terrified. He couldn't be the man they thought he was. He'd never been. He played every game of his career high. He couldn't win his fans China, he would disappoint them and he would disappoint Kenpachi.

His team would realize they'd been right all along to look down on him. His fans would see why they'd been wrong to love him because they'd loved a lie. Nothing could save him. He couldn't save himself because there was nothing in him worth saving; Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez was dead and he'd always been dead.

Where was the harm in a little more self destruction? If he was lucky, his heart would burst in his
chest and he'd die on the pitch, so high out of his mind that it didn't matter one way or the other. It was poetic. He'd had his run. Best go out with a bang.

He'd take Nnoitra's concoction. Maybe he'd take more than he should. What did it matter?

You can't kill what's already dead.
On the fifteenth of June, Ulquiorra awoke from a pitiful sleep. He'd slipped into sleep so thin, it felt like blinking. He'd forgotten to pack sleeping pills with him to China and without them he couldn't sleep in a new location. It was unusual of him to forget something so crucial.

His stomach churned all night and his heart rate kept him up. His mind raced, the names of China's best players bouncing back and forth in his mind. At 5:00 PM, Japan would face China and play their first game within their regional group. He would do his best to win Japan the game today. Even if they lost, they still had a few more games to pay within the next few months to win them enough points to enter round two.

Forcing his mind off the issue, Ulquiorra got ready for the day. As he buttoned his shirt, he stopped by the window and looked down into the streets of Beijing. He and his team were staying in the Chaoyang District, the second largest district in Beijing and home to the National Stadium where they would play tonight.

Ulquiorra hadn't seen the stadium yet but the pictures he'd seen made his stomach churn at the thought of playing in it. The Bird's Nest as it was called had hosted many sporting events such as the winter games, the Olympics, and Ulquiorra hadn't imagined he would be the first to play a World Cup game in the stadium.

It was a historic moment for him. His phone buzzed on the dresser and he checked his messages. It was from Ichigo.

*Yo, where are you? Orihime and I want to start exploring the city. You down?*

Ulquiorra told them he would meet them in the lobby and hurried downstairs. In the lobby, Orihime and Ichigo were sitting on the sofa by the window. Orihime waved and called, *"Good morning, Ulquiorra-kun!"* Ulquiorra waved and went to meet them.

*"Let's go, I'm starving!"* Ichigo said. Ichigo helped Orihime to her feet and Ulquiorra followed them out into the streets.

*"Where are we going?"* Ulquiorra asked.

*"Tiananmen Square. They do a flag raising at 6:00,"* Ichigo said, *"It's in front of the Forbidden City. There should be some food there, if not we can grab something after the flag raising."* They waited a minute for Renji who stumbled out, rubbing his bleary eyes, and the four of them caught a train that took them to the square.

Security checked their bags, something Ulquiorra was unprepared for, and let them in through the gate. The sun rose over the square which Ulquiorra thought was devoid of much to see and do. It was a massive space, big enough for it to be a city of its own Ulquiorra thought but only three buildings rose to the left, right and center in the square.

Ulquiorra followed Ichigo as he hurried through the crowd choking the gate and out into the square. A line of troops assembled in front of the flags as they ascended, rippling in the warm morning breeze. He felt small in this square.

Upon asking locals in his rough Chinese, Renji returned to them and said, *"Okay, so the middle building is a mausoleum. The structure in the middle is a monument. The building on the left is a museum and the building on the right is a hall to something."*
"No restaurants?" Ichigo asked.

"There's lots around the square. We shouldn't have too much trouble finding one. I just want duck and I'll be happy." Renji said. Orihime wanted to look at the monument and so they approached. Though Ulquiorra thought it plain at first glance, up close he saw that there were carvings depicting symbols of revolts that ran the width of the structure. An epitaph was written on the front and back.

"Glory to the people's heroes." Renji read, checking his language book.

"Anyone know what's going on here?" Renji asked, looking bored as he walked the width of the obelisk and glazed over the events depicted.

"It's a memorial for heroes of historical events in China," Ulquiorra said and leaned in closer, "I think the first one is in memory of the destruction of opium. Then the Jintian Uprising." He wasn't entirely sure about some of the others.

Ulquiorra couldn't read the epitaph on the back and Renji's translation made Ichigo roll his eyes. "That is not what it says!"

"You translate it, then!" Renji chuckled, chucking his book at Ichigo's head.

"The mausoleum." Ichigo and Renji looked at him like he had five heads.

"Why do you want to see a dead guy when we're supposed to be having a good time?" Renji asked.

Ulquiorra didn't think it was odd. The mausoleum was there for a reason. "It's the mausoleum to Chairman Mao, the founding father of the People's Republic of China."

"Yeah, but he's still dead and I don't wanna see a corpse while I'm here."

Ulquiorra decided he'd go by himself but Orihime, not wanting him to go alone, offered to come, and Ichigo out of his love for history wanted to join them. Renji sighed and accompanied them. There was a long line to get inside and while they waited, Ulquiorra's stomach rumbled and his mind tried to remind him that he would be playing in front of millions tonight.

Finally, they were let in and in the blink of an eye; they were rushed past the remains of the Helmsman himself and out the other side. The door slammed behind them and Ichigo said, "I guess it's too busy to mill around for ten minutes inside."

"Great idea, let's see a dead body…Now I'm just remembering that I'm gonna die one day…" Renji whined.

"I thought it was interesting," Orihime said as they walked to the museum next. "Was that a wax sculpture or his body covered in wax?"

"I don't wanna think about it…" Renji said.

"I believe it was his body." Ulquiorra said and Renji scowled. "Can we just enjoy today and not talk about dead bodies? Thanks!"

Ulquiorra and the others visited the museum for fifteen minutes, gazing upon artifacts from different dynasties of different eras. Renji yawned the whole time, Ichigo was interested to a point and Orihime admired the pottery and sculptures. Ulquiorra read over what he could understand of the
item descriptions, reading from Renji's book to help him translate.

They couldn't ignore their rumbling stomachs any longer and they left Tiananmen Square and began the search for food. They found a restaurant a few blocks from the square and settled in. Orihime ordered youtaio, fried dough strips with sweetened soybean milk. Ichigo ordered meat baozi and Ulquiorra ordered jianbing which he understood was a popular street dish for breakfast but the restaurant served it. Renji ordered something he couldn't pronounce when his friends pressured him into ordering.

Their meals arrived and before Ulquiorra could dig into his steaming egg crepe, Renji gagged. "Oh fuck! Is that a tongue?" Ulquiorra peered across the table into Renji's bowl. It was a soup with chunks of mysterious meat floating on the surface alongside vegetables.

"Is it pork or beef?" Orihime asked and Renji covered his mouth.

"That's a tongue! Look at it!" He pointed into the center of the bowl and Ulquiorra noticed the bumps on the wide strip of meat. He looked away, disgusted, and Ichigo began to laugh at his friend's misfortune. They later found out Renji ordered pig's organ soup. He would never make the mistake again.

Ichigo shared his dumplings with Renji and they left the restaurant and Ulquiorra said, "Can we take a car ride to the Great Wall?"

"Like hell I'm walking that thing." Renji said.

"Let's go later tonight after the game!" Orihime piped in, jumping with excitement. "You can camp on the wall! There's supposed to be a great view of the stars! Let's do that." Ichigo and Renji liked the idea. Ulquiorra had never liked camping or anything involving the outdoors but he didn't see how he could refuse. It wasn't everyday one camped on the Great Wall of China.

In their spare time, they hopped in a pedicab and the driver gave them a tour of the hutongs, alleyways formed by traditional courtyards. Ichigo felt guilty for paying a man to pull them around the city. "I feel like he's our slave or something..." Ichigo said and Renji snorted.

"Get over yourself, man."

For their itinerary, they chose to ride to Prince Gong's Mansion. The driver boasted it was the best preserved mansion of the Qing Dynasty mansion and when they arrived, Ulquiorra had to agree with him.

A massive courtyard and sprawling garden was built around the mansion and the architecture harked back to the feudal era of imperial China. Stepping through the gates, Ulquiorra felt like he'd been swept back to the past. As they walked the grounds, operatic singing carried to Ulquiorra's ears on the breeze and Orihime sighed beside him.

"It's so tranquil here." She murmured. Ichigo linked his arm with hers and Renji strolled ahead while Ulquiorra lingered behind, stopping to admire the ancient architecture of times gone by. They crossed over the arch of a red bridge suspended over a pond and entered a pavilion.

The four of them sat on the benches and gazed out over the lake together. From here, they could just make out the city skyline through the clouds.

Renji snapped Rukia a picture to send her, Orihime and Ichigo cuddled on the bench and Ulquiorra rested his elbow on the railing and gazed out over the lake at blue skies suffocated by heavy gray clouds.
He liked Beijing. He didn't want to get his hopes up for tonight, but despite himself he found himself thinking that their camping trip to the Great Wall would make a fine celebration if they won tonight's game.
I want to take this moment to quickly thank everyone for reading. Not many people are commenting, but my statistics on FFN tell me I have readers from many parts of the world checking in every week to catch the latest chapter and I am so grateful for every view and comment.

It really means a lot to me, especially considering A, that Bleach ended and B, that I am writing for a very uncommon (but awesome) pairing.

I know a lot of people start fanfics they never finish, but I want to assure everyone I am enjoying this story immensely and I have been pouring my heart and soul into it and genuinely want to see it through to completion. I already have an ending in mind.

Thank you all for reading and for your lovely comments and feedback. It means the world to me and I hope you continue to enjoy the story.

Ulquiorra arrived at the stadium and was beset upon by reporters, snapping photos of him and shouting over one another to talk to him.

"Mr. Cifer," an American reporter cried, shoving a microphone under his nose, "What do you think your chances are for winning tonight?"

"If we win, it will be hard won. Whatever happens tonight, it will be a privilege to have played in the National Stadium."

Ulquiorra hurried away before more reporters could stop him and heard them descend upon someone else. "Mr. Jaegerjaquez!" Ulquiorra glanced over his shoulder and saw Grimmjow breeze past reporters. He ignored Ulquiorra as he swept by him, a scowl on his face as he headed out onto the field. Ulquiorra changed in the locker rooms and didn't acknowledge Grimmjow who was unusually quiet and subdued.

Something was wrong with him but Ulquiorra figured it was none of his business even if Grimmjow's sudden onset of depression unnerved him. Ulquiorra watched his teammates to keep from reflecting on how hard his heart was racing. His stomach was churning and he felt sick. He closed his eyes tightly and breathed out to calm his nerves. With only a minute remaining, team Japan lined up at the doors and waited to make their entrance. From here, Ulquiorra could hear the cheers of the crowd and his stomach did backflips.

"Where's Grimmjow?" Ichigo asked, looking around. Ulquiorra didn't see him. He heard the bathroom door slam and Grimmjow rushed out and went to stand behind Renji. He wavered from one foot to the other, swinging his arms at his side in anticipation, and his eyes were wide. Ulquiorra wasn't sure if he wanted to know how he'd raised his spirits since his arrival.

Japan exchanged high-fives, excited hugs and nervous assurances. Ulquiorra in his nerves stood away from the others and wasn't surprised when no one approached him, though as always he wished someone would. The doors opened and as the music blared outside, the flag bearers marched.
out onto the field and the noise from the crowd accelerated.

Kenpachi, China’s coach, and the referees walked out and Ulquiorra followed as Ichigo led the team out the doors, team China lined up beside them. The teams walked out onto the field and the crowd erupted into cheers. In the stands, Ulquiorra saw people waving the flag of Japan and he could see that some people had painted their faces white with a red sun on their foreheads.

In Chinese, the announcer asked the crowds to rise the national anthem of China swept through the stadium. Behind them, China’s troops unveiled the flag of China and it rippled in the breeze. Divided by the coaches, Ulquiorra looked past them and spotted team China standing solemnly, their hands to their chest, singing along with shining eyes.

As the song ended, the crowd cheered, some wiped tears from their eyes, and Japan’s national anthem filled the stadium. Ulquiorra closed his eyes and bowed his head and tried to focus on the song rather than his nerves. Grimmjow was fidgeting next to him, his arms often brushing Ulquiorra’s and his breathing was shallow.

The crowd roared as the teams walked by one another, every team member exchanging handshakes before hurrying to their respective side of the field. Kenpachi beckoned his team over. Grimmjow jogged past Ulquiorra to meet him.

They gathered around him and over the screams of the crowd and the announcers’ introductory comments and reports, Kenpachi said, "China's got good defense. Their strikers on are par with our own, and their midfielders are nimble. It doesn't matter. I've got the best damn team in the country standing next to me and we're gonna win this or die trying."

Ulquiorra tried to focus and found Grimmjow's constant swaying, his fingers drumming frantically on his shoulder, to be distracting. Glancing at him, Ulquiorra's breath caught when he saw how wide and wild Grimmjow's eyes were. His pupils weren't dilated but his eyes were flicking from one spot to the other, he wet his lips every few seconds and he kept sniffing.

Ulquiorra didn't think Kenpachi noticed. In this moment, he was blind to anything other than finding a way to win. As the away team, Japan had the honor of getting the kick off and it was Ichigo who launched the ball across the field to the midfielders. "And we're off!" the announcer cried and the stadium erupted into cheers. One of the Chinese midfielders disrupted the pass and headed it across the field to his teammates.

Grimmjow shot in like a rocket and jumped out in front of the midfielder, catching the ball on the crown of his head as he hurled it back into Japan's side of the field away from the Chinese. The crowd cheered for him and Grimmjow thrust his hands in the air as he jogged to defend Japan's goal.

"Good save from Jaegerjaquez. He's had a rough year in and out of trouble with the police and the media coverage on the last two weeks of practice hasn't been in his favor but he seems very energetic tonight. He's got a lot of fans in the crowd and no doubt he'll be motivated to play his usual best tonight."

Across the field, Ikkaku lunged in to head it and so did Chinese player Guo. As Guo lunged for the ball, his elbow collided into the side of Renji's face. Renji toppled over, hugging his head in his hands and play came to a halt as the referee sounded his whistle.

"Fucker!" Ichigo shouted, racing to Renji's side as he huddled, pressing his face into the pitch. The referee confronted Guo and Guo heatedly explained himself but Ulquiorra was too far away to make out their exchange. The referee beckoned for play to resume and Ichigo scowled, shooting a glare Guo's way.
"Guo is insistent it was an accident and the referee agrees."

"He's going to have to watch himself if he wants to stay out of trouble. That didn't look like an accident..."

Replay of the incident filled the screens. Ulquiorra didn't think it was accidental but perhaps Guo had gotten caught up with himself. Play resumed as Ichigo helped Renji to his feet. Ulquiorra looked across the field at Kenpachi and saw him pacing up and down like a caged tiger.

Within twelve minutes of play, China made an attempt to Japan's goal. Chinese midfielder Cheng kicked the ball to their forward and before it could reach him, Grimmjow jumped in and headed the ball over goalkeeper Hisagi and over the net.

"Good save. Jaegerjaquez is on his game tonight." Another ball was thrown in and Ulquiorra kicked it to Uryuu who kicked it out of the field away from the Chinese defenders, sending the ball flying just past the goal.

"And we have our first corner kick of the match!"

Uryuu set the ball down in the corner of the field and shot it towards China's goal. Ichigo jumped in and headed it past the goal keeper and into the net. The crowd lost themselves, screaming and jumping up and down. Ichigo, Renji, Ikkaku, Yumichika and the other players engulfed Uryuu, slapping him on the back.

"What an incredible display of team work from Japan! Not even twenty minutes in and we have our first goal for Japan!"

Ulquiorra clapped Uryuu on the shoulder and play resumed. As one of China's forwards shot the ball towards Japan's goal, Grimmjow caught the ball on his head as he dove into the ground.

"Excellent save from the King of the Field!" the announcer cried and the crowd roared their agreement. The referee's whistle sounded and Ulquiorra caught the ball as it rolled to his feet. He looked towards the whistle's shrill scream and saw a crowd of players gathering around Japan's goal.

Ulquiorra scooped the ball under his arm and jogged towards the crowd. "Don't touch him! Ichigo shouted over the concerned babbling of the Chinese and Japanese players. "Don't touch him, I know what to do; my dad's a doctor! Get something to put under his head!" Ulquiorra squeezed through the crowd and his stomach plummeted.

Grimmjow was lying on the pitch, his mouth agape in a silent scream as his body spasmed. His eyes rolled back into his head and foam spilled over the corners of his mouth. Ulquiorra dropped the ball, paralyzed by the sight. How had this happened? What could he do?

"Someone put something under his head!" Ichigo said and the teams scrambled about. Kenpachi shoved his way through the crowds and his face drained of color. Ulquiorra couldn't understand how this was happening. Grimmjow had been acting strange all morning. Ulquiorra had felt in his soul that something wasn't right and he hadn't done anything. Could he have prevented this?

"Help me hold him, someone, but do it gently." Ichigo rolled Grimmjow onto his side and when no one moved to help, Ulquiorra went and knelt by Ichigo and put his hand on Grimmjow's shoulder. Grimmjow's shoulder blade stuck out like a knife against his skin and despite the frustration this man had caused the past two weeks, Ulquiorra felt nothing but pity for the skeletal man lying helpless at his feet.

Renji peeled off his jersey and folded it into a makeshift pillow, shoving it under Grimmjow's head.
The crowd had gone deathly silent and the announcer's voice was quiet when he said that medics were on their way.

A medic cart drove up the pitch and the drivers unloaded a stretcher. Ulquiorra couldn't look away even as the sight of Grimmjow's white eyes sent a thrill of horror through his stomach. Five minutes went by, though it felt longer. Ulquiorra whispered things to him he couldn't remember, his hand caressing his shoulder though he was sure Grimmjow couldn't feel it. Ulquiorra could hardly stand to look into his face; Grimmjow looked like a corpse.

Grimmjow's convulsions became twitches and then he ceased moving. His breath which until now had been frantic became shallow gasps and the blue of his eyes reappeared as he came to. Ulquiorra wasn't relieved; Grimmjow's face was white, his eyes wide, and he didn't recognize his team. As he looked from one face to another, his breaths grew short and his eyes glazed over with fear. His gasps became whimpering and Ulquiorra continued to speak to him and rub his shoulder. Ulquiorra stayed by him as Ichigo stood up on wobbly knees and Grimmjow lay his head on the pitch and shivered.

The medics knelt by him. "Excuse me, sir, I need you to move." Ulquiorra didn't hear them and jumped when Ichigo touched his shoulder. Ulquiorra stood up on legs that felt like gelatin and the medics helped Grimmjow into the stretcher. They strapped him in and Grimmjow looked dazed and confused except for the panic in his eyes.

As the medics started the engine, Grimmjow looked towards Ulquiorra, his eyes shining and terrified and Ulquiorra wanted to go with him. The cart drove off the field and Ulquiorra watched him leave with an ache in his chest. Shaking his head, Kenpachi marched off the field and approached the stand where the substitutes sat. He beckoned and a small, effeminate man Ulquiorra remembered as Luppi got to his feet. He was smiling and the sight made Ulquiorra's fingers curl.

"To make up for time lost, the referee is adding four minutes of stoppage time to the clock," the announcer said. Ulquiorra felt the warmth of Ichigo's hand on his shoulder. It was trembling.

"You okay?" Ichigo asked, "You did good." Ulquiorra didn't know how to answer. He hadn't done anything, not during Grimmjow's fit or beforehand.

"Ichigo, are you alright?" Renji asked and Ichigo shook his head. His lips were trembling. Renji sighed and pulled him into a hug, crushing Ichigo's head of orange hair to his shoulder. Ichigo held him tightly. "It's alright. You did a really good job, man. He'll be okay."

Ulquiorra wanted to go with Grimmjow. Grimmjow would be frightened to be alone in the hospital but he couldn't leave the team. He wished to this day he had. For the rest of the game he unfocused and thirty minutes in, Chinese striker Fan dribbled the ball, dodging Ikkaku's tackle as he shot the ball at Japan's goal. Hisagi lunged but his fingers missed the ball by inches and China won their first goal of the match to the roars of the crowd. Fan was surrounded by his teammates as they engulfed him in a group hug.

At half time, Kenpachi pulled his team aside and said, "Listen, I know we're all shaken up. The hospital called me and said Jaegerjquez is in stable condition. So let's make him sorry he missed out and boast his ears off when we visit. Let's do this!"

Play resumed with a kick off from China to midfielder Han. Ulquiorra caught the ball and took off towards China's goal post. China's defense swept after him and a brutish defender rushed out in front of him and tried to kick the ball away from his feet. Ulquiorra tried to shoot it around him and the floor fell out from under him as he stumbled over the defender's leg. He crashed down onto his shoulder and cradled his leg to him as the muscles in his leg spasmed. The referee sounded his whistle and approached defender Lee and reprimanded him with a yellow card.
"And we have a foul for China as Lee is shown the yellow card, and our first penalty kick of the match."

The referee marked the spot where the foul occurred and Ulquiorra stood to his feet, assuring the referee he was fine. The Chinese goal keeper readied himself and gestured at Ulquiorra to bring his best.

"As we know, Ulquiorra Cifer scored more goals for Espada than any else on the team. If he scores, then Japan will have a two point lead with only ten minutes on the clock for China to even the score."

Ulquiorra breathed in to ease his nerves and lined up his shot. Behind him, his team waited with baited breath. Ulquiorra rushed at the ball, running right, and kicked to the left. China's goal keeper lunged in the wrong direction and the ball flew into the net. Ulquiorra breathed a sigh of relief and his team rushed him, slapping him on the back and hugging him.

"And we have a goal for Japan, giving them a two point lead to China's one! To their credit, China has played aggressively today and Japan so far has scored on corner kicks and penalties. Only time can tell now who will win today's game."

China kicked off and within a minute their striker made a dash for Japan's goal, breaking through Japan's defense. China's fans went wild and the stadium filled with their cries. Hisagi threw himself to the floor, cradling the ball to his chest and the Japanese fans in the stadium hollered their relief and approval.

"Excellent save from Hisagi, as expected of one of Sierceitai's all time goalies."

Hisagi, grinning, threw the ball back out to Ichigo who dribbled it towards Uryuu. Before he could shoot it to the forward, defender Lee hurtled across the field and rammed him, trying to possess the ball. Ichigo tumbled over, clutching his ribs. Ulquiorra didn't think it was accidental judging from the anger on Lee's face.

Renji got in Lee's face and began yelling at him. Lee yelled back and Renji shoved him. The Chinese players descended on Renji, hollering at him. Kenpachi's face burst across the stadium's screens, cursing and gesturing wildly in his disapproval and frustration. Once again, the referee sounded his whistle and Lee was reprimanded with his second and final yellow card of the game.

Lee was sent off, scowling as he high-fived his teammates on the way out. Since Lee was fouled, no one was allowed to replace him and China would be forced to play with one teammate less. Renji was shown a yellow card and the referee, his face red as he shouted over the players, dispersed the bickering teams. Ulquiorra sighed and slumped against his knees. He wasn't sure he'd ever played such a dirty, dramatic game.

With only a minute left, play continued and China's defense fell apart. Chinese forward, Chung, raced across the field, dribbling the ball between his legs as he weaved between players. He kicked the ball towards Japan's goal and Hisagi lunged for it but the ball never made it to him. Ichigo leaped in and fell, heading the ball out of play as he tumbled into the dirt. The ball flew into the audience and the referee sounded his whistle as, with only fifty seconds on the clock, the game came to an end, winning Japan the first game in their region in the World Cup series.

Euphoria swept over Ulquiorra and his knees wobbled and he fell down to the pitch, exhausted and overcome. Behind him, Japan rushed at Ichigo and Renji leaped into his arms as their team collided in a massive group hug, beside themselves. Team China, their faces red and sweaty, cursed and scowled and gave one another bitter high fives.
Ulquiorra raised himself off the ground and looked up towards the screens; broadcasting the points Japan earned and saw that amongst the other teams in their group they'd scored third, knocking Korea down to fourth place and bringing China to fifth.

"There are many disappointed faces in China's side of the stadium tonight, but Japan has never looked happier. With three more games in their group for this season, the future of the World Cup is bright for Japan tonight." The announcer concluded.

Team Japan and China exchanged handshakes and Ichigo swept his arm around Ulquiorra's shoulders and led him to the locker rooms. Ulquiorra was reminded of Grimmjow as he left the field and he dressed and showered quickly.

He knew seeing Grimmjow wouldn't do either of them any good, so he wasn't about to go even if he wanted to. As he left the showers, Ichigo grabbed his arm and led him outside to Orihime. They linked arms with him and together, they set off for the hospital.
Grimmjow didn't remember much between the game and waking up in the hospital room, just the high. He'd felt invincible, untouchable, like the world was in his hands. Then he was coming to on the floor, unsure where he was, who he was with or what happened.

Through the panic turning his heartbeat to a scream, he could recall a quiet, deep voice in his ear that brought back memories of his boyhood and his teenage years. He felt a small hand on his shoulder, evoking the memories of a darkened movie theater, their hands intertwined on the arm of the seat.

His panic calmed until he was separated from that familiar touch and a rush of fear swept over him. Then he remembered circular light fixtures flying past over his head, the feeling of speeding along as frantic voices surrounded him. Then he woke up in an unfamiliar place alone. Outside his window, the sun was rising and he wondered how long he'd slept.

The doors opened and he turned to see a petite nurse hurry in. "Good morning, Mr. Jaegerjaquez." She asked him what he wanted to eat but Grimmjow wasn't hungry.

"What happened to me?" His voice was dry and gruff and she handed him some water.

"We're still waiting for the results of your blood test. The doctor will see you in a few moments." She swept from the room and Grimmjow lay back against his pillows.

After what felt like a year, the doctor hurried in and Grimmjow awaited his news, his stomach twisting about. "You had a grand mal seizure during your game. The results of your blood test are in and we found cocaine and heroin in your system. We contacted your mother and she told us you have no history of epilepsy, is this true?" Grimmjow nodded. He wondered how his mother had reacted.

"Then we believe the seizure was the result of the drug combination. You went into cardiac arrest in the ambulance but paramedics revived you."

Grimmjow's skin felt cold and clammy. He'd almost killed himself and he'd let the whole world know how far gone he was. His breathing turned shallow and he slumped over, his head in his hands as wave after wave of horror washed over him.

He couldn't believe he'd let this happen. Everyone knew about his drug use; his team, his coach, his aunt, his mother, his fans. "Fuck…" He dug his nails into his scalp. He thought he'd had it under control. He was kidding himself. He hadn't been in control of his life since he was ten years old.

"Mr. Jaegerjaquez, for your health's sake you need to get help. I strongly recommend inpatient treatment and group counseling. I'm going to give you the contact information of a rehabilitation facility I think can help you. Once you're discharged, I'd like you to contact them."

"I can't. I don't live here. I'll be going back to Japan in a few days."

"Where in Japan do you live?"

Grimmjow gave him the location of his neighborhood and the doctor said, "Then I'll find a clinic within that area code for you to visit when you return."

Grimmjow didn't know what to say. He didn't want to be to rehab; he'd always dismissed the idea because he thought he hadn't needed it. He wasn't an addict, he told himself. He could stop
whenever he wanted. It was just for fun. It wasn't hurting anyone; he had no one in his life to hurt but himself and it didn't matter because he didn't care about himself.

In the mirror by the bathroom, Grimmjow could see a skeleton lying in his bed. He looked frail, weak, pathetic. His stomach churned over. He'd never associated those words with himself but looking at his body and how he'd deteriorated, Grimmjow couldn't think of any other words to describe himself.

He'd almost killed himself and it was only now that he'd brought himself so close to the edge that he realized he was scared to jump. His life, pitiful and empty as it was, driven by drugs, still had value to him. He didn't know how or why or if he should laugh at himself for feeling this way.

He wanted to be clean; even if he was scared he couldn't do it. He'd wanted to quit for months now and though he was ashamed he'd had to hit rock bottom to realize the depths of his addiction and misery, he finally had the motivation he needed. He accepted the doctor's card, detailing the name and location of a clinic in downtown Tokyo near his home.

The doctor prescribed him anti-convulsions to prevent more seizures as a result of drug withdrawals. He wasn't allowed to take them without a nurse's permission. Grimmjow's stomach churned over. The withdrawals would be a bitch. He didn't know how he'd get through them.

The doctor left him alone to rest and Grimmjow turned on the television and caught up on last night's game. The sports channels discussed Japan's big win against China, showing the moment Kurosaki headed the ball out of play before China could make a shot at the goal.

As they finished their discussion on the game, the topic changed to Grimmjow's seizure during the game. Grimmjow hardly heard the sport's anchor's commentary. He couldn't look away from the screen as he watched his body spasm. He felt cold all over and nauseous; he looked like a corpse.

Kurosaki knelt above him with Ulquiorra beside him, his hand on Grimmjow's shoulder. Grimmjow felt sick with shame to imagine how either of them thought of him. Before their eyes, he'd shown them how weak he was despite how hard he'd tried to prove them wrong.

Grimmjow's door opened and his nurse stuck her pretty face in through the door. "Mr. Jaegerjaquez, you have visitors."

"Oh goody…” Grimmjow sat up with a sigh. He wasn't ready to face his team or any fans who'd come to visit him.

Kenpachi entered the room and the chair wheezed as he collapsed into it. He had a pink balloon attached to his finger. It's a girl, the balloon proclaimed. Grimmjow snorted. "Real funny."

Kenpachi tied the balloon to the arm of his chair and said, "That's gonna be there until you leave. Hope you like it." He went quiet, looking down at his knees. "So…the doctor's telling me you overdosed on something called speedball. Cocaine and heroin…” Kenpachi scrubbed his hand across his stubble and shook his head. Grimmjow looked away and up at the television screen. He hadn't wanted to make Kenpachi look so disappointed.

"I don't have to say it, do I?" Kenpachi said, fixing dark eyes on him.

"Spare me."

"That was fucking stupid, Jaegerjaquez. Do you know how many people have died from that shit?"

Grimmjow looked down at his blankets, unable to meet his coach's gaze.
"I can't feel guilty about this. People are asking me why I didn't know, trying to blame me. I gave you the chance to talk to me; I tried to let you know I had your back, Jaegerjaquez. I had other people who needed my attention, too."

"It wasn't your fault."

"In some ways it is, but I did what I could. Now you have to do the rest. You're out of the games until I see some weight on your bones and I know you've got your life in order. Understand?"

Gimmjow thought that was more than he deserved. Kenpachi said, "Now is there anything I can do?"

"No."

"Did the doctor tell you when you're getting out of here?"

"A day or two."

"I'll bring you food, we've gotta fatten you up. Jaegerjaquez, has this been going on a long time?"

"Yeah. I think I've played every game of my career high."

Kenpachi shook his head. "Shit…you know the press is gonna want to know how soon I can have you back. I'm going to have to tell them something, Jaegerjaquez, you know that."

"Go ahead." The words fell heavy off his tongue but what was the point in hiding it? His fans deserved the truth and his teammates' opinions of him couldn't get any lower. He had nothing to lose, not any more.

"I'll keep that detail to myself, but I'm going to have to tell them the truth and you're gonna have to promise me that if you come back, you're done with that shit. I have to run. You played well last night."

Kenpachi left the room and Grimmjow's phone buzzed on the table. He had over a hundred Facebook notifications and two missed calls from his mother, and his aunt Nelliel had texted him twice and tried to call him. He ignored his mother's voice messages. He wasn't ready to hear her voice after so many years of silence between them. She was the last person he'd expected to reach out to him.

His Facebook was full of messages of support from his fans, wishing him well and hoping he recovered quickly. His heart clenched in his chest. He felt ashamed of himself for airing his dirty laundry in front of all of them.

Grimmjow posted a short message to his Facebook wall; Alive. Feel like shit but I'm gonna get through this. I'm out of the games until I'm clean but I'll watch every one of them. I'll see you guys back on the pitch in a few months.

He wasn't sure if he could kick his addiction in a few months or if he would be there for a year but he was sure of one thing; he was going to be clean no matter how long it took. He was done being a slave to cocaine.

Gimmjow didn't want to call his aunt and hear her disappointed voice or her sobs but he did it anyway.

"I don't understand," Nelliel's voice wept, "I thought you were clean. Why didn't you talk to me? I
would have helped you."

"I don't know."

"Grimmjow, you have to get help. You are worth it. You deserve to be happy. Please get help."

"I will." She went on a few minutes more and Grimmjow was silent as she poured out her feelings, telling him how inadequate she felt, wishing she'd been there for him. He wanted to throw himself out the window for making her feel this way. She'd done more for him than she could ever realize.

Just as he hung up, wondering if he ought to throw himself out the window to his death, his phone vibrated in his hand.

Francine: Grimmjow, long time no see, I know. I'm so sorry. I watched your game last night. I'm so proud of you.
I've tried calling you twice but you didn't pick up and I don't blame you. Just know I'm thinking of you and worrying about you and I would like to visit and catch up.
Please let me know soon.

Grimmjow didn't know what to say or do. Maybe it was his brush with cocaine scented death, but he wanted to see her. He wanted to know if she was living the life she'd always wanted. Another part of him remembered how angry and hurt he'd been after his mother left. She'd promised they'd run away from his father together yet she'd abandoned him.

Now all of a sudden you're missing me? Now you care? Fuck off, he thought and he wanted to tell her to stay the hell away. Fingers poised above his virtual keyboard, he hesitated and realized he couldn't tell her no. Conflicted, he shoved his phone into his drawer and rolled over.

The afternoon sunlight filtered through his blinds and he closed his eyes and drifted into sleep. When he awoke his stomach was rumbling and the sun was setting outside. His nurse gave him his pills. They were his favorite kind; bitter tasting and large enough that they hurt his throat going down.

"Can I get you some dinner, or would you like to have your snack first?"

"Huh?" She picked up a paper bag Grimmjow hadn't seen. It was sitting on his bedside table just out of sight behind his lamp. Had Kenpachi left that there for him? Grimmjow opened the bag and stared in astonishment at the croissant inside. He took a bite and sweet almond paste graced his tongue.
Now he really did want to call his mother. He hadn't had an almond croissant in so long and he was remembering her.

"Hey, who gave me this?" he called after the nurse.

"He didn't say who he was but he wanted to make sure you got it. He told me to tell you he hopes you recover."

Grimmjow could think of a few people who knew of his love for almond croissants. He liked to snap pictures every time he got an almond croissant and share them with his fans, so his mysterious gift giver could have been any number of them.

The other person would be Ulquiorra but Grimmjow dismissed the thought. Maybe in the past Ulquiorra would have done something like this for him, but those times were long gone. Ulquiorra had no reason to send him food, then again he'd also had no reason to stay by his side and calm him down when he'd had his fit.
Grimmjow didn't know what to think so he focused on finishing off his croissant. It didn't matter who had done it or why he decided, though not wholeheartedly. In any case, memories of happier times swirled in his head and brought him peace as he gazed out the window at Beijing's skyline.
Sincerely Yours

Chapter Notes

Due to a miscalculation on my part, the first game in China now takes place in 2016 instead of 2015, so the characters ages have been changed accordingly. This is because the World Cup ends in the year 2018 and since the first round in the WC happened in 2015, then technically Grimmjow and Ulquiorra's team would have had their first game in March, 2016 since the first round is only reserved for lower ranking FIFA members and Japan wasn't on that list. Derp.

The day he was discharged from the hospital, Grimmjow awoke and was surprised again to discover an almond croissant sitting on his bedside table. The doctor prescribed him pills to take and released him as he was deemed in stable condition. He asked again if the nurse knew the person leaving him his favorite pastries and she claimed not to know.

"You have a secret admirer! How fun!" She squealed and Grimmjow left the subject alone. He dressed and watched coverage of the game. On the television, footage from last night's game was being played and images of his seizure raced across the screen. Kenpachi appeared on screen and provided details of his player's wellbeing. The closed captions read;

"Grimmjow will be allowed to play if and when I am sure he is in proper shape to play the World Cup. We need to take this moment to acknowledge a very sad truth among athletes, because Grimmjow's story is not the first and it will not be the last because of the tremendous pressure all athletes play under. Athletes are always expected to be at their best in order to win no matter what is going on in their lives. We need to do a better job at listening; we need to be more understanding and supportive and we need to do what we can to let them know they aren't alone."

One of the substitute players Grimmjow had seen in passing was interviewed; a small, effeminate man with a bob haircut and a condescending smile named Luppi Artenor. "Yes, such a shame about Jaegerjaquez. Personally, I don't understand how he even made the team; he was a wreck and I'm a more…level-headed defender. It's just as well if he never comes back. We don't need a cokehead on our team." His words left Grimmjow outraged.

Grimmjow left the hospital and he and his teammates boarded the plane to take them back to Tokyo. Grimmjow didn't speak to his teammates before or during the flight and he sat away from them and ignored their stares and their questions about his wellbeing.

In particular he kept his distance from Kurosaki and Ulquiorra. He didn't want to know why they'd helped him after he'd made it clear how much he loathed them. His stomach clenched and the nauseous discomfort he'd felt as they went through security turned into a wave. He hurried to the bathroom and was sick in the toilet.

As he stumbled from the bathroom, he encountered Luppi outside the door. He looked up at Grimmjow and smiled a smile that made Grimmjow want to strange him. "Withdrawals? I'll use another bathroom. You probably stunk it up."

Grimmjow was paralyzed. He hadn't been spoken to in such a condescending tone since his days with his father. The smaller man extended a hand, partially covered by the sleeve of his sweater.
which was too big on him. "I'm Luppi. I'm your substitute."

Grimmjow's blood boiled. Kenpachi was replacing him with this smug little shit?

"Or should I say your replacement? Let's be honest now, Jaegerjaquez; you're never coming back. You won't last a month without a fix. So do yourself a favor and quit now. You'll be spared the media attention when you relapse, and I'll get to take your position that much faster."

Grimmjow couldn't speak. He'd never felt more outraged in his life. Luppi waved a twig-like hand in his face. "Hello, hello? Is the junkie home? Whatever, your brain is probably dead anyway. I should have used smaller words."

Grimmjow seized Luppi by the front of his sweater and threw him into the wall. A series of gasps erupted through the cabin and passengers turned their heads to look over the back of their seats. "Jaegerjaquez, sit the hell down and stop that!" Kenpachi barked from his seat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. We are about to begin our departure." The voice over the intercom announced. Grimmjow released Luppi as his hand trembled from the effort of holding him up. He couldn't think of a comeback, his heart was racing and he couldn't focus under the weight of all the eyes on him.

He turned and walked away to his seat and collapsed into it, lips tightly pursed as anger coursed through him. How could Kenpachi use someone like Luppi as a substitute? It was insulting. Luppi brushed past to his seat and Grimmjow stuck out his leg and tripped him as he walked by.

Luppi snorted and smoothed out his sweater and fell into his seat beside Ulquiorra. Grimmjow considered moving. He didn't want to hear them talking smack about him. Grimmjow heard Luppi say, "Ugh, did you see what that junkie did? Look at my sweater, brand new and now I'll have to wash it! I don't understand how he was chosen over me, do you? I'm a much better—,"

"Be quiet." Grimmjow's mouth fell open. He'd never heard such venom in Ulquiorra's voice and in that moment, he felt respect for him.

When they got back to Tokyo it was late at night and though he was exhausted, Grimmjow didn't want to return home. He couldn't when he remembered he had a pound of cocaine in his home. He fumbled in his pockets for the card detailing the location of a rehabilitation facility in his neighborhood and he took the train.

His hands trembled and he jumped when a group of passengers laughed uproariously. His body was craving coke and he felt sick. If he wanted to quit, he couldn't allow himself to return home. His body begged to differ; he would feel so much better if he got high, none of his problems would matter anymore.

Grimmjow thrust his hand up his shirt and felt the ribs prodding through his skin. He was half dead; he couldn't continue to ignore his problems if he valued his life. He got off the train and walked beneath skies heavy with rain to the address the doctor had given him. He stared up at the building that would be his home for the next several months and his heart felt heavy.

He never thought it would come to this. He'd always assumed he would be strong enough to quit on his own. With laden feet, he entered the rehabilitation clinic and smelled potpourri air freshener. A front desk decorated with brightly colored potted plants assaulted his eyes. Plump sofas in bland colors were arranged to the left and Grimmjow could see a dining room and cafeteria in the room to his right.
"May I help you?" The receptionist was peering around the computer at him.

Grimmjow dragged his feet to the desk and he couldn't meet the receptionist's gaze.

"What's your name and how can I help you today?"

"Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez. My doctor recommended this facility." Thankfully the receptionist spared him the humiliation of explaining his addiction.

Grimmjow's trembling hands signed papers and he was shown to his box of a room. He sat and waited on the bed, staring down at his knees as his hands trembled and his heart raced. The door opened and he jumped.

"Hello, Grimmjow, my name is doctor Unohana." He looked and found a middle aged woman with long black hair tied into a braided ponytail. She wore a motherly smile.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions. You don't need to answer if you feel uncomfortable." She sat in the chair across from him.

"How long have you been taking cocaine?"

"Too long to remember."

"How were you introduced to cocaine?"

"Some asshole I knew from school. First it was weed, then he got me into coke."

"So peer pressure? You don't need to be ashamed. That's one of the most common causes of drug use."

"I'm not saying why I took it." Grimmjow wasn't ready to air his family life to a stranger.

"That's alright. How often did you use it and how?"

"Started off with just once a week or whenever I needed a pick me up. Then once I started playing games, I started getting high before I played. I snorted it. Never injected it. I'm an athlete so I didn't want anyone noticing holes in my arm."

"Really, what kind of games do you play?"

"Soccer. I had a seizure during my game in the Bird's Nest."

"Ah, you were in the World Cup game? I wanted to go. How many times would you say you've used this month?"

"I don't know…every day, at least. Used to be I could go a week or two but now…"

"It's alright. That's a normal response. Alright, Grimmjow, thank you for being so open. It's not an easy thing to do, I know. I'm going to set you up for cognitive-behavioral therapy twice a week. CBT will help you avoid relapse and help you recognize and avoid situations in which you're likely to use."

Grimmjow's stomach churned. What did that mean for his career? He'd used before every game.

"I'm also going to recommend contingency management; it's a reward based program on the basis of drug-free urine tests. We look forward to having you here, Grimmjow, and we will do the best we can to help you recover."
"Thanks…"

"Every Wednesday at 1:00 PM we hold group meetings that you're welcome to attend. People share their stories and their advice for living a drug-free life. It's a place where we focus on re-integration and success stories. For the treatments I've discussed with you, I'm going to recommend a six month stay."

Grimmjow hated the idea of talking about his addiction to a group of strangers. They would judge him behind his back just like everyone else did. Unohana shook his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Grimmjow. I am always here if you need to talk and my doctors will do their best to help you."

Grimmjow nodded and once she'd left, he sunk into bed and didn't move. Staring up at the ceiling of his small bedroom, breathing in the potpourri, Grimmjow realized that this was the start of a new chapter in his life. Only time could tell whether the story of his path to a drug-free life ended in tragedy or commenced a new beginning for him.

The first month at rehab was hell on earth. Grimmjow suffered cocaine withdrawals and when his irritability wasn't raging high enough for him to snap at the cafeteria lady if she asked him one more time to repeat himself, then the shakes kept him up at night. Either the food here was bad or the withdrawals made him nauseous because when the shakes weren't keeping him awake, he was vomiting up everything he'd eaten that day.

His doctor took him off his anti-convulsions and he hadn't had another seizure, but when he was unable to sleep at night as his stomach roiled nauseously and his body trembled, he thought he'd prefer another fit than to suffer withdrawals. At least when he had a fit he passed out.

When Grimmjow awoke on the 31st of July to a pounding headache and an overwhelming urge to vomit, he realized he was in for one shitty 28th birthday. Not that any of his birthdays were usually anything to boast about. His parents had always been too poor to afford a good day for him so he'd taken what he could get from them and he'd never had any friends to celebrate the day with. He could recall a few good birthdays he'd celebrated during his years with Pantera, and his aunt Nelliel had always gone out of her way to show him he was appreciated.

He remembered getting shitfaced with Shawlong, Elforte and D-Roy, then going home and getting high with Nnoitra. This year he had no one to celebrate with, he couldn't get high to feel better about it, and going to therapy wasn't the way he wanted to start the day. Resigning himself to a shitty day, Grimmjow threw on a shirt that was inside out and wrenched on some jeans as he dragged himself out of his room.

He spent a half hour with his therapist talking about his addiction, his withdrawals, and how he'd feel so much better if the assholes running this joint would just let him have a few snorts of coke. She wasn't terribly amused but insisted he would feel better in time and that he was doing well. Grimmjow didn't know if he wanted to feel better which was good, because he was sure he never would.

As he drudged through the lobby towards the cafeteria, the receptionist called out to him. "Jaegerjaquez-san! Someone left something for you!"

Grimmjow almost tripped over himself. The receptionist heaved a box onto the desk and Grimmjow went over to inspect it. It was wrapped with blue paper with a green bow on top. A card was attached to the bow. "Did you do this?" Grimmjow asked, wondering if the guy was playing with him.
"No. Some guy and a girl dropped by with it. They wouldn't tell me who they were. Oh, they left this, too." He held out a balloon that read Happy Birthday!

Grimmjow was sure his mouth had fallen down to the floor. My mysterious gift giver is back, Grimmjow thought. Wordlessly, he accepted the box and carried it into his room. He sat on the bed, the box in his lap, and opened the lid. A cake with chocolate icing graced his vision with the words Happy Birthday, Grimmjow! written in icing. Grimmjow tried to remember the last time someone had done something like this for him and failed.

When he'd lived with Nelliel five years ago, she'd thrown him a party and invited his teammates from Seireitai. She'd bought him a new phone and made him a delicious cake but since then, no one had done anything like this for him and at the realization, Grimmjow wished he knew who his mystery gift giver was. They'd brightened up his day. Grimmjow tied the balloon to his lamp and opened up his card.

Happy Birthday, Grimmjow.

I can't imagine celebrating your birthday in rehab is any fun and I know how much you hate birthdays. I hate them, too. I hope this makes you feel a little better.

Congratulations on a month clean. I hope you like the cake. I wasn't sure what kind you like, so I hope it fits the bill.

Get well soon, both because I believe in you and before I'm forced to kill Luppi. I can't stand him.

Sincerely yours,

A fan

Grimmjow smiled. Who was this person and who signed their cards with sincerely yours? He read over the card again and couldn't wipe the smile from his face. It felt good to know at least one person out there believed in him. Unable to resist any longer, Grimmjow cut himself a piece of cake and dug in. The cake was moist and fluffy and tasted of almonds. Grimmjow slapped his hand over his mouth in disbelief. "Are you fucking kidding?"

He ate three more pieces and when he was done, his stomach ached wonderfully. He grabbed some paper from his desk drawer and scribbled on it.

Whoever you are,

Thanks for the cake. I like more than just almonds, though.

I don't know you, do I? Don't be a stranger and say hi sometime! I won't bite unless you want me to.

More sincerely than you,

Grimmjow

He gave the note to the receptionist and after a week of repeatedly bothering the receptionist, he finally received a note attached to a bouquet of fruit.

Grimmjow,

I'm happy you enjoyed the cake. I don't like sweets but even I wanted some.

It's best if we keep our distance. If we did meet it would take the fun out of our exchanges. You'll see
me once you get out of rehab so hurry and recover.

Sincerely yours.

P.s. I hope you like the fruit.

Grimmjow didn't understand why they couldn't meet but he did enjoy their exchanges. There was something fun about it and they managed to brighten up his day without even being there. Grimmjow ate half the bouquet of fruit in his room, gazing up at his bedroom ceiling with a smile he couldn't shake.
The first month without Grimmjow on team Japan went by. In August they would play a home game against Korea but until then, Ulquiorra spent his time relaxing at home. He watched television documenting Korea's progress in the World Cup. During their game against China, they'd put Korea in fourth place and Korea had just lost their game to Iran.

There were good players on Korea's team, but Ulquiorra wasn't concerned. They were suffering and he was confident Japan would beat them. He was alone during the month leading up to the game. Ichigo and Orihime were out of town on a vacation together and he had time to kill by himself.

He caught up on his latest Hemingway book and went to the gym. He tried his hardest to keep his mind off Grimmjow and how he was doing. The news reported that he'd checked himself into rehab and Ulquiorra wasn't surprised. Grimmjow was prideful but he wasn't stupid; he had to have reached the point where he could take no more.

Ulquiorra hadn't expected the swell of pride in his chest when he heard the news. He wanted Grimmjow to recover and he wanted him back on the team, if only so he wouldn't have to listen to Luppi's boasting when practice began. During his first month in rehab, Grimmjow wrote a rant in reply to a fan's post revealing the location of his rehab. Grimmjow took the post down shortly after, realizing his reblog had only made things worse, but his reply was up long enough for Ulquiorra to know the location of his clinic which was how he'd been able to send Grimmjow gifts.

Every so often, Ulquiorra checked Grimmjow's Twitter to see if he'd posted any updates on his progress. He'd posted a picture of his room which he captioned as "Home sweet home." It was a small and bland room with the bare necessities and little else. Otherwise, Grimmjow was very private about his progress and said little other than, "Almost two months clean. Good for fuckin me. I just hope I can stay that way."

Ulquiorra considered going and leaving something for him to celebrate but he wasn't sure what would do it so he decided against it. Even if he wanted to do his part in encouraging Grimmjow, he had to remind himself to keep his distance.

Orihime texted him with a plan.

Orihime: Would you stop second guessing yourself? I know what will make a great present! Come and meet me at my house!

Ulquiorra met up with her the week of her return from her trip, and she dragged him to a local florist. "What flowers do you think he would like?" Ulquiorra looked at her like she had five heads.

"None."

"Come on, Ulquiorra-kun. He's two months clean! He deserves something nice."

"Nothing I give him is going to help him."

Orihime rolled her eyes. "Ulquiorra-kun, it is going to be so helpful to his recovery if he knows people are rooting for him."

"Not me. He has his fans to do that for him."

Orihime ignored him and said, "His room is so boring. He needs some color in it…let me see…Can I
have a bouquet of the forget-me-nots, the morning glory, and the bluebells?" The florist combined the flowers with the darkest blue in the middle, spiraling out to the brightest. The colors reminded Ulquiorra of Grimmjow's eyes.

"Put yellow tulips in the middle, in a circular formation." Ulquiorra wasn't sure why he added them on. It was unlike him to get sentimental but he couldn't resist when he remembered the ring of gold in Grimmjow's eyes so close to the dark blue of his pupils.

Orihime bought a card despite Ulquiorra's protests. "I'm not signing it." He insisted but he wrote Grimmjow a message anyway.

*Get better soon. You have people awaiting your return to the field. People still believe in you. Don't disappoint them, or me.*

*I know what you're capable of. Congratulations on two months clean. Keep that number rising.*

Orihime thought it was blunt but Ulquiorra didn't want to come across as saccharine. Ulquiorra raised his hood over his head as he entered the rehab clinic with Orihime beside him, also wearing a hoodie, hoping Grimmjow wouldn't see them. Orihime smiled. "It's like we're secret agents on a mission..." she giggled and Ulquiorra sighed.

"Can you give these to Jaegerjaquez?" Ulquiorra asked, setting the flowers and the card on the desk.

"Of course. I'm sure he'll be very happy. Thank you."

"Has he had any visitors?"

"No, only fans."

"Any other gifts?"

"People have asked him to sign things. I think he'll really appreciate it."

Ulquiorra thought it was ridiculous that his fans were harassing him. He'd seen plenty of messages of support on Grimmjow's social media, but in person people took advantage of him. Orihime frowned.

"Really? His fans aren't sending him anything? That's pretty sad." She gasped. "Hide!" Ulquiorra looked to his left and saw a flash of blue. Orihime dragged him around the corner as Grimmjow emerged from a door to their right, a sweat-towel around his shoulders. Ulquiorra thought the muscles in his arms were more defined and he looked like he'd put on more weight.

"Have a good workout, Jaegerjaquez-san?"

"Can you tell the assholes snapping pictures at me through the window to fuck off?"

"I'm so sorry. I'll have security deal with them. Oh, before you go..." he handed Grimmjow the flowers and the card.

"This from you?"

"Oh, no! Some guy and a girl came in and gave them to me. I didn't know their names but they wanted to make sure you got these."

Ulquiorra watched as Grimmjow flipped open the card. His scowling mask fell away if only for a few moments as he read, lips parted and eyes widening in disbelief. Orihime put her hand on his shoulder. "Look at his face! He looks so touched." Ulquiorra's chest felt tight at the sight of Grimmjow's face.
"Did they leave?" Grimmjow asked, tucking the card into his back pocket.

"No, they're right over there!" He pointed in their direction. Ulquiorra hit his head against the wall.

"Come on, Ulquiorra-kun! Let's go say hi, please?" Orihime said and Ulquiorra snatched her hand.

"Run." He dragged her towards the doors.

"Hey, get back here!" Grimmjow called as Ulquiorra shot by him, ducking his head down so Grimmjow wouldn't see his face. "Get back here! Who the hell are you?" Grimmjow threw open the door behind them but Ulquiorra barreled around the corner and left him behind.

Throughout the rest of the day, Grimmjow's expression refused to leave his mind and even if they'd almost been caught, reducing his likelihood of visiting again, Ulquiorra was happy he'd listened to Orihime's advice.

He felt like he'd made Grimmjow happy and though he doubted his actions would be enough to help Grimmjow down the road to his recovery, he was glad he'd done it.

Orihime told Ichigo about their gift a day later as they sat in a local café, sipping tea and coffee. "Grimmjow liked the gift," Ichigo said, scrolling through Grimmjow's social media. "I'm pretty surprised, Ulquiorra."

"About what?" Ulquiorra asked, sipping his tea.

"I don't know…you're always going on about how there's no meaning in everything, everything's pointless, life is pointless, but then you do stuff like this. You're kinda contradicting yourself, huh?"

Ulquiorra set his tea down. Now that he was thinking about it, his actions were pointless; there was no guarantee they would help and even if they did, nothing would come from it. Grimmjow would continue to hate him, possibly even if he knew Ulquiorra was the one sending him gifts.

So why was he doing it if he was sure it wouldn't benefit him in any way? He'd promised himself he would keep his distance and yet here he was secretly sending Grimmjow gifts.

"Oh shit. I think I broke his brain." Ichigo said when Ulquiorra was quiet. "I sent him on a downward spiral. Ulquiorra, come back!"

"Ulquiorra-kun, if it makes you feel good, you should keep doing it. Not everything has to have meaning. You clearly care about him and there's nothing wrong with that. Who knows, maybe he'll forgive you?"

Ulquiorra felt guilty for the damage he'd done to Grimmjow but trying to alleviate that guilt was ultimately a waste of time because Grimmjow would never forgive him. "That's not why I'm doing this." Or so he thought. He wasn't sure why he was doing it but seeing Grimmjow lying frail and alone in the hospital had stirred something inside him; a need to be there for him as he once was.

He didn't think he was expecting anything in return, he would be stupid to. He hoped he wasn't. He knew better than to get his hopes up. Grimmjow wouldn't never be his friend again, or anything else.

"Then I don't really get why." Ichigo said.

"Does there need to be a reason? Maybe I just wanted to. There's no reason for doing anything, ultimately it all amounts to nothing so trying to apply meaning to everything is a waste of time because meaning is—,"
"A social construct, yeah, yeah, okay. Spare me. I guess it doesn't matter, it's just kind of weird of you to go out of your way like this."

"I wanted to leave it at almond croissants during his hospital stay, then your girlfriend interfered."

"Yes and you went along with my plans, so you do care about him!" Orihime said, squeezing his shoulders. "Go on, admit it."

"Why I'm doing it isn't anyone's business but mine." Ulquiorra left it at that and refused to say more. He didn't know what his feelings were and he wasn't sure why after all Grimmjow had done he was doing things for him.

But he wanted to. What did it matter why? Wondering why and trying to apply meaning to everything wasn't how he tried to live his life, even if at times like these he found himself trying to probe deeper into his feelings.

Maybe as a teenager he thought he'd discovered what life meant to him, but he was young and stupid then. Playing soccer gave him a semblance of meaning for 90 minutes; he was happy on the field and his goal in life was certain, but then he left the field and was overcome by feelings of emptiness.

Maybe it didn't matter; why did there need to be something else in his life to derive meaning from? Ulquiorra was keenly aware of the emptiness of life than others, that was why people were happier than he was. He should be happy; after all he had nothing and therefore nothing to lose.

But what did others have that he didn't to be so content in their lives? Kurosaki and Inoue were infinitely happier since they'd gotten together. When Ulquiorra asked Kurosaki what his idea of meaning was, he told him his career, his future with Inoue, and his family.

Ulquiorra didn't know what he derived meaning from. He wanted to say from his career, but if his career brought meaning into his life then why did he feel like he was passing time until his death when he was off the field? If wealth and financial security brought meaning into people's lives, it certainly hadn't for him. For some people, family brought meaning in their lives but Ulquiorra was sure he would never get married and he was surer that he didn't want children.

"Everything that people derive meaning from has garnered me no success or happiness, so it doesn't exist." Ulquiorra concluded.

Ichigo rolled his eyes. "That's your problem, Ulquiorra. Literally right there. Well the rest of us are happy so," he blew a raspberry. Orihime gave her boyfriend a look.

"Ulquiorra, just keep on playing soccer for now. Maybe you'll come to a realization when you least expect it?"

Ulquiorra didn't believe her. He was sure he would always feel this way and if that was so, then it was fine by him. If he was meaningless then so were the people around him. The only difference was they refused to accept it and kept pressuring him to conform to their construct of what a meaningful life meant.

If he could be by himself for a while, away from people, maybe he would be content with his life. The only problem was that, for reasons he couldn't fathom, he didn't want to be away from people. He sighed and came to a new conclusion; he was a walking, talking contradiction.
August arrived and Japan played against Korea. Grimmjow wasn't allowed to play. His therapist worried being in the stadium would trigger a relapse. Grimmjow watched a live broadcast of the pre-game warmup. He watched as Ulquiorra shot the ball into the corner of the net. Kurosaki and Abarai practiced heading the ball to one another. Luppi worked on intercepting passes. Grimmjow's legs itched, begging to feel the ball beneath his feet.

"Luppi-san, Luppi-san!" The reporter rushed up to Luppi. "How does it feel to be on team Japan?"

Luppi smiled, folding his arms behind his back with the air of a child about to throw a stone. "Being a substitute was not my calling. Kenpachi is a great coach, but he underestimated me. If Jaegerjaquez never returns, Kenpachi will keep me as a central defender."

"Why won't Jaegerjaquez return?"

"He can't play, of course! He was out of shape, did you see him? Skin and bones! I'm much more qualified to play his position."

"Kenpachi-san said he would let Jaegerjaquez back on the team if he was able enough."

"Kenpachi is not so desperate he needs Jaegerjaquez back. He needs to do what is right for his team and he can't afford Jaegerjaquez back on the team. Besides, we've played much better without him. Everyone is happier, wouldn't you agree?"

Anxiety swirled inside Grimmjow and he balled his fists. He needed to get better. He needed to get back on the field as soon as possible. Six months was too long to be out of the game. What if Kenpachi got tired of waiting for him to come back and replaced him with Luppi? His career would suffer if he continued to stay shut away in rehab. He couldn't let Luppi replace him. He refused to come so far only to be booted off the World Cup team. He had been clean for two and a half months now, he could leave.

Grimmjow's stomach did backflips as he shut off the TV and went to his group meeting on the second floor. He hated these meetings; he hated hearing how well people were coping without cocaine. He felt like he had to compare to them and he was sure he never would. But what did it
matter if his life was shit compared to theirs so long as he was clean?

He had to play the next game. He couldn't stand seeing Luppi stealing his position. He had to return and reaffirm his status as the best damn player they had. Grimmjow sat between recovering addicts during the meeting. He blocked out their comments, churning over what he would say when his time came to speak.

"Grimmjow, would you like to share your progress with us?" Unohana asked. She was the only person in the meeting that looked at him. His fellow addicts in recovery had come to ignore him due to his silence during these meetings.

"I'm leaving." Every head in the room snapped his way. Unohana frowned. Grimmjow explained, "I've been off cocaine for three months now. That's the longest I've ever lasted. I don't need some big success story to tell. I need to start playing games again."

"Grimmjow," Unohana said, "We can't make you stay, but I would advise against leaving now."

"I haven't wanted to use in ages. I'm good to go, so I'm leaving."

"That's good, but just because you haven't wanted to use now—,"

Grimmjow shoved his chair away as he got to his feet. "I don't need some bullshit success story to be clean!"

He packed his bags, waved to the receptionist, and stepped out into the rain washed streets of Tokyo. He breathed in the damp air and listened to the traffic. If he felt uneasy, he ignored his feelings and set off towards home to retrieve his kit. He didn't need group meetings and therapy, not anymore. He'd gotten this far, he could handle the rest himself.

As he rode the train home, he realized he'd been away from home for two and a half months. Instead of feeling relieved to be returning home, there was a noxious twisting in the pit of his stomach. He had coke in his apartment. He wasn't sure how much, he couldn't remember.

Doesn't matter. I'm done with cocaine. If I have any left, I'll flush it down the toilet, he thought and he twisted his fingers together in his lap. He was stronger than cocaine, he had to be. He had to get back on the pitch and to do that, he had to stay clean and so he would. Grimmjow walked to the apartment on wobbly knees and fumbled with his keys in the lock. He climbed the stairs, memories racing through his mind tainted with erratic euphoria. If he found coke, he wouldn't touch it. He wouldn't be a slave to cocaine any longer.

His hands trembled as he turned the key in the lock and stepped into his apartment. The shades were down and darkness fell upon the apartment. Grimmjow switched on the lights, breathing in the smell of dirty laundry and dust. After so much time away, he felt like a stranger in his own home. As he walked by the kitchen to his closet, he asked himself, I kept some in the kitchen, didn't I? In the third drawer...

He sniffed and forced his eyes away from the kitchen counter. He opened the closet and found his metal straw sitting on top of the organizer. Flecks of coke and blood coated one end. Grimmjow felt something cold in the pit of his stomach at the sight of it. He could remember one nostril, drier than a bone and raw, gushing blood the moment he inserted it. He held it between his fingers, picking the end clean.

This thing and the coke he'd snorted with it for years had cost him his sense of smell among other things. He set it down and grabbed his sports bag and he paused as he turned to leave. He snatched
up the straw and marched into the kitchen with it. He stamped on the pedal to the garbage can and held the straw over the open lid.

He didn't let go. Grimmjow remembered his throat going numb and the rush of euphoria drowning him. Throwing out the straw wasn't a big deal; he could snort cocaine with rolled paper. It wasn't like keeping the straw was a threat.

Grimmjow opened his fingertips and the straw fell into the garbage. Grimmjow let the lid fall closed and he found himself staring towards the cabinet. Did he want to know if he still had any? If he did, he needed to get rid of it.

Grimmjow opened the drawer, half afraid he would find a creature with razor teeth bared to strike at his fingertips. He reached inside, feeling in the back of the drawer. His heart raced with relief as he checked the last drawer and found it empty. Good. There was nothing to tempt him in his home.

_I didn't check the back of the bottom drawer._

With trepidation, he reached into the back of the drawer and felt the wood of the rectangular lockbox. His stomach turned over. He pulled the box out and set it on the counter. To his relief, it was locked.

6-20-15, wasn't it? He hoped that wasn't it. Otherwise if it opened, he would be tempted. With trembling fingers, he swiveled the knob on the lock and pulled the metal handle. The box clicked open and instead of the dread he expected, his body cried out in delight.

He opened the lid and gazed at the white powder. There wasn't a pinch of cocaine left; there was enough to keep him higher than a kite everyday for two weeks. Kenpachi wouldn't accept him back yet. His body wasn't what it was but if he showed up energized—

_He'd know. I'd get fired._

His workouts weren't as good as they could be. He was lacking energy. If he snorted and worked out, he'd have enough energy to keep him going for a whole day. He'd have his body back before he knew it and—

_My heart'll burst in my chest. I'll fucking die, that's what will happen._

He sniffed. He could already feel his throat going numb. He didn't need to be clean. What was the point in living if he couldn't get high? He felt so happy when he was high. Did he really want to stop doing something that made him feel so, so happy?

_Life's about more than being happy all the time, you fucking idiot. Throw it out. Get rid of it. I'm done being a coward, I'm done being a slave to this shit, get rid of it!_

He didn't want to. He wanted to snort a little off the tip of his finger. A speck in each nostril, enough that the world and everyone in it no longer mattered. How could that hurt?

When he was high, he wasn't a sack of skin and bones. It didn't matter if he was alone and would always be alone. He could do anything and even if he failed, it didn't matter because he was beautiful and his life was beautiful.

Could he live without that feeling? Did he want to?

He stared across the room into his mirror at the man staring back at him, not dead or alive. He remembered the skeletal man he'd been three months ago and compared to then he still wasn't much
better. But he had the chance to be. He had the chance to take the world by storm and prove why he deserved to be called King of the Field. His body and mind could be his again.

Or he could continue to hide behind coke when his insecurities bore down upon him. For all he'd destroyed using coke, Grimmjow only needed more as his highs grew illusive. He would kill himself. He almost had. How much farther did need to fall?

He'd built his career from the ground up. He'd thrust his middle finger in the faces of everyone who'd doubted him. He couldn't let them see him fall, not after everything he'd done. Grimmjow tilted the box over the garbage can. Cocaine sprinkled in like falling snow but he couldn't pour anymore in. He didn't want to.

Anger made him claw his nails into the box's smooth wooden surface. He was a prisoner. He always would be. He shoved the box into the back of the cabinet and left his apartment.

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At the sight of the Dome, a wave of bitter memories assaulted Grimmjow. What he remembered of practice was a blur of speed and sound. He remembered feeling invincible, like he could go for days without rest. Without cocaine, could he still play like he did? Was he even as good a people thought he was, or was it the way he played while high that people had loved so much?

As he entered the lobby, he saw a flash of bright orange. Kurosaki and Abarai were standing in front of the doors, sharing videos on their phones. He grinned. "Move it!" They jumped ten feet.

"Holy—!" Ichigo's eyes went wide at the sight of him. "Grimmjow? What—?" Grimmjow shoved by him, pushing open the large doors that led onto the pitch.

He could see Kenpachi from here, talking to his team. Kenpachi shoved through his team and met Grimmjow half way there. "Jaegerjaquez, what in the hell are you doing here?"

"I've been clean for three months. They let me leave. I'm playing against Korea."

"No, you're not. Three months isn't enough time, Jaegerjaquez. You've got to go back."

"It's enough for me."

"So you haven't thought of using drugs again, even once?"

Grimmjow hesitated. "I can think about it as much as I want, doesn't mean I'll do it."

Kenpachi's lips thinned. "I don't care how you feel. I'm your coach, and I don't trust you yet. You told me you got high before every game; you've been playing too long to get over your addiction so fast."

"I'm feeling fine. Let me play, I need to get back on the field!"

"No, you need to put aside your pig-headedness and get your ass back to rehab before you relapse! Go back, do your six months, and get your life in order."

"I'm not going back! I don't need to stay in that hellhole for six months! I'm clean, I—,"

Kenpachi grabbed the front of his shirt and shoved him backwards.

"Don't argue with me, Jaegerjaquez. In your state, if I let you back on the field now, you'd be too fatigued to make it to half-time. Go back, get in shape, and come back and show me why I should let you back on the team."
Anger and shame burned inside him. He couldn't go back to rehab. He was clean as he would ever be. He turned away from Kenpachi and walked into the locker rooms. He sat on one of the benches and opened up his gym bag. His equipment lay within, wrinkled and grass-stained. He hadn't fallen during the game except when he'd had his seizure. The grass stain had to be from moments before he'd had his fit.

He went to the bathrooms to wash it off and as he opened the doors, he felt cold all over as the memories washed over him. His eyes were locked on the middle stall. He remembered sitting on the toilet seat and sniffing a line of pure white off the palm of his hand.

He sniffed. His throat felt numb remembering. His hands trembled and he grew short of breath. He would never be able to play without cocaine. It was high-Grimmjow his fans loved. It was high-Grimmjow who'd won so many games for Pantera and Seireitai. He wasn't at his best unless he was high.

"I'm weak. When did I get so fucking weak?" His hands balled at his side, nails cutting into the palms of his hands. He had to go back. He wasn't clean, not at all. He didn't even trust himself to return home and ignore the cocaine in the back of his drawer.

He threw open the bathroom door and found himself face to face with Luppi. Grimmjow's heart plummeted.

"Jaegerjaquez? What are you doing back here? Oh...don't tell me you were getting high in the bathroom?"

Grimmjow's nails broke through the skin of his palms.

Luppi placed a dainty hand on his chest and Grimmjow's skin crawled at his touch. "Go on, run back to rehab where you belong, little junkie."

Grimmjow shoved Luppi and advanced on him. "Stop talking shit about me to the media."

"Then stop giving me shit to talk, honey."

Grimmjow's blood boiled. He seized the front of the man's jersey and threw him up against the lockers. "I'm gonna come back, you hear me you little shit? And the minute I do, Kenpachi is gonna boot your ass off the team! No one takes my place!"

"I did, and you're not taking it away from me." Luppi wasn't afraid of him. He didn't see Grimmjow as a threat to his position. Grimmjow was beneath him.

"I'm gonna get better, I'm gonna come back and when he sees how much I've changed—,"

"Sorry, you're sniffing too much for me to believe you." Grimmjow hadn't realized. When he felt agitated, he sniffed.

"Do us all a favor, Jaegerjaquez; go overdose and die this time. You were never worthy of the World Cup. You're a lousy player, high or not."

Grimmjow saw red. He slung back his fist, ready to break every tooth in Luppi's vile mouth. Something closed around his fist and he whirled around and saw moon white skin and pale green eyes. "Take your juvenile behavior somewhere else."

Grimmjow didn't know who he wanted to hit more. He shoved Ulquiorra's arm off of him and Luppi, smiling, skipped around him and towards the field. Before Grimmjow could chew Ulquiorra's
head off, Kenpachi entered the room and made a beeline for the bathroom.

Grimmjow realized he'd almost gotten in trouble with Kenpachi. If Kenpachi had seen him throw the first punch, Grimmjow wasn't sure what he'd have done.

"What are you doing here?" Ulquiorra asked.

"That was nice of you to stick up for your friend." Of course Ulquiorra would be friends with someone like Luppi. The idea set his blood boiling.

"What are you talking about?"

"He hates me as much as you do. It makes perfect sense. I bet you tell him half the things he says on camera about me."

"I don't hate you."

"Because I'm beneath you, right? Fuck you, Ulquiorra. I'm gonna come back stronger, I swear on it! When I do, I fucking dare you to look down on me."

"Then you better not give me any reason to."

His words lit a fire in Grimmjow's belly. He would get his body back and he would be clean and if that meant he stayed in rehab for a year, then so be it. He would do this if not for himself then only so he could wipe that look of indifference off Ulquiorra's face. He would be worthy of respect, never again would he be lesser-than.

"I'm coming back and when I do, you're gonna regret ever looking down on me, Ulquiorra. Your friends, too."

"Good."

Grimmjow turned his back on Ulquiorra and walked back into the lobby.
Grimmjow returned to rehab and tried to come up with a plan for himself. He needed to eat better and spend any points he earned from his drug-free urine tests on workout sessions. He knew he needed to eat more protein if he wanted to bulk up.

His phone buzzed and he snatched it up to see his aunt Nelliel had texted him.

Nelliel: **OMG! Did you see the latest cover for Athletes Weekly? It's so hot! Aren't those your teammates?**

She'd attached a picture from the women's magazine and sent it to him. Team Japan posed for a picture, shirtless with their arms around one another. Grimmjow gagged when he saw Luppi shirtless. He had a boy's body. He snorted.

"I could kick your ass in a heartbeat…"

He frowned as he looked over Kurosaki. There'd been a time when he was certain he was the better looking of the two. Now, looking at him, Grimmjow felt inferior. He found Ulquiorra in the picture and frustration welled up inside him.

Ulquiorra had a beautiful body. He always had. He was slender and small and his muscles gave him graceful strength. His abs were flat, his Adonis belt gave his hips an attractive curve. His chest was smooth and round with enough definition to keep him from looking too boyish.

Grimmjow removed his shirt and walked to the mirror and disgust clawed into him at the sight of himself. His bitter ex-lover was a show-stopper compared to him. He couldn't have that.

Grimmjow clenched his fists. Ulquiorra was going to be in for a huge surprise when Grimmjow returned to the field.

Within the week, Grimmjow spent the tokens he earned as reward points to take trips to the gym. He ate lean meats, vegetables, and he drank more water than he thought he needed. Within the third week of his return to rehab, Japan had their game against Korea. Grimmjow watched it from the living room with all the other patients.

The patients' spirits rose as they watched their country play against Korea. Grimmjow noticed things about his teammates he hadn't noticed before.

He had to admit Kurosaki's heading skills were good. He could shoot the ball for miles off the top of his head, he was good at intercepting passes, his tackles were accurate. The crowds loved him. As Kurosaki kicked the ball out into the crowd, the audience went wild, chanting his name.
Anger dug its claws into his heart. Everyone had always loved Kurosaki. Grimmjow didn't get why. He was hot-headed and obnoxious. He was also good looking, charismatic, and his teammates looked up to him. Grimmjow scowled.

*I'm all that and more. So why could people care less about me?*

With a minute left, Ulquiorra scored them their fifth goal and the referee sounded the whistle. Japan won with five goals to Korea's zero. The patients in the room went wild, leaping to their feet and hugging one another and Grimmjow watched the recap.

Japan passed the ball from one player to the next, closing in on the goal. Ulquiorra, completely composed, caught the ball as he charged in from the left. He hurled the ball into the corner of the net. The Korean goalie hadn't had time to react and stood, blinking as he tried to process what had happened.

Grimmjow shook his head.

Was the guy even real? Grimmjow didn't know how he did it, but he was almost always accurate when he shot the ball. Ulquiorra's teammates engulfed him, jumping up and down with him until they fell over. He frowned.

How did someone like Ulquiorra have the admiration and respect of his teammates? He was quiet and a loner, but people loved what he brought to the team and he had friends off the field. Grimmjow, for all the games he won and his fame off the field, had no one. He kept telling himself he was better off this way, but if he was set in his ways then why did envy claw at his insides?

The points Japan won for their game against Korea put them in third place. Grimmjow hoped to be back in time to play the final game, so he focused on building his muscles and jogged for fifteen minutes. He wanted to start going an hour, but his legs cramped by the end of his jogs.

As he returned from his jog, Grimmjow made for the showers and someone called out to him. He turned and saw Unohana wave to him. "Come into my office for a moment, please. I won't keep you long."

Confused, Grimmjow followed her inside and she took a seat in an armchair by the window. Grimmjow looked around at the affirmations framed on the wall and the tiny statue of Buddha on her desk.

"What do you want?" He asked.

"I wanted to talk to you, that's all. You're approaching your sixth month here and you're still very quiet in our meetings. I wondered if you had anything on your mind you'd prefer to tell me in private." He had a lot on his mind but he didn't want to share it.

"How's your progress going?"

"It's fine. I've been working out, eating better, not being a cokehead. I wanna get outta here."

"Do you still have the urge to use?"

"Sometimes my body misses it. I don't."

"Are you noticing any improvements in your life without cocaine?"

"Not really." Grimmjow didn't know what to say. He was still friendless, he had people depending
on him, he still wasn't sure if he could play without coke.

"Some people have told me they feel in control of their lives. You don't feel that way?"

"Not yet."

"You will, give it time. Do you have anything planned for this week, anyone coming to visit?"

"No." He'd been here for months now, why would people come out of the blue to see him?

"You must have some people who want to see how you're doing." Unohana frowned.

Grimmjow scoffed. "My mom wants to see me but like hell I'm letting her near me. She left me and she thinks she can come back into my life?"

"Why did she leave?"

"She found out I was doing weed, so she left." Grimmjow was angry but he didn't blame her for leaving. He'd let her down and if he could take it back, he would. His aunt offered to visit but Grimmjow didn't want her coming out of her way. She'd already done enough for him.

"Do you want to see her?"

"What's that matter?" He did, sometimes. Other times he wanted her to stay as far away as possible. Knowing she'd watched his game tore his soul into pieces and made it whole again all at the same time.

"You must miss her."

"Not really." The ache in his chest contradicted him.

"What about your father? Is he around?"

"No idea. I don't know if the guy's alive." Sometimes Grimmjow wondered where he was, what he was doing, if he was happier. If he was alive, that is.

"So your mother left you with your father?"

"And my father dropped me at my aunt's and took off. You know, the day I started using, he was criticizing me. That's what pushed me into smoking weed. I thought I'd be around people who accepted me if I did it. It's his fault and he didn't have the fucking guts to fix what he started." Anger seeped into his voice and he cut himself off. He hadn't let his father get to him in years and he wasn't about to change that.

"What about your teammates? Do they ever visit?"

Grimmjow laughed at the thought.

"What?"

"Like hell. They're disappointed I didn't die during the game." Unohana frowned at him.

"Why would you say that?"

"They think they're better than me. They always have, because I was a cokehead and they weren't. They had normal families, I didn't. They've got friends on and off the field, I don't. But so what, I
don't need any of that stuff to have a successful life."

"Would you have liked any of those things?"

Grimmjow was silent. The day he'd left Seireitai for good was still burned into his memory. He hated knowing he might not see any of them again but he'd swallowed those feelings down. all that mattered was winning.

Leaving Pantera was worse. He'd never wanted to play knowing he wouldn't be playing with Shawlong, Elforte and D-Roy again. What was the point in playing if he was playing alone and only ever for himself?

"Is there anything you like about your teammates?"

"No—," If he was honest with himself, he respected Kurosaki's skills as a defender. Grimmjow thought he was better by far, but somehow Kurosaki was the more popular of the two of them. He had a charisma about him and people flocked to be his friend. More than that, he was warm in ways Grimmjow wasn't.

The man was super human in his skills as a striker. Whenever he watched him play, Grimmjow was helpless to keep his jaw from falling agape in amazement.

Ulquiorra, for all his social awkwardness, had friends off the field. Grimmjow couldn't comprehend it. How could Ulquiorra have people in his life while Grimmjow was alone?

Unohana touched his hand and he jumped. "It sounds like what you need is people in your life who respect and care about you so don't be afraid to show that you care."

Grimmjow shook his head. People were trouble, like his father said, and Grimmjow destroyed every relationship in his life. "I haven't got time for relationships. I need to focus on my career."

"Grimmjow, it must have hurt you when your mother and father left, but not everyone will hurt you the way they did. By letting people into your life, you'll give these self-defeating thoughts less power. Try to let people in; not everyone thinks of you the way your father did. You need to see that."

Grimmjow doubted that. He'd only known people who thought his French heritage, his poverty, and his addiction made him worthy of scorn. It was easier to force people to respect him, and that meant winning.

But never had a day gone by where he wished he could plant his feet in the earth and stop pushing forward. He wanted someone who could take him as he was, someone he didn't have to work hard to please but someone who didn't see him as their better.

He'd never find someone like that. He needed to reclaim his title as King of the Field. King was a lonely position, even in all its power, but it worked for him. People were too complicated. Grimmjow stood up and walked to the door.

"There are people out there who care about you. Did you know the people who brought you those flowers?"

"No. They ran off before I could see them." He'd been surprised they hadn't asked for an autograph. All the fans who visited him had wanted things signed. Regardless of what their intentions were, Grimmjow couldn't throw the flowers away. He read the card they'd left him and his heart swelled inside him.
Someone out there was rooting for his recovery, and they saw something in him that they still believed in. It meant something to him and it motivated him. Grimmjow increased the length of his morning jogs and he increased the number of reps he did at the gym. By the end of the day, he was sore and exhausted, but he was building muscle and gaining weight.

He stopped other joggers to recommend a route to him and many of them recommend a trail in the mountains outside Tokyo. "It's a very long run! I barely made it, there's so many stairs!" the jogger said, taking a gulp of water as he stretched out his ankles.

"Where's this trail?" Grimmjow asked.

"It's on Mt. Takao. You can take a cable car and to the left of the station is Inariyama Trail. It takes around ninety minutes to reach the top, but it is worth it. Take the Keio train from Shinjuku and get off at Takaosanguchi."

Grimmjow knew right away that he would climb to the top of that trail. It would be a test to prove that his body and soul no longer relied on drugs to get through life.

So as he neared the end of his fifth month in rehab, he was nervous when he boarded the cable car that carried him through the skies towards Mount Takao. He would be disappointed in himself if he grew too tired to climb the trail to the top.

As he stepped out of the cable car, he walked around the station and found a trail awaiting him. He followed the trail as it ascended up the mountain, high out of sight, and steeled himself. A few months ago, he would have been out of breath climbing the first twenty steps, but he was breathing steadily as he climbed.

He pressed on and the sun peered out from behind Mount Fuji, glittering from behind the mountain like a diamond. He'd applied bug spray before he left, but the early morning was cool and quiet and no bugs were out to bother him. Birds cried out in the trees, and Grimmjow stopped to change to his jogging shoes.

He hadn’t come here to hike. He was here to push himself to the limits and come out on top. If that meant he would run up the mountain, stopping only for short water breaks and to stretch his ankles, then so be it.

Grimmjow put his playlist on full volume and left everything but his water and lunch behind a tree. He stretched his legs for a minute and took in a deep breath, vowing himself not to back down.

He was done being a slave to cocaine. His body was his today, never to be owned, abused or mistreated again.

With that thought in mind, Grimmjow took off up the steps and began the ninety minute journey to the top. Half an hour later, he was breathless and in need of a rest; his ankles felt tight and his heart was pounding in his ears.

He slumped over, hands on his knees, and took a few gulps of water, coughing in the cold air. He stretched out his ankles and when he was ready, he pressed on up the mountain. The sun rose high into the sky as he ran and despite the cold, the sun beat down into his back and kept him warm as he ran.

Grimmjow couldn’t remember the last time he'd felt the wind in his hair or appreciated how deep blue the sky was. Cocaine had taken away his senses. He'd been living blind, dumb and deaf for years and he finally felt like he could have his life back.
An hour and a half went by. Grimmjow wondered if he'd ever reach the end of the trail, then the ground sloped upwards. He followed the bend, his legs aching and his throat raw from cold.

He pushed aside the sprawling branches of a tree, revealing the city of Tokyo far below him. He'd left his addiction behind him.

Months ago, he never would have made this climb. His body would have caved but he was stronger now. He'd taken the lash cocaine whipped him with and broken it in two over his knee.

Grimmjow let his head fall back against his shoulders as he collapsed onto a rock. He relished in the ache and throb of his muscles as he stared up into the blue infinity of the sky above him.

He grinned as for the first time he could remember he realized he was happy and that the world was his for the taking.

He was free.
In November, Japan began training for their final home game of the year against Iran. They played a game in October against Saudi Arabia and won enough points to put them in third place. They'd need to win against Iran to put them second place to qualify for the third round. They'd lost the game with one goal to Saudi's two.

Ulquiorra didn't understand how they'd gone from five to zero against Korea and then played poorly against Saudi Arabia. He would blame the many injuries the team sustained during the match. Hisagi injured his hand saving their goal and was unable to play. His replacement was an oaf.

Kurosaki cracked his head into an attacking defender trying to head the ball. Abarai got fouled off the field, losing them four points. Coupled with their poor goal keeper and their weakened defense, it was no wonder they'd lost. Luppi whined as the team dressed to leave the field and insulted his teammates.

"Hisagi, what the hell was that? It didn't hurt that much, did it? You should have kept playing!"

"Kurosaki, you dumbass! What idiot hits their head like that? I should have played this game myself!"

Ulquiorra scored them their only goal of the match, but Saudi Arabia won the game on a penalty kick. Spirits were low, but Kenpachi insisted they could secure a spot in round three if they played their best against Iran. If they got third place, they would be set back in play-offs and Kenpachi didn't want that.

Ulquiorra would like it if they won against Iran. It was their last game until March when round three began. The other teams still had games to play until then. He would feel restless unless they ended their season on a good note.

Before practice, Inoue invited him out for breakfast at a café. They had an early morning coffee, the windows laced with the first frosts of winter.

"Let's bring Grimmjow-kun something." Orihime said and Ulquiorra didn't argue. He was a man of habit and whenever they came here, they got Grimmjow something. He was also tired of arguing with her. They bought him the usual and took the train to his clinic. Ichigo huffed.

"This is nice, Orihime, but if Grimmjow sees me, he's gonna flip out."

"We haven't gotten caught yet. I'll ask the receptionist to give it to him for us." Orihime assured him. Ichigo sighed. "Why are we doing this anyway?"

"Because no one else will. He's all alone. He appreciates it, doesn't he, Ulquiorra-kun?"

"He seems to." Grimmjow was lonely. How could he not be? His mother didn't visit, his fans used him, and no one from their team visited.

Having lived with loneliness every day of his life Ulquiorra knew the feeling too well. If he helped ease someone else's loneliness, these trifle gifts were good for something.

They arrived at the clinic and Ulquiorra gave the pastry to the receptionist. "Give this to Jaegerjaquez-san."
"Sorry, he left."

"Where did he go?"

"I have no idea. He left. Sorry."

Ichigo and Orihime looked at Ulquiorra.

"Did he say whether he's coming back? He still has one more month here." Ulquiorra said.

"No, he rushed right out the door. He had a bag with him. He must be coming back, he didn't check out."

Ulquiorra pushed the paper bag into the bottom of his bag and turned to leave. Ulquiorra worried Grimmjow left rehab again. He had the chance to help himself; he couldn't afford to get impatient and leave.

"I hope he's coming back. He's been doing great here. It could be harmful if he left before the doctors deemed him ready."

Ulquiorra's fingers clenched around the handle of his gym bag. That was exactly what Grimmjow would do, act like he was the judge of his condition. What was he doing, wasting his time on someone who couldn't care less about themselves?

He knew better. People had only ever brought disappointment and hurt into his life. Ichigo and Inoue were his friends now, but what about after they got married? Would they want to hang around with him then?

He still wasn't sure why they let him tag along in the first place. Was it out of pity because they knew he had no other friends? Fighting back a sigh, Ulquiorra walked out into the streets.

He felt like an idiot for continuing to waste time on Grimmjow. Hadn't he pledged not to give him the time of day? Nothing would come from this. Grimmjow would always loath him and nothing Ulquiorra did could change that.

Ulquiorra ignored Ichigo and Orihime's quiet chatter and hurried ahead to the stadium. Once inside, he changed and stepped onto the pitch with Ichigo.

"Hello, Shorty-chan." Luppi's voice purred in Ulquiorra's ear. Ulquiorra fought back the urge to sock him in the stomach to get out of his range. "Excited for the next game? Try to do better this time or Kenpachi will have me play the forward position, too."

"Shut it, Luppi." Ichigo snapped, "It's been a month, would you get over it?"

Luppi smiled, folding his arms over his chest. "Get over it? Instead of learn from my mistakes? With that kind of attitude, you'll lose us the game again, Kurosaki."

"I didn't—!" Ichigo began, eyes blazing, and Renji barked, "Hey, Luppi! You better not be talking shit over there, or we're gonna have a problem!"

"Sorry, sorry, I was wrong. Abarai lost us the game when he got fouled off the team. Otherwise the three points from your only goal, Cifer, might have earned us in second place."

Ulquiorra didn't know why the man went on and on about his only goal of the game. Luppi couldn't score to save his life; it wasn't like he could have done any better. Renji called Ichigo away and
Ulquiorra tried to walk around Luppi who marched out in front of him.

"Play better. The junkie is never coming back, and I'm not playing with a shitty team, understand?" Luppi asked, all in a sing song voice as his mocking eyes blazed into Ulquiorra's. An overwhelming urge to sock Miniature Hitler as Ichigo called him in the face arose inside him. He wouldn't forgive himself if he wasted any of his time on Luppi.

Before he could so much as move, Luppi's mouth fell open and his eyes widened to the size of a soccer ball. "Oh, what in the—?" Luppi's voice became a choke as a thick hand shot out and seized the front of his jersey. Luppi was wrenched off his feet and brought in inches from Grimmjow's face, contorted in a smug grin.

"Guess who's back, bitch?" Grimmjow whirled Luppi around and shoved him towards the stadium doors. "Now get the hell off my field."

Ulquiorra hardly recognized Grimmjow; he'd put on weight in the past five months. When he turned piercing blue eyes in Ulquiorra's direction, something in Ulquiorra's soul tumbled over.

"Move it." Grimmjow shoved by him and walked towards Kenpachi. Kenpachi ended his phone call and marched over to meet him.

"Jaegerjaquez, what in the hell are you doing back? I told you—,"

"To come back when I was able bodied. I'm not out of rehab until next month, but my doctor deemed me fit to play, so I'm going to Iran and no one's stopping me."

Kenpachi scowled. "We'll see about that, Jaegerjaquez. Come into my office. I want to have a look at you because like it or not, I do get the final say around here."

Grimmjow looked at Luppi, pointed to the stadium doors and blew him a farewell kiss and walked away with a wave. Luppi snorted, folding his arms. "No way. No way will Kenpachi replace me with a junkie." He burst out laughing.

"I don't know," Ichigo was grinning, "Grimmjow looks like he's in good shape to me."

"It hasn't been long enough…" Renji fretted. Ulquiorra watched Grimmjow leave, unable to tear his eyes away. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined he'd see Grimmjow whole again. He hadn't realized he'd been rooting for this moment until he was speechless by the sight of Grimmjow walking tall and full of confidence.

"He's a cokehead. He'll always be! Nothing will change that and I'm not getting replaced by a junkie!" Luppi seethed and hate blazed in his eyes. That condescending attitude was what turned Grimmjow to drugs in the first place. Being he'd never accomplish anything, people telling him he wasn't good enough.

Ulquiorra's palms stung as his nails dug into his skin. Grimmjow was still recovering. If he came back onto the team and Luppi harassed him, would he be able to take it? How damaging would Luppi's words be? Ulquiorra worried Luppi's toxic attitude would become a threat to Grimmjow's recovery.

After fifteen minutes, Kenpachi emerged from the lobby. Grimmjow wasn't with him and Ulquiorra's mouth felt drier by the sight. Ulquiorra went to meet Kenpachi as he assembled the team and gave them the run down on today's practice. As he dismissed them, Ulquiorra stayed behind with Kenpachi.
"Where is he?"

Kenpachi said, "I sent him to get testing done. He seems as clean as the next man, but I'm gonna be pissed as hell if he's still screwing around."

"Is he fit to play?"

Kenpachi nodded, brows raised. "As fit as anyone else on this team. If he's clean, he's welcome back."

"What about Luppi?"

"Like I give a rat's ass. He's outta here if Jaegerjaquez comes back. The guy's a good player, but he's the biggest pain in the ass I've ever worked with. Why, you think otherwise?"

"No. I was going to say having him around could be detrimental to Jaegerjaquez's recovery."

Kenpachi nodded. "Me, too. Now, get your ass onto the pitch." He clapped Ulquiorra on the shoulder. Ulquiorra felt better to know Kenpachi was taking Grimmjow's health seriously.

As Luppi whined beside him, Ulquiorra realized he couldn't wait for Grimmjow to return to the team. Grimmjow was a delight to play with compared to Luppi.

Please let those tests come back clean, Ulquiorra thought. Was he, a nihilist and atheist, praying? If he was praying it wasn't to God. No, he preferred to think of it as hoping. He was a pessimistic person and a realist and Grimmjow's chances of coming back clean was up in the air.

He couldn't say Grimmjow's drug tests would come back positive because he didn't know if they would. Even if they came back clean, there was nothing stopping Grimmjow from relapsing. Ulquiorra couldn't believe in an optimistic outcome but he wouldn't settle for a pessimistic one, either.

He would try to keep his mind open to both possibilities and whichever came to pass, he would have to accept. A quiet voice whispered in his mind, radiating with hope as it whispered again and again in no uncertain terms,

He will be clean. He will be clean. He will be clean.

Because when Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez said something, he went through with it. If he said he was going to Iran, he was going and there wasn't anyone who could stop him. And Ulquiorra hoped—yes, hoped—that anyone included himself.

At break, Ulquiorra sought out his usual quiet sitting area by the windows. He read while he ate and he heard footsteps and looked away in disinterest as Luppi walked by him.

Ulquiorra remembered the doctor's office was around the corner and irritation surged within him. "What are you doing?" Luppi stopped at the corner.

"None of your business, Shorty-chan."

"How about you waste less time on Grimmjow and spend more time practicing? For all your boasting, you played a poor defense against Saudi Arabia."

"Practicing isn't going to mean a thing if I'm going to get thrown off the team the moment Cokehead gets back on."
"Leave him alone." For all his attempts at disinterest, the warning was as natural as breathing.

Luppi chuckled. "There's no way he's clean after only five months. Kenpachi has to know that. I'm not getting replaced."

"If he is, you're back to being a substitute. Harassing him won't change that." Luppi wrenched Ulquiorra's book from his hands and hurled it across the room.

"He's the one who should be a substitute! Not me!" Luppi's shrill scream tore into Ulquiorra's ears. A small hand, surprising in its strength, seized Ulquiorra's shirt and wrenched him to his feet. Luppi forced Ulquiorra to face him, eyes bulging and face contorted in a snarl.

"I was captain of my team! I don't play second best to a tweaked out cokehead!"

"He played better high than you do sober." Luppi's mouth fell open in outrage. "You're intimidated by him. He's the better player and Kenpachi will have him back on the team once he's recovered. Nothing can change this, so leave him alone."

"Fine." Luppi smiled, hideous in his anger, and stepped away from Ulquiorra. "No, this is good. I hope he comes back onto the team. I hope he relapses. When he does, he'll overdose and he'll do our team a favor and die this time."

Ulquiorra's knuckles cracked against the side of Luppi's nose. Luppi flew into the wall and before he could recover, Ulquiorra seized the front of his jersey. Luppi gaped at him in horror and outrage, his teeth bared,

"Artenor, you are a substitute. You will always be a substitute whether Jaegerjaquez makes the team or not. So shut your vile mouth."

The muscles in Luppi's arms swelled and Ulquiorra braced himself for a fight he'd started. Someone whistled and Ulquiorra saw Grimmjow standing at the corner behind them. There was a bandage on his arm with a spot of blood showing through.

"Fighting over me, ladies?" Grimmjow asked, his lidded eyes dancing with sly amusement. Ulquiorra stumbled backwards as Luppi shoved him. Red-faced and sneering, Luppi turned on his heel and marched away.

Luppi called out with an arrogant smile, "Even if you make the team, you're still a cokehead to me, Jaegerjaquez! Your position is mine and I'm getting us to Germany!" He spat over his shoulder at them.

"Little fucker." Grimmjow muttered. He turned to Ulquiorra and said, "That was ballsy, didn't know you had it in you."

"Someone had to shut him up."

"Fuckin' tell me about it…"

Ulquiorra realized this was the most civilized they'd been since they started playing together. Ulquiorra turned away and packed up his lunch, unsure how to react to this strange turn of events. As he turned back, Grimmjow tossed him his book from over his shoulder and Ulquiorra caught it.

"I'm fit to play."

Ulquiorra's breath caught in his throat and he wondered if he'd misheard. He was reluctant to get his
hopes up, afraid of disappointment. He looked up in time to see Grimmjow's armor fall away as he smiled.

It was a smile that radiated with confidence and pride. His smile reignited a flame in his eyes and Ulquiorra realized Grimmjow had died and been reborn.

All at once, he was the man Ulquiorra had once known and a stranger.

"Bet you didn't see that coming, did you?" Grimmjow's eyes burned into Ulquiorra's. "I'm coming back, Ulquiorra, and I'm gonna show you who the better player is."

Grimmjow walked away and Ulquiorra was unable to look away until he'd vanished from sight.
By 7:00 the following morning, the doctor emailed Grimmjow and Kenpachi the results of his blood test. There was not a trace of cocaine found in his system. Grimmjow knew from the start what the outcome would be, but to have it confirmed brought a smile to his face.

After he read the email, he lay back in bed and didn't move for a while. He still had one month left of rehab but he was clean. From time to time, his body missed cocaine, but he knew now that he didn't need coke to feel good in life. He felt good when he ate right, he felt good when he worked out, and he knew he would feel good playing soccer.

Best of all, Kenpachi gave him an evaluation before he got his blood work done and deemed him fit to play. After so many years as a slave to cocaine, his body and mind were his again.

Grimmjow wasn't sure how to react to these realizations as they washed over him one by one, submerging him. He should feel like a prisoner, kept in darkness all his life, who'd seen the sun for the first time.

Instead a voice, laden with dread, fretted, What if I relapse? What if I'm fit to play but I can't play without it? What if I was only a good player while I was high? What if I'm shit without it?

He gnashed his jaw as his breath grew shallow.

What if my fans have forgotten about me?

What if they're still disappointed in me?

What if I can't win back their respect?

If I don't win us Iran, that's it for me. I'll lose face for good this time.

Fuck.

Fuck!

I have to play my best this game. I have to. I can't afford to lose. What if I'm not ready? What if—?

Grimmjow slung his legs over the bed and stood up. He was anxious because he hadn't hit the gym today, he'd feel better knowing he'd attained his fitness goals of the day. He would increase his reps and try to work out for an extra hour today. As long as he took strides towards being at his best, he would feel more at ease as the game approached.

He went to the gym for an hour and a half. He'd hoped to stay longer but he pushed himself too hard and he wore himself out. His aching muscles and the fatigue that made him sluggish on the walk home told him he'd hadn't slacked off.

He showered at the clinic since the gym showers were freezing. Then he retired to his room and devoured a salad. He gulped down a protein shake and relaxed in bed as snow fell outside his window.

I don't need coke to work out, so I don't need coke to get me through this game or the next. I can do without it.

He couldn't control whether his fans respected him or not. All he could do was play his very best and
if he impressed them, they would come rushing back.

*Or they'll realize I'm shit without cocaine and they'll leave. What's stopping them? I sure as hell wasn't good enough for my mom to stick around, or my dad.*

Even if he did win Iran, he was still alone. Nothing would change that. Grimmjow scowled at himself. He wasn't being wholly truthful with himself; one person still believed in him. He fumbled inside his end table until he felt smooth paper under his fingertips. He pulled the unsigned card out of his drawer and opened it.

He knew the contents by heart from many sleepless nights spent awake as frustration and doubts gnawed him. The message brought him peace of mind through those restless nights. As familiar with the message as he was, it never failed to bring him peace of mind.

Get better soon. You have people awaiting your return to the field. People still believe in you. Don't disappoint them, or me. I know what you're capable of. Congratulations on two months clean. Keep that number rising.

Grimmjow wished he at least knew the name of the person who'd written him this card. He wasn't sure why he wanted their name. He wasn't a sentimental person, so he couldn't imagine he'd be able to repay the favor in kind.

*If I knew their name, at least I'd know if it was a girl sending me this stuff, he grinned to himself. Maybe it is a girl, I don't know. Oh, man…I hope so. I hope she's got hella jugs. That'd be hot.*

If it was a girl, now he wanted her to approach him after the game against Iran. Regardless, it meant the world to know someone out there believed in him when he couldn't do it himself. He didn't know how much support he had to win back, but he knew that he already didn't have to try for at least one person.

He had to keep trying and he wouldn't try only for himself. It would be bad enough if he failed, but it would be worse to let someone who believed in him down.

The storm of doubt and insecurity raging inside him began to subside. Grimmjow watched the snow fall outside his window until he finally fell asleep.

After his nap, Grimmjow jumped on the metro and rode it to the Dome. It still felt strange to be back after so many months. The last time he was here, he memories of his addiction haunted him.

He felt better since then. He regretted ever touching cocaine and he hated to remember how dependent he'd become on it. He would never do that to himself again.

As he entered the changing rooms, the chatter of his teammates stopped and all eyes were on him. Grimmjow he held his head high even as his skin prickled when he imagined what they might be thinking of him.

Even if they still doubted him, or if they thought lowly of him, he would prove them wrong. Not today or tomorrow, but someday soon. Luppi looked angry enough to spontaneously combust, and Grimmjow grinned at the sight.

"What? Want coke? Haven't got any, sorry." His teammates looked away and continued to change. Chuckling to himself, Grimmjow muscled his way through to his locker. His shoulder knocked into someone else and he turned to find Ulquiorra looking his way.
This was the second time Ulquiorra had met his gaze since they started playing together. Since when did Ulquiorra start looking at him? For a long time, Ulquiorra's disinterest infuriated him. Now that he was beginning to catch Ulquiorra's attention, he wasn't sure how to feel about it. He couldn't place the reason behind Ulquiorra's shift in demeanor towards him.

"What?" Ulquiorra turned away and resumed dressing. Bemused, Grimmjow changed into his gear and at the sight of his jersey he couldn't fight back a grin. He was finally back on the field and in his excitement; he hurried out to greet Kenpachi as he assembled the team.

"A word, first!" Kenpachi barked. "We've got a lot to cover today so I don't want any horsing around. Let's get to the obvious; Yes, Jaegerjaquez is back and he will be joining us for our match against Iran. Thank you, Luppi, for covering for him. Now, get your asses in gear. We've got a long day ahead of us."

Luppi seethed at the floor. Grimmjow smiled so hard, his cheeks hurt. The little shit deserved to a good kick off his high horse. Practice commenced. Grimmjow breathed in the smell of the pitch and his legs burned as he weaved in and out between cones. He wondered why he'd denied himself the gratifying ache of hours of honest, hard work.

He hadn't been living while he was high. His senses had been on edge but he'd muted himself to everything. By the time practice was over, Grimmjow's whole body ached but he relished in the sensation. Cocaine numbed how amazing it felt to wear himself out doing something he enjoyed.

Before he could head for the showers, Kenpachi took him aside. "Give me an update."

"I'm feeling great." Grimmjow assured him.

"Today wasn't too much for you?"

"Hell no."

Kenpachi looked him in the eyes. "You being straight with me?"

"Yes!" Grimmjow snapped and Kenpachi slapped him on the shoulder.

"Good. Now get outta here. See you tomorrow. Good job today."

Grinning, Grimmjow hurried into the locker rooms. As he stripped off his sweaty jersey, he saw Ichigo wave farewell as he left with Renji, his hair wet from the showers. Ulquiorra waved back and set a pair of towels on the bench. Grimmjow realized he hadn't grabbed a towel on his way in and hurried over to get one.

The basket was empty and Grimmjow wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want to get his clothes wet on the walk home. He supposed he'd have to bum one off of Ulquiorra. The thought made him scowl but he imagined he could pester Ulquiorra into giving one up. He turned and encountered Luppi, naked and with a towel in his hair.

Grimmjow's stomach lurched at the sight. Luppi had an extra towel and Grimmjow's blood boiled. Before he could beat the towel out of his hands, Luppi wrapped the towel around his lower body. Grimmjow realized he'd have to bleach his whole body if he dried himself with that thing now.

Scowling, he marched around Luppi to Ulquiorra and glowered down at him. "Give me one."

Ulquiorra picked up the towel and handed it to him. Grimmjow's mouth almost fell open.

"Take it." Ulquiorra waited and Grimmjow stared at him in bewilderment. He'd been expecting this
exchange to be akin to pulling teeth. Since when was Ulquiorra so agreeable towards him?

"Forget it." 

I don't want it. I packed an extra. As long as you don't use the orange one, I don't care what you do with it."

"Why not the orange one?" Grimmjow asked, finding the man to be bizarre.

"It's my favorite one." Ulquiorra told him, his face and voice dead pan and yet Grimmjow knew he was being serious.

"Are you for fucking real?"

"Yes, in fact keep the towel. I don't want it after you've touched it."

Grimmjow stared down at the towel Ulquiorra offered him, lying draped over the bench. Grimmjow didn't understand what was going on in Ulquiorra's head. Why was he looking him in the eyes, letting him have his extra towel? Five months ago, Ulquiorra had hardly been able to look him in the eyes.

Grimmjow couldn't accept the towel. This situation was too bizarre to him. He'd walk home wet before he accepted anything Ulquiorra willingly gave him. "Fuck you, Ulquiorra." Grimmjow turned on his heel.

"You asked me for a towel, I offered you one."

Grimmjow whirled around to face him. "You weren't supposed to offer me one. You aren't supposed to offer me anything! What the hell is up with you?"

"How do you mean?"

"Talking to me, looking me in the eyes, offering me things! What, so I'm hospitalized, I come back and now you're playing nice? You think we're friends because you sat with me when I had my fit? You're wrong!"

"You want me to fight with you over a towel?"

"Yes!"

"No, that's a waste of my time."

"So was looking at me a few months ago. What's going on, you like me, Ulquiorra?" He was hoping to reverse their situations and make Ulquiorra uncomfortable.

"No. I was taken aback. I wasn't expecting you to make any progress in rehab, so the strides you've made in your recovery is surprising."

Grimmjow was speechless and his skin was itching. He didn't know what to do or say. Everything he thought he'd known about their relationship was being thrown into question right now and it was about to get worse.

"No, fuck this; I don't want your towel." His voice was unsteady and as he turned, he collided into the bench and knocked over Ulquiorra's gym bag. Ulquiorra's shampoo containers bounced out and rolled across the floor. A brown, crumpled paper bag had fallen out and the label was all too familiar. Hoping this was a coincidence, Grimmjow picked up the bag and opened it.
Inside was an almond croissant, flattened but still edible. The kind he'd eaten for months during his stay in rehab. The kind that brought back memories of his mother. The kind that reminded him of childhood, roaming the streets of Paris as if they were a playground all his own.

His stomach twisted around inside him. He recounted the gifts given to him the past five months; the croissants, the flowers…The cards. His mouth went dry and the bag slipped from his hand. His emotions were all over the place, swirling around inside him like a hurricane.

*I guess I can cross out a hot girl with big jugs*, he thought and he felt sick.

His mystery gift-giver who gave him the strength to keep on believing in himself in the midst of his darkest days was Ulquiorra.

Grimmjow looked up at him to find Ulquiorra averting his gaze much like a dog caught in the act. Grimmjow didn't know what to do, what to say, what to think. Everything he thought and felt about Ulquiorra was thrown into turmoil.

Grimmjow didn't shower. He threw on a jacket over his shorts and he ran from the locker rooms.
I want to thank everyone for the lovely comments and kudos. It means a lot to know people still live this ship as much as I do.

During the two weeks leading up to their game, Ulquiorra didn't speak or so much as look at Grimmjow. Of all the ways he imagined Grimmjow might react, Ulquiorra hadn't imagined he would run away like he did.

Nor had he imagined the deep embarrassment he would be feeling. But there was nothing for him to feel embarrassed about...except that he'd sent the wrong message and come across as harboring—friendly—feelings for him.

Ulquiorra didn't hate Grimmjow, not even after Grimmjow had chosen drugs over Ulquiorra. He'd hated himself for not being enough to help him. Ulquiorra felt disappointed in Grimmjow, but he hadn't hated him.

There were very few people in the world he hated except Luppi, so it wasn't like Grimmjow was an exception. Ulquiorra couldn't say why he'd sent Grimmjow gifts. It was a stupid idea, and he was stupid for feeling disappointed by Grimmjow's reaction.

Orihime dragged him into it and Ulquiorra went along with it to avoid arguing with her. If he was honest with himself, he'd done it to make Grimmjow feel better and amend for the damage he'd done.

Had he expected Grimmjow would appreciate his thoughtfulness and bounce back to him? Had he thought that through his kindly gestures they would be friends like before? He must have, otherwise the bitter anger he felt around Grimmjow wouldn't be there.

He was an idiot, plain and simple. He would never learn to stop expecting more from people than they were capable of offering. People had only disappointed him. Even the people he considered his friends would one day leave him behind. It was time he put this foolishness behind him before he got hurt.

As he packed his suitcase for the flight to Tehran, Ulquiorra pledged to ignore Grimmjow for good. He needed to focus on winning and playing his best. That was his goal in life. People with all their complications were nothing but a hurtful distraction.

Ulquiorra read his book during the flight, looking out the window at the clouds that engulfed them. Orihime and Ichigo chatted and giggled beside him, their hands intertwined on the arm of the seat.

Ulquiorra had to wonder if he would be as happy as they were if he had something other than soccer in his life. He wondered if it would brighten his soul if someone in the audience was rooting for him.

_I don't need someone to play for. No one would feel this way towards me, so why should I waste my time feeling this way for someone else?_ He continued his book and pushed these thoughts far to the back of his mind.

Their flight got into Tehran late at night and the team made their way to their hotel in District 11.
Tehran was divided up into districts and villages, each unique from the next. Tehran boasted a bustling metropolis as well as quieter, more rural neighborhoods.

They would play in Azadi Stadium, Iran's nation stadium and the largest Asian stadium. The stadium dominated the village of Shahrah-e-Sadra in the Rostaq Rural District. Tomorrow they would meet for practice and a pregame warm-up at 5:00 before the game at 8:00.

Until then, Ulquiorra wanted to explore the city in the morning. He wanted to see the Golestan Palace and the Azadi and Milad Towers. In the morning, Ichigo used an app to book a local to show them around the city.

"So, who is this guy? You get a random stranger to show you around?" Renji asked, drumming his fingers on his knee as he waited.

"Some guy named Ali. He said he'll be here in five minutes." Ichigo replied.

"So why'd you book a guy? Why not a hot Persian girl?" Ikkaku whined, "Come on. This is like…the perfect hookup app; get a hot chick to show you around and then bang afterwards."

Ichigo snorted. "Get a girlfriend, dude…"

Finally Ali turned up, a young Persian man who was very excited to show them around his hometown. As the group prepared to leave for breakfast, Ichigo stared at someone behind Ulquiorra. Ulquiorra turned and saw Grimmjow step out of the elevator and head towards the dining room.

"He's always by himself," Orihime said, "We should invite him."

Ichigo sighed. "Why?"

Before Ulquiorra could stop her, Orihime called out to him, "Grimmjow-kun, we're going out for breakfast! Do you want to join us?"

Grimmjow shrugged and said, "I'll go, but I'm not saying a word to you people."

"Really?" Ichigo quirked his brows.

"I'm hungry and I wanna see the city. I'm not doing it to hang out with you, so don't call me back if I split off on my own after a while." Grimmjow snapped, striding after their guide as he hurried out the door.

Ulquiorra gave Orihime a look. "Ulquiorra-kun, don't be mad at me…" Orihime said, sweating under his glare. When they arrived at the restaurant, he sat as far away from Grimmjow as possible.

Ulquiorra ordered Persian tea and flatbread spread with Feta cheese and jam on top. The sweet and salty combination was delectable. Their guide told them it was a traditional Iranian breakfast and that the bread was Lavish bread. Grimmjow ordered the same thing as Ulquiorra but left the tea alone. Ulquiorra knew he would. Grimmjow had never liked tea and his taste hadn't changed.

Ulquiorra finished breakfast and kept his eyes away from Grimmjow. Ali wanted to show them the Marble Palace, a historical royal residence. They took the train and their host stopped Grimmjow from trying to enter the second car. "The first, second and last cars are reserved for women who don't wish to ride with men."

Grimmjow raised his brows. "Seriously?" They boarded another car and rode to their destination. The Marble Palace was beautiful, combining eclectic, Western and European architectural styles.
The palace boasted a vast garden, blanketed by a light layer of snow.

While Ichigo and the others stayed inside, Ulquiorra walked around the gardens. Ulquiorra brushed snow off a bench and sat, basking in the quiet. He took a few pictures and returned inside.

Ichigo, Orihime, Renji and the others were gone. Ulquiorra hurried outside and looked both ways but was unable to find them in the crowd. "Seriously?" He muttered and something collided into his back. He scowled when he recognized the annoyed grumble behind him.

Grimmjow peered over the crowds with ease due to their height difference. "For fuckin' real? They left us here?" Grimmjow growled. "Some friends of yours…Oh well, I was sick of them anyway." Grimmjow walked down the steps and rejoined the crowds hurrying through the street.

"Do you know where you're going?" Ulquiorra asked.

"Don't care. How hard can it be to find my way around? I'll use my phone."

"If you get lost and can't find your way back, Luppi will have to play for you."

Grimmjow stopped walking and Ulquiorra saw his shoulders stiffen. "Not gonna happen."

Grimmjow pulled out his phone and frowned. "What the…?" He pressed the button a few more times but his phone didn't turn on. "Oh what? For real, my phone's dead? Fuck…"

Ulquiorra sighed. Of course when he wanted to avoid Grimmjow the most they wound up stuck together. Ulquiorra retraced his steps to the metro, Grimmjow putting on bursts of speed to walk ahead of him. Ulquiorra couldn't remember what train they'd taken though he was sure it was the 1 train.

"No, it was the 2." Grimmjow argued and Ulquiorra scowled, unable to remember now.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! It was the 2!" Grimmjow insisted and they waited for the train, back to back against a pillar. Ulquiorra wanted to see more of the city, but not if he had no idea where he was going. They'd have time to explore after the game. When the 2 train arrived, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra boarded and sat at opposite ends of the bench.

As they rode, Ulquiorra realized he had no idea what stop they were getting off at. He stood and when the train stopped, he marched off. His gut was telling him something wasn't right. Grimmjow followed him and Ulquiorra stopped to read a map.

"Can you even read Iranian?" Grimmjow muttered.

"Can you? Then be quiet." Ulquiorra said, opening up his travel book.

Ulquiorra couldn't make head nor tails of the map and he sighed and opened up his phone and tried to call Ichigo. Ichigo could connect them to their guide and he could offer directions. Grimmjow scoffed beside him and proceeded ahead.

"Where are you—?"

"Reception, dumbass."

Ulquiorra scowled and followed him up into the streets. They emerged into an expansive square, Ulquiorra spotted a monument standing tall. It was a monument with two legs spiraling outwards and
supporting a square tower. Forgetting his call, Ulquiorra flipped through his book and found a picture of the tower in his book.

They'd found Azadi Tower, also known as the Freedom Tower. They'd discovered one of the places Ulquiorra wanted to visit. Ulquiorra pocketed his phone and hurried towards the entrance.

"Hey, you're not calling them?" Grimmjow called over him and Ulquiorra said, "I'll call later." Grimmjow rolled his eyes and trailed behind him. Ulquiorra breezed through the lobby and he and Grimmjow entered the elevator. They got out at the observatory and Ulquiorra looked out the frosty windows at the square below them.

People the size of ants walked by below them and the city skyline rose up to greet them. They were alone in the observatory and the realization made Ulquiorra's skin prickle. He heard footfalls behind him, echoing in the quiet, and Grimmjow came to a stop beside him. Grimmjow removed his beanie, a waterfall of blue hair cascading down to his shoulders. Ulquiorra's mouth went dry; he liked Grimmjow with long hair.

He fixed his eyes on the view and remained quiet as he took in the sights of the city. Grimmjow coughed beside him, shuffling his feet. Ulquiorra was restless beside him. If he was bored then why had he chosen to follow Ulquiorra? Why not go his separate ways? They had no reason to spend any time together except on the field.

The air between them was fraught with tension. Ulquiorra didn't know when the silence would break or how. He felt that if Grimmjow wanted a fight he'd have had it by now, so where did that leave them?

Grimmjow was watching him. The back of Ulquiorra's neck warmed. His skin began to itch and he found it hard to focus on the view. He heard more than he saw Grimmjow part his lips, he heard a slow intake of breath as he prepared to speak and paused.

The elevator doors dinged and a crowd of people hurried in, led by a tour guide. They stepped back out into the snow and Ulquiorra referred to his travel book. Grimmjow walked by, taking the book away from him. "Forget that. I've heard of a cool place not even mentioned in that book."

"Where?"

"The Grand Bazaar. It's back in the city centre. It's way the hell cooler than this place."

"What's there?"

"Not too sure, a bunch of shops, but better."

Ulquiorra wished he'd be more specific. Grimmjow scowled and said, "Then see for yourself!"

They hopped on the metro and rode it back to the city centre. They asked the locals for directions and set off. Grimmjow led Ulquiorra through the streets, weaving between the crowds and hurrying to make it past traffic.

Grimmjow hurried into a small corridor that twisted and turned. The corridor became a spiraling labyrinth full of merchants peddling their goods. From carpets, to sizzling kebabs, to Persian pots and pans, they walked past goods of every kind. Sandwiched between locals and tourists, Ulquiorra grew claustrophobic.

The Bazaar was a sprawling maze, every corridor full of different shops selling a variety of things. They walked past a shop selling vintage record players and watches. Beautiful carpets waved like
flags from where they drifted in a carpenter's doorway. They passed a crowd of women, their faces covered, ogling sparkling jewelry.

Ulquiorra stopped to admire a pottery store. Through the window, shelves full to bursting with antique vases dominated the walls. His stomach rumbled as he caught the scent of sizzling meats and onions. He rounded the corner into a food court, selling more food than he could eat.

Ulquiorra ordered lamb kebab with grilled tomatoes and raw onions over rice. To Ulquiorra's surprise, one order of kebab was enough for two people to share so he offered some to Grimmjow.

They found a small garden away from the market and sat on a bench, the kebabs between them. Ulquiorra hoped they would eat in silence but Grimmjow said, "I wanna see some more sights after this." Grimmjow wasn't asking about the gifts Ulquiorra had given him. Ulquiorra was relieved he wouldn't answer any uncomfortable questions.

"What time is it?" Ulquiorra asked.

"3:00. We have a while 'till practice but if you wanna leave, don't do me any favors by sticking around."

Ulquiorra thought he would stay. He wanted to see more of Tehran, even if he was sightseeing with Grimmjow. He felt like something had shifted between them. A few months ago, Grimmjow would have started swinging at him by now. Ulquiorra wasn't sure how to feel about this uncertain development in their relationship.

Silence fell between them and Ulquiorra couldn't help himself. "You aren't going to ask?"

"About what?" Grimmjow refused to meet his gaze and fixated his eyes on the distant mountains.

"What do you think?"

"No. I don't care why you did it." Grimmjow concluded after a long pause.

Ulquiorra wondered if he meant that. "Then why are you hanging around me if you don't want answers? A few months ago—,"

"I know how things were a few months ago! All that matters is that I win us our game tonight. I don't give a damn what you or anyone else thinks. I've got bigger fish to fry."

Grimmjow's phone buzzed and he snatched it up and checked his messages. Grimmjow's eyes darkened. "Fuck off, mom..." he muttered, pocketing his phone.

"I thought you said your mother left."

Grimmjow's kebab lay untouched in his hand for a minute. "My mom's been in touch recently. I haven't got much of an interest in seeing her, but I don't know..."

"That's idiotic."

"What?" Grimmjow snapped.

"Your mother wants to visit you. You should let her."

Grimmjow curled his lip, blue eyes blazing. "How about you stop telling me what to do?"

"You have the chance to fix things and you don't take it?"
"Hey, she left me! She promised we'd leave together and she left me. I don't owe her a fucking thing."

"If I heard from my mother, I would jump at the chance to see her."

"Good for you. But you hear from her all the time, don't you?"

"I haven't heard from her in years."

Grimmjow paused, his kebab inches from his lips. His brow furrowed and he asked, "Why?"

"She left my father and me for an actor she met in New York. I haven't heard from her since."

Grimmjow's kebab never made it into his mouth. "When?" Grimmjow asked.

"Five years ago. I'd turned nineteen and she wanted to take me on a business trip before I started business school."

A fly buzzed around Grimmjow's kebab. Grimmjow's blue eyes were wide, locked on Ulquiorra's face, and Ulquiorra felt ill at ease to be looked at in such a way.

"You should eat that." Ulquiorra said and Grimmjow swatted at the fly and crammed his kebab into his mouth. Grimmjow was quiet as he ate, staring down into his lap.

He didn't meet Ulquiorra's gaze when he said, "Well, that was shitty of her." Ulquiorra's mouth went dry. He wasn't sure how to respond. This was strange territory they were venturing into.

"I wasn't surprised. I knew she never loved my father. Things were bound to—,"

"Fall apart, yeah no shit, but it still fucking sucks. People need to stop being fucking idiots and dragging their kids into their shit." Scowling, Grimmjow stuffed the rest of his kebab down his throat.

"You shoulda gone to business school." Grimmjow added, his face brightening as he stared out over the gardens.

"Why?"

"Cause you're boring as fuck and only boring people go to business school." Ulquiorra wondered if Grimmjow was teasing him. Grimmjow added, "Look, regardless of why you gave me all that stuff, it doesn't change anything. I'm still gonna make you realize who the better player is, and I'm gonna do that by winning Iran."

"I don't care."

Grimmjow's brow furrowed. "Don't try to tell me you don't think you're better than I am; you've fucking shown it time and time again."

"It doesn't matter to me which one of us is the better player. I couldn't care less if you were better than I am."

Grimmjow's lip curled and he rounded on Ulquiorra. Ulquiorra tensed, fighting back the urge to move away as Grimmjow's face leaned in close. Ulquiorra could smell his aftershave, and he could see the hints of gold in his eyes.

"Stop this shit, Ulquiorra."
"If you'd be more specific I would have an easier time listening to you."

Grimmjow seized the front of his shirt in his frustration. "Stop telling me you don't hate me when you've been giving me attitude the entire time we've played together! It's bullshit! You've hated me the moment we split up back in high school; that's why you snitched on me!"

Frustration surged inside Ulquiorra. How many times did he have to say it for Grimmjow to get the message? Feeling cornered to be so near to him, Ulquiorra shoved him backwards and said, "I don't hate you. I was angry at you when we broke up, but I never hated you."

"That's total bullshit!"

"I was disappointed in you so I decided you weren't worth my time. Your skills as a soccer player were never the factor in my decision to ignore you."

Grimmjow's eyes, as big as the moon, stared into Ulquiorra's, sapped of their anger. Grimmjow's grip slackened, brows furrowing as he churned over Ulquiorra's words. "For real?" Ulquiorra nodded.

Ulquiorra knew the kind of person Grimmjow could be. He knew what the worst side of him looked like, but he also knew the best side of him. He had seen the strength, bravery and passion within him before cocaine and dope had wrung it all out of him.

"I couldn't stand to look at you. A part of me has always associated you with the boy who won us our first game together when we were children. I was wrong to cling to that image of you. Or so I thought. I am wrong, aren't I?"

Grimmjow's lips thinned and bitter emotion blazed in his eyes. "You weren't kidding when you said you still believed in me?"

"When did I say that?"

"In your last card, idiot."

"You read it?"

Grimmjow's face colored. "I peeked at it, yeah, so what?"

"You ate the cake I gave you?"

"Didn't I say so? It was fuckin' delicious and I'm only saying that 'cause I know you didn't make it."

"Orihime made it. You're lucky she made it now that she's a good cook now. The sweets she made back in high school were horrendous."

Grimmjow chuckled. The sound stirred something in Ulquiorra's soul and caught his breath. "Yeah, I'll bet."

"Well, you weren't wrong. I'm gonna win us Iran. I'm coming back from this and my fans are gonna be sorry they ever lost faith in me."

Ulquiorra didn't say anything. He couldn't guarantee Grimmjow would fulfill his promises to himself. But seeing how much he'd progressed in only five short months made it hard for Ulquiorra not to have faith in him.

"What are you frowning for? Don't believe me?" Grimmjow bristled.
"People say all kinds of things they never follow through with."

"I said I'm winning us Iran, so I'm winning us Iran, dick-schnitzel."

"Then do it and don't disappoint me, frog." Grimmjow grinned; his eyes alight with the prospect of a challenge.

Silence fell, ushering in a truce that would alter the course of their lives in ways they had yet to realize. Ulquiorra looked out towards the distant mountains as Grimmjow finished off their kebabs.
"Artenor-san, how does it feel to know you won't play against Iran?"

"Artenor-san, a fan caught a dispute between you and Cifer-san on film! Why did he hit you?"

"Shut up and get out of my way!" Luppi rammed through the reporters, his ears flaming red and his eyes blazing. Grimmjow was taken out of his anxious thoughts for a moment and found himself grinning.

"Wait, what? The ass kicking you gave Luppi got publicized?"

"Yes, it was a subject at least every sports news station wanted to cover." Grimmjow wished he watched television so he could replay the moment Ulquiorra punched Luppi. Ulquiorra left his side and hurried on ahead and the reporters rushed at Grimmjow.

"Jaegerjaquez-san, are you well enough to win tonight?"

"Jaegerjaquez-san, what do you think your chances are for winning?"

"Jaegerjaquez-san, can you tell us more on your recovery?" Grimmjow supposed he ought to at least let his fans know how he was doing.

He forced a grin he hoped radiated with confidence and confronted the babbling reporters. "I'm feeling great and I was deemed fit to play by my coach and by my doctors. Thanks to my fans for all their support, I'll see you guys on the field!"

The anxiety he felt turned his insides to a nauseous mess and he felt sick after their pre-game warm up. "Play your best tonight!" Kenpachi told his team and Grimmjow took in a deep breath and released, balling his fists. "Even if we don't win, we have enough points to guarantee us a spot in the playoffs. Do the best you can."

Ulquiorra split off to the locker rooms while the rest of the team remained to chat with Kenpachi. Grimmjow tried his hardest not to envision the stands full of people, rooting for him. The thought inspired terror rather than confidence. He would have to play his best tonight if he wanted to reclaim his title of King of the field, and he didn't know if he could.

His stomach roiling, Grimmjow turned and went to the locker rooms on legs that felt like gelatin. His breath came in quick puffs as his breathing shortened. He'd only won games while high, could he win this one sober? Or was he only a good player when he did coke before a game?

Grimmjow needed to stay close to the toilets until he went on the field, so he made for the bathroom. Something rattled, there were a series of breathless grunts, followed by a crash. The orange towel abandoned on the floor and the soaps spilled on the ground made Grimmjow freeze. Grimmjow peered around the corner into the locker room.

"You scrawny little prick! Not so full of yourself now, are you?" Luppi's voice was shrill with rage. Ulquiorra's hand covered his nose as blood leaked between his fingertips. He shielded his face as Luppi threw a swing at him and Luppi's fist struck the lockers. With a furious snarl, Luppi hurled his
Ulquiorra kicked Luppi in the abdomen. Luppi doubled over and pushed on, raising his foot over Ulquiorra's head. Grimmjow charged into the room and hurled him into the lockers, shaking the doors in their frames. Luppi's hands shot out, clawing for his face, his expression contorted in hate and rage.

"You need help from a junkie, Cifer?" He bellowed, clawing at Grimmjow's wrist to free himself as his eyes blazed. "You're a little, fucking, pussy! Let me go! I'll tear you both to pieces! No one humiliates me, do you hear me?"

Grimmjow drew back his fist and propelled it into Luppi's stomach. He relished in the way his fist sunk into Luppi's skin and grinned when he saw his eyes cross. Luppi sunk onto the floor, coughing and gagging. It felt good to finally get even.

"How's it feel to know a junkie replaced you and kicked your ass, huh, Artenor? You should stop humiliating yourself." Grimmjow heard a cough behind him. Ulquiorra sat up; blood, a bright crimson against his moon white skin, ran in little rivers down his chest.

Grimmjow walked around Luppi and extended a hand Ulquiorra's way. "You look like shit. How long's it been bleeding?"

"A minute." Ulquiorra grasped his hand and something inside Grimmjow gave a jolt. He expected Ulquiorra to pull him down and ram his head into his nose, or to take this opportunity to swing at him. Ulquiorra did neither and stood up, wobbling on his feet. Ulquiorra pinched his nose and Grimmjow, his hand tingling, rushed to the bathroom.

Grimmjow returned, brushing past Luppi as the man hobbled out, clutching his stomach. Ulquiorra accepted the tissues and hung his head low while he bled out into the tissues.

"Is it broken?" Grimmjow asked. Ulquiorra shrugged and replied, his voice muffled, "I don't think so."

Grimmjow snorted. "That's not too convincing."

"Why did you do that?" Ulquiorra asked and his question gave Grimmjow pause. He wasn't sure why he'd rushed in to help. There hadn't been a second thought to it; he'd done it. Since when did he go out of his way for Ulquiorra of all people?

"Your nose is gushing blood and you wanna start asking me questions?" Grimmjow quirked a brow at him.

"It doesn't make any sense. You have no reason to trouble yourself with me."

"Yeah, and you had no reason to sock Luppi when he started shit-talking me. So why'd you do that?" Grimmjow, beginning to sweat, turned the questions onto him.

"Because comments like that are detrimental to your recovery." Grimmjow didn't know what to say and his skin prickled. Since when did Ulquiorra worry about his recovery?

Then again he's concerned himself with my recovery for a while, hasn't he? Grimmjow thought, remembering the gifts and the cards Ulquiorra gave him.

Fuck…none of this makes any sense.
Grimmjow slumped over, his head in his hands and unable to stop himself from laughing.

"What?" Ulquiorra asked.

"I never asked you to care about my recovery. I don't need people looking out for me, so keep your fucking distance."

"If you relapse because of him then I have to listen to his boasting when he comes back to replace you. I had to play alongside him for five months and I'd rather not relieve the experience." Grimmjow didn't buy his reasoning but if it were true, it made him feel better than to hear Ulquiorra did it out of the kindness of his heart.

"Alright, great; so we're settled, then."

"Settled?"

"Yes! You gave me a bunch of shit to encourage me to get out of rehab; I saved your ass from Luppi. Any favors you thought I owed you are repaid, so let's focus on the games, alright?"

"I never thought you owed me anything. I didn't do what I did to be indebted to you."

Grimmjow's mind was whirling. Since when did people do things for him out of kindness? "Then why the hell—?" He clamped his jaw shut. Hadn't he told Ulquiorra only a few hours ago that it hadn't mattered to him why he'd done it? Grimmjow didn't want to know why he'd done it. He was afraid to find out and have his opinion of Ulquiorra change anymore.

"Does there need to be a reason?"

"Yes! I thought you fucking hated me the past few months we played together!"

"You can try to apply reason to everything but I don't."

If his nose wasn't broken, Grimmjow wanted to finish the job. "Yeah, you do need to have a reason to go out of your way like that for me when you could hardly look at me out of disappointment!"

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you fucking do!"

Ulquiorra stood up, still clutching tissue to his nose and left the room. "Get your ass back in here!" Ulquiorra ignored him and Grimmjow kicked the bench and plopped down onto it, fuming. Now he'd only revealed how curious he was.

The doors opened and their teammates streamed by, chatting as they changed. Grimmjow averted his eyes to the floor, still mulling over Ulquiorra's words. He didn't believe for one minute Ulquiorra went out of his way because he could; there'd been too much sincerity in his cards and too much thoughtfulness in his gifts.

His stomach churned over and he put his face in his hands, digging his nails into his forehead.

No one's ever gone out of their way like that for me. Did he do it all for shits and giggles? It meant nothing to him?

All this time he'd wanted to shatter Ulquiorra's indifference. Now that he knew Ulquiorra believed in him all along, Grimmjow wished he could have Ulquiorra's indifference back. Now he didn't know where they stood and worst of all, the way he thought of Ulquiorra had shifted.
The chatter from his teammates grated on his nerves and he decided he would shower and focus on playing his best for tonight. Grimmjow stripped out of his gear and grabbed a towel, striding towards the bathroom. He threw open the shower room door, wrenching open the stall closest to him.

Ulquiorra was on the other side, his hair soaked and hugging his face. Water ran in rivers over his abs and lower, disappearing in the tight curls of dark hair between his legs. Grimmjow averted his eyes and Ulquiorra hurried out to stand by his gear, folded on a bench outside the door.

Grimmjow stepped under the warm spray of water and found that his breath was stuck in his throat. Warmth was pooling between his legs and the steam from the shower made him feel lightheaded. It wasn't like he hadn't seen Ulquiorra naked before. He'd seen him shirtless in magazine covers; he'd caught glimpses of him while they changed.

But he was only human and he could appreciate a beautiful body, and Ulquiorra had a very beautiful body. It had been too long since he'd pleased himself or had sex, so he wouldn't blame himself for being turned on by the sight of another person naked. The fact that it was Ulquiorra's body that left him short of breath and hard had little to do with it.

He was aware of movement through the slit in the door and it was hard to keep his eyes to himself. Through the gap between the shower door and the wall, he could see Ulquiorra as he stepped into his jock strap.

His cock ached at the sight of his taut buttocks and thighs sculpted beautifully like something carved from stone. He followed the dip of his buttocks and thighs sculpted beautifully like something carved from stone. He followed the dip of his spine to his broad shoulders where ebony hair tumbled down past his shoulders. His hair hadn't always been that long; he'd been growing it out. Was as soft as it looked, and how it would feel beneath his fingers?

Grimmjow wondered if Ulquiorra was a virgin. They'd never gotten around to doing anything more than mutual masturbation. Looking at his body made it hard for Grimmjow to imagine he hadn't had his fair share of admirers.

Not that his face wasn't anything to boast about. He had a strong jaw line and a pointed chin, a sharp nose and high cheekbones, features Grimmjow found attractive in a man. Ulquiorra struck a perfect balance between handsome and pretty.

His breath was short and his cock throbbed, begging for his hand. Grimmjow lamented that of all things Ulquiorra had to be a confusing pain in the ass on top of being gorgeous. He didn't know what was wrong with him. He was stressed about the game and so he was more susceptible to strange thoughts and feelings right now.

Outside, Ulquiorra reached for his jersey and Grimmjow swore Ulquiorra's eyes stared right into his. His owlish eyes, pure glass-green, were large enough to make Grimmjow feel he was staring into his soul.

His heart in his throat, Grimmjow got soap suds over his hands, hissing as his hand ran from the curls of hair at the base of his rigid shaft to the tip.

He was nervous, stressed out about where he and Ulquiorra stood, and he was horny to top it all off. The curve of Ulquiorra's slender hips, the water following the shape of his abs the way a river traced a bend was burned into his mind.

He wished Ulquiorra hadn't held his towel in such a way that it concealed his lower body. He'd have loved the see the water dripping off his cock as it hung long between his legs.
The showers were empty, he wasn't bothering anyone. What did it matter if it was Ulquiorra on his mind, who was he hurting? He'd been through a lot and he deserved to feel at ease before the game.

He closed his fist around his taut flesh and his whole body jolted. He hadn't been this hard in months. He closed his eyes and saw fair, feminine hands, splayed against the tiles. He groped and squeezed tight, round buttocks. Rounded cheeks parted for him, a puckered hole, glistening with lube, twitched; beckoning him.

Grimmjow plunged into his hand; waves of pleasure swept like an electric current to the tip of his aching shaft. That tight, puckered hole sucked him in greedily, urging him in deeper, harder faster.

Long, slender fingerprints clawed at the wall, a deep, velvety voice echoed off the tiles. That voice begged him for it as Grimmjow plowed his hips into that tight heat. He tangled his fingers through a curtain of tousled, ebony hair and tugged. He brought his lips to a swan-like neck, biting until blood ran in crimson rivers down moon-white skin.

The velvet voice rose in hoarse grunts and gasps and ascended into shameless, moans. Hips snapped off the wall, buttocks plowing into Grimmjow's hips. He thought of Ulquiorra's head back against his shoulders, hair cascading down his back.

Ulquiorra's voice trembled and broke as he took every inch of Grimmjow's cock like a whore. He begged him for it harder, faster, deeper; moaning Grimmjow's name between a chorus of vile curses. Then Ulquiorra was clamping down around him, moaning his name as he came and squeezing Grimmjow's orgasm out of him.

Grimmjow fell against the wall, lips parted in a silent howl as he came in a great tug against the wall. He bit down on his lower lip to stifle his cry; his knees trembled and almost gave out. He slumped over, gasping; unable to remember the last time he'd experienced an orgasm so intense.

Something in his soul gave a tug and he wanted to feel guilty for thinking about Ulquiorra in such a way but he was too exuberant to blame himself. He was a man and he had needs and he was allowed to feel attracted to someone's body.

What he did behind closed doors was no one's business but his, and he would take his dirty secret to the grave.

Grimmjow's nerves surged when Kenpachi called out, "Five minutes!" Grimmjow could hear the crowd and he wondered if the crowd was bigger than China's. He couldn't see them yet, but he could feel the weight of their expectations and his stomach lurched. He ducked into the bathroom and was sick into the toilet.

"Nervous?" He jumped and found Ulquiorra standing at the sink behind him. Grimmjow hadn't seen him as he rushed in. Grimmjow's skin tingled as he met Ulquiorra's gaze and the man held it. Now that he'd been reminded of how good looking Ulquiorra was, Grimmjow couldn't unsee it.

"No…I don't know. I can't remember the last time I felt this way, I was high before every game so I never, you know…"

"Felt it?"

"Yeah."

"It passes once you get onto the field."

A sudden fear struck Grimmjow that he might be sick on the pitch in front of everyone. "Fuck…"
He shivered as nausea roiled through him. What would the media say if he got sick, would they think he was using again?

He grinned despite himself. "Why, you speaking from experience? I didn't know the great Ulquiorra Cifer got nervous."

"A little."

Grimmjow snorted. "Yeah, okay."

"You don't want to use again, do you?"

Anger flared inside him and Grimmjow whirled around to glare at him. "The hell do you mean?"

"Playing a game isn't reminding you or making you want cocaine?"

Grimmjow's initial burst of anger faded and he realized he hadn't felt the urge to use once. He couldn't forget what playing high felt like and he knew for a fact that if he were high right now, he would feel better. But as they lined up outside the doors, Grimmjow realized he wouldn't miss this feeling for anything in the world.

His heart pounded, his hands trembled, and as he listened to the roar of the crowd, he felt a rush like a burst of wind sweeping butterflies through his stomach. He realized that he wasn't only nervous; he was excited for the first time in years about playing a soccer game.

He couldn't wait to show the world that he was back; back for good and never to leave again. He was King of the Field and nothing could keep him down. Even if he lost tonight, he wanted to give tonight's game everything he had. Ahead of him, Ichigo clapped Renji on the back and the team exchanged high-five, hugs, or slaps on the back. Ulquiorra stood beside him and Grimmjow noticed he didn't get any attention from the team.

What the hell? This guy's scored more goals than anyone on the team and they ignore him?

Grimmjow squeezed his shoulder and Ulquiorra jumped, looking at him with wide eyes. Grimmjow had to grin at the sight. "Don't get in my way."

"Then stay out of mine."

Grimmjow cackled and slapped him on the back. "We're winning this, I fucking feel it!"

The doors opened and team Japan and Tehran marched onto the field. The flag bearers carried the flag of Tehran ahead of them, rippling in the night breeze. The crowd erupted into cheers and Grimmjow felt their excitement, their loyalty, and their love all at once.

Tehran stood tall and proud for the national anthem of Iran and their guests joined them. The ball was set in the middle of the field and the kick off commenced as Grimmjow kicked the ball high into the air.

Fifteen minutes in, neither side had scored any goals. Iran clustered around their goal as Ulquiorra swept in with the ball and they tried to prevent his shot. Grimmjow knew that if he could find an opening, he could easily get the ball into their goal. This was the closest they'd come since the game started and he wanted a goal and he wanted one now.

Defender Mahmoud tried to pass the ball to midfielder Kamran and Grimmjow saw his chance. He leaped out in front of Kamran and rammed his head into the ball. With the force behind Mahmoud's
kick to propel it; the ball shot over Iran's heads and flew into the back of their net.

"And we have a goal! Japan's first goal of the match scored by Jaegerjaquez!" The crowd was boisterous in their euphoria and Grimmjow fed off their love like a man deprived of sustenance. He thrust his hands in the air and his victorious roar was lost as the crowd chanted, "All hail the King! All hail the King!"

His fears and his insecurities were long forgotten; as the crowd chanted his name, he realized they'd be as anxiously awaiting his return as he had. Even if they didn't win tonight, no one would forget that he'd scored Japan's first goal of the match after five months away. Hands rained down upon his back, crushing Grimmjow in a group hug as his team mates engulfed him, jumping up and down with him.

Grimmjow wrestled away from the group, grinning so hard it hurt. Someone rushed by him and slapped him on the shoulder. He looked up in time to see Ulquiorra watching him over his shoulder as he sprinted to his spot before the kickoff. Grimmjow held his hands to his ears and raised his hands to the sky in praise as the crowd roared for him.

The screens replayed his goal, he saw Kenpachi pumping the air and clapping, his face split into a grin. Grimmjow's heart swelled at the sight.

The kick off commenced and Iran's players passed the ball, growing closer to Japan's goal post. Grimmjow tailed behind Iran's striker, Javad, as Iran passed the ball ever closer to him. Javad ran to catch the ball and Grimmjow rushed him, shoving through players as he lunged. He sprung into the air as Javad went to head the ball, Grimmjow shoved his shoulder into him and caught the ball off the top of his head.

"Jaegerjaquez is like a jack rabbit with those jumps!" Grimmjow landed and Javad crashed to the floor, tumbling over and clutching his head. The whistle sounded as the referee hurried over to Javad, cradling his head in his hands.

"You hit him!" The referee said and Grimmjow snorted.

"He should watch where the hell he's going, because he ran into me, I didn't hit him!" The referee thrust a yellow card under his nose. "Are you fuckin' kidding me? He ran into me! If I threw my arm into him, it was to shield myself!" Grimmjow suspected he'd get caught, but in his haste to get the ball the consequences hadn't mattered. Scowling, Grimmjow watched as Iran was awarded a free kick.

Ichigo, Renji, Ikkaku, and Grimmjow linked arms in front of their goal. Iran's striker readied himself for an attempt at their goal. Grimmjow kept his eyes fixed on the striker's feet, hoping he could identify the incoming attack. The striker charged and kicked the ball, aiming over their heads. Grimmjow launched himself into the air and the ball tickled the hairs atop his head.

Grimmjow fell back to the ground and snarled in frustration. If Kurosaki had jumped higher, he might have blocked Iran's first goal of the match. "Kurosaki, what the hell was that?" Grimmjow shoved Ichigo. "Do you wanna win or not?"

"Chill the fuck out, man!" Ichigo threw his arms up, miffed.

Iran's players went wild and Grimmjow shoved through his teammates to find another spot on the field. They were even but they still had time to gain an advantage over Iran. "Good job, Grimmjow," Renji said as he shoved by, "If you hadn't gotten us a penalty, they might not have scored."
"They'd have scored anyway with your shit defending." Grimmjow spat onto the pitch. "Hey, Hisagi, what the hell kind of goal keeping was that?" He barked and Hisagi ignored him, pushing his hair back from his face.

Play resumed with twenty minutes until half time. Iran made another attempt at goal and Grimmjow fell backwards, catching the ball off the tips of his toes. The ball soared over Iran's heads and bounced to a halt at Ulquiorra's feet. Ulquiorra weaved through Iran's players, kicking the ball through their legs with speed Grimmjow couldn't keep up with.

Grimmjow remained kneeling and watched, unable to do anything else. Ulquiorra kicked the ball around a midfielder and ran to catch up with it, a defender stuck out his leg and the ball bounced off his sole. It was a careless kick taken with a short distance between both of them and Ulquiorra had no time to slow down.

The crowd groaned in sympathy and shock as the defender's foot plowed into Ulquiorra's face. "Shit!" Grimmjow cringed watching it happen. Ulquiorra tumbled over the defender's knee and rolled to a stop on his stomach, his face buried in the pitch. He lay there long enough for the referee to halt the game and hurry to his side. Grimmjow stood up, wondering how much pain Ulquiorra must be in.

Ulquiorra's fingers were curling into the pitch, his legs furling up to his chest. He rocked himself onto his back, his face in his hands as his chest rose and fell. "Oh, come on, get up..." Grimmjow murmured, standing on his toes to peer over the cluster of concerned Japanese players.

He'd taken a foot to the face once before. It hurt like hell; the spikes on the soles were built in for traction on the field but they could make lethal weapons. Ulquiorra hadn't been kicked; he'd flown headfirst into those spikes. Grimmjow couldn't imagine he'd suffered any minor cuts.

Ulquiorra finally sat up as the referee knelt and pried his hands away from his face. Something cold fell into Grimmjow's stomach when he saw the blood pouring from Ulquiorra's right eye.

"Oh, shit..." Grimmjow jogged over to get a better look, wetting his lips.

"Did he get your eye?" Renji called out, his hand over his mouth.

Ichigo, his eyes blazing, rounded on Iran's defender and shouted, "The hell were you thinking? You had to know you were gonna hit someone!"

The referee helped Ulquiorra to his feet and escorted him off to the side and Japan followed him. "What if he got his eyes? He could go blind from that!" Ichigo shouted over the concerned chatter.

Grimmjow snapped, "Would you shut up? We don't know what the hell happened yet." He didn't want to think about it. He'd never seen an injury like this before.

The medics inspected Ulquiorra; Ulquiorra ran his fingers along his brow line. Did his brow get cut? Grimmjow thought with trepidation and he held his breath as the medic poured water over the injury. The medic dabbed the injury clean and applied a bandage to his brow.

Though Grimmjow wasn't a doctor, he thought Ulquiorra's eye looked undamaged. The kick had gone to his brow. Grimmjow shuddered to imagine losing his eyesight in such a gristy manner. He was thankful to leave it at that.

Ulquiorra walked back onto the field and Ichigo bounded over, bombarding him with questions. Grimmjow thought he looked dazed but eager to put this behind him. Grimmjow gave him the thumbs up, rotating his hand. Ulquiorra nodded, assuring him.
Ulquiorra's injury occurred in the penalty box, awarding Japan their first penalty of the match. The referee marked the spot to place the ball and Ulquiorra lined up behind the ball. Iran's goal keeper waited, his eyes locked on Ulquiorra.

Ulquiorra ran and threw his hip to the right, scooping the ball off the floor and sending it soaring over the goal keeper's head. The ball flew into the corner of the net, caressing the goal keeper's fingertips. Grimmjow failed to keep his jaw from dropping down to the floor.

He didn't know how he did it, but Ulquiorra's accuracy was always so precise. He more than made up for being the smallest person on the team. Ichigo and the others engulfed Ulquiorra in a group hug as they ended the first half of the game with two to Iran's one.

Japan rested their legs, gulped down water, and when the game resumed, they met Iran on the field for the second leg. Forward Ahmad set the ball down and as the referee sounded his whistle, he shot the ball over Japan's heads.

Grimmjow saw the Iranian defender racing to catch the ball and lunged after him. Grimmjow was too late and as he tumbled to the floor, he saw the ball plummet towards Japan's goal. Hisagi lunged and missed by inches as the ball flew over his head and into their net.

"Goal! A goal for Iran not even a minute into the second leg! A stunning display of teamwork from Ahmad and Hassan of Iran! It's a tie!" Iran went wild and Ahmad sprinted around the field, his arms open as he basked in the roar of the crowd.

Grimmjow scowled, gnashing his teeth. "Could have blocked that…" he muttered, angry at himself. His frustration had only begun. As the game went on, Iran got more aggressive.

Five minutes after their first goal, they went for another. Midfielder Ramin dribbled the ball towards their goal and shot it. Grimmjow threw himself between the ball and caught the ball off his chest. He cursed his luck as the ball flew right into Ahmad who kicked it towards their goal.

Hisagi threw himself into the dirt, catching the ball off the tips of his fingers. Iran's fans groaned their disappointment and Japan's side of the stadium roared their relief. Hisagi threw the ball back into the field and Ulquiorra caught it.

Before Ulquiorra could pass it, defender Mahmoud stuck out his foot and tripped him. Ulquiorra tumbled head over heels, clutching his ankle. Ichigo swept in and shoved Mahmoud in the chest, bellowing at him.

Mahmoud shoved Kurosaki, and Ikkaku, Renji and Hitsugaya jumped down his throat. Mahmoud's teammates rushed to his aid and tugged him away from Japan. Grimmjow watched, unable to fight back a grin, and bellowed, "What, you can't win without a few dirty tricks, huh?"

The referee got between them and fouled Mahmoud. "What about him, he shoved me!" Mahmoud argued, gesturing at Ichigo. Ulquiorra pushed himself into a sitting position beside him. Grimmjow snorted and extended a hand, "Man, this game hasn't been nice to you, has it?"

Ulquiorra looked from Grimmjow's hand to his face and Grimmjow cocked his fingers. Ulquiorra took his hand, his skin warm and damp against Grimmjow's, and got to his feet. Ulquiorra stretched out his leg and cringed. His lips tightened and he slumped over. Grimmjow frowned. "Man up. You got up after a kick in the face for fuck's sake."

"Worried?"

"Yeah, you're the only forward that's scored us a goal this match. If you walk out, I'm gonna have to
do it all myself."

"You could. Probably." Grimmjow smiled.

"A moment of camaraderie between Cifer and Jaegerjaquez." The announcer noted, "There's been a lot of tension between them during practices this past year. You have to wonder what they're talking about…"

Uncomfortable, Grimmjow left Ulquiorra alone as Japan earned a direct free kick. Uryuu tried to score them a goal but one of Iran's defenders headed it away. Grimmjow's heart sunk; they only had three minutes left in the game to put them one point over Iran and win.

Renji deflected the ball from the midfielder trying to take possession and the ball fell into Ulquiorra's clutches. Grimmjow trailed behind him, scanning the field for any attackers as Ulquiorra neared Iran's goal.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ahmad shoving his way through teammates as well as enemy players. Ulquiorra became cornered and kicked the ball to Grimmjow but a midfielder intercepted the pass.

Grimmjow ran as Iran's striker closed in on the ball. If they got a hold of it now, Grimmjow didn't know if they would have time to get it as close to Iran's goal as they did right now. As far as he was concerned, this was their last chance.

Grimmjow weaved between players, his feet scrambling in the dirt. As the striker tried to kick the ball away from their goal, Grimmjow lunged, catching the ball off the crown of his head. He tumbled over; the roar of the crowd muffled as his head struck the earth and left him reeling.

Dazed as he was, Grimmjow threw himself to his feet and looked towards Iran's goal. The goal keeper lay face down, the ball rolling to a stop in the back of the net.

The referee sounded his whistle, signaling the end of their final match in the second round of the World Cup. Grimmjow's body trembled as a wave of emotion washed over him.

"And it's game over and there can be no question about it; Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez has returned, all hail the King of the field!" The crowd echoed him in a chant as the screens reflected the men and women in the stands, drying their eyes.

Grimmjow lost control, roaring like a war chief at the end of long, bloody battle. He collapsed onto his knees and thrust his hands into the skies, marveling at the beautiful night sky above him.

"All hail the King! All hail the King!"

Grimmjow's teammates engulfed him in their arms and it was as if the first few rough months had never happened. Grimmjow realized everything that he'd wanted had come to pass. Unable to stop smiling, Grimmjow wrestled through his teammates and saw Ulquiorra on his knees in the dirt.

Grimmjow was shaken out of his euphoria when he saw the way Ulquiorra was looking at him. Ulquiorra's eyes were wide and shining, his lips parted in a beautiful expression of awe. The sight brought back his smile in full force. He'd finally broken through that indifferent mask.

Ulquiorra clambered to his feet and to Grimmjow's surprise, Ulquiorra reached out to him.

Ulquiorra took his hand and Grimmjow, his heart in his throat, met Ulquiorra's shoulder in a hearty bump. Ulquiorra loosened his grip but Grimmjow put his arm around his shoulders. With Ulquiorra
at his side and surrounded by his teammates, Grimmjow and team Japan left the field, victorious in their last game of the year.

Grimmjow could hardly wait to play round three in 2017.
Ulquiorra's First Day of Winter

In the weeks following Japan's victory, there were few things that stuck out in Ulquiorra's memory more than Grimmjow winning them their last game. As he watched Grimmjow raise his hands to the skies, a rush of emotion swept over him.

Ulquiorra expected Grimmjow to disappoint him. People said many things they rarely followed through with, so he hadn't wanted to get his hopes up. Instead, his world turned upside down when he realized Grimmjow hadn't just come back; he'd been reborn.

He'd shatter the shackles drug addiction held over his life for so many years; he'd reclaimed his body and returned to the field as the aggressive, cocky defender his fans knew he could be.

Grimmjow made Ulquiorra feel like a fool for doubting him and Ulquiorra couldn't get over it. He was beyond surprised; he of all people was hopeful for Grimmjow's future and the future of their team.

These feelings faded as he realized that it would be four months before he could get back on the pitch again. He would be alone and without direction until he returned to the field. He felt empty and purposeless when he realized on December 1st he would celebrate his 26th birthday. He would be another year closer to death and no closer to realizing what he needed to give his life meaning.

He wouldn't play soccer forever, and he wasn't sure if playing would be worthwhile to him if their team failed to qualify for the World Cup. Would a day come when he no longer wanted to play? He didn't know and he was worried.

Soccer was all he knew how to do, it was all that brought him happiness and purpose. If a day came when he no longer wanted to play, he wasn't sure what else he would do in his life.

On December 1st, he woke up and wanted to stay in bed. He wanted to ignore his birthday, but Orihime had other plans for him and texted him.

When he realized it was her messaging him and not his father, he was disappointed. What else had he expected? He'd been shown from a young age that he came second to his mother and father's needs.

Orihime: Come meet Ichigo and me at 1:00 at the ice rink.

Ulquiorra sighed and texted her back.

Ulquiorra: No. I don't want to celebrate.

Orihime: Ugghhh fine. It's not your birthday. Its just another day and we want to ice skate and celebrate winter. There. Come meet us.

Ulquiorra, barricaded within his thick blankets, was tempted to stay there. He knew if he did stay home he would be alone all day, asking questions he couldn't answer about the futility of life.

When he realized this, the idea of being alone was as depressing an alternative to celebrating his least favorite day of the year. As his mood fell lower and lower Ulquiorra realized he didn't want to be inside his head for the rest of the day. He threw on his peacoat and grabbed his latest Hemingway book, *A Farewell to Arms*, to read on the train. He needed to stay preoccupied.
When he arrived at the ice rink, Ichigo hurried over and clapped him on the back. "Happy Birthday!"

Orihime jumped in, "No, Happy First Day of Winter!"

"What?" Ichigo raised a brow at her.

"It's winter, we're celebrating winter!" Orihime squawked.

"Oh, okay… Then what'd we get these presents for?"

"Ulquiorra-kun, when's the last time you went ice skating?" Orihime asked, taking his arm and steering him away from her confused boyfriend. Ulquiorra couldn't remember.

"Not since I was little. I used to figure skate."

"Wow, I didn't know that! Why don't you tell me anything about yourself?"

"I just did."

A roar split the air, turning the heads of every man, woman and child in the lobby. The doors burst open, bringing in a rush of cold air and snow as Grimmjow charged in, a baseball bat over his shoulder. People hurried away with their children and Ichigo gaped. "What in the—?"

"Kurosaki!" Grimmjow bellowed, gesturing at him with his bat as if it were a sword and he the initiator of a duel. "This is it! I've had it up to here with you and your attitude! We're finishing this, here and now!"

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Ichigo shrieked.

"You invited me here, dumbass! Now are you gonna fight me or not?" Grimmjow beat the bat against his palm as he strode inside baring his pointed teeth in a vicious grin.

"I invited you here to ice stake, not to fight, you moron!"

The grin fell from Grimmjow's face and he stared at Ichigo, stupefied. "Huh?"

"If I wanted to fight you, I'd have done it already!"

"So why don't you? What, you think you're better than me, stronger than me, is that it?" Grimmjow advanced, snarling, and Ichigo put his hands up, smirking.

"I mean, I probably am."

"Then prove it!"

"Ichigo, stop it!" Orihime got between the boys and said, "Grimmjow-kun, Ichigo and Ulquiorra-kun and I—"

"I had nothing to do with this."

Orihime sputtered, "O-okay, so Ichigo and I wanted to go ice skating. Renji and Rukia are out of town, Ikkaku hates ice skating, and Yumichika and Uryuu are visiting family so we thought you would be interested."

Grimmjow was silent for a minute, blinking stupidly at them with wide eyes. His brows furrowed. "Why would you think I'd have any interest in hanging out with idiots like you? We're not friends; I
punched your boyfriend in the face and kidnapped you."

"Look, Grimmjow," Ichigo said, putting himself between Grimmjow and Orihime, "We're all pretty
impressed with you. You defied all our expectations and you won us a game. You're cool in our
book as long as you chill out with all this fight me bullshit. So do you wanna hang out or not?"

Grimmjow's brows hung so low over his eyes they were almost hidden from sight. Grimmjow raked
a hand through his wild blue locks and the bat almost slipped from his hand. Considering how alone
Grimmjow was, it had to come as a surprise that people wanted to spend time with him.

Grimmjow shrugged. "Why not? Seeing you fall on your ass would be pretty entertaining. I'll hang
around for a bit but if I leave early, don't call me back." He added, familiar cocky smile slipping back
into place, "Besides, I bet I'm the better skater."

"Why does everything have to be a contest with you?" Ichigo snapped.

"Life's more fun that way."

"Sir," A security guard hurried up to Grimmjow, "I'm going to ask you to put that away; this is a
civilized, family friendly area."

Grimmjow tossed the bat out the door in the snow. "Fine, fine, fine..." Grimmjow trailed behind
them, a surly frown on his face as he stuffed his hands deep in his pockets.

They tried on their skates and Ichigo whistled. "Man, what are your feet, Grimmjow? Sleds?"

Grimmjow flashed Ichigo a suggestive smile. "Well, you know what they say, guys with big feet—,

"Have big socks?" Orihime asked. Ichigo snorted and said, "Yeah, you wish."

"I've seen you, Kurosaki. I don't know how you keep this girl satisfied." Ichigo's face turned redder
than a tomato and Orihime put her hands over her mouth.

"Grimmjow-kun!"

"I'm gonna trip you once we're on the ice." Ichigo seethed, "What the hell was I thinking? This is
why you don't do nice things, ever!"

Grimmjow cackled, his eyes dancing. Ulquiorra sighed and laced up his skates. Why had he agreed
to this? Beside him, Grimmjow fumbled with his skates and created a knot. "The fuck?" He
muttered, trying to lace them again and failing. "Fuckin' motherfucking piece of—," Ulquiorra had a
tick developing in his brow. He reached out and smacked Grimmjow's hand away.

"Let me."

"Hey, I don't need—!" Ulquiorra laced up Grimmjow's skates.

"Are you out of rehab yet?"

"Just about. One more week and then I'm free as a fuckin' bird." Grimmjow tied up his last skate and
stood up and slipped. Ulquiorra caught his arm and Grimmjow tugged it away.

He took small steps towards the rink, wobbling like a toddler learning to walk. Ulquiorra allowed
himself a quiet laugh but it wasn't as funny when he tripped. He hadn't worn skates in years and he'd
forgotten how difficult it could be to walk in them.
He collided into Grimmjow's back and Grimmjow latched onto the railing that bordered the skating rink. "Wow, not even on the ice yet and you're falling all over the place." Grimmjow snorted. Ichigo and Orihime sped by on the ice, hand in hand and laughing.

Grimmjow scowled. "I could do that, no problem." Grimmjow stepped onto the ice and slid forward, an expression of panic seized his face. He flung himself into the railing and held on for dear life as his legs slipped all over the ice.

Ulquiorra took small steps over the slippery surface, his arms out to either side for balance. "Having trouble, World's Best Skater?" Ulquiorra asked, gliding to a stop beside Grimmjow.

"Shut up. This is easy…" Grimmjow let go of the railing and back away and almost fell backwards onto the ice. "Fuck! Okay, nice and slow…" He moved forward inch by inch, his eyes wide and locked on his feet. Ichigo sped by with Orihime and waved, spraying ice in Grimmjow's direction.

"Sick moves!"

Grimmjow snarled, gnashing his teeth. "Fils de pute!" He marched across the ice and fell. Grimmjow crashed onto the ice and Ichigo slapped his hand over his mouth as he skated by, laughing.

"Are you alright, Grimmjow-kun?" Orihime called, smiling.

"Putain de merde!" Grimmjow spat, sitting up on his knees and Ulquiorra was amused at how angry he was over a few slips and falls.

"You're taking this too seriously. We're only ice-skating, this isn't anything to get upset about."

"He won't fight me, so I've gotta show him who the better skater is! I'm sick of his fucking attitude!"

"I can show you. I skated for a few years."

Grimmjow raised a brow. "When?"

"Before we met. I still remember some techniques."

"I can do it myself."

"We'll be ready to leave by the time you've learned how to skate."

Grimmjow bristled, conflicted. "Alright, fine, then show me a thing or two!"

Ulquiorra said, "Start off holding onto the railing so you don't fall. Bend your knees and don't take steps, just glide."

Grimmjow shuffled forward and scrambled as his feet slid out in front of him. He danced a bizarre jig trying to maintain balance, and latched onto the railing for dear life. Ulquiorra glided along beside him as Grimmjow inched his way across the ice. Gradually, Grimmjow's strides grew longer and he held onto the railing with one hand.

"Ready to let go?"

"Yeah. Let's do this." Ulquiorra took his hand and Grimmjow jolted away from him, pressing himself flat against the railing.

"What the hell?" Grimmjow squawked and Ulquiorra said, "To maintain balance."
"That's gay as fuck. Couldn't you just, I don't know…"

"I didn't know you were so easily embarrassed."

Grimmjow's cheeks colored and he scowled. "Fine. Just get it over with." Grimmjow slid back to his side and Ulquiorra reached out and took his hand.

Even though his reaction had been more tempered than Grimmjow's, it did feel strange to hold his hand again, even if there were no romantic feelings behind it. Grimmjow’s hand was large and warm in his, and it covered Ulquiorra's completely.

Grimmjow's grip was tight at first but as time went on, he held Ulquiorra's hand gently as they settled into an even pace. "Anything else I need to know?" Grimmjow asked and Ulquiorra realized he'd been quiet since they started staking. It was hard to focus on anything other than the warmth and gentle touch of Grimmjow's hand.

"No, I think you're ready to let go." Grimmjow looked at him with wide eyes.

"No?"

"Fuck…Just hang on a few minutes."

Ulquiorra increased their speed and Grimmjow uttered a small gasp, his eyes widening. A grin burst across Grimmjow's face and his eyes, wide in both fear and excitement, lit up. Ulquiorra couldn't look away. He hadn't seen this side of Grimmjow before.

"I've got this, Ulquiorra, let's kick their asses!" Grimmjow led Ulquiorra after Ichigo and Orihime. "Kurosaki, let's race around the rink to the entrance over there!" Grimmjow pointed to the gate. "Ulquiorra and I against you and your woman. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me!" Ichigo said and Orihime clapped her hands.

"Yes, let's do this!" Orihime cried.

"What do we get if we win?"

"Winner's boasting rights!"

Before Ulquiorra could protest, Grimmjow linked his arm and took off across the ice. Ichigo and Orihime started off in first place, but Grimmjow rammed into them and sent them flying into the railing. "Jackass! Ichigo hollered.

Ulquiorra looked at Grimmjow, wide-eyed, and Grimmjow laughed maliciously. They had a lead on Ichigo and Orihime as the pair tore across the ice behind them, Orihime's laughter filling the air. Grimmjow turned too late and collided into the railing and Ulquiorra was yanked to the ground with him. Grimmjow bulky body toppled onto him, knocking the wind out of him. Grimmjow's hand, placed deliberately against his hair, shielded Ulquiorra's head from the ice.

Ulquiorra's rebuke got stuck in his throat as he realized only a few months ago, he'd been able to feel every one of Grimmjow's ribs. The man lying atop him was solid muscle, his body firm and strong and warm. Grimmjow raised his head from Ulquiorra's chest and Ulquiorra fought the urge to squirm when they came nose to nose.

They hadn't lain so close together since their teenage years when all it took to make Ulquiorra want him was the touch of his hand. Ulquiorra could see every shade of blue in Grimmjow's eyes, rimmed
with gold. Ulquiorra held his gaze even as the intensity of those blue eyes made something inside him shiver and squirm.

"We won!" Ichigo cried and he laughed at the sight of them. "Get a room, you perverts!" Grimmjow scowled and heaved himself up only to slip and fall right back onto Ulquiorra.

Ulquiorra sighed and Grimmjow chuckled, amused by Ulquiorra's impatience. Grimmjow got to his feet, holding onto the railing to steady himself, and extended a hand. Ulquiorra took it and Grimmjow pulled him to his feet. Ulquiorra stumbled and he pushed Grimmjow up against the railing. His face inches from Grimmjow's chest, Ulquiorra mumbled, "Sorry."

"What, shut up, it's fine..." Clearing his throat in uncharacteristic embarrassment, Grimmjow shuffled around Ulquiorra. Grimmjow accompanied him off the ice. "Next time I'll win." Grimmjow said and Ichigo shrugged.

Ulquiorra had to admit, his birthday was much more entertaining now that he wasn't spending it alone.

After leaving the rink, Grimmjow suggested a bar in the area and the group stopped by for drinks. Ichigo ran to the bank to get cash and Orihime accompanied him. Grimmjow went downstairs to the restroom. Left alone, Ulquiorra took this moment to finish the last few pages of his book.

As he read, the bar stool next to him creaked as Grimmjow took his seat. Grimmjow ordered a brandy and as he drank he asked, "What're you reading?"

"A Farewell to Arms. It's a Hemingway book."

Grimmjow raised his brows and took a drink. "People still read his stuff? It's pretty old."

"His style is unrivaled; he paints a picture using as few words as possible."

"It's good?"

"Very; his books are like a taste of history. Do you read a lot?"

"Nah. I skimmed through Fifty Shades of Gray once."

Ulquiorra thrust the book at him. "That doesn't count. Read this. I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on it."

Grimmjow accepted the book. "Sure, why not. Can't guarantee I'll finish it, though. I'm not a bookish guy."

"Just give it back once you're done." On second thought, Ulquiorra took the book back and scribbled his number on the front page. Grimmjow frowned.

"What?"

"Isn't it kinda soon?" Grimmjow was smiling at him, and it was a smile untainted by malicious intent or mockery. Grimmjow had a nice smile. It was very easy to notice now that he wasn't snarling and scowling.

Ulquiorra didn't know how to react; he was hot around the collar. How could he stay composed when every encounter with Grimmjow felt like a reintroduction?
"This is pretty forward of you, huh? I'm touched."

Ulquiorra felt pressured to make sure things between them stayed within his comfort zone. "It's so you can call me and return the book." Ulquiorra didn't see what was so strange about that. This way if the book was misplaced, all it would take to retrieve it was a phone call.

"Sure, alright." Grimmjow put the book in his bag. "So, if I have any questions about Hemingway, or about the plot, how about I give you a ring?"

Ulquiorra wasn't sure he wanted Grimmjow blowing up his phone with texts. Now that he thought about it, he shouldn't have given Grimmjow his number. Things had shifted between them, but that didn't mean they were friends.

"I'll help you understand some of the bigger words."

"Haha, fuck you." Grinning, Grimmjow gulped down the rest of his brandy and Ichigo and Orihime took their seats at the bar.

Ichigo set a box down on the bar between them and Ulquiorra sighed. "No—,"

"Come on, Ulquiorra!" Ichigo slapped him on the back and withdrew a card and a wrapped gift from the box. "Happy Birthday. Someone's gotta celebrate you."

Grimmjow choked on his last sip of brandy. "Wait, what?"

Ichigo said, "It's Ulquiorra's birthday, we're celebrating."

Grimmjow thumped himself on the chest, eyes wide in bewilderment.

"You didn't know?" Orihime asked.

"Sure I did, we've been the best of friends since I joined the team."

Grimmjow was so surprised it was hard for Ulquiorra not to be amused. They ordered a round of drinks and stayed a while longer and afterwards they went out to a movie. Ulquiorra thanked Ichigo and Orihime for the new book to add to his Hemingway collection and he and Grimmjow rode the train home.

During the train ride, Grimmjow opened up the book and read until his stop arrived. "See you around." It occurred to Ulquiorra that he wasn't sure when he would see Grimmjow again.

"I'll see you in March."

Grimmjow shrugged. "Sure. See you." As Grimmjow's form became a blur in the windows, Ulquiorra wondered where his life would be within the next three months.

When Ulquiorra got home and curled up in bed and opened up his book, his phone buzzed on the bedside table.

*He was serious about messaging me?*

Ulquiorra tried to ignore his disappointment when he saw it was from Ichigo.

**Ichigo: You didn't find a ring, did you?**

**Ulquiorra: No.**
Ichigo: Shit then I left it at the bar dammit. What if someone stole it? Oh God oh god oh god oh god oh god

Ulquiorra resumed his book. He read for a half hour and his eyelids grew heavy. He put the book down and reached over to turn out his light. His phone buzzed again and Ulquiorra snatched it off the table. He was being called from a number he didn't recognize.

"What? Still up? Are you a vampire or something?" Grimmjow's voice, deep and low, greeted him when he answered.

"I was about to go to sleep but you interrupted me. Isn't it late to be calling?"

"You still answered." He could hear the smug smile in Grimmjow's voice.

"How do you like the book?"

"It's good. I'm not a big romance guy but I like it so far."

"Any words you're having trouble with?"

"Fuck you." Ulquiorra stifled a chuckle, turning out the lamp though he didn't sleep for an hour. He stayed up talking to Grimmjow, exchanging taunts that developed into a conversation.

"Wait, what? You've lived in Tokyo how long?"

"Four years or so. You?"

"A little less than that. It took me a hell of a long time to afford a place and I'm gonna sell it soon."

"Why?"

"I want a fresh start. I don't know, I'm still thinking about it. I'll see how I feel once I'm back. It's kinda weird I never bumped into you considering how close our districts are…"

"I guess so."

"So, you said you'd never been to Kyoto? Why the hell not? It's fuckin' gorgeous, especially in the spring."

"I don't like to leave home very often."

"Bullshit. You were like a kid in a candy shop in Tehran."

"That was for business." Ulquiorra didn't enjoy traveling alone. There was something exciting about exploring China with Ichigo and Orihime and seeing the Grand Bazaar with Grimmjow. If he'd gone by himself, he wasn't sure how much he would have enjoyed the experience.

"I'm going up to Kyoto for three days in January to visit my aunt and my nephews. Can't wait…"

"What's it like there?"

"I love it! I lived there for years. The city's in a valley so there's tons of trails to hike and you can always see the mountains. There's a ton of prewar buildings, too, but a lot of 'em are being torn down which sucks. It gives the city so much character..."

Ulquiorra was taken with Grimmjow's passion for the city. His excitement awoke a desire within him
to see the city himself. "I've heard there are many National Treasures there."

"Oh, yeah. There's tons of historical shrines and gardens. It's fuckin' beautiful."

"I've always wanted to see Saiho-Ji."

"The Buddhist Temple? Yeah, I've been there. It's completely covered in moss. Never seen anything like it before…Wanna come with me?"

Ulquiorra was taken aback. Almost a year ago they'd been at each other's throats. Ulquiorra found the idea of traveling with him to be strange, but he was having a hard time coming up with an excuse not to go. He'd always wanted to see Kyoto. He would receive free room and board, though he'd pay his way for everything else. Even if it was Grimmjow, he would have a guide around the city.

"When are you leaving?"

"On the second week of January. It's just for three days."

"Will I have my own room?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Then I'll go."

Grimmjow yawned, stifling his chuckle. "Great; I'll be able to get in some early practice with you."

"That's true. We need to stay on our toes."

"Do you remember when they'll be announcing who our competitors are?"

"Sometime in January."

"Damn that's a month away...I hope we get to play against Saudi Arabia again. That game fucking sucked. It's cause I wasn't there."

"Keep telling yourself that."

"Yeah, 'cause it's true. Fuck, I'm tired. I've gotta sleep. Damn, you're talkative!"

"I could say the same about you." Ulquiorra glanced at the clock and saw that it was almost 1:00 in the morning. "Goodnight."

"Yeah, same."

Grimmjow hung up and the silence washed over Ulquiorra as he sunk back into his pillows. As he drifted into sleep with Grimmjow's voice, his laugh and his taunts in his head, Ulquiorra realized he was too excited to sleep.

He wanted to see Kyoto and visit the temples and the gardens and see the green mountain peaks. He wanted to be there with Grimmjow. Things were changing between them but Ulquiorra was beginning to realize these changes didn't have to be a bad thing.

After all the negative outcomes he'd anticipated when Grimmjow returned to the team, it felt good to know that maybe, just maybe, he'd been wrong.
Grimmjow left rehab on the second week of December. As he sat in his final meeting, Unohana turned to him. "Is there anything you would like to share with us, Grimmjow?"

"I'm feeling stronger physically. I'm feeling better about myself and my body, and I'm in a better place than when I first came here. I'm looking forward to going home."

Grimmjow packed his bag and before he left, he stopped at the front desk. "Give this to Unohana." He dropped a card onto the desk. It was a thank-you card. He'd kept it short and sweet but he still felt awkward giving it to her. She'd helped him a lot these past six months and he wanted her to know he appreciated it.

Grimmjow walked out the doors and made for home. As he rode the train and remember the stash of coke he had at home, nerves twisted in his stomach, so he took out the book Ulquiorra loaned him.

He snorted at the memory of Ulquiorra seated at the bar, his book propped open while his beer lay untouched by his hand. Grimmjow didn't know anyone like Ulquiorra. There was something unique about him from the way he dressed, always button-down with never a wrinkle in sight, to the way he played soccer, to the books he read.

Who the hell reads classic literature in this day and age? Grimmjow wondered, That's pretty cool. And he doesn't just read it; he's fuckin' into it.

Grimmjow wasn't sure what the nature of their relationship was, but considering they'd stayed up late texting last night, he thought Ulquiorra mustn't be as cold towards him as he let on. Or Ulquiorra stayed up late texting all his friends.

The train stopped and Grimmjow got out and walked home. As he stepped through the door, he almost gagged. His apartment stunk of trash, dirty clothes, and rotting food. Coughing, Grimmjow stumbled in and gaped in horror at the state of his apartment.

Dust lay layers thick on the furniture, he saw a roach as big as his thumb crawling around the garbage, and he tripped on empty Chinese food boxes. Dirty dishes piled in his sink and on his dining room table, his bed was unmade and surely had something living in it.

Grimmjow didn't recognize the posters on his walls; they were all rock bands he'd listened to while high. He ripped them all down, crumpled them up and threw them in the trash. This was a beautiful apartment and he'd ruined it and to his dismay, it was still a stoner's apartment.

Yet to acknowledge this brought Grimmjow relief; he could no longer associate himself with the man that enjoyed these obscure bands, or bought the bong in the corner, or trashed his home.

He was a different person from then. Grimmjow spent half the day cleaning up his home; he took out the trash, cleaned the dishes, mopped and dusted. He changed his sheets and set the washing machine running, then he went out on his balcony and smashed his bong to pieces.

As he folded his clean clothes and enjoyed the ache of hard work spreading through his shoulders, Grimmjow felt triumphant in taking back his home from the stoner's clutches. Then he remembered what he'd hidden in the kitchen cabinet and his triumph faded. He opened the drawer and withdrew the lockbox, covered in dust. He hesitated in opening it, worried the sight of cocaine would be enough to trigger a relapse. His stomach churned over and he felt sick.
Fuck this. I'm not weak, not anymore. Open it up and get rid of it.

Clenching his jaw, Grimmjow unlocked the box and popped the lid open. His skin turned cold at the sight of the white powder scattered inside the box, looking as pure as snow. Yet, having seen snow, Grimmjow could vouch that real snow was more beautiful by far. A few months ago, he would have begged to differ, for there was nothing in the world that could compare to cocaine.

He knew now he'd been wrong; life could be beautiful without cocaine as long as he knew how to make it that way. He saw the beauty of life when he traveled, so he was excited to go to Kyoto and show Ulquiorra the city.

Cocaine made him forget he was alone and while Grimmjow didn't have anyone to come home to, things were changing. Why else would Kurosaki have invited him to spend Ulquiorra's birthday with them?

He didn't need cocaine to live a happy life or to help him see the beauty in the world. Not anymore. Looking at the powder in the box made Grimmjow's stomach shrivel and turned his breath short.

He could have killed himself, he was amazed he hadn't. He didn't know what was in cocaine or how pure it was, though Nnoitra vouched on his life it was the purest in the world. Had he believed Nnoitra?

His disgust turned to anger and he picked up the box and emptied the contents down the toilet. As he flushed away the last reminder of the pitiful life he'd led, Grimmjow swore he would never be that person again.

Having worked up an appetite, Grimmjow took a trip to a nearby Chinese food restaurant. They knew him; he must have enjoyed their food when he was high.

*Can I keep on living here?* Grimmjow thought, his appetite long gone, *This whole neighborhood is a stoner's playground…*

He had to get out; this neighborhood no longer suited who he was or the lifestyle he wanted to live. As the sun went down, Grimmjow stopped in a nearby park to eat his dinner. He didn't want to go home. He worried he'd stay up all night remembering how much of himself he'd destroyed using cocaine. Being home brought back too many bad memories.

As he ate he finished reading Ulquiorra's book, unable to comprehend how abrupt the ending was. "Are you fucking kidding me?" He'd invested hours into this book only to have it end in tragedy. He pulled out his phone and texted Ulquiorra.

**Grimmjow:** Yo. Finished ur book. It was sad as fuck. Want 2 hang out n talk? I'm traumatized.

Grimmjow chuckled. Even back in high school, his grammar in text messages ticked Ulquiorra off and he enjoyed getting under his skin.

**Ulquiorra:** Ichigo and Orihime are busy tonight.

Grimmjow frowned, annoyed that Ulquiorra felt he had to do everything with them.

**Grimmjow:** So? It could just b us. I don't bite.

**Ulquiorra:** I'm busy.
Grimmjow scoffed.

**Grimmjow: Yeah ok so we can meet up some other time. Right?**

Ulquiorra didn't reply. He felt like Ulquiorra was trying to avoid him. Had he been wrong to assume they were at a place where they could enjoy one another's company?

They would see one another in a month, but did Ulquiorra want to have nothing to do with him until then? A minute went by without a response and Grimmjow's mood soured.

Grimmjow scowled and stood up, shoving his phone into his back pocket. "Fine. Fuck you, too."

What the hell was the guy's problem? He stayed up late talking to him, he loaned him a book, yet they couldn't hang out? Why had Ulquiorra agreed to go to Kyoto with him if he didn't feel there was some camaraderie between them?

_Aside from the fact that I'm his fucking meal ticket to Kyoto? Fuck. I'm such a moron. We're not friends. He only gave me his number so he could get the book back, he wasn't even gonna invite me to his birthday celebration. Fuck! I'm so stupid…_

Gnashing his teeth, Grimmjow decided it didn't matter if he spent his first night at home alone. He'd rather be alone than with someone who only humored his attempts at friendship.

He only felt angrier when he realized that after all his attempts at getting under Ulquiorra's skin, it was Ulquiorra who'd gotten under his. He was left feeling genuinely hurt by Ulquiorra's dismissive attitude.

He'd overcome his addiction but there was only so much he could change. He would always be alone because he wasn't someone people could be friends with. No one wanted him, not his mother or father, not Ulquiorra. Fine; he didn't want any of them.

Ulquiorra was good looking, but no amount of good looks was worth tolerating a dismissive attitude. As he walked through the deserted streets, Grimmjow passed a pet store and saw something that prompted him to stop and look.

On one side of the glass were puppies, frolicking, playing and napping. On the other side was a single white Persian kitten grooming itself. Grimmjow assumed the kitten was a girl by the pink tag around its neck.

The kitten was by itself but it didn't mind and swatted a red ball around the cage, leaping and rolling upon it. Grimmjow snorted.

_Are you kidding? This cat's way the hell happier than I am and she's by herself._

Grimmjow had always wanted a cat but his mother never liked animals and his father was allergic. One of Grimmjow's Parisian friends had a cat and Grimmjow always enjoyed going to his house after school to play with the cat.

Grimmjow tapped the glass and the kitten pounced at the glass, trying to claw at his finger. Grimmjow moved his finger from one side of the window to the other and the kitten bounded after his hand.

"You're an aggressive little shit, aren't you?"

Grimmjow liked her. She was full of feisty spirit and cute to top it all off. He usually thought Persian
cats were ugly but this kitten's nose wasn't as flat and her eyes didn't bulge. It occurred to him that he could have her if he wanted. Who was to stop him?

They were two lonely souls trying their hardest not to give a damn.

*Come on. I haven't got time for a cat. I'm traveling too much…don't cats do well if they're left alone?*

Grimmjow walked past the window and the scratching of little claws follow him. He turned and saw the kitten trying to follow him, pawing at the glass as if demanding him to come back and play some more.

*Oh fuck it.*

Grimmjow went inside and thrust his card across the counter. He picked out a dozen cat toys, a litter box and a scratching post and some cat food the manager recommended. The manager recommended grooming supplies to keep the cat's coat free of tangles and her eyes clean.

The manager reached into the display and picked up the kitten and handed her to him. Grimmjow held her as if she were made of glass and clutched her to his chest, worried he'd drop her. She was small enough that she fit in the palm of his hand and softer than cotton.

She looked up at him with big, blue eyes and made the tiniest cry that tugged at something inside him. He stoked the top of her head and when he realized her head was the size of a tennis ball, he felt an overwhelming urge to protect her from harm. He'd fallen head over heels in love with the animal and she was about to take over his life.

Grimmjow left the store with an armful of cat essentials and a song in his heart. He tried to think of names as he walked. He had to give her a good name. She was far from a prissy cat; she'd tried to bite him twice when he put her the carrier.

When he got home, he let her out. He filled up her litter box in the bathroom and scattered toys around for her and he set her little bed in next in his room. For an hour he followed her around the house and watched her explore her new home.

She crawled under the sofa and Grimmjow, worried she'd get stuck, reached his hand under to try and scoop her out. She batted at his hand and tried to turn his concern into a game.

She darted out from under the couch and attacked his socks, swatting at his toes and pouncing on his feet. Grimmjow thought he should train her to desist the behavior but he was charmed by it and let her attack his feet as he prepared dinner.

Grimmjow filled her bowl with canned food and ate his dinner on the floor with her and watched her eat. He retired to bed and watched the film adaptation of *A Farewell to Arms* and wondered if Ulquiorra had seen it. He thought the film was too sentimental but the girl playing the lead was beautiful so he didn't mind.

He jumped as the kitten climbed into bed beside him, raking her claws through his blankets to aid her ascent. She almost fell and Grimmjow caught her, pushing the tiny kitten into the crook of his arm. "Crazy cat…"

Grimmjow watched the credits roll and danced his fingers across the bed sheets so the cat could chase them. He bowled the kitten over and tickled her belly and she nibbled his fingers. Grimmjow thought he would name her Ada. In French it meant nobility and this cat would be treated like it.

On the bedside table, his phone buzzed and Grimmjow's heart jumped into his throat. He snatched
his phone and in his excitement, he failed twice to unlock it. He had a message from Ulquiorra.

Ulquiorra: Sorry. My phone died.

Grimmjow: Yeah sure.

Ulquiorra: I'm sorry. Ichigo and Orihime convinced me the only reason you'd ask is if you wanted to meet with me.

Grimmjow: As compared to what, genius?

Ulquiorra: I thought you were reaching out to me out of pity.

Grimmjow reread Ulquiorra's reply twice. He covered his mouth to stifle his laughter as a grin burst across his face. Ulquiorra had felt as insecure as Grimmjow did.

Grimmjow: No you idiot! I don't do pity. Let's hang out. Does tomorrow work?

Grimmjow waited, eyes fixed on the screen even as his kitten pounced on his chest and tried to swat the phone away. Grimmjow rolled over onto his side and she tumbled off.

Ulquiorra: Yes, it does. What would you like to do?

Grimmjow: Who cares let's wing it. Come over to my place first. I want you to see my cat.

Ulquiorra: You have a cat? That isn't a euphemism for something deviant?

Grimmjow barked laughter.

Grimmjow: Come over and see.

Grimmjow drifted into sleep with a smile; he and Ulquiorra were finally on equal footing.
Ulquiorra walked to Grimmjow's apartment as light snow fell from the sky and the sun disappeared behind the skyscrapers. He walked past windows bedecked with multicolored baubles, glittering with flashing lights. People rang bells and asked for charity, and a choir sang Christmas carols outside a church.

Ulquiorra wasn't sure what he'd do for Christmas. Usually Ichigo threw parties at his home and Ulquiorra went. He didn't like parties and he sat off to the side and drank eggnog, talking sparingly to people he knew. Otherwise he sat at home alone and wondered where his mother was and how she was doing and if his father was happier.

He knew his father had started seeing someone new a year ago, but his mother's well being was a mystery to him. Ulquiorra wondered if she'd married that actor she'd left his father for. The years had flown by since his parents' divorce yet it still felt strange to know they were dating.

When he was little he'd loved Christmas as much as any child. He'd seen Christmas as a time when they could spend time together as a family.

Now that his family was divided, Ulquiorra saw Christmas as a reminder of what he'd had and lost. He stopped celebrating and kept himself busy either at Ichigo's parties or at home alone with a book.

Seeing families enjoying each other's company sent a pang of envious contempt through him. So in his bitter feelings, he took delight in noticing how miserable people were as they rushed to do last minute Christmas shopping. He chuckled to himself when he listened to Ichigo angst over what to buy Orihime. He was grateful to be spared the hassle people went through to visit family living in other countries.

Even if he had no one to spend the day with, he was fortunate he was being spared the stress of Christmas.

"Yo." Ulquiorra looked up and found Grimmjow standing in the doorway to his apartment.

Even though they were on friendlier terms, Ulquiorra felt a jolt inside him every time he looked into Grimmjow's face and saw how much he'd changed. Or was it the sight of the bright blue sweater that clashed horrifically with his blue hair?

Or was it the sweater hugging his physique that left Ulquiorra flustered? Ulquiorra couldn't get over how different he looked and only in the best of ways.

Grimmjow reached out and tapped Ulquiorra's forehead. "Anyone home in there?" Ulquiorra brushed his hand away and Grimmjow tried to maneuver his hand around and tap his face.

Ulquiorra fended him off. "Stop it." Grimmjow's eyes gleamed with mischief. "Then come on in already."

He let Ulquiorra in and Ulquiorra brushed by, tensing as his shoulder caressed Grimmjow's chest. They took the elevator up and Grimmjow said, "Sorry about this. This place is a dump; of course the fuckin' intercom isn't working now…"

"Are you moving?"

"Probably next year. I've been looking at places."
Ulquiorra followed him inside. The kitchen was open to the living room that boasted a glorious view through floor-to-ceiling windows.

A widescreen TV sat atop a glass coffee table that must have cost Grimmjow more than the appliances in his kitchen, and cat toys were scattered across the faux fur rug. All in all Ulquiorra thought it was a cozy bachelor's pad and he couldn't see why Grimmjow would want to leave.

The door closed behind him. He was alone with Grimmjow in his home and the thought sent a rush through his stomach. Ulquiorra sat down on the sofa and Grimmjow said, "Want anything to drink?"

Grimmjow peeled off his sweater. The shirt underneath rode up past his abdomen, giving Ulquiorra an eyeful of chiseled golden skin.

Grimmjow quirked a brow at him, smoothing out his shirt. "I've got water, I could make you up a protein shake. I've got hot chocolate, pretty sure there's some brandy around here somewhere…"

Ulquiorra blinked, tearing his eyes away from Grimmjow. "No, I'm alright." He wanted to see Grimmjow's cat and leave as soon as possible. Once they were out in the open air, the possibility that something could happen between them would dissipate.

This is stupid. Nothing is going to happen between us. It wouldn't make any sense. I haven't slept with anyone in months; maybe that's why I'm feeling so—?

Grimmjow plopped down on the sofa beside him. Ulquiorra fought the urge to move to the end of the couch and put some space between them. Grimmjow said, "So, I finished your book."

Grimmjow's lips, usually pouting, quirked upwards and when Ulquiorra looked into his electric blue eyes, he found it hard to look away. His mouth went dry when Grimmjow held his gaze.

"It was depressing as fuck." Grimmjow's face split into a grin that crinkled the corners of his eyes, and his chest shook as he laughed.

"It fit the story. It wouldn't have made sense to have a happy ending."

"Yeah, I guess so but still…He lost his family in the same night! It was fuckin' brutal!"

"It was very abrupt but realistic."

"They went through so much shit to be together and then the story took a dump all over them. But that's life, I guess. So yeah, it was pretty realistic. Made me feel something, too."

"What?"

"Pissed off. Why the hell did I waste my time? Why did I even bother?"

Ulquiorra was surprised Grimmjow had such a strong reaction to the story. "What did you think of his writing style?"

"I'm into it. I stayed away from a lotta older books 'cause they lose me; too wordy, takes ages to get to the damn point. But this was short, simple, no BS and I sat through it 'till the end. I liked it. What other books have you read?"

"The Old Man and the Sea, For Whom the Bell Tolls, A Moveable Feast…You'd like A Moveable Feast. It's a memoir about Hemingway’s life in Paris. You lived in Paris, didn't you?"

"Oui." Grimmjow grinned, turning to face Ulquiorra.
"Then you would enjoy it. Many of the cafés and bars he mentions in the book are still in Paris; maybe you've even visited them."

"Nah. I'd have been too young. I only lived in Paris 'till I was ten."

Ulquiorra shook his head. He'd forgotten Grimmjow had left Paris at such a young age. "Oh, then never mind."

"But! I probably walked past 'em; I loved running around the city like a crazy kid. What places did he write about?"

"I don't remember, you should read it for yourself. Next time we meet, I'll have to loan you my copy."

Grimmjow chuckled.

"What?"

"You're so excited; you're talking so fast!" Grimmjow shoved his shoulder and Ulquiorra's breath caught at his touch. A squeak caught Ulquiorra's attention. He peered over the couch and spotted a tiny white kitten clawing at the sofa in her haste to come up.

Grimmjow scooped her up and pulled her in close to kiss her tiny head before he plopped her onto the sofa. Ulquiorra fought back the urge to pinch himself.

"There you go, bossy little shit. Happy now?" The kitten sniffed Ulquiorra's leg and climbed onto his lap. Ulquiorra touched the top of the kitten's head and she walked by, his finger running the length of her tiny body.

"Her name's Ada." Grimmjow said, rolling her onto her back so he could tickle her soft belly. She bit and nibbled his fingertips and Grimmjow hissed. "Ow! Mean little thing." He shoved her off his lap and the kitten scurried away to play with one of her many toys. Ulquiorra snorted.

Grimmjow frowned. "What?"

"I didn't know you had such a soft spot for animals."

"Yeah, go on, laugh it up. If you're jealous, I can pet you if you want." Ulquiorra retreated to the end of the couch and raised his foot in defense as Grimmjow inched closer. Ulquiorra shoved him in the chest and Grimmjow grinned, stretching out his hand.

"What? She comes to me for pets all the time 'cause I'm fucking good with my hands." Grimmjow said, waggling his fingers towards Ulquiorra. Ulquiorra kicked him away and jumped off the couch. Grimmjow burst out laughing and doubled over, smacking the sofa in his mirth.

Ulquiorra scowled and tried to keep his mind off what might have happened if he hadn't resisted. "I'm leaving."

"Oh, come on…Let me get my coat on!"

Grimmjow laughed as he buttoned up his coat. Ulquiorra stood by the door, not humored by Grimmjow's teasing. They hurried out the door together. Ulquiorra said, "You asked me, so I'm assuming you have something planned."

"Not really. Let's walk around a bit. If we see something cool, we'll check it out."
Ulquiorra frowned. He liked to have a plan rather than wandering aimlessly in the cold. "There isn't anything you'd like to do? By the time you've thought of somewhere to go, it might be closed or—,"

"Then we'll see what happens! Chill the hell out." Grimmjow squeezed his shoulder and hurried into the elevator. Ulquiorra's shoulder tingled and he had a hard time figuring out when Grimmjow had gotten so physical with him, and why.

As they stepped outside into the cold, Ulquiorra decided he wanted to plan out some things to do. "I'd like to see Senso-ji temple. I've never been there at night."

"I want food first."

"They have food at the temple."

Grimmjow made a face. "Let's go to Kabukicho. There's tons of clubs down there, we can grab a bite there."

"Isn't that the red-light district?"

"Yeah, so? The club scene is great and it's the perfect place to go at night."

"I don't want to eat around prostitutes."

"It's not that bad! So, what, we're only gonna do stuff you want to do?"

"If your idea of fun is visiting the red-light district, then yes."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't wanna visit some boring temple."

"Then don't."

"Fine!"

Ulquiorra realized they were more likely to split up rather than spend time together. Ulquiorra didn't want to see the temple by himself. Ulquiorra wondered if Grimmjow felt the same; he was scowling but he'd made no attempt to go on ahead.

"We'll visit the temple first since it will close soon, then we can stop in Kabukicho for dinner." Grimmjow shrugged.

Ulquiorra stifled a sigh. "What does that mean?"

"Sounds fine. I know a few good places to eat in Kabukicho."

"Weren't you hungry?"

"I am, I'll snack on something at the temple."

"You said you didn't want to go."

"Yeah, well, maybe I changed my mind?" Grimmjow said, curling his fingers in his hair in agitation. Ulquiorra left it at that and they hopped on a train to Asakusa. Ulquiorra spotted the five-story pagoda adjacent to the temple reaching high into the sky. It glowed golden through the falling snow.

Red lanterns shone through the snowfall as they entered the temple grounds. They walked past shrines, their rooftops painted white with snow, and stopped to admire the pagoda, each of its eaves
covered with snow.

The Thunder Gate dominated the entrance to the temple, and an enormous red lantern hung from the gate. Nakamise-Dori, the street they walked to reach the temple, was lined with rows of food and gift stands to their left and right.

The stands sold Buddhist scrolls, souvenirs, kimonos and other robes. Past the street, Ulquiorra saw a noodle stand selling tempura, sushi and other goods. "Want some?" Ulquiorra asked and Grimmjow hurried over to get a look. Grimmjow ordered sushi and they walked the street to the temple which was lit up like a beacon.

Ulquiorra was happy they'd come at night. There was something magical about the lights winking at them through the falling snow. They stopped once more to buy a statuette of Senso-ji temple Ulquiorra was taken with. Since Ulquiorra was low on cash, Grimmjow chipped in and they bought it together.

Grimmjow asked, "Want some?" He dangled some sushi from his chopsticks in Ulquiorra's face.

"What kind is it?" Ulquiorra only liked salmon roll sushi, though he didn't hate other kinds.

"Good, good and good." Grimmjow said, shrugging. Ulquiorra bit the sushi off Grimmjow's chopsticks and Grimmjow jolted.

"Hey! I was gonna get you your own chopsticks!" Grimmjow scowled and wiped the chopsticks off on his jacket.

"I'm not contagious; you don't have to worry about contracting anything." Ulquiorra assured him, unsure what the problem was.

"My mouth was on that…" Grimmjow grumbled, cramming more sushi in his mouth. They walked the temple grounds, stopping to explore the shrines dotting the grounds. Ulquiorra decided he'd seen enough and they walked back to the subway.

"What's with you and temples?" Grimmjow asked, "You're far from religious, aren't you?"

"The religious connotations don't matter to me. I like the architecture of the Edo period more than I'll ever like the modern architecture of the city. It's unique. At least we still preserve it to some degree."

"You'll like Kyoto. There are tons of shrines there and they preserved a whole street full of Edo architecture."

They rode the metro to Kabukicho, Tokyo's red-light district and signature nightlife spot. The clubs were bustling, advertisements flashed and blinked from skyscrapers, and sex shops were on every corner. Ulquiorra spotted a security camera hanging from the side of a residential building.

"That's the tenth one I've seen." Grimmjow noted. Every street or so there were posters demanding civilians report yakuza sightings to the Kabukicho Renaissance, an anti-yakuza group.

"This area must be a yakuza hub." Ulquiorra said and Grimmjow grinned.

"Oh yeah. There's over 1,000 yakuza in this area."

"I see…"

"What?"
"This is why you wanted to visit." Ulquiorra snorted. Of course Grimmjow would want to visit an area of the city notorious for its yakuza sightings.

"What would be cooler than seeing a yakuza?" Grimmjow asked, holding the door open as they stopped in a bar. They sat at a table in the back where it was quieter on Ulquiorra's request. They ordered udon for dinner and some sake to go with it.

"Any plans for Christmas?" Grimmjow asked, slurping up his noodles.

"No."

"Yeah, same here. I usually buy my aunt a gift and send some candy to my nephews but that's it."

Ulquiorra was surprised to hear Grimmjow's attitude towards Christmas mirrored his own.

"I celebrated when I was little, but since my mother is in America and my father is traveling all the time, there's no point in celebrating. Sometimes Kurosaki throws parties I'll attend."

"Really, since when are you into parties?"

"It's something to do, so I go. I don't know why he invites me. I'm not very much fun."

"Cause he knows otherwise you'll be sitting around feeling sorry for yourself. Yeah, I hate Christmas. Used to love it when I was a kid, now it's fucking annoying to see all these happy families knowing mine's a wreck." Scowling, Grimmjow shoveled noodles in his mouth and went quiet for a while.

"My thoughts exactly."

Grimmjow snorted, lips tugged down at the corners. "Sucks, huh?"

Ulquiorra knew perfectly well how Grimmjow felt. "How is Christmas in France celebrated?" He asked, hoping to change the subject as he was unsure how to feel knowing their feelings were so similar.

"My family would burn Yule Logs made out of cherry wood we'd cover in red wine if my pops hadn't drank it all. It smelled sweet, probably one of my favorite smells in the world. My mom would drag me to church on Christmas Eve and we'd come home and have Revellion."

"What's that taste like?"

Grimmjow barked laughter, his eyes dancing. "It's not a food, stupid! It's a long dinner! We'd have seafood appetizers, Turkey with chestnuts as the main course, and Buche de Noel for dessert. I forget what you'd call that here. You know, sponge cake shaped like a Yule log."

Ulquiorra fought back a smirk. "You just pronounced it."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did. It's called a Yule log."

"Buche de Noel is Buche de Noel!"

"Which means Yule log, does it not?"

"No, it means Christmas log!"
"It's the exact same thing."

"Yeah, and you know how much French? And no, Croissant doesn't count, dipshit."

Ulquiorra put his hand over his mouth to stifle his laughter. Grimmjow's impatience was more amusing than usual; Ulquiorra would blame his third glass of sake. Grimmjow snorted with laughter and shoved Ulquiorra in the chest.

"Stop fucking laughing."

"I'm not."

"Yeah you are, I see it. Dammit, you're such a little asshole." Grimmjow downed his fifth shot of sake and choked, laughing too hard to swallow. Ulquiorra was unable to resist chuckling at Grimmjow's sudden outburst of humor.

Grimmjow had a sixth shot and his cheeks were rosy and his eyes were hazy so Ulquiorra asked for the bill. "Lemme pay." Grimmjow said, his speech slurred, and Ulquiorra held the bill out of his reach and paid.

"Hey, come on! Let me get the tip at least." Grimmjow slapped some yen on the counter to cover the tip and the waitress came by to run Ulquiorra's card. Ulquiorra jumped as Grimmjow leaned across the table, leaving little space between them.

"Anyone ever tell you that you're one hell of a pretty boy?" Grimmjow asked, puffing warm, sake-scented breath against Ulquiorra's lips.

Ulquiorra's brain went into panic mode and he didn't know what to say or do. He put his hand on Grimmjow's shoulder and Grimmjow covered Ulquiorra's hand with his own.

Ulquiorra's mouth went dry as the warmth of Grimmjow's touch engulfed his hand. Ulquiorra hoped it was the sake that was sending a rush of heat to his loins rather than Grimmjow's touch. He couldn't tell.

"It's too bad you're so fuckin' annoying." Grimmjow rambled as his thumb traced Ulquiorra's lower lip. There was a hunger in Grimmjow's eyes that made Ulquiorra feel cornered yet unwilling to run.

"I can't tell if I wanna punch you in the nose or ask if you wanna slip into the bathroom with me..."

Despite his initial alarm, Ulquiorra saw an opening to reserve their situation. "And do what? Pee with me?" Grimmjow doubled over with a roar of laughter. Ulquiorra tensed as Grimmjow dropped his face into his shoulder.

"No, no, you...you're funny, you know that? In a really fuckin' weird way."

"You're drunk. Let's go home." Ulquiorra helped him to his feet and Grimmjow wobbled away him, waving goodbye to everyone on the way out.

Ulquiorra didn't want to take any of Grimmjow's rambling seriously. Grimmjow wasn't attracted to him, it was the alcohol talking. Ulquiorra would never forgive himself if he was stupid enough to go down that road again with Grimmjow.

No good had ever come from it, though he was sure it would make the heated buzz in his loins subside. It's the alcohol, just the alcohol, Ulquiorra insisted. He pressed on up the street with Grimmjow behind him, singing a Christmas carol in slurred French.
As they walked, trying to find the subway, the crowds dimmed and they saw fewer people by the minute. Soon they walked in silence, side by side with the street to themselves.

*If he tries to seduce me once we get to his apartment, what would I do? Shove him away, of course, why do I have to ask? What if I don't want to?*

Alarmed, Ulquiorra shook the thoughts away. He was the least tipsy of the two of them; he had to be the sensible one.

"Holy shit…Grimmjow, mother-fucking, Jaegerjaquez!" Ulquiorra stopped walking and Grimmjow bumbled into him. Ulquiorra's stomach turned over at the sight of the man behind them. Nnoitra Gilga was the spitting image of the tall, lanky teenager Ulquiorra remembered.

His hair was longer and greasy, his clothes baggy and dirty. He'd lost an eye since his high school days, concealed by an eyepatch.

"And…oh no…no, no, no, is this for real?" Nnoitra bayed laughter, slapping his knee. "Ulquiorra, fucking, Cifer! Oh this is too good to be true. The fuckin' faggot dream team is back together!"

Ulquiorra's annoyance became dismay when he saw the color drain from Grimmjow's face. This was the first encounter with his dealer since he'd overdosed in June. Judging by Grimmjow's face, it was bringing back more than unpleasant memories.

Nnoitra approached, towering over them, his yellow teeth bared in a smile. "Grimmjow, man, how you been? You look good. I haven't heard from you in months; my wallet's missed you."

Grimmjow's lips thinned and his fists balled at his side. Ulquiorra's blood went cold when he saw the packet of cocaine Nnoitra produced from his pocket. Ulquiorra saw tattoos crawling up from under his sleeve to Nnoitra's fingertips.

"Grimmjow, he's a-," Ulquiorra began. Nnoitra shoved his way between them and waved the packet in Grimmjow's face.

"Want some, it's been months; how the hell have you lived without me?"

"Get that shit out of my face."

Nnoitra's brows disappeared into the greasy hair hanging in his face. "What the hell's with you, huh? Have some; I'll give you a discount, two for one. Come on, just like old times."

He waggled the packet in Grimmjow's face and Grimmjow ignored them. Nnoitra's brows furrowed. "You have any idea how much you owe me, dipshit? You still haven't paid up from the two month supply I gave you!"

Grimmjow smacked the cocaine out of Nnoitra's hands and snarled, "You almost killed me! I don't owe you jack shit!"

Nnoitra lunged and Grimmjow, still intoxicated, didn't have time to react. Ulquiorra didn't think twice as he rushed at Nnoitra, though he should have. Ulquiorra socked Nnoitra in the jaw and he flew into a trashcan and tumbled over into the garbage.

Grimmjow gaped at him. Ulquiorra wiped his hand on his coat, unable to hide his disgust as Nnoitra stood up, his face contorted in fury.

"Get out of our way, Gilga. He's clean. He doesn't want anything from you, so let us through."
Ulquiorra couldn't have reacted if he wanted to. Nnoitra struck out like a rattlesnake and Ulquiorra saw white as his head struck the wall behind him. Warm blood gushed down his face, the coppery taste of it making Ulquiorra sick.

"Touch me again, faggot!" Nnoitra advanced on him, eyes blazing and teeth bared. "I'm not taking shit from you! You took away my best customer! Fuck you!" Grimmjow intervened, wrestling Nnoitra away from Ulquiorra and into a payphone stand.

"He didn't do anything!" Grimmjow seethed, "It was my decision. I'm done with you and your shit, Gilga, so stay the hell away from me." Grimmjow shoved Nnoitra, bowling him over into the street. Nnoitra tumbled into a pothole, splashing filthy water all over himself.

Grimmjow hurried to Ulquiorra's side. "Shit! You okay?"

Ulquiorra, pinching his nose, nodded though in truth he felt terrible. Behind them, Nnoitra, his face twisted in rage, reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. Ulquiorra's blood ran cold and he took Grimmjow's hand. "Run."

"I'll kill you, Jaegerjaquez, and I'll take everything you owe me off your corpse!" They ran; Ulquiorra looked over his shoulder in time see the neon lights flash off the pistol in Nnoitra's hand.

Ulquiorra ran with Grimmjow beside him, not knowing where he was going or where they would end up. All that mattered was getting away from Nnoitra and so the pair ran until they were breathless.

Grimmjow veered to the right and tugged Ulquiorra into a convenience store. The man behind the counter gave a start as they burst in and Grimmjow led Ulquiorra into the back.

Grimmjow grabbed a package of tissue and Ulquiorra slumped against the wall and held the tissues to his nose. He caught his breath while he waited for the bleeding to subside.

Ulquiorra jumped as Grimmjow held him close, stumbling into the shelf behind them. Ulquiorra heard Grimmjow's heart racing as Nnoitra came to a halt outside the store and looked around .

Grimmjow held Ulquiorra closer to him as Nnoitra lingered outside, catching his breath. Ulquiorra heard him bellow a curse before he turned and crossed the street.

His back to them, Nnoitra kept walking until his lanky legs swallowed up the distance and he vanished. Grimmjow's chest shook with laughter and Ulquiorra looked up to see his face split into a grin. They looked at one another in disbelief.

Lost in his mirthful disbelief, Grimmjow's face fell into Ulquiorra's shoulder. It felt good to finally be able to look out for Grimmjow the way Grimmjow looked out for him when they'd been children. Grimmjow's laughter died to soft pants, warm against Ulquiorra's neck. "Come on. I'll walk you home. Don't need someone's death on my conscious."

They rode the 1:00 train home. Ulquiorra fought off sleep as his head threatened to fall against Grimmjow's shoulder. Grimmjow walked him to his front door and Ulquiorra frowned. "Will you take a cab? The trains are running slowly."

"Nah, I'll wait."

"Text me when you're home."

"I'll be fine."
Ulquiorra's jaw clenched. "Just do it."

Grimmjow waved farewell and Ulquiorra collapsed into bed but he couldn't sleep. He kept checking the clock and wondered if Grimmjow had made it home. Around 1:40, his phone buzzed and Ulquiorra, bleary eyed, checked his messages.

**Grimmjow: Alive. Have some sweet dreams for me. G'night.**

Ulquiorra dropped his phone onto the end table and, his mind at ease, finally slipped into sleep.
Joyeux Noel

Looking back, Grimmjow didn't know what he'd have done if Ulquiorra hadn't been there. At the sight of his dealer, Grimmjow was paralyzed and his mind had been thrown into disarray. Having Ulquiorra there had given him strength to cut Nnoitra out of his life once and for all. After confronting Nnoitra, Grimmjow felt like he'd severed the chains of his junkie lifestyle for good.

Grimmjow put his apartment up for sale in mid-December and had his eyes on an apartment in Asakusa. In the week leading up to Christmas, he saw many people interested in buying, but he hadn't heard back from them. The sooner he got into a new neighborhood, the better. He didn't trust Nnoitra not to come after him.

As Christmas approached, Grimmjow bought gifts to send to his aunt and her family. He stopped outside a bookstore and considered getting something for Ulquiorra. He wasn't sure if they were at the point where exchanging gifts would feel comfortable to them.

Grimmjow wasn't sure where they were in their friendship, or when they'd become friends. Even if they'd recently reconnected, Grimmjow wanted to give him something. Grimmjow shouldered the door open and browsed the store's selection.

He was there fifteen minutes, trying to decide between a collection of Hemingway's short stories, or a collection of stories by H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft was well known for his cosmic horror stories detailing mankind's encounters with the unknown.

He thought Ulquiorra would like Lovecraft; his stories reflected on mankind's insignificance in the vastness of the universe.

Ulquiorra was a metaphysical thinker; he liked to ask big questions that made Grimmjow's head spin. Only a week ago, they'd gone out drinking; on the walk home, Ulquiorra stopped to look up at the moon. Swaying, he said, "Have you ever wondered why we exist or how we exist?"

"Sometimes, if I'm bored; I try not to think too hard on it."

"It's an important question." Ulquiorra continued, his speech slurred as he weaved after Grimmjow. "How did the universe come to be? Why? It's baffling."

"Hell if I know."

"The universe never ends. It's the only thing in the world that doesn't have an end. Life ends but the universe doesn't. It's infinite."

"Can you shut up? You're freaking me out."

"It is scary. It scares me when I realize how insignificant we are. There's so much more out there but we go about our lives, obsessed with our insignificant problems. None of it matters, we don't matter. We're a speck on a clover, like that story, what was it?"

"The one about the elephant? Yeah, I don't remember...I liked the cartoon, it was my favorite—,"

"There's a theory that there are multiple dimensions, that we're one universe of many. So then is our whole universe an orb in someone's pocket?"

Grimmjow's mind was reeling.
"Sometimes it frightens me," Ulquiorra confessed. "There's so much we don't know so we simplify what we can't answer by saying God created everything, but there's nothing to prove that idea. The universe exists somehow, we exist, and none of us know why or how or what the purpose is."

"So who gives a shit?" Grimmjow's train of thought derailed when he noticed how lovely Ulquiorra looked illuminated by the moonlight.

"I mean, come on. I don't know what's gonna happen to me when I die; I'll never find out unless I off myself. So I'm not gonna waste my time worrying about it. See how it goes? You should try it sometime."

"I wish I could." Ulquiorra looked genuinely bitter. Grimmjow liked that this was something Ulquiorra thought and felt deeply about, even if he couldn't understand it. He wondered if Ulquiorra thought less of him for seeing the world in a simpler way.

Grimmjow snorted and tousled his hair before he could stop himself. Ulquiorra's hair was so soft and smooth under his fingertips and it was hard to tear his hand away.

"I mean you can think as hard as you want on it, but don't get yourself so bent outta shape about it. Live your life and forget about the crazy details."

"That was helpful, thank you." Grimmjow rolled his eyes.

"My point is focus on the here and now. Why worry about shit you can't change? It's stupid, but you're stupid, so of course you'd waste all your time and energy getting triggered over stupid shit."

Ulquiorra shoved him and Grimmjow could remember chuckling on the walk home. He didn't know anyone like Ulquiorra. He was as odd as he was unique and Grimmjow enjoyed his company all the more for that.

Ulquiorra would enjoy the Hemingway book for the connection they shared through his works. He would also appreciate Lovecraft's stories in his own way, so Grimmjow left the store with both.

He didn't want to wrap them; he was terrible at gift-wrapping. If Ulquiorra wrapped his gifts he would do it very well, Grimmjow knew this. Grimmjow didn't want to half-ass it so he wrapped them to the best of his abilities.

He wasn't sure when to present Ulquiorra with these gifts, but an opportunity popped up. Ulquiorra texted him, asking if he would like to go to Kurosaki's Christmas Eve party. Grimmjow would have preferred if it was just them, but he smirked at all the ways he might bother Kurosaki.

On the night of the party, Grimmjow threw on a black dress shirt, some white pants and a white dinner jacket. He bought buche de noel from his local French pastry shop and hauled the cake to Karakura Town. Grimmjow remembered coming to Kurosaki's home long ago with his mother. At the sight of Kurosaki's home, bitter memories washed over him.

He and Ulquiorra had gone on their first date and shared their first kiss in the front seat of Ulquiorra's car. His father had crossed the one line Grimmjow hoped he would never cross and laid a hand on his mother. He could still remember the shame he'd felt knowing Ulquiorra had to see what a wreck his family was.

"Grimmjow? You're here?" It was Abarai and his girlfriend, Rukia.

"No, I'm Grimmjow's double."
Renji rolled his eyes. "What, Ichigo invited you? So are you buddies now or what?"

"No, Ulquiorra did. I'm not stealing your boyfriend, don't worry."

Renji rang the doorbell and Ichigo greeted them both with a hug. He sputtered when he saw Grimmjow and Grimmjow realized it had been a good idea to come after all.

"Grimmjow! What the—?"

"Yo, Kurosaki. Gonna let me in?"

"I'm not letting you in unless you promise not to embarrass me! My family is here!"

"Not my fault you still live with daddy."

"Promise me now, or you can sit out here and freeze."

"No can do, sorry."

"It's alright, he's with me." Ulquiorra stepped onto the lawn behind them, his feet crunching in the snow. Ichigo breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"Alright, Grimmjow, play nice and I won't tell Ulquiorra to escort you out, alright?"

Grimmjow's words were stuck in his throat at the sight of Ulquiorra dressed in a black dinner jacket with matching pants and a green tie. Ulquiorra could pull off anything and something about him always sent a rush of heat throughout Grimmjow's body. Grimmjow hadn't wanted him more than he did right now.

"Coming in?" Ulquiorra was holding the door for him.

"No, I was gonna stand out here all night for the fun of it." Grimmjow said with a burst of breathy laughter as his stomach did flips under Ulquiorra's emerald gaze.

They entered Kurosaki's living room where a table full to bursting with cookies and eggnog awaited them. A plump Christmas tree in the center of the room flashed with multicolored lights and glimmering ornaments.

Ichigo and Orihime cuddled on the couch while Uryuu, Renji and Rukia conversed in a corner. Kurosaki's father was talking to Uryuu's father over a glass of eggnog. Grimmjow caught snatches of medical jargon in their conversation.

Grimmjow tapped Ulquiorra on the shoulder. "Hey, is that Keigo Asano?" Ulquiorra looked at the brown-haired young man talking to a man with a black pixie haircut.

"I think so."

"Seriously? It's like being back in time whenever I'm around Kurosaki…" Grimmjow muttered.

The doorbell rang and Ichigo leaped to his feet. "It's Chad!" He cried in delight. He threw open the door, throwing his arms around a giant Hispanic man, his eyes obscured by a mop of curly dark hair.

Chad slapped Ichigo on the back and Ichigo hurried inside with him.

"How's the games going in Mexico?" Ichigo asked as Chad greeted Kurosaki's guests with warm hugs.
"Very good. Mexico qualified for the next round in the world cup."

Ichigo, Renji and Rukia exclaimed in excitement. "What if we played against you next year?" Renji said, slapping Chad on the back.

"I hope so," Chad said, "I've watched all your games. You've played well."

"Chad, this is Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez." Ichigo said, gesturing Grimmjow's way. Chad marched over and Grimmjow let the giant shake his hand. He'd heard nothing but good things about his skills as a goalie. He was a lifesaver to the team.

"Ulquiorra, this is Chad Yasutora." Grimmjow stifled his laughter when he saw how far back Ulquiorra had to crane his head to look up at Chad. Chad shook his hand and his hand swallowed up Ulquiorra's.

"I've heard good things about both of you." Chad concluded and Ichigo offered him eggnog.

Grimmjow whistled, unable to stop the grin from spreading across his face. "Can you imagine scoring a goal against a guy that big? They look impenetrable, but it might be easier than you think to score off a nutmeg." Grimmjow mused. He hoped they played against Mexico now; he wanted a shot at a goal defended by Yasutora.

"Have you heard from any of your family?" Ulquiorra asked and Grimmjow was taken by surprise. Scowling, he poured himself some eggnog. He found himself wishing it was alcoholic.

"I heard from my mom after the game against Tehran. She watched it. She still wants to see me, but like hell if I'm gonna forgive her. She wants to see me so bad; she shouldn't have left me."

Grimmjow gulped his eggnog. A part of him did want to see her and talk to her, another part of him was too prideful to meet with her. He wasn't worth enough to her to stick around and he didn't know why she thought she deserved the time of day from him.

"Do you want to meet with her?"

"No." Grimmjow ground out. His mind was made up.

"You should."

"Yeah, and you should mind your own business."

"At least you've heard from your mother."

Grimmjow scoffed. Like that was anything to be happy about. "What about you?"

"My father sent me a card. He says he's merged his business with a company in Taiwan. He hasn't expressed any interest in seeing me."

Uryuu played the keyboard and Ichigo and his family gathered around to sing. Kurosaki's mother was long dead, but the family was thriving and whole-hearted. Seeing how happy they were stirred envy in Grimmjow's heart.

He wished he could have a family like Kurosaki's. Grimmjow realized he could; he still had the chance to make amends with his mother. Or she could hurt him again and the idea was enough to make him want to stay as far away from her as possible.

The song ended and Orihime and the guests applauded, their faces shining with mirth. "Alright,"
Ichigo announced, "Let's open some presents!" The guests gathered around the sofa and Grimmjow sat beside Ulquiorra. He didn't know anyone else he felt comfortable sitting with. They sat close enough their legs touched and Grimmjow decided he'd made the right choice.

Orihime gifted Grimmjow a box of marzipan and it was the only gift he received of the evening which was fine. Grimmjow hadn't expected much in the ways of gifts since he wasn't a close friend of the family.

Ulquiorra opened the wrapping paper and Grimmjow barely stifled his curse. Orihime and Ichigo had gifted him the exact same book of short stories by Hemingway. Grimmjow seethed at the floor until he heard a tune that struck a chord inside his heart.

Orihime and Ichigo's sisters were singing along to a melody Grimmjow knew by heart. Grimmjow didn't know the Japanese translation, but in French the song was Douce Nuit.

This had been his mother's favorite Christmas song. She'd sung it to him every Christmas Eve when he was still small enough for her to rock to sleep. Grimmjow didn't know how to sing it in Japanese, but he knew the song well enough to sing along under his breath.

"Douce nuit, sainte nuit," Ulquiorra tensed beside him and he could feel those owl-like eyes on him but he paid him no mind as his spirit rose. "Dans les cieux, l'astre luit."

Unable to help himself, he looked over at Ulquiorra, giving him a cockeyed look over his glass of eggnog. Grimmjow tripped over his words as he fought back a laugh, "Le mystère annoncé s'accomplit," Grimmjow held Ulquiorra's gaze and grinned at his reaction, swaying to the song as he sang along with growing confidence. "Cet enfant sur la paille endormi. C'est l'amour infini, c'est l'amour infini..." Orihime and the girls stopped singing. Ichigo, his eyes alight, clapped for them.

"You sing?" Ulquiorra asked.

"Yeah, in my off time." Ulquiorra raised his brows and Grimmjow snorted. This guy was terrible with sarcasm. Grimmjow shoved his shoulder. "It was my favorite Christmas song when I was a kid..." He laughed at the memories. "My mom always listened to the version by Celine Dion. She loved that shit, I did too; I'd belt my lungs out! I was a retarded little kid."

Ulquiorra's lips quirked upwards in a small but sincere smile that brought warmth into his eyes. Once again, Grimmjow was rendered speechless by him. He hadn't seen Ulquiorra smile since that day in the rain so many months ago in Ichigo and Orihime's company. He was finally worthy of a smile from Ulquiorra and it stoked his ego like nothing else.

"Now I wish you would get in contact with your mother. I would like video tapes of that."

Heat rushed down the back of Grimmjow's neck. "No, you wouldn't. If you wanna know more about me though, ask. I could tell you things that would turn my mother's hair gray." Grimmjow leaned over to whisper in his ear and a thrill went through his stomach when Ulquiorra shuffled in his seat. He heard the little intake of breath that brought a wolfish grin to his face.

"Hey, Grimmjow." Ichigo's voice made Grimmjow jump off the couch as far away from Ulquiorra's as possible. Ulquiorra's uncharacteristically frantic shoving would have sent him flying even if he hadn't.

"What?" Grimmjow snapped.

"Didn't you bring a cake or something? Where is it?"
Grimmjow fetched his cake but when he returned to the sofa, Ulquiorra excused himself to the bathroom. For the rest of the evening, he skirted around Grimmjow. Grimmjow felt good that he brought some color into Ulquiorra's cheeks but he wanted to speak to him before the party ended.

As Ulquiorra was leaving the bathroom, Grimmjow grabbed his arm and took him into the kitchen. The chatter of the guests was muffled and Grimmjow's heart beat faster when he realized they were alone. Grimmjow's first impulse was to make a pass at him to see what he couldn't and couldn't get away with.

His body didn't want small touches; he wanted to pin Ulquiorra against the fridge and devour his lips with hungry kisses. The very thought left him short of breath and sent a surge of heat down past his hips.

But was that what Ulquiorra wanted? Grimmjow had no idea. He hadn't stopped to consider he might be the only lusting for the other. Did Ulquiorra want Grimmjow the way Grimmjow wanted him?

For the first time since they'd reconnected, Grimmjow was given pause in what he wanted and how to get it. Or even if he should.

"What is it?" Ulquiorra asked and Grimmjow jolted out of his thoughts. He didn't answer; his mouth was drier than a bone. Grimmjow didn't want a relationship, he knew better than to set foot down that road again. What he wanted was the incarnation of every foul deed and vulgar fantasy that kept him awake at night.

All he had to do was make a move and either be accepted or denied, so why was he holding back? He wasn't known to be a coy lover by any means, and he'd had his share of rejections and he'd never been deterred.

So why were his hands locked at his side, his heart hammering in desperation to escape his body? Sleeping together every once in a while was as far as he wanted to take it, but his palms were sweating.

"Grimmjow, if you're not going to say anything—,"

Grimmjow thrust the wrapped book of short stories by H.P. Lovecraft at him. "I got this for you."

Ulquiorra unwrapped it. He turned the book over in his hands, perusing the description on the back cover. Grimmjow's throat felt full of gravel, he cleared it and said, "I thought you'd like him. He's got the same ideas about the universe and the insignificance of the human race."

"I'd wanted to pick up one of his books for a while now."

"Well, now you've got a whole collection. Thank me later."

"And that one?" Ulquiorra was pointing at the second book in Grimmjow's hand.

Grimmjow's stomach turned over. "It's nothing."

"It's for me as well."

"Not everything's for you, jackass."

"It has my name on it." Scowling, Grimmjow shoved the book at Ulquiorra and he didn't look as Ulquiorra opened it.
"I didn't know Kurosaki's woman was gonna get you the exact same thing..."

"It's good to have a copy." Ulquiorra said, tucking the books under his arm.

"Yeah, I guess..." Silence fell between them and Grimmjow's uncertainty mounted.

"I didn't know you were getting me anything, otherwise I would have made more of an effort. I wasn't sure if you would like anything I gave you." Grimmjow's hand clenched in his pockets.

There's something you can give me if you'd fuckin' show me some sign you were interested...

Grimmjow realized what was holding him back. In his eyes, he hadn't been subtle at all about his change in demeanor. He went out of his way to touch Ulquiorra, he sat next to him at every opportunity, he made sure his body language was as open as possible. How had he not gotten the hint by now that Grimmjow was attracted to him?

Therein lay the source of all Grimmjow's hesitation. He didn't know if they were on the same page. Judging by the outcome of all his advances so far, Grimmjow wanted to say that no, they weren't even close.

Ulquiorra's only response to Grimmjow's advances was to crawl back into his shell. Though he'd been drunk when he made a pass at Ulquiorra in Kabukicho, Ulquiorra had rejected him.

As these realizations swept over him, bitter disappointment welled inside him. Grimmjow didn't know what to say or do. In another example of their mismatching feelings, Grimmjow went out of his way to get Ulquiorra a present and Ulquiorra got him nothing.

"Grimmjow? If you'd like I could get you something. I hate trying to surprise people, so if you could tell me outright what you'd like—,"

"I don't want anything. Never mind." Grimmjow shoved by him and walked away down the hall.

Screw this. If he's not gonna pursue me, why should I open myself up to get shot down?

Grimmjow brushed past Ichigo and Ichigo called out, "Hey, thanks for the Yule log! It was great!" Grimmjow grunted a reply and climbed into his car. Orihime waved goodbye.

"Goodnight, Grimmjow-kun! Have a happy New Year!" Grimmjow stuck his hand out the window and flapped it in response and then he started the engine.

Someone rapped on the window and he turned to see Ulquiorra standing outside. Grimmjow wanted to be angry at him and drive off without a word, but he was a sucker for a guy in a tie.

Grimmjow rolled down the window and Ulquiorra thrust an envelope in at him. Grimmjow was taken aback. "I thought you said you didn't get me anything."

"I didn't get you a gift, but I got you a card. I knew you liked those."

Grimmjow took the card from him and fought back the urge to wrench him in by the tie and crush their lips together. "Thanks. I'll see you soon. Have a good week."

"You, too."

As Ulquiorra lingered for parting words with Ichigo and Orihime, Grimmjow drove home, his mind a blur. He stumbled into his apartment, stopping on his way to bed to pet Ada as she pounced on his feet. He stripped and curled up beneath the blankets and opened Ulquiorra's card.
Grimmjow,

I'm very impressed with the strides you've made in your recovery. I know you'll go into the New Year a stronger man than you started, so you can cross a few resolutions off your list. Spending time with you has raised my spirits even during my least favorite time of the year, so thank you. I look forward to playing with you next year. I hope we don't have to, but if we need to, I'll enjoy punching more yakuza with you.

Joyeux Noel,
Ulquiorra

Grimmjow punched his pillow. Of all the men he had to lust over, he'd set his sights on one who was as confusing as he was endearing. He wished he'd made a move on him in the kitchen. He'd looked ravishing and they'd stood close enough for Grimmjow to smell his aftershave and feel his body heat.

Had he been wrong to think Ulquiorra would push him away? Ulquiorra liked him, but did he want him? Grimmjow didn't know and his whole body was aching for him and he wished Ulquiorra wanted him as much as he did. His fingers dipped past the waistline of his boxers and all the fantasies he'd suppressed during the dinner party overcame him.

Grimmjow wasn't insecure but brazen, his hands roaming every inch of Ulquiorra's body. Locked at the lips, they undressed until there was nothing between them but hardened flesh. Grimmjow bound his hands with his tie and with Ulquiorra's breathless moans encouraging him, Grimmjow rode him.

His release left him gasping but the pleasure was tainted with bitterness because he wanted Ulquiorra and he couldn't have him. But as Grimmjow fell asleep, he vowed to keep at least one of his resolutions open, for better or worse.
The New Year ushered in 2017. On the second week of January, Ulquiorra finished packing his bags for the trip to Kyoto. His phone rang and when Ulquiorra picked up, Orihime's voice was on the line.

"Have fun in Kyoto, Ulquiorra-kun."

"I'll enjoy being somewhere quieter than Tokyo."

"I wish I could go. I've been to Kyoto, it's beautiful. Take pictures!"

"I will."

"I still can't believe Grimmjow-kun invited you! Will it feel weird to spend so much time with him?"

"No." Ulquiorra was lying. It would be strange to spend one on one time with Grimmjow. He wasn't sure what to expect and Grimmjow's behavior was unpredictable.

"Oh, that's good. This will be a great bonding experience. What will you do, do you know?"

"He said he'll take me sightseeing and that we'll visit the bathhouses."

Orihime choked.

"What?"

"A bathhouse? You and Grimmjow will be in bathhouse together?"

"Yes."

"You'll be naked together?"

Ulquiorra sighed. "Everyone is naked in a bathhouse."

"He's your ex, he's good looking, and you guys are on good footing now."

Things had changed between them; Ulquiorra couldn't deny it even if he wanted to. Grimmjow's flirtations did make Ulquiorra warm around the collar but he was introverted. Anyone might make him feel that way.

"So that means we'll sleep together? I'm not stupid enough to go down that road with him again."

He could almost hear Orihime turning the color of a tomato. "No, no, but things happen. I mean, he's been close with you lately, you guys hang out all the time—,"

"So?" Ulquiorra didn't like what she was implying. "He doesn't have feelings for me and I don't have any for him. We can bathe together if we want. In fact, I'll bathe with him anyway to contradict you."

"I didn't mean—Never mind, Ulquiorra-kun, have a good trip—and please bring protection." She hung up before Ulquiorra could argue. She'd planted a seed of doubt in his mind. Ulquiorra was confidant in his ability to control himself if he got any stupid ideas. Grimmjow on the other hand was sending him mixed signals.
He's being friendly when he touches me and he was drunk when he flirted with me. I'm imagining things.

With the thought placed in his mind, Ulquiorra grabbed his bags and went to wait in his lobby. He sat in a lounger by the fireplace and waited until Grimmjow arrived, cheeks flushed with cold. "All packed up?"

"Yes. You were ten minutes late."

"Shut up."

Ulquiorra stood and Grimmjow slung an arm around him and crushed Ulquiorra to his body. Ulquiorra felt the chill clinging to his body through his coat.

"You walked? Aren't we driving?"

"I had to park a couple minutes away, sue me." They walked through the snow together until they found Grimmjow's car. Ulquiorra threw his luggage in the trunk and joined him in the front seat.

Grimmjow set their route via GPS and said, "Alright, let's do this! To Kyoto!"

"Before we go, here; this is for you, but I expect you to share." Ulquiorra handed Grimmjow a flat black box embroidered with gold. Grimmjow opened the box, revealing the donut balls dusted with powdered sugar.

"What is this?"

"Fortchen."

Grimmjow raised his brows. "What? Is that some Nazi shit?"

"Yes, Fortchen was Hitler's favorite food."

Grimmjow snorted. "I'm kidding, what the hell is it?"

"It's a jelly donut. In Germany, children will go door to door on New Years Eve and receive sweets. These were my favorite. I always had them when I was a child, so I order them from my favorite bakery in Berlin every year."

"I thought you said you didn't like sweets." Grimmjow popped one of the pastries into his mouth and chewed. "It's good…Hitler's favorite food…" He rumbled laughter.

"I make an exception for Fortchen." Ulquiorra reached into the box and forked one of the donuts into his mouth.

"Wait, I thought you were born and raised in Japan." Grimmjow said as he started the engine.

"I was. My mother would take me on trips to Berlin in December. It's a beautiful city but I can't imagine it without snow."

"Sounds nice. You still have a house there?"

"Yes but I haven't gone in years." Ulquiorra loved his home in Germany, but he saw no point in going if he would be alone. He'd always gone with his family and if he went by himself, he'd only remember when his family was whole but unhappy.
"We can go next year."

Ulquiorra raised his brows. "We?"

Grimmjow nodded, his eyes alight. "Hell yeah. I'd love to go to Germany. I'll take you to Kyoto, you take me to Germany. Alright?"

"Sure." Ulquiorra imagined himself and Grimmjow alone together in his home. Thinking about it made his stomach flutter. If the thought of being alone in his house with Grimmjow made him nervous, Ulquiorra wondered how he'd feel to be naked with him in a bath.

Now that he was thinking on it, he wondered if Orihime was right. They were friends now, Grimmjow was handsome and it was hard not to notice his touches and coy looks. Grimmjow was messing with him and even if he wasn't, Ulquiorra refused to cave to his advances.

Ulquiorra scowled at himself. He was bathing with Grimmjow. There was nothing between them, so they could bathe together without an issue. Ulquiorra forced his doubts to the back of his mind, settled on his decision, and watched the city speed by them.

Kyoto was a five hour drive from Tokyo and Ulquiorra hoped the drive went smoothly. Ulquiorra breathed in and asked, "Is the car new?" Grimmjow nodded, smiling.

"Yeah. Got it as a New Year gift to myself. Figured I deserved a reward for being drug-free and all."

Ulquiorra heard distressed mewing and looked in the back seat and saw a white cat carrier. Grimmjow called, "Quiet! You're not dying, Ada, everything's fine!"

"She's scared because she knows you're driving."

Grimmjow retaliated by blasting AC/DC's Highway to Hell on the speakers. Within the hour, they'd left the city of Tokyo behind and mountains towered over them.

Within five hours, they arrived in Kyoto and snow-capped mountains soared above the city. Grimmjow's aunt lived in the Yamashina ward, a section of the city that bordered the mountains.

Grimmjow drove them through Yamashina, a rural ward with quaint houses nestled together. They drove through tight streets that made turning in the ice hazardous, and they followed an icy river that surged through a narrow channel. Already Ulquiorra thought Kyoto had character and he was eager to see more of the city.

Grimmjow parked the car in the driveway outside a traditional wooden townhouse. Ulquiorra noticed the baked tile roof and said, "Was this built in the Meiji period?"

Grimmjow nodded, fetching Ada's carrier, "Yeah. My aunt loves it, says she feels like she owns a piece of history. It almost got torn down by developers."

As they approached the door, the door burst open and two boys hurtled across the lawn. "Grimmjow!" They cried, pouncing on each of his legs and latching on tight.

Grimmjow said, "You guys have gotten so big! What the hell's your mother been feeding you?" He heaved his feet towards the door as the boys continued to cling to him. "These are my baby cousins. Ulquiorra, this one is Hiroki," he said, pointing to the boy on his left leg, "And this is his twin, Haru."

"Hi!" the boys exclaimed and returned their attention back to Grimmjow, "Did you get us anything?"
"Let me inside, you damn brats." Though his words were harsh, Grimmjow's eyes were aglow to contradict the scowl on his face.

"Grimmjow, what have I told you about swearing around the boys?" A woman with owlish hazel eyes, flowing teal hair and a lithely figure drifted into the doorway. She smiled at the sight of him.

"I just got here, don't start lecturing me, or I won't give you these." Grimmjow produced a bag of sweets from his pocket. The boys exclaimed in delight and Grimmjow tossed the bag into the house and the boys raced after it.

Grimmjow marched up to the doorway and said, "Let me in, I'm freezing!" He hadn't finished speaking before his aunt crushed him to her bountiful bosom. Ulquiorra snorted with laughter behind his fist.

"I can't believe you've gotten so handsome! I'm so proud of you!"

"The hell's that mean? I've always been hot!" Grimmjow struggled to free himself.

"Oh, you know what I mean! You were a mess a few months ago and now," she began to tear up, "Now you've changed haven't you? Tell me you've given up drugs."

Grimmjow wrenched himself out of her arms and sucked in a deep breath. "I'm seven months clean and I'm gonna keep that number rising." His aunt's lower lip trembled and tears filled her eyes.

"I'm so proud of you."

Grimmjow coughed and said, "Yeah, it was hard but I did it. Ulquiorra helped." Ulquiorra was taken aback. How exactly had he helped contribute to Grimmjow's success? He hadn't done anything.

"Ulquiorra, hi, I'm Nelliel Tu Odelschwanck. You can call me Nell or Nell-Tu if you like." Ulquiorra almost asked her to repeat herself. Why didn't Grimmjow or any of his relatives sound French?

Nelliel let her nephew and Ulquiorra inside. They entered a narrow hallway with traditional sliding doors flanking them and a staircase. They stepped onto the landing and Nelliel opened the door on the left. There were cushions on the floor, a small television, a coffee table and a Christmas tree.

"And in here we have the dining room." Nelliel slid open the door to the right of the hallway. Cushions were gathered around a short, squat table, and the dining room was open to the kitchen.

Past the table were doors with frosted windowpanes leading out to a tiny patio, covered in snow. Nelliel showed them upstairs which consisted of four cozy bedrooms and a bathroom. like in the old days of Japan, the mattresses were on the floor.

Ulquiorra felt like he'd stepped back in time and he fell in love with her home immediately. Nelliel said, "I'll have dinner ready soon. Ulquiorra-kun, you can have the room on the left. Make yourself comfortable."

"You don't have a room?" Ulquiorra asked Grimmjow.

"Yeah, yours used to be my old room."

"You don't want it?"

"Nah. I like sleeping in the living room. The boys make a racket at night."
Ulquiorra unpacked and as he finished, Nelliel called them down to eat. Nelliel, her boys, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra gathered around the table and ate warm bowls of Oden.

Stuffed, Ulquiorra brushed his teeth and took a warm bath. On his way to his room, Grimmjow called from below, "Don't sleep in! I wanna show you around the city tomorrow."

"I'll be sure to wake you up."

Grimmjow cracked a grin. "Yeah, sure. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Grimmjow carried the kitten into the living room where he'd already set up her litter box and cat tree. Ulquiorra retired to his room and turned out the light. He curled up on the mattress beneath warm blankets and listened to the silence of the countryside. Every minute or so he heard a lone car drive by; churning up snow, but otherwise silence blanketed his ears.

He lay awake for little while and listened to every creak and rustle. He closed his eyes and breathed in. He thought the room smelled like Grimmjow, as if he were lying beside him.

With that thought, Ulquiorra fell into a deep and comforting sleep.

Ulquiorra woke up an hour earlier than he usually did the next morning. He threw on some clothes and showered, then he went down into the living room.

Grimmjow lay curled up on a mattress, a little white ball of fluff nestled by his hand. Ulquiorra leaned over him and hesitated to kick him awake; Grimmjow looked so at peace while he slept. Ulquiorra forced himself out of his thoughts by planting a kick in the small of Grimmjow's back.

Grimmjow jolted, brows furrowing and his face scrunching in annoyance. He swatted at Ulquiorra and pulled the blankets over his head.

"I'm gonna fuckin' kill you…" Grimmjow said, his voice dry and groggy.

"Let's go. Take me on one of the hiking trails."

"Are you fuckin' crazy? It's too fuckin' early, who the hell wakes up this early?" Grimmjow heaved a sigh which morphed into a growl, then he hurled the covers off. Grimmjow, in nothing but his boxers, heaved himself to his feet and trudged over to the closest.

Ulquiorra tried his best to ignore the way his boxers hugged every curve and swell to the best of his abilities. He leaned against the wall and listened to Grimmjow grumble and mutter and the soft rustle of fabric.

Grimmjow emerged, combing his hand through his tousled hair. His shirt was on inside out and backwards and his socks mismatched. Ulquiorra snorted.

"The hell's so funny, you cruel little bastard."

"Go brush your teeth before we go."

"Nope. You did this, you're gonna have to reap what you sow." Grimmjow tugged on his shoes and walked out the door with one arm through the sleeve of his coat.

Ulquiorra pulled up the collar of his turtleneck as they stepped outside into the cold. Snow fell in gentle flurries around them and the sun was peaking its head out behind the mountains. The world
was quiet and theirs for the taking.

"What's the nearest trail?" Ulquiorra asked.

"I wanna eat first, at least allow me that." Grimmjow said, dragging his feet through the snow and creating a canyon in the snow. They walked in silence; content to listen to the snow crunch under their feet.

They walked past houses that dated back to times and traditions long gone and found a restaurant to eat at. They warmed themselves with a steaming bowl of miso soup and dined on side dishes of steamed tofu, small mounds of rice, baked fish and vegetables. Each dish was celebrated with its own special bowl and the set up was lovely enough for Ulquiorra to not want to eat.

Grimmjow said, "One of the trails I like to go on is the path that leads to Mount Hiei."

"It's a good walk?"

"We can reach the summit walking on the trail to Enryakuji Temple. It's a great walk, especially in the spring. Sometimes you can see monkeys."

"Why monkeys?"

"Kyoto's got tons of wild monkeys. There's a whole friggin' park built around them. Wanna go?"

"Sure."

Grimmjow slurped down the last of his soup and slammed the bowl down. "Hey, I know what we should do. We should go up to Kurama village and stay the night there!"

"What's in Kurama?"

"There's a temple, the hot springs are supposed to be great, and there are lots of trails to hike. There's another village nearby, Kibune, and there's tons of inns there."

"So, we'll hike and enjoy the hot springs in Kurama, and spend the night in Kibune. When should we go?"

"I don't know, whenever we want."

"Let's go on our last night. What can we do tomorrow, then?"

Grimmjow shrugged. "How about you stop trying to plan every little thing and do whatever comes to mind?"

"I don't want to miss out on anything."

"You won't, I'm your tour guide, remember? We're not going to all the dumb touristy places, I'm gonna make sure we see authentic Kyoto."

Ulquiorra and Grimmjow finished breakfast and took the train to Shugakuin Station. Mount Hiei rose high to the northeast of Kyoto and stood on the border between Kyoto and Shiga. Tourists took buses and cable cars but Grimmjow and Ulquiorra sought out the trail.

Trees silhouetted with snow towered into the deep blue sky all around them. They walked the trail for an hour before they sat down to have lunch, dusting snow from a nearby boulder so they could sit.
Ulquiorra reached for a second onigiri from the tin and couldn't feel it. He turned and stared, wide-eyed at the Macaque monkey chewing on the onigiri in his pink hands.

Ulquiorra tapped Grimmjow and he jumped, scooting to the edge of the rock when he spotted the monkey. The tin rattled and a second monkey stole away with one of their onigiri. Ulquiorra and Grimmjow scrambled off the boulder as it was beset upon by hungry monkeys.

"Shit! These things aren't aggressive, are they?" Grimmjow asked. Considering how brazen the monkeys were, Ulquiorra assumed they were accustomed to humans.

"They must get fed all the time." Ulquiorra snapped a picture of a third monkey as it leaped onto the boulder and nosed around their tin.

"Their taking all our food." Grimmjow growled. He snatched up a stick and chucked it at the boulder and the monkeys didn't bat an eye. "Hey! Get away from our food!" Grimmjow bellowed but more monkeys climbed onto the boulder.

Grimmjow looked ready to charge in and scare them away, but Ulquiorra gripped his sleeve. "Leave it. I don't want to be in a newspaper headline."

Scowling, Grimmjow cast the monkeys a glare and they kept walking. They walked for another hour and finally arrived at the temple. They climbed the stone steps and entered the temple grounds. Grimmjow chuckled beside him. "You know, this place has hosted ceremonies for the yakuza…"

"You want to meet one, don't you?"

"Hell yeah. That'd be fuckin' sweet. I bet I could kick his ass."

Ulquiorra snorted. "You'd fight the air if you could."

"Yeah, and I'd win."

They walked the grounds together, admiring the pagoda decorated with snowfall. The architecture made Ulquiorra feel as if he'd gone back in time. They walked to the main hall and climbed the stairs where a vista of snow covered mountains graced their vision.

Ulquiorra said, "Let's take the cable car down."

"Sure. We've earned a rest."

Far below them, they could see Kyoto glittering through the falling snow. Grimmjow leaned on the railing and they stood shoulder to shoulder under the eaves, untouched by the cold.

Grimmjow shuffled beside him and Ulquiorra wondered if he was bored. He asked, "Do you want to leave?" Grimmjow shrugged and Ulquiorra looked at him and thought he looked at ease.

"It's not my scene but we climbed that trail for ages so this was worth it. Wish I could punch a yakuza, though. I came here in the past but I never hiked. It's a different experience."

"Hiking here?"

"No, having someone else here with me."

"So the King of the Field gets lonely?"

"It's different, that's all. And by different, I mean annoying. I knew where I was going."
"You took a wrong turn twice on the way up here. If you'd followed the map I had—,"

"We found the place, didn't we?"

"We would have arrived in less than half the time it took to get here."

"We weren't in any hurry."

"Why do you think you know better than Google Maps? Traveling with you is the most frustrating thing I've done."

Grimmjow grinned and wrapped his arm around Ulquiorra's shoulder and tugged him. Ulquiorra's head collided into Grimmjow's shoulder and he sunk into Grimmjow's arms.

"Good to know I can piss you off so easily."

"How is that a compliment? If anything it's an insult considering my patience."

"You're not that patient, Schnitzel. I know you think you are, but you're no better than I am."

"Now that is insulting."

"What?"

"Being compared to you."

They argued and bantered and exchanged insults whenever they could. But in this moment, Ulquiorra felt like he made Grimmjow happy and in turn, he felt happy and cared for as well.

Regardless of where things went from here on out, Ulquiorra was glad that of all people it was Grimmjow he was with.
After breakfast, Nelliel took Grimmjow aside. "What? I did my dishes." Grimmjow said, hoping she wasn't going to give him any grief.

"That's great, thank you! I wanted to talk to you, that's all."

They sat at the dining room table and Ada rubbed his ankles under the table. Outside, snow fell in flurries and the wind whistled as it caressed the building. Nelliel said, "Your mother contacted me. She wants to know if you're alright."

"Why?"

"She wants to see you."

"Yeah, well I don't wanna see her."

"It's been over twelve years, Grimmjow. She wants to reconnect."

"If she cared so much, she should have stuck around. I'm done talking about this."

"Grimmjow—,"

"I'm not gonna forgive her!"

"Agreeing to see her doesn't mean you're forgiving her. It means you're open to idea that things could go either way. Listen, how about you meet with her, tell her how you're feeling, and leave it at that?"

"She doesn't deserve to see me."

"You've got to put this behind you. Meet with her, tell her everything, then decide how you feel. If you don't want to see her again, then that's fine, but you can't continue to hide behind your anger."

"Yeah, and you should mind your own damn business." Grimmjow glared down into his lap. He'd felt torn on whether he should see his mother again since June. He wondered if things would be different between them.

His pride ached and throbbed when he thought of going to meet her after the pain she'd caused him. How could he forgive her for leaving him behind when she'd promised him they'd run away together?

"I can't forgive her."

"You don't have to." Nelliel took his hands and squeezed. "Use this as a chance to tell her everything you've ever wanted to say to her. Let it all out and see how you feel afterwards. At least you can say you tried."
Grimmjow didn't know what to do. Nelliel handed him a piece of paper with his mother's number scrawled on it. Grimmjow didn't know if he should hurl the paper in the trash or keep it.

As he struggled, he overheard Nelliel greeting Ulquiorra. He threw open the door, seized Ulquiorra's shoulder and dragged him towards the door.

"Let's go."

"I want tea."

"You can get tea later! Come on!" They stumbled outside and Grimmjow tossed Ulquiorra his coat. Ulquiorra glared at him as he buttoned up his coat and he was pouting as they walked the road into town. Grimmjow shoved the paper at Ulquiorra.

"Can you hold onto that?"

"No, carry your own trash." Grimmjow thrust the note into Ulquiorra's pocket. Grimmjow took them to the restaurant they'd eaten at the previous day.

Grimmjow had some coffee and Ulquiorra sipped on his morning tea as the snow fell outside. Grimmjow couldn't decide whether to call her or not. He thought for months he'd made his decision and because of Nelliel, his mind was in turmoil.

"You're quiet." Ulquiorra observed.

"Thanks, Captain Obvious."

"Was the number you gave me—?"

"Yeah. You can throw it out, though. I'm not calling her."

"I'm not making decisions for you. If you want to throw it out, do it yourself." Grimmjow wanted to throttle him. He wanted Ulquiorra to do it because he didn't know if he could.

"Fuck you. Do it."

"Why can't you?"

"I don't know if I can." Grimmjow wished he hadn't spoken. Ulquiorra was quiet, Grimmjow wondered if he thought less of him.

Ulquiorra slid the paper across the table to him. "Then make that decision for yourself."

Grimmjow scowled. "Let me guess, you think I should meet with her?"

"I don't know what to tell you. I can't say if seeing her again will be a good or bad thing for you, that's up to you to decide."

"I don't know, either! Even if I did wanna meet with her, which I don't, I don't know where the hell she lives."

"Find out. She has a Facebook, doesn't she? Once you know her location, it should be easier to plan a meetup."

Grimmjow didn't want to see her Facebook. He hadn't seen his mother's face in years and the idea of seeing her again, even in a picture, set his heart racing. He wanted to know how easy it would be to
see her. He didn't want to go out of his way if she lived halfway across Japan.

Hope surged inside him. If she did live halfway across Japan, then he wouldn't see her and that would be the basis of his decision. Grimmjow looked her up on Facebook with her maiden name, Francine Bernard. His heart flew into his throat when he saw her profile picture. His hands shaking, he clicked to open her profile.

She'd dyed her hair blonde but Grimmjow would have recognized her regardless. Her profile stated she engaged to a man named Thomas, and that she worked as a photographer for Vogue.

She'd made posts advertising the fashion shows she shot for. She took pictures of herself and her handsome fiancé. She had pictures of Japanese pastries on her page. Grimmjow checked where she lived and his heart sunk.

It was his luck she lived in Osaka, a one hour drive from Kyoto. "Fuck…" he seethed. He had almost no excuse not to agree to see her. "Why can't she see me, then? Huh? She wants to see me so bad, how about she does it herself?"

"You look like a lunatic sitting there talking to yourself."

"She lives in Osaka! Right down the fucking street. Whatever, alright? I'm not seeing her, forget about it…"

"You could text and ask her to come to you. It would be a good test to prove how badly she wants to see you."

"She'll say no. No way would she come to see me…" Grimmjow unlocked his phone, punched in his mother's number and texted her.

_How about instead of using my aunt to get to me, you come and visit yourself? I'm in Kyoto._

He sent the message and downed the last of his coffee. She would refuse. She wouldn't have the guts to make the first move.

"You aren't scared of seeing her, are you?"

"No. It's a waste of my time, that's all. She wants me to forgive her and I'm not going to. I'd be stupid to forgive her after she left me the way she did…"

"It's a start that she wants to see you. You could reconnect, or the outcome might not be what you want. It's up in the air."

"So you think I should go?"

"I don't know. If she were my mother, I'm sure no good would come from going to meet her. I don't mean anything to my parents. But it's you." Grimmjow quirked a brow at him.

"You're the kind of person people gravitate towards. You force people to feel a certain way towards you. You don't give them any other options. So I have to admit, I'm disappointed in you."

Grimmjow's mouth fell open. "What? Why? What the hell did I do?"

"I never saw you as the kind of person to run away from anything, which is why I was so disappointed when you started using."

"I'm not running away! You don't get it, alright? She abandoned me when she promised me for years
we'd go to Tokyo together. I don't owe her jackshit!"

"No, you don't get it. She wants to see you so much that she tried to reach you through her ex-
husband's sister. If my mother felt that way for me..." Ulquiorra cut himself off as he forced himself
back to reality. "But she doesn't. She never will."

Grimmjow caught a glimpse of the longing in those emerald eyes before they turned cold and empty.
Something tugged inside him. He couldn't understand Ulquiorra's mother and father. Their son had
perfect grades in school, and he was hard-working to the point of perfectionism. He was well-read
and an incredible, successful soccer player.

How could they not be proud of him? How could they not want him in their lives? By all means, his
parents should be breaking down the door to see him but that wasn't the case. He felt guilty that it
was his mother that was getting in touch with him. He'd disappointed her and betrayed her trust, why
did he get a second chance?

Grimmjow reached across the table and grasped Ulquiorra's hand. "That's because she's a fucking
idiot." Surprise flared in Ulquiorra's eyes but they dulled.

"I'm not worth her time. I never was."

"Yeah, because she's a fucking idiot and it's got nothing to do with you. So cut it out with the 'I'm
meaningless' bullshit."

Grimmjow's phone buzzed in his hand and he jumped and almost sent it flying. His mother had
replied to his message.

I'm so happy to hear from you! I would love to come up to Kyoto and visit. I could come up today.
What time would work best for you?

Grimmjow gaped, unable to believe it. His mother wanted to come out of her way to see him. His
feelings of disbelief faded and he felt like the lesser of the two of them.

"Get up, we're going back."

"Do you have any plans for today?"

"Yeah, we're going to Osaka. Fuck it; she's not one-upping me!" Grimmjow slapped some yen on
the table and stomped out, determination fueling his steps. He didn't know what to expect when they
finally did meet, but he wasn't running away from his mother.

Grimmjow and Ulquiorra drove for an hour until they arrived in Osaka late afternoon. The entire
drive, Grimmjow's stomach writhed and in his anxiety, he lay on the horn at anyone who didn't steer
out of his way fast enough.

They arrived in Dotonbori, the heart of Osaka famous for its nightlife. Grimmjow parked the car,
looking around at the video screens and mechanized signs. Blinking signboards illuminated the river
canals that carved through the city.

They crossed the Ebisu Bridge and walked along the boardwalk, admiring the way the lights
sparkled in the icy waters. Grimmjow's mother asked them to meet her at Kani Doraku. It was a
landmark crab restaurant, iconic for the six-foot mechanical crab hanging above the doorway.

When he spotted the restaurant, Grimmjow's stomach turned over. He was about to see his mother
again for the first time in twelve years. He didn't know what he would say. Grimmjow looked up at the mechanical crab, waving its claws and eyestalks, and didn't move.

"This is the place, isn't it?" Ulquiorra asked.

"Yes." Grimmjow snapped.

"Are you nervous?" Grimmjow didn't know how to reply. He'd always imagined getting angry at his mother and instead, he wondered if he would vomit.

"Well, I'm going inside. I'm cold." Ulquiorra brushed by him and Grimmjow clenched his jaw and squared his shoulders. He couldn't act like a coward, not in front of Ulquiorra. Ulquiorra looked over his shoulder at him and said, "Will you at least come in and order? The crab is delicious."

"I'm coming." Grimmjow took in a deep breath and entered the restaurant. The chatter of the diners washed over him and the smell of crab wafted to his nose. Grimmjow scanned the tables and booths, full to bursting with people, but he didn't see his mother.

"She's not here yet…Or she stood us up." Grimmjow muttered, longing to leave.

Ulquiorra brushed past him and greeted the host. "We have a reservation under Bernard."

The host led them to their table in a quiet corner by the window. Grimmjow stood indecisive for a minute until a waiter walked into him. Grimmjow sat beside Ulquiorra and averted his gaze out the window.

"She stood us up." Grimmjow said.

"I still want to try their crab, so I'd like to stay a while." Grimmjow thought Ulquiorra was being open minded. He would have expected Ulquiorra to be as pessimistic as he was. Something between them had reversed now that Grimmjow couldn't be the stronger of the two of them. Grimmjow's phone vibrated.

Francine: I'm running late, so sorry. You go ahead and order. Get me the chawan mushi, please.

Ulquiorra ordered boiled crab and Grimmjow for himself and his mother. Every time the door opened, Grimmjow's heart lurched. He passed the time shredding his napkin, and he drank enough water to drown himself.

"I'm so sorry I'm late." The fluent Japanese voice, lilted with Parisian French, made Grimmjow's heart tumble over. He raised his head like it weighed a thousand pounds. Blue eyes that could have been his own stared into his soul and made something inside him tremble.

At the sight of him, her eyes filled with tears and a trembling smile burst across her face. Grimmjow knew right away she was whole and she'd found everything she'd wanted. Or the fur coat, hat and mittens that could have bought Grimmjow dinner for two weeks made her look younger.

Grimmjow always thought if he ever saw her face again, he would lose it. He thought he'd start yelling every insult imaginable for leaving him the way she did. Instead, a whirlwind of emotions raged inside him and he wanted to cry.

"You look great." His mother's voice trembled as she wiped the tears leaking from her eyes. "You're a completely different man than you were so many years ago."
"You look like a million bucks." Grimmjow gestured to the coat.

She laughed. "I'm so proud of you. You played so wonderfully against Iran. I could tell you'd been working on yourself."

Of all the things Grimmjow had expected, he'd never imagined he'd hear his mother say she was proud of him. He thought he'd lost the right to hear those words the moment he'd started using.

"Who is your friend?" Ulquiorra had been on his phone ignoring their conversation to the best of his abilities. Ulquiorra set his phone aside and jumped up to greet her.

"Ulquiorra Cifer. We've met once, very long ago."

"Really? I don't remember you…"

Grimmjow hadn't expected her to. It was impossible for him to forget Ulquiorra's presence that night. If Ulquiorra hadn't been there, he still didn't know what he would have done.

Grimmjow's mother sat down across from them and Grimmjow collapsed into his seat. His knees were trembling. Their food arrived; Ulquiorra and Francine ate while Grimmjow poked and prodded at his crab legs.

"Where did you go?" He asked and his mother paused, her spoon inches from her lips. Her hand trembled and she dipped the spoon back into the soup.

"I lived in Tokyo for a few years in a small apartment. I could barely afford it, so I started looking for a new job and I got hired by a company in Osaka. I moved here, met my fiancé and it's been smooth sailing ever since."

"Yeah, clearly." Grimmjow said, eyeing her fur coat.

"I'm not rich, Grimmjow, but I have enough money to live on and I can afford to indulge myself on occasion. I've been doing a lot of traveling, taking pictures of fashion shows in Greece, London, Paris. It felt wonderful to return to Paris, I have a house there. I always hoped we could visit again."

Grimmjow didn't know how to express everything she'd made him feel after she left. He was no good with words. Under the table, the tip of Ulquiorra's shoe rammed into his shin. He looked across the table and met Ulquiorra's gaze. Ulquiorra's eyes were steely, challenging him.

The look in those emerald eyes said, *Do it. Don't disappoint me.*

"The hell is your problem?" Grimmjow's voice trembled as anger ignited his blood. "I don't see you for twelve years and you talk like nothing ever fucking happened. Did you forget that you promised me we'd go to Tokyo together? Did you forget you left me behind without saying a word to me?"

"Grimmjow—," His mother couldn't meet his gaze.

"Of course it doesn't mean anything to you. You left; you got to go to Tokyo but I didn't. I was stuck with my dad, then with my aunt, taking care of myself. You were off clothes shopping with your rich boyfriend, taking trips around the world!"

"I didn't have it easy, either," his mother retorted, "Leaving you behind was one of the worst mistakes I ever made."

"That's why you didn't call once, right? You're full of shit, you only contacted me when you thought
I was dying, were you gonna do it before? No!"

"I couldn't stand to. I couldn't hear your voice; I thought I would fall apart if I did. After I saw what happened to you on television, I was too afraid not to call you. I thought if you died before I got to tell you, I would never forgive myself."

"Tell me what?"

"How sorry I was. If I could do it all over again, I would never have left you."

"So why did you?"

"I failed you." Tears sprang to his mothers eyes and her lips trembled. "I failed to help you when you were being bullied by your father and your classmates. I failed to let you know I appreciated the hard work you did, and I was unsupportive of your love for soccer. I only wanted you to be successful; I wanted to know you could make something of yourself, and you have. Now look at you; you're an amazing player, and you did it all without any of my help."

Grimmjow was speechless. He never thought he'd hear his mother speak so highly of him. He thought he'd destroyed any respect and love she felt for him after she found out he was using.

His mother wiped her eyes and continued, "After you got expelled, I felt so terrible. I felt like it was all my fault. I hadn't tried hard enough to be there for you and to help you. I'd made you feel like all I cared about was your school work, I drove you to using drugs, and I'm so sorry."

She began to cry and Grimmjow felt like hitting his head against the table. "No, you didn't. I mean, yeah, sometimes I wondered if you cared. But I figured if you didn't, you wouldn't have invested so much time in helping me with my studies."

"I should have been there in other ways. I should have gone to your games, I—,"

"I chose to use drugs, you didn't make me."

"But if I'd been more nurturing, if I'd supported you—,"

"Yeah, we had it rough but I could have been a man about it instead of hiding behind drugs."

"You were a child. How were you supposed to man up, Grimmjow? Honestly..." His mother dried her tears, snorting bitter laughter.

"Tons of kids have a shitty time and not all of them grow up to be addicts."

"That's true," Ulquiorra said, "But people handle things differently. Either way, it doesn't matter anymore. You both made your mistakes but you've gotten past them."

"This is true. I never should have left you, Grimmjow, but I thought you would be better off anywhere else than with me."

"That's bullshit. I'd have gone anywhere with you if you'd have asked. You should have given me the option of going with you, or said goodbye, or..."

"I know. I know, and I'm so sorry."

"Me, too." Grimmjow couldn't remember the last time he'd uttered an apology, but he meant it. His mother wasn't the only one to blame, he known it for years but he couldn't accept it. He'd blamed Ulquiorra, he'd blamed his parents, he'd blamed his team; everyone was at fault for his terrible
choices but himself.

It hurt to accept it, but in doing so he was shedding his skin and crawling out from the remains of the angry, bitter addict he'd been.

"I wanna see Paris with you." He didn't know when, only that he wanted to. He wanted to revisit the city of his birth and walk in the shadow of the Eifel Tower. He wanted to sip coffee and enjoy an almond croissant in his favorite café, and he wanted his mother to be there with him.

He wanted to talk to her and ask her all kinds of questions. He wanted to laugh and joke with her like they'd never had the chance to living under his father's hateful eyes. He wanted to wipe the slate clean and make up for all the time they'd lost in poverty and self loathing.

His mother smiled. "I'd love that."

They spent an hour at the restaurant and Grimmjow and his mother made plans to visit Paris late in the year. They parted ways and Grimmjow and Ulquiorra walked back across the bridge.

A tidal wave of emotion swept over Grimmjow, and he breathed in more deeply than he had in years. He'd done the one thing he thought was impossible and made amends with his mother. They were going to see each other again and he had the chance at a fresh start with her. He could hardly believe it and his legs trembled.

He felt like he'd climbed a mountain after years trapped below summit, fearful of an avalanche. Tonight he'd scaled to the top and seen the beauty and possibility of the future beyond his fear.

Grimmjow stopped walking and slumped over the stone railing of the bridge. He lay motionless as all the years of bitter anger and hurt were finally lifted from his shoulders. He could feel Ulquiorra's eyes on him and his gaze radiated with uncertainty. The air was still between them until Ulquiorra said, "Feeling better?"

Grimmjow looked across the water at the moonlight, gleaming like gems as its reflection scattered off the surface of the rippling water. "She doesn't deserve a second chance."

"Yet you gave her one."

"Stupid, huh?"

"I don't know. She could still disappoint you."

"Yeah, but she has the chance to fix all her fuckups, so I'm gonna let her. But if she lets me down again, that's it."

"Will you be alright if she disappoints you?"

Deep down, he wanted to believe his mother could change and be the woman he'd always wanted her to be. He was taking a risk, laying flat on his back land exposing his belly. There was a chance she would spare him her fangs and Grimmjow wanted to take that chance.

"I'll get over it if it comes down to that."

Ulquiorra hummed beside him. "I'm not sure if I could do what you're doing."

His words brought a grin to Grimmjow's face. He'd never expected to smile after a night like this. He wondered whether Ulquiorra would have a second chance with his family.
"You should do it."

"What?"

"Take a risk. Reach out to your folks. You think you do, but you don't know what the hell anyone thinks of you."

Ulquiorra shook his head, his ebony locks swaying against his cheek in the night breeze. "I don't matter to them. I've known this for years. If I did, they would be the ones reaching out to me."

"Or you shut people out. Stop guessing what other people think of you. All you're doing is using that as an excuse not to make an effort."

"I'm not guessing. I don't need to guess; they made it very clear that I came second to their own problems. I don't matter, not to them or anyone else."

Grimmjow whirled Ulquiorra around to face him, pinning him up against the bridge. Ulquiorra's eyes went wide and he froze as their bodies pressed close together. It infuriated Grimmjow to hear Ulquiorra talk negatively about himself.

"What the hell do you know? You don't mean jackshit to yourself, but don't put words in my mouth. Do you know what Kurosaki and Inoue think about you? What I think about you? No. You haven't got a fucking clue."

Ulquiorra didn't argue, though his lips were agape in surprise. Grimmjow surprised himself, too, but he couldn't help himself.

No words could come close to telling him what it meant to have him here tonight.

Grimmjow's grip on Ulquiorra's sweater slackened and he lost himself in the deep green of Ulquiorra's eyes. Grimmjow thought about kissing him. They stood close enough for Grimmjow to smell his clean clothes and aftershave. Kissing him would be as simple as blinking, but he couldn't. Ulquiorra with his negative self-image could never comprehend how much Grimmjow wanted him.

Grimmjow wanted to taste him and tangle his fingers through his raven hair. Ulquiorra was like a supernova and Grimmjow didn't know if he would be sucked in or propelled away and lose him for good.

Frustration swirled inside him and Grimmjow shoved Ulquiorra away from him. "Talk like that around me again, and I'll punch you."

Ulquiorra remained by the railing as Grimmjow turned to leave. "Why? It isn't as if I'm insulting you."

Grimmjow looked back over his shoulder at him. "Yeah, you are."

It was the closest he could come to telling Ulquiorra how much he mattered, and it wasn't enough.
Grimmjow and Ulquiorra packed their things for an overnight visit to Kurama village. Nelliel and her family accompanied them to the train station and waved at them, her eyes shining.

"Goodbye, guys! Thank you for coming!" Nelliel leaned over to whisper something in Grimmjow's ear that made his face turn the color of a tomato.

"The hell's the matter with you, woman?" Grimmjow squawked. Ulquiorra didn't want to know what she said but he had an idea it mirrored his conversation with Orihime. It would be strange to be in a bathhouse with Grimmjow but it wasn't as if he hadn't seen Grimmjow naked before. Besides, nothing would come of it.

They boarded the train and found their compartment. Kyoto was soon left behind them as the train soared through tunnels of trees blanketed with snow.

"Once we get to Kurama we can hang out for a bit and walk a trail that'll take us right to Kibune." Grimmjow said. They would be spending the night at an inn nestled along the banks of a river. The inn boasted traditional styled rooms with private baths and a hot spring.

The train swept through the snow-covered mountains, speeding beneath crisp, cloudless blue skies. As they traveled, Ulquiorra produced A Moveable Feast from his bag and handed it to Grimmjow.

"This is the one you told me about?" Grimmjow asked.

"Yes, you'll enjoy it. Let me know if you recognize any of the places he writes about. I'll also help you with any of the bigger words."

Grimmjow slapped him over the head with the book. "Fuck you."

Ulquiorra moved over to sit next to him and Grimmjow angled the book so he could have a better view. Ulquiorra's breath caught as Grimmjow sat close enough for their legs to touch.
Ulquiorra tensed, unsure what to do, and Grimmjow grinned. "What? So you can read better." He tilted the book towards Ulquiorra. Their compartment was cold and Grimmjow's body was like a furnace. They read in silence for the duration of the train ride and arrived in Kurama at noon. The train pulled into the station and Grimmjow grabbed his bags.

"Grimmjow, sit down—," Ulquiorra began but the train lurched to a stop and Grimmjow lost his balance. Grimmjow fell into Ulquiorra's lap as the train screeched to a halt, making Ada flatten her ears and fluff up her fur.

Ulquiorra sat motionless as Grimmjow's body crushed him into his seat. Grimmjow's warmth enveloped him, hot puffs of air wafted against his neck.

Ulquiorra wondered how it would feel if Grimmjow's lips were to press against his skin and trail up his neck. He was short of breath at the thought and there was a prickling in his loins he tried to ignore.

Grimmjow raised his face from Ulquiorra's shoulder, bringing them nose to nose. Grimmjow's breath warmed his lips.

"Didn't crush you, did I?" Grimmjow chuckled, eyes alight as he climbed off of Ulquiorra.

"No, I'm fine." Ulquiorra hoped Grimmjow didn't hear the way his voice wavered. Grimmjow turned around and stuffed Ada in her carrier and grabbed his bags. Ulquiorra remained seated, his mouth dry. He felt cold without Grimmjow's body flush against his. Ulquiorra stood up and grabbed his bag, picking up the book that had fallen to the floor.

Why did he freeze up whenever Grimmjow was close to him? Why could he never push him away? He didn't know where he and Grimmjow stood but he had to be the one to ensure things between them remained unchanged.

They couldn't afford to go down that road again, not after how things had ended between them. But he couldn't help himself from savoring the few moments when Grimmjow stood close to him, or when they touched.

Ulquiorra knew he should put a stop to it but a part of him worried about making a fool of himself if it turned out Grimmjow was only teasing him. Another part of him wondered if he wanted Grimmjow to stop.
They walked the nature trail to Kurama village. Ulquiorra decided to have a rendezvous with the first attractive man he saw once he returned home. He was pent up and Grimmjow was attractive and showing him attention. It only made sense he would be gravitating towards his old love.

He vowed to put his urges aside and ignore Grimmjow's actions to the best of his abilities. Ulquiorra thought he was reading too much into Grimmjow's playful touches and smiles. Orihime was wrong; there was nothing between them and tonight would set that fact in stone.

Grimmjow poked his cheek. "Your head's gonna fuckin' explode. What's going on in there?"

"Nothing." Ulquiorra kept his lips sealed until they arrived at their ryokan. They decided they'd sooner book an inn at Kurama so they didn't have to haul their luggage from one village to the next. They'd also enjoyed the views of the forested mountains that enveloped the inn.

Ulquiorra was surprised when he saw the dining room was packed with people enjoying breakfast. The receptionist was sweating as she tried to calm the men and women who'd arrived without reservations.

"I'm so sorry, we're packed! Unless you booked a room, I can't help you!" The men and women went away seething and muttering and Grimmjow snorted beside him.

"Idiots. Who arrives at a hotel without reservations?" He strode up to the counter and the woman flushed at the sight of him, tripping over herself as he greeted her with a smile and asked for the key to their room.

Grimmjow walked away, tossing the key up and down in his hand. "She was pretty cute. Think I should get her number?"

"No. Three's a crowd, isn't it?" Ulquiorra didn't want some girl they barely knew tagging along, fawning over Grimmjow all the while.

Grimmjow quirked his brows as they climbed the stairs. He wore a wolfish grin that made Ulquiorra feel like a cornered lamb. "Jealous?"
"No, if you want to pay for her expenses, then go right ahead."

"You're turning green."

"Yes, I'm nauseous at the idea that anyone could be into you."

"Yeah, because you're—," Ulquiorra slammed the key in the lock and turned viciously until it opened, revealing a quaint, traditional-styled living room with a bedroom on the right and a private bath on the left. The living room boasted a small balcony with views of the snow-capped mountains.

Grimmjow rushed inside and looked out the window, whistling his approval. He let Ada out, set up a food and water dish for her and threw some cat toys around the room. Ulquiorra watched the kitten pad around and explore her new environment. Ulquiorra liked their room and couldn't think of a thing he would change until he went into the bedroom.

They'd booked a double bed. Ulquiorra couldn't comprehend why the universe was doing everything in its power to force him and Grimmjow to have sex.

Although, if this is the decision of the universe, who am I to argue? Maybe this is a natural outcome? Ulquiorra argued with himself, and he fought back the urge to slap himself in the face. He turned tail and marched out the door into the hallway. "Pack up; I'm getting us another room."

"What, why?" Ulquiorra slammed the door on Grimmjow and descended the stairs. He slammed their key onto the desk and said, "I want another room with two single beds."

The receptionist looked ready to tear her hair out. "I'm so sorry, sir, were you not here when I was telling people there are no more rooms?"

"There's nothing opening up for today?" She checked her computer for three seconds and replied, "No."

Ulquiorra couldn't tell if she was giving him attitude or if she was being genuine. She looked ready to stab him if he argued so he said, "If something opens up before tonight, call my room."
"Of course." She was muttering something as he walked away. Ulquiorra hoped something would open up. If they had to share the same bed, Grimmjow would never let him live it down. If there was anything unresolved between them, Ulquiorra worried it would come to fruition tonight when they lay beneath the same sheets.

Ulquiorra balled his fists as he ascended the stairs. Ulquiorra would make sure that, if the opportunity arose, he would have the sense to smash it down with a firm no and leave it at that.

If worst came to worst, he would sleep in the living room but he wouldn't have to because there was nothing between them. They could bathe and sleep together in the most literal sense without an issue.

Ulquiorra returned to their room and said, "Let's have breakfast and hike to Kibune village." Grimmjow accompanied him downstairs and they seated themselves once a table opened up for them. Grimmjow ordered Mizutaki, a soup with meat and vegetables. Ulquiorra ordered Yosenabe, a soup with seafood, vegetables and egg.

They dug in and Grimmjow made a face. "Ugh, fuck…"

"What? Did they do something wrong? I can order you another one."

"I hate bean sprouts. Who the hell eats these things?" Grimmjow plucked out the bean sprouts one by one. Ulquiorra ate what he took out and focused on eating to hide his amusement. With breakfast warming them, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra set out for Mount Kurama and the temple at the top.

They climbed a stone staircase carved into the mountain trail. They passed beneath Kurama-dera's gates with frosted eaves into a forest of cedar trees that towered above them, their branches heavy with snow. Rice string rope dangled from the branches, the attached messages fluttering in the breeze.

Grimmjow read one of the messages and snorted. "Spirits live here, huh? Spooky." They continued their climb to the temple's courtyard, shielded from the wind by the trees on either side of them. They were silent as they climbed, the only sound being the wind through the trees and the crunch of snow beneath their feet.

They entered the courtyard, dominated by the main hall, and gazed out over the forest and distant mountains, blanketed with snow. Ulquiorra leaned on the railing and stared out at the mountains as
they reached into the gray skies. The rolling mountains were endless, like waves in a distant ocean. Though he wasn't a spiritual person, Ulquiorra thought the temple owed all its power to the beauty of its environment.

Grimmjow rested against the railing beside him. They stood shoulder to shoulder in silence until they were ready to move on. Grimmjow left the railing first and Ulquiorra felt cold without him so he followed.

They passed through the temple grounds, admiring the ancient structure that had survived innumerable wars and fires to stand before them. Through the temple's main hall; they found a secluded entrance to a trail that would take them to Kibune village.

They walked a winding trail illuminated by lanterns and came upon a rock with a sign beside it. Ulquiorra inspected the sign and discovered that a 12th-century warrior had used this rock to measure his height.

"Wanna bet he didn't out grow the rock?" Grimmjow said, elbowing Ulquiorra. Ulquiorra spotted another trail that vanished into the woods on their right. He wanted to explore but was worried they might become lost due to the snow that obscured the trail.

"Let's take a look." Grimmjow said, pushing on ahead.

"If we get lost—,"

"We'll find our way back!" Ulquiorra followed him with some reluctance. If they became disorientated, they could always follow their footprints back. Something snagged Ulquiorra's right leg and he stumbled and fell, catching himself with the palms of his hands. The snow threatened to bleed cold into his gloves and Grimmjow extended a hand. Ulquiorra took it and let Grimmjow help him up.

Grimmjow's hand was large and warm in his and Grimmjow didn't let go as he peered around Ulquiorra and asked, "What'd you trip on?"

"A root, I think." Ulquiorra dusted snow from his feet and discovered he'd tripped on a sprawling tree root. Grimmjow gave a start.
"Shit, there's more!" Ulquiorra could make out twisting, writhing mounds in the snow like sleeping snakes.

"Watch your step. I don't wanna carry you back to the village on my back." They maneuvered around the roots and stumbled upon a shrine in the middle of the woods, covered with snow. A banner wrapped around the shrine, waving in the entranceway.

"Think someone's sleeping in there?" Grimmjow asked. Ulquiorra found the idea unsettling enough that they returned to the main path. Shrines weaved in and out of the woods, built to honor the Buddhist King of Light, and Mao, the Magic King. They crossed over a little red bridge, the shallow stream trickling beneath them, and entered Kibune village.

Grimmjow and Ulquiorra stopped outside Hirobun, a restaurant with a growing line. They ate at a bar above a rushing stream that cascaded over mossy rocks.

The locals told them in the summer, the chefs poured somen noodles through bamboo pipes and diners caught their meal as it swept by. Ulquiorra thought that sounded bizarre. Grimmjow smiled at the idea that he might catch more noodles than Ulquiorra.

They ate lunch and Ulquiorra asked a local and his wife, "What is there to do in the village?"

"Are you single?"

Ulquiorra thought that was an odd question but he replied, "Why?"

"Visit Kifune shrine and dip the empty fortune papers in the water. You'll be surprised. Past the temple's main hall is Yui no Yashiro, a shrine to the deity of matchmaking. You'll have to pay, but buy a fortune and write your desires on it. I did and the deities heard me; I met my wife a few weeks later."

Ulquiorra didn't buy into it, but he wanted to do more sightseeing before they returned to Kurama. He and Grimmjow walked up the trail to the shrine where lanterns hung, glowing in the setting sun. They passed a pool of water where people knelt dipping their fortune papers into the water.

Ulquiorra purchased a fortune and dipped it in the cold water and writing appeared. Grimmjow leaned over his shoulder, brows furrowed. "That's weird. What's it say?"
Ulquiorra said, "It tells me good omens are around the corner. Good to know." He crumpled it up and tossed it in the trash. Grimmjow snorted.

They encountered a small shrine where written prayers for love rippled like ribbons in the breeze. Grimmjow said, "Man, that's sad. Look at how pathetic some of these are." He snorted as he looked over the prayers.

"I'm cold, let's head back."

"You sure you don't wanna leave something?"

"No, I don't need to."

Grimmjow glanced his way, his brows furrowed as full lips tugged downwards. "You're seeing someone?"

Ulquiorra found it hard not to lose himself in Grimmjow's piercing gaze. There was intensity in his eyes that made Ulquiorra's mouth go dry. "No, this is nonsense."

Grimmjow nodded, looking back at the prayers. "Same. It's pretty pathetic. But hey, if it'll get me laid that much faster I'll do it." Ulquiorra went to wait by the lanterns while Grimmjow purchased a fortune. He watched as he stood by the shrine and contemplated what to write.

Finally, Grimmjow scribbled something on the fortune, ripped off someone else's, and tied his to the railing. He smirked as he walked back to Ulquiorra and quirked his brows.

"What? Did you read that? It was pathetic as fuck."

"And yours was better?"

"Hell yeah, it's not sad and pathetic like all the others."
"What did you write?"

Grimmjow smiled and Ulquiorra thought there was a wistful look in his eyes when he replied, "I can't say. I'm hoping you'll find out soon enough."

As the sun set behind them, Ulquiorra and Grimmjow returned to Kibune to spend the rest of their night together.

Ulquiorra's stomach was churning later that night as he and Grimmjow climbed the stairs to reach the outdoor bathes. His palms were sweaty and there was a fluttering in his stomach he couldn't shake.

We're taking a bath. We won't be alone; they'll be other people there. This is a normal thing to do.

But he was taking a bath with Grimmjow. Grimmjow, who he'd spent lustful nights with many years ago. Grimmjow, who'd been sending signals Ulquiorra didn't understand. Grimmjow, whose blue eyes made Ulquiorra feel like he was drowning. Whose touch warmed him and filled him with uncertainty.

He'd seen Grimmjow naked before, in bed, before they hit the pitch, after they showered, his body gleaming and dripping wet. Why did this feel different than all any of the other times?

They stepped into the changing rooms where only a few men were dressing to leave or getting ready to soak in the warm waters. Ulquiorra split off to find a locker away from Grimmjow and undressed. He took his time, folding his clothes and arranging them in his locker.

He locked his things away and secured a towel around his waist as he stepped outside. The winter night chill washed over him, raising the hairs on his arms and causing his body to break out in goosebumps. The mountains rose up all around him like great waves over the bathhouse.

Steam wafted through the air and the further he went onto the patio, the warmer the air became. There were one or two men enjoying the warm bath but other than that, it was quiet and serene. Ulquiorra let his towel drift to the floor and the warm steam enveloped his body. There were no eyes to judge him, it was himself and nature and he felt at ease.

He heard footsteps behind him and Grimmjow's baritone voice carried to him on the night breeze, "Getting in?"
Grimmjow was clad in a towel that hung low around his hips. His blue eyes gleamed like a blade in the moonlight as they wandered Ulquiorra's frame. He bore his teeth in a smile, pointed canines glinting. Ulquiorra felt like he was prey cornered by a predator intent on devouring every inch of him, only to stop when he'd had his fill.

His instincts were telling him it was in his best interest to run, but Ulquiorra remained where he was, his eyes following the dark curls that trailed from Grimmjow's naval, disappearing below his towel.

Ulquiorra tore his eyes away from Grimmjow's chiseled form and dipped his toes into the water. The cold prickling at his skin washed away and he sucked in a little gasp as the temperature changed. Once he'd adjusted, Ulquiorra stepped into the water and submerged himself up to his chest. The warmth of the water eased the aches of the day and the steam made him slip his eyes closed as he breathed in a deep lungful.

"Is it nice?" Grimmjow was watching him intently.

"Come in and see." Grimmjow grinned his approval and let his towel pool at his feet. Ulquiorra couldn't stifle his longingful sigh at the sight of him, hanging thick and long between his legs. Ulquiorra's mouth was dry; the sight of Grimmjow naked sent a rush of heat through every part of him.

Grimmjow approached. Ulquiorra tore his eyes away and stared out at the mountains. The water rippled all around him as Grimmjow sunk into the hot spring beside him. All he wanted was ravish the man with his eyes, so Ulquiorra shifted further away from Grimmjow.

Ulquiorra closed his eyes but Grimmjow's body was burned into his mind. The warmth of the water stoked the heat blazing between his legs, and he was breathless and willing himself to remain composed.

Ulquiorra's cock twitched as Grimmjow groaned, laying his head against the edge of the bath. Ulquiorra fought back images of straddling him in the bath and focused on the scenery to take his mind out of the gutter.

Beside him, Grimmjow's voice rumbled, "I can't get over it."

Ulquiorra was silent, unsure what to say. He was still trying to shake Grimmjow's naked form from his mind. Grimmjow continued anyway, "How well things went with my mom. I thought I'd yell at
her, throw things, hurt her for leaving me the way she did… I don't know…"

"You don't know what?"

"If I reacted the way I should have. I couldn't get angry at her. I was too fuckin' shocked to do anything."

"You still told her how you felt."

"Yeah, sure, but should I have agreed to see her? She abandoned me. Did I forgive her like that?"

"It didn't seem to me like you forgave her. You're being open to the idea that things could go one way or the other, you're accepting either outcome. As I said, it's nothing I would have done, but it's admirable."

Grimmjow snorted. "I'm not accepting anything. If I did I wouldn't be so…" Grimmjow dropped his head back against the rim of the bath, lips turned down in a scowl as he gazed up at the night sky.

"So what?"

"Freaked out." Grimmjow didn't meet his gaze and glared down into the water, a shadow had fallen over his face. "She might let me down again. I know she could. I wanna believe that she wanted to see me for a reason."

Ulquiorra hadn't realized he'd shifted closer to Grimmjow until Grimmjow turned to face him and they were almost nose to nose.

"What will you do if she disappoints you?"

Grimmjow heaved his shoulders up and dropped them, shaking his head. He curled his lip. "Track her down and kick her ass, then move on with my life. At least I can say I didn't run away."

Grimmjow lapsed into silence, staring up at the stars. He didn't look settled in his decision. Old
familiar feelings of guilt stirred inside Ulquiorra. If he hadn't gone behind Grimmjow's back, Grimmjow wouldn't have to worry about what he'd do if his mother shut him out.

Words he'd long since held back were pressing against his lips. "Do you still blame me?" Grimmjow scratched behind his hand, running damp fingers through his hair.

"I did, for a long time. I thought they'd never find out I was using, I thought I was untouchable. Who was I kidding? Even if you hadn't gotten me expelled, my mom would have found out."

"You don't hate me?"

"For a while I did. I wanted someone to blame. More than anything, I hated myself and all the shit drugs made me do. I drove my mom away; you helped speed up the process." Bitterness flooded Grimmjow's voice and he couldn't meet Ulquiorra's gaze.

Ulquiorra looked Grimmjow in the face for the first time since they'd entered the bath. "I thought it would make you stop, I was worried for your safety. I shouldn't have done it. I was young and impulsive."

"I don't care anymore. So no, I don't hate you or blame you."

Grimmjow's arm slid around his shoulders and Ulquiorra's breathe hitched. He looked around, wide eyed, and found that the bath was deserted. They were alone and Grimmjow was looking at him with dark, lidded eyes.

"What about you?"

"What about me?" Ulquiorra asked, fighting the urge to fidget under Grimmjow's touch.

"You don't hold anything against me, do you?"

"No. There wouldn't be any point in continuing to be angry at you. If anything, I should thank you."
Grimmjow frowned. "What? Why?"

"You opened my eyes. You made me realize how fickle and meaningless love is."

Grimmjow pouted and tugged Ulquiorra closer. "That's depressing. What, so you were happy after we split up? You didn't feel anything?"

Ulquiorra realized he was one scoot away from being in Grimmjow's lap and struggled to come up with a reply. "I was...disappointed, but I don't know why I expected any better." He didn't like looking back at the days after he and Grimmjow broke up.

Something inside Ulquiorra had gone numb and he hadn't cried once since they broke up. He told himself again and again their breakup was a blessing in disguise. All love brought him was heartache so he was better off without it.

"Disappointed?" Grimmjow was frowning. "That's all?"

Ulquiorra was silent. What was he supposed to say? It would be contradictory if he admitted to Grimmjow how much he'd missed him. The void their breakup left in his life was a reminder of the purpose their love had given him that he'd lost.

"You sound hurt," Ulquiorra noted, hoping to take the focus off of himself, "Why, were you expecting a different response?" Grimmjow's lips, damp and warm from the steam, pressed to Ulquiorra's neck.

The touch of Grimmjow's lips sent heat rushing to his cock. Grimmjow's fingertips glided across his chest. Grimmjow's voice rumbled against his skin as his lips kissed a trail along Ulquiorra's neck, "You missed me, didn't you? Come on and admit it."

"There's nothing to miss." Ulquiorra's voice was unsteady, every touch of Grimmjow's heated lips made his body ache for him. He didn't understand how it was possible to still feel this way after so much time had passed.

"You missed my lips," Grimmjow kissed his jaw line, dragging his lips across Ulquiorra's cheek to his ear, "My cock, the way I knew how to touch you the way you liked it." Ulquiorra was heady as Grimmjow ravished his neck in hungry, heated kisses. He knew it was in his best interest to push
Grimmjow away, but his body thrummed with need for him.

Ulquiorra wanted relief and he wanted Grimmjow to be the one to give it to him. "You've clearly missed me." Ulquiorra murmured and Grimmjow chuckled against his neck. Under the water, Grimmjow's hand glided across his thigh and Ulquiorra's body went taut under his touch. "I missed your body," Grimmjow nipped Ulquiorra's ear, his breath coming in hot puffs against his skin. "I missed the little noises you made when I beat you off, I missed the way you moaned my name when I made you come."

Ulquiorra latched onto Grimmjow's hair, guiding Grimmjow's lips across his cheek. Grimmjow's breath was scorching against his lips, Ulquiorra could almost taste him. Ulquiorra remembered how rough his lips could be, and the way he poured his body and soul into every kiss.

Ulquiorra's rational was a blur and if their actions tonight had any consequences, it didn't matter. All he wanted was the water sloshing around them as they lost themselves in carnal pleasure.

The screech of the sliding door opening behind them sent Ulquiorra into a panic. Ulquiorra threw Grimmjow off him and sent him flying into the water. He disappeared beneath the water as Ulquiorra scrambled to escape the bath. Water flew every which way, sloshing over the sides and spilling across the patio. Sense came crashing back to him and Ulquiorra knew he had to get away before he did something stupid.

Grimmjow hadn't had time to resurface before Ulquiorra dashed into the changing rooms. He threw on his clothes, not caring that his shirt was on inside out, and raced to their room. Once in the bedroom, he locked the door and dressed for bed, leaving his clothes scattered in a pile on the floor.

Ulquiorra turned out the lights and submerged himself in darkness. Ulquiorra was a logical man and there was only so much denying he could do before he accepted the truth. He still had feelings for Grimmjow. The vicious cycle of their love had left a hole inside him, a hole in his chest that gaped and throbbed.

But the claws sprouting from their lust would rend into that bottomless hole and only after he numb from the pain of it all would he learn.

He could still feel Grimmjow's lips against his skin, desire left him short of breath, but Ulquiorra refused to give himself relief. He would not cave to the hard throb of need; he would not let
Grimmjow into his thoughts or into his bed. The emptiness inside him would never be filled, no matter how he wanted to be whole. Ulquiorra would not give an inch of himself to Grimmjow again.
Grimmjow gazed up at the ceiling of his apartment, moon white splashed with green as the emerald lampshade reflected off the wall. How was it that a ceiling made him think of Ulquiorra? Grimmjow knew by now that he was having serious withdrawal symptoms but the man he needed to ease that restlessness in his soul wasn't answering his messages.

They'd returned from Kyoto in early January and they'd talked at first via text and Ulquiorra started inventing excuses as to why they couldn't meet. January flew by and before Grimmjow knew it, it was Valentines Day and he was back to dating his right hand.

Grimmjow didn't understand him. He'd made a move on Ulquiorra and the man liked it. What was the problem? They had a complicated history, but the past was the past. It wasn't that Grimmjow wanted Ulquiorra to be in love with him. All he wanted was for Ulquiorra to want him, which he'd thought for sure Ulquiorra did.

Grimmjow scowled and dropped his arm over his eyes. "Fucking shit..." He seethed, teeth clenched as a tidal wave of frustration swept over him. Something was wrong. Something had gone off in Ulquiorra's mind after their encounter in the hot springs, and whatever conclusion he'd come to made him want to stay away from Grimmjow.

Grimmjow could only assume he'd frightened Ulquiorra away with his advances and if that was the case, then Grimmjow wanted to see him so he could make it clear this was not what he'd intended. If given the choice between being Ulquiorra's friend and fucking him, Grimmjow would rather have Ulquiorra's friendship.

Grimmjow had very few people in his life he could call friends, so he treasured those few. He wished he could find a way to let Ulquiorra know that, but it was hard when the man wouldn't pick up his phone.

So, visit his house. What the hell's wrong with me?

Grimmjow had considered breaking down Ulquiorra's door the first week he'd gone silent on him. He was holding back and for reasons he wasn't comfortable with. Grimmjow didn't know what Ulquiorra would say to him and not knowing kept him awake at night, tossing and turning and almost knocking Ada out of bed.

Would Ulquiorra forgive him or would he break off their friendship? If Grimmjow lost the one person he thought he could call friend all over again, he would be furious with himself for a long time.

What if he'd ruined what they had, and all because he couldn't keep his dick to himself?

The thought spurred him into action. He had to do the one thing he detested the most; apologize. His pride cried out at the thought but Grimmjow couldn't see another way around it. He pulled out his phone and sent Ulquiorra a text, fingers slipping on the keys.

Grimmjow: Would you answer me already, schnitzel? At least let me know if you're alive or not, it's been a month! If you have a problem with what I did, just come out and say it. What happened isn't worth fucking up what we have.

Scowling, Grimmjow waited. He couldn't believe himself. Not only had he used proper grammar
and punctuation, but he'd also taken back what he did. If Ulquiorra didn't accept his sort-of-apology after that, then he could go fuck himself.

Grimmjow waited. A minute went by, then five, then ten, and Grimmjow felt it in his soul that Ulquiorra wasn't going to reply. He ground his teeth so hard it hurt.

_Fuck this. I can't take this anymore._

Grimmjow heaved his legs off the couch and dragged himself to the door. He had to have an answer. If Ulquiorra wanted their friendship to end, then so be it, but Grimmjow wasn't letting go without a fight.

Grimmjow grabbed his coat and hurried out the door and into the snow, his glare hot enough to melt the snowflakes before they'd touched the ground.

_I bet he's with Kurosaki and his whore,_ the thought made his blood boil. He'd been replaced by Luppi and that had infuriated him, but he wouldn't stand being replaced with Kurosaki. The idea of Ulquiorra being friends with Kurosaki rather than him not only infuriated him, it insulted him.

They had history Kurosaki would never understand, Kurosaki didn't get Ulquiorra the way Grimmjow did, how could he? Grimmjow had known Ulquiorra since he was ten years old and he'd tried to befriend him when Kurosaki only had eyes for his mother. Grimmjow knew his quirks, what books he liked, what made him tick. Kurosaki and his woman didn't know Ulquiorra the way Grimmjow did.

_Great. I'm seeing my hand because of this guy when I should be fucking some hot chick, and now I sound like a hot chick. Fuck my life._

Growling loudly enough that the people nearby him shot him nervous glances or hurried away, Grimmjow marched through the snow until he arrived in the Shibuya district where Ulquiorra lived. Taking the train would have been faster by far, but Grimmjow felt an uncharacteristic urge to take his time as butterflies fluttered frantically through his stomach.

Grimmjow froze, about to turn the corner into Ulquiorra's street. He shut his eyes tightly. His heart was pounding, trying desperately to escape his chest. If Ulquiorra said he no longer wanted to see him, Grimmjow didn't know what he would do. He wouldn't walk away until Ulquiorra heard him out and he wouldn't stop trying to get Ulquiorra to forgive him until he was sure he'd done everything he could to change his mind.

Only then would he accept defeat. His resolution set, Grimmjow marched out around the corner and stumbled to a halt as all the blood in his body turned to ice. It was only the back of his head Grimmjow saw, but he would recognize Nnoitra Gilga's tall, lanky frame from miles away.

His old dealer climbed into the car. Someone was in the back seat and a wave of nauseous fear washed over him when he thought of who it might be.

"Gilga!" Grimmjow roared, taking off after the car, but Nnoitra didn't see him or hear him and his car drove away through the snowfall and was out of sight before Grimmjow had gotten halfway down the street. Nnoitra hadn't been able to let sleeping dogs lie. He couldn't find Grimmjow, so he was going to get what he was owed through Ulquiorra.

His horror turned to fury. Grimmjow couldn't stand the idea of Nnoitra going through someone else to get to him. It was cowardly; detestable. If Grimmjow had a problem, he took it right to the source and he didn't dick around with anyone else, and he expected the same from anyone who might take
issue with him.

His fists balled in his pocket, nails cutting into his skin. It was time to confront Nnoitra and finally put the last piece of his cocaine-addled past to rest. Grimmjow ran to the metro and rode it to Kabukicho. As he stepped off the train, his phone vibrated. Ulquiorra was calling him.

"Ulquiorra? What's going on?"

Raucous laughter erupted into his ear. "What the hell's happened to you, Jaegerjaquez? You gone soft, or what? You sound like you're shitting yourself with fear!"

"You're gonna be the one shitting yourself after I've gotten a hold of you." Grimmjow snarled, "Touch a hair on his head, and I'll scalp you."

"We're waiting for you to try, aren't we, boys?" Roars of agreement carried to his ears and Grimmjow couldn't deduce how many guys Nnoitra had with him. "Come on over, Jaegerjaquez. Don't keep me waiting!"

The line went dead and Grimmjow stuffed his phone into his pocket and ran to Nnoitra's apartment and by the time he got there, his throat was raw from the cold and his lungs ached. Grimmjow buzzed Nnoitra's apartment and tore inside when he was let in. Grimmjow jumped the stairs and before he could kick down Nnoitra's door, he was seized and thrown inside.

Grimmjow's head struck the wooden floor and he saw white. "And the man of the hour is here! The King of the Field, facedown and at my mercy!" Nnoitra's shrill laughter pierced Grimmjow's ears and his men roared their approval and support. Grimmjow pushed himself onto his elbows and heaved himself to his feet. His vision was spinning and he swayed as he stood up. Nnoitra—all five of him—faced him, a shit-eating grin splitting his ugly mug in two.

Grimmjow screwed his eyes shut and when he opened them, his vision had stabilized. He growled, "Where is he?"

"What the hell is this?" Nnoitra curled his lip. "And here I was, thinking you came for me…You came for your boyfriend? That's sweet of you. After you pass out, I'll puke down your throat."

"Start talking or I'm gonna punch a hole in you, then I'll cut through your friends, then I'm dragging my friend outta here."

Nnoitra cackled and made kissing noises in Grimmjow's face. "Look at you! You've gone soft! Your limp wrist won't leave a scratch on me!"

Grimmjow slung back his fist and plowed it towards Nnoitra's stomach. Nnoitra caught it, his spidery fingers crushing Grimmjow's wrist in his grasp. Nnoitra's mirth faded and a snarl twisted his face.

"Well, shit…Guess you're serious. Whatever. I know you think you've gotten stronger, but you're still a sack of skin and bones to me, coke-whore."

His words ignited Grimmjow's blood. He was ten times the man Nnoitra had made him. He would prove that today. "No guns. Fists only." Grimmjow said. Nnoitra shrugged.

"We'll see." Nnoitra underestimated him and Grimmjow would use that to his advantage.

Nnoitra's boys formed a circle around them and Nnoitra and Grimmjow sized one another up, waiting for the other to make the first move. Grimmjow swung fist and he telegraphed his swing to the right. Nnoitra blocked him and countered, wrenching Grimmjow in close by his fist. Grimmjow's
vision spun, stars exploded before his eyes, and his skull pounded as Nnoitra cracked the crown of his head into Grimmjow's forehead.

Grimmjow stumbled backwards but he wasn't thrown for a loop like he would have expected. Nnoitra had hit hard, but Grimmjow knew for a fact he could have hit harder. Looking at Nnoitra was like looking into a mirror at the man he'd been a year ago; his pants sagged down past his hips, his jacket swallowed him, his cheekbones stood out against skin stretched too tightly over his face.

As Grimmjow watched Nnoitra ready himself for another swing, sniffing like a bloodhound, his pupil dilated, he could no longer hold back the grin that burst across his face. Grimmjow bared his teeth the way a wild cat would when it sensed its prey was weakening, ready to strike. He'd already won this fight.

Nnoitra lunged for him and Grimmjow threw himself into his fist, tensing the muscles in his stomach as Nnoitra's fist collided into his abs. He heard Nnoitra hiss as his knuckles bounced off of Grimmjow's solid frame and though the hit left him winded, Grimmjow wasn't deterred. Nnoitra had hurt himself more than he'd hurt Grimmjow.

The distance closed between them and Grimmjow struck out with a chop against the side of Nnoitra's exposed neck. Nnoitra was thrown to the right with a choked grunt and Grimmjow pounced before he could recover. Grimmjow slid his knee beneath Nnoitra's gaunt midsection and rammed him. Nnoitra caved over his knee and Grimmjow rocked himself forward and sent Nnoitra flying backwards.

Nnoitra tumbled over the coffee table, sending packets of cocaine and marijuana flying off the table. Grimmjow tore after him, teeth bared like a panther on the hunt, and Nnoitra seized a lamp off the end table and hurled it. It shattered against Grimmjow's body and Grimmjow felt the shards of glass against his skin as they pierced through his shirt. He was running on a full tank of gas and the pain felt like pinpricks. Nnoitra was running on fumes.

Grimmjow leaped over the coffee table and tackled him and both men toppled to the floor. Grimmjow tore after him, teeth bared like a panther on the hunt, and Nnoitra seized a lamp off the end table and hurled it. It shattered against Grimmjow's body and Grimmjow felt the shards of glass against his skin as they pierced through his shirt. He was running on a full tank of gas and the pain felt like pinpricks. Nnoitra was running on fumes.

Grimmjow twitched and writhed, blood pouring from his nose and Grimmjow's fury turned to delight. The man beneath him was malnourished, on the brink of starving himself to death; his hair was thinning, his single eye was swallowed up by his pupils and his face was skeletal. Grimmjow had been the victor the moment he walked into the room.

He wanted to get Ulquiorra and leave this place and never return. Grimmjow stood up and grabbed a packet of cocaine off the coffee table. He opened it and let the white powder rain down over Nnoitra's face. Nnoitra sputtered and coughed, choking on blood and coke, and Grimmjow sneered. "Want some more? It'll make you feel better, for a little while anyway."

Nnoitra snarled up at him, hatred blazing in his eyes, and Grimmjow didn't know if he'd ever seen a sight so ugly but he knew he'd looked like this only a year ago. Grimmjow knelt over him and grabbed the front of Nnoitra's jacket, heaving him off the ground to look him in the eye.

"I don't want shit from you, Gilga. Stay the hell away from me. I'm done with you."

"You're no better than I am," Nnoitra snarled and he spat a mouthful of blood into Grimmjow's face,
baring his crimson teeth at Grimmjow in a repulsive smile. "You'll be back. You'll relapse. We all do. Might as well help yourself now." Nnoitra dragged a finger across his cheek, smeared with blood and coke and Grimmjow caught a whiff of it.

The smell tugged at his brain and made his nostrils burn. Grimmjow slung back his fist and plowed it into Nnoitra's face. Nnoitra's head snapped back, his chin jutting up towards the ceiling, then he fell limp and didn't move.

Grimmjow stood over the body of the man who'd ruined his life and looking down at what remained of him, Grimmjow was certain he was finally the better of the two of them. He turned to Nnoitra's boys, watching with wide eyes, and said, "Whose next?"

The men exchanged glances and one by one, they turned their backs on Nnoitra's crumpled body and left the room, sparing nervous glances over their shoulders. Grimmjow grinned and walked over Nnoitra's body. He heard a rattle and he saw the bedroom doorknob turning left and right. Grimmjow jumped over Nnoitra and raced to the door. Nnoitra had stuck a screwdriver in the lock and Grimmjow tossed it to the floor and threw the door open.

Ulquiorra stood on the other side, not a wrinkle on his clothes or a bruise to be seen. His lips parted and relief blazed in his eyes at the sight of Grimmjow. "Grimmjow, are you—," Grimmjow wasn't convinced. Grimmjow reached out and took a hold of Ulquiorra's chin. Ulquiorra's voice was cut off abruptly and Grimmjow heard a little intake of breath as he advanced, wanting a closer look.

Grimmjow leaned in closer until the familiar smell of clean clothes and the faint scent of Ulquiorra's brand of shaving cream blanketed him. He'd missed this smell. After their trip to Kyoto, his whole car had smelled like Ulquiorra and every time he'd climbed in, something inside his soul ached.

It felt like years since he'd seen Ulquiorra when in reality it had only been a few weeks. His skin was warm and soft beneath Grimmjow's hand, and he couldn't look away from Ulquiorra's eyes. He was sure every shade of green the world had to offer painted those eyes, and though he'd seen them at their coldest, right now he thought they were the colors of a meadow at sunset.

"What happened?"

"Nnoitra figured he could get what you owed him out of me."

"He hurt you?"

"No, but I want to get out of here."

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Can we leave?"

Grimmjow wanted to accuse Ulquiorra of dodging his question, but he didn't want to have their conversation with him in a stoner's home. Grimmjow and Ulquiorra walked out into the living room and Grimmjow reached for the pile of cash on Nnoitra's coffee table.

"Leave it," Ulquiorra said, "He'll come after you again if he doesn't get what he's due."

Grimmjow gnashed his teeth. "You're not paying what I owe."

"Can you pay him off?"

Grimmjow had been set back by his episode in Beijing. If he'd play the games after Beijing, he
imagined he'd have more than enough to pay off Nnoitra, but as of right now he didn't. He was silent, unwilling to tell Ulquiorra the truth. It wasn't enough that he'd dragged Ulquiorra into his problems, now Ulquiorra had to pay off his dealer. "You're not covering for me."

"I have money. It's fine."

"It's not fine by me!" Grimmjow could hardly meet his gaze. He felt humiliated.

"I'm paying off what you owe with the idea that you will not repeat the same mistakes you've made."

"I won't!"

"Good. Then he can keep the money and we can put this behind us and move on with our lives. Understood?"

Grimmjow couldn't meet his gaze. His face was warm, and he was outraged enough for his hands to tremble. He'd never wanted this and he would have happily let Nnoitra come for him again if it meant he could pay him off in due time.

Wordlessly, Grimmjow shoved by Ulquiorra and they descended the stairs and stepped out into the cold. Grimmjow's pride was wounded enough that he wanted to break things off with Ulquiorra right here and now. He wanted to be Ulquiorra's equal and instead he had an immeasurable debt sitting on his shoulders. He was so tired of people looking down on him and treating him like garbage. He was tired of not being enough; he was tired of feeling inferior.

"Where are you going?" Grimmjow turned his back on Ulquiorra and felt those green eyes follow him.

"So, this is our new start? Fine. You didn't want to have anything to do with me. Maybe it was for the better." The words fell heavy off his tongue. Before he could walk away, a small hand, surprising in its strength, froze him in place. Grimmjow turned and found Ulquiorra staring at him intently, his lips tightly pursed.

"What?" Ulquiorra didn't speak and Grimmjow's temper mounted. "Spit it out. I asked where you've been, I want an answer."

"I don't have one."

"That's bullshit. You shut me out for weeks. Was it because of what happened at the hot spring?"

"No. I think I've felt this way for a while. The hot springs just made me realize it." The snow around them fell thicker and faster and the wind swept their hair about them.

"What do you mean?"

Ulquiorra's lips formed a thin line and he didn't speak. Grimmjow's heart was caught in his throat. He took one step then another and just like always, he was brought back to Ulquiorra and he didn't know if it was because he willed it or if it was like the stories said and there was a little red thread wrapped around their fingertips, connecting them together.

"Look, if this is gonna be such a big problem for you, then let's just forget about what happened at the hot springs. It's not worth all this drama, alright? I thought we were both over it, you know? The past is the past and all that shit..."

Or did Ulquiorra mean that he wanted to stop being friends entirely? Did their history make even that
too complicated and hurtful?

Finally, Ulquiorra wet his lips and said, "I don't understand you."

"The hell's not to understand, you moron? I just gave you a solution, are you gonna take it or not?"

"You make passes at me and you risk your life for me after I haven't spoken to you in weeks."

"And you still haven't answered my question, dickhead."

"Why would you do something like that for me?"

"Quit dodging my question and give me an answer!"

"What are we?" Ulquiorra's question stole away some of Grimmjow's fire and he struggled to come up with a response. "For months, you've been touching me, flirting with me. I thought you were doing it to annoy me at first, but after we went to the hot springs, I realized there was more to it. I was going to chalk it up to sexual attraction but then you risked your life to help me. So what are we?"

Grimmjow didn't know what to say or do. He wanted to say they were friends but their relationship was more complicated than that. It had changed so much within the past few months and so quickly that he couldn't pinpoint when or how. All he knew was that he was attracted to Ulquiorra and he got a kick out of teasing him and pressing his buttons.

"Didn't know you could talk so much, Ulquiorra."

"Be quiet and answer me."

Grimmjow was speechless, sweating beneath his coat as Ulquiorra's emerald eyes drilled into him. He didn't know what they were to one another. He couldn't put a label on it. He felt cornered and when Grimmjow felt cornered, his claws came out.

"If there was nothing but attraction between us, why would you endanger yourself like that?"

Grimmjow's hands became fists in his pockets, his lips thinned. He didn't know what they were but he knew what he wanted. He closed his eyes and steeled himself. *Fuck it, he thought, what the hell have I got to lose?* And through the confusion turning his thoughts to a scream, he found clarity in the intensity of Ulquiorra's eyes and the movement of his lips.

Grimmjow let go of the steering wheel and let his instincts take over. His hand shot out, fisting in Ulquiorra's scarf. He tugged on Ulquiorra's scarf and took a step forward and let their bodies come together. He tilted Ulquiorra's chin and emerald met sky blue. Ulquiorra's armor cracked; his eyes went wide in astonishment and a little fear, his lips parted, the first syllable of Grimmjow's name silenced by the touch of Grimmjow's lips against his.

The world stood still and nothing mattered except the softness and warmth of Ulquiorra's lips. He tasted faintly like mint, just like Grimmjow remembered, and there was a chill on his lips that made Grimmjow shiver.

Ulquiorra didn't wear fragrance; he smelled of shampoo, soap and whatever laundry detergent he used and yet the smell of him made Grimmjow hard for him. Grimmjow's fingers wandered, tracing Ulquiorra's jaw line, his cheekbones, before weaving through his hair. His hair was as soft as Grimmjow remembered and once he realized how soft it was, Grimmjow had a hard time moving his hand away.
Ulquiorra's hand pressed against his chest and Ulquiorra's lips were firm against his but Grimmjow wasn't deterred. Ulquiorra could have pushed him away five seconds ago without an issue.

Grimmjow parted his lips and let his tongue caress Ulquiorra's plump lower lip. Ulquiorra's lips lost some of their resistance at his touch and parted. Grimmjow's cock pulsed against the front of his jeans and he moaned his approval.

The hand against his chest became a fist in his coat and Grimmjow found himself being brought closer. The resistance between them fell away and Ulquiorra's lips nibbled and sucked Grimmjow's lower lip as he slowly reciprocated Grimmjow's advances.

Grimmjow grew short of breath, every touch of Ulquiorra's lips burned against his skin and as Ulquiorra tugged them close together, any hesitation Grimmjow might have had fell away. Grimmjow took hold of Ulquiorra's hips and steered him backwards until Ulquiorra's back was up against the apartment behind him.

Grimmjow thought they were flush together before, but with the building behind them they were crushed together. Ulquiorra's chest rose and fell against Grimmjow's with every frantic breath and he was harder than Grimmjow, almost painfully so. Grimmjow longed to close his hand around him without any fabric between them. Grimmjow held himself back and his tongue darted out to caress Ulquiorra's lips.

Ulquiorra's lips parted at his touch, their tongues tangled and Grimmjow ravished his lips in a flurry of nips and bites. Ulquiorra's long, slender fingers ghosted the back of his neck and Grimmjow shivered at his touch. Ulquiorra's fingers toyed with the strands of hair at the nape of his neck, giving a tug to bring them closer.

Spurred on, Grimmjow placed open-mouthed kisses to Ulquiorra's neck, tugging down the neck of his sweater for unrestricted access to his skin. Ulquiorra's pulse raced beneath his lips and he bit down on the moon white skin of his neck. Ulquiorra's breath caught in a small grunt of pain that sent the blood rushing to Grimmjow's cock but Ulquiorra didn't push him away.

Grimmjow's hands couldn't remain idle any longer and they wandered brazenly across Ulquiorra's body, feeling the firmness of his rising chest and tracing the curve of his hips. Grimmjow's fingers found the waistline of his jeans.

"Grimmjow…"

Ulquiorra didn't push him away and the breathless moan of his name drove Grimmjow crazy. Grimmjow's hand dipped past the waistline of Ulquiorra's jeans and felt the swell of him jutting against the opening of his jeans.

Ulquiorra's hips rocked into his hand and he uttered a noise Grimmjow could only describe as relieved. Grimmjow wondered how long it had been since he'd touched himself or let someone else touch him. Grimmjow longed to feel the heat and hardness of him in his palm; he wanted to hear every little sound Ulquiorra made when he came undone.

Then the warmth of Ulquiorra's body was gone and Grimmjow was stumbling backwards, arms flailing for something to latch onto. He collided into a lamppost and almost fell over. "What the—?" He wiped at his lips, wide eyes locked onto Ulquiorra.

Ulquiorra's eyes, dark and lidded with lust, grew steely as he pushed himself off from the wall. "We can't." Ulquiorra's voice was breathless and low with need but firm in his decisiveness. "I'll be your friend, Grimmjow, but that's all we can be." Grimmjow's balls were past blue and turning purple, but
he couldn't argue when he saw the rosy pink in Ulquiorra's cheeks, his hair tousled and his lips flushed.

Ulquiorra's name was a ghost on his lips as Ulquiorra turned and walked away, his coat rippling in the breeze. Grimmjow watched him go, too bewildered to argue, and he didn't see Ulquiorra until March when they began practice for their first game of the year.
Happy 2018!
Sorry for no chapters yesterday. I thought I got over a cold, instead it came back to kick my ass. I'll see if I can upload another chapter today to make up for it. I know not very many people are reading, but to those who are, it means the world to me and I want to do right by you guys!
Thanks again for all your support!

As March arrived, ushering in practice for the third round in the World Cup, FIFA drew for the matches the qualifying teams would play. Japan and their five opponents were put into group B. For their first game on the 17th, Japan would play as the away team against the USA in NYC’s Madison Square Garden. Ulquiorra wasn't excited about the idea of being back in New York. He wondered if his mother still lived there and if she did, if he would want to see her after what she'd done.

On May 20th they would play a home game against Thailand. On September 20th, they would play as the home team against Australia, and the away team in Moscow on the 30th. They would end their season with an away game against Mexico on November 10th. If they finished their season with enough points, they would qualify for entrance into the World Cup by the end of 2017.

If they qualified for third place, they would participate in playoffs over the remainder of the year to have a shot at their last chance of qualification. If Japan didn’t qualify for the playoffs or for entrance into the World Cup, they were disqualified.

Ulquiorra only wanted to do the World Cup once. If he allowed their team to lose, what good was he? If they lost, Ulquiorra thought he would retire from the bitterness of it all. He always had the option of taking over his father's business if he decided to no longer play soccer.

Ulquiorra wanted to be back on the pitch. He needed something to do to keep his mind away from Grimmjow. Despite that he said he would be Grimmjow's friend, Ulquiorra hadn't made an effort to contact him. February flew by before he knew it and he hadn't seen Grimmjow since their kiss in the snowy streets of Kabukicho.

Their kiss was burned into his memory. For hours after their encounter, Ulquiorra could still feel Grimmjow's rough lips against his, his touch burned into Ulquiorra's skin and Ulquiorra could smell him on his clothes.

Ulquiorra wished he hadn't returned Grimmjow's kiss, but the moment Grimmjow's lips touched his, he realized he'd wanted and waited for this moment. Ulquiorra could deny until he was blue in the face, but he wasn't stupid. Grimmjow's touch left him short of breath, his scent made Ulquiorra ache for him, and every kiss stole away pieces of his reasoning until all he wanted was to cave to his carnal desires.

More than anything else, Ulquiorra felt wanted by Grimmjow. Even if he was guilt-ridden Grimmjow had been hurt because of him, Ulquiorra liked that Grimmjow had risked his safety to help him. No one else would have done what Grimmjow did, Ulquiorra was certain, and that was because Grimmjow saw him in a way other people didn't.
Grimmjow could spend hours taking jabs at him, trying to find a way under his skin, when many would have dismissed Ulquiorra as an awkward loner and moved on. Grimmjow kissed and touched Ulquiorra with fiery desperation, as if he feared that if he didn't touch him and kiss him now, he might never get the chance to.

Grimmjow made Ulquiorra feel needed. He wasn't a worthless sack of blood and bones; he wasn't empty and meaningless, not to Grimmjow. He was the one Grimmjow wanted to kiss and touch, he was the one Grimmjow was hard for and even after he told himself they would just be friends, Ulquiorra loathed the idea that someone might have him.

After their kiss, Ulquiorra's whole body tingled, his lips burned. He'd gone back on his word not to let Grimmjow into his thoughts and showered. Alone beneath the warm spray of the shower, he'd wondered how things would have been if he hadn't pushed Grimmjow away.

Instead of standing alone beneath the spray, listening to the water trickle and splash, Grimmjow was there with him, their naked bodies gleaming and wet and pressed close together. The thought made his cock pulse and twitch and with Grimmjow's taste and touch still burned into his senses, Ulquiorra grasped himself and worked his hand from the base to the tip, squeezing and pulling.

He started off slow; the way Grimmjow might, rocking his hips into him at a tantalizing pace. Grimmjow wanted to see how much Ulquiorra could take before he snapped, because Grimmjow knew he would. He knew what Ulquiorra wanted, to be fucked so hard he was left senseless, unable to think and only able to feel as with each thrust, he lost his reasoning.

As their bodies came together, every swift, hard union met with harsh, breathless gasps, Ulquiorra was liberated. Ulquiorra wasn't worthless, he wasn't meaningless or empty. He was Grimmjow's, Grimmjow's to break and make his own. With every kiss against the back of his neck and coarse moan of his name, Ulquiorra realized Grimmjow was his, as well.

In his fantasies, Ulquiorra could feel a single heart race as one within their entwined hands. As if his heart had finally found someone to beat for, or if Grimmjow had entrusted Ulquiorra with his own.

Then he was doubling over as his ears rang, his moan stifled by his lower lip as he bit down hard enough to draw blood. He tossed his hips into his hand and he came undone against the shower wall, Grimmjow's name a choked gasp on his lips.

Ulquiorra allowed himself a few moments to recover as his heart caught up with him and his breath returned to him, then he stepped under the shower spray and washed himself clean. The euphoria faded. He was alone and the thing he wanted most would never come to pass.

After two weeks of training, Ulquiorra focused on his training and ignored Grimmjow when possible. He stood away from Grimmjow during practice, he changed separately from the others, and if he encountered Grimmjow on his way out of the showers, he ignored him.

Ulquiorra would be lying if he said it was easy to keep his eyes to himself, or to hold back on confronting him and asking why he'd kissed him. There were times when he felt eyes on his back, raising the hairs on his arms. He looked over his shoulder in time to see Grimmjow avert his gaze, a frustrated scowl on his face.

Ulquiorra wanted to speak to him. He wanted them to talk and spend time together like they used to, but Ulquiorra couldn't look at him without remembering what it felt like to kiss him and he didn't trust himself to keep his word that they could only remain friends.
Ulquiorra kept to himself; he relieved any feelings of pent up frustration alone beneath his blankets and kept himself as preoccupied as possible. At the end of the second week of practice, Ulquiorra packed his bags and joined his team at the airport where they caught an early morning flight to America. They didn't arrive until late at night and they caught a shuttle straight to their hotel.

As they drove into the city, a wave of memories washed over Ulquiorra as the pulsing, flashing lights of New York City swept over him. He remembered taking this same route into the city with his mother so many years ago after his breakup with Grimmjow.

He remembered the guilt and grief washing away as he and his mother weaved through the crowds of Times Square, swerving through dark train tunnels in a packed subway car on their way to Central Park to ride the horse carriages, sitting side by side in a dark theater illuminated by stage lights as they immersed themselves in Phantom of the Opera.

It had been years since then, but New York hadn't changed in the slightest. Even in the darkest hours of the night, people were out and about, bar-hopping, coming back from late movies or plays, and traffic sped by carrying people to who only knows where at these hours.

The team arrived at their hotel, the multi-colored lights of the Empire State Building shining high over their heads. Last time Ulquiorra had visited, the lights had changed colors on different days of the week but tonight the lights went from blue to green and more within the blink of an eye.

Ulquiorra could see the Chrysler Building peeking out from behind a distant highrise, the falcon gargoyles watching over the city. He'd visited both these buildings on his last trip here with his mother and while the team eagerly discussed going to the top of the Empire State, Ulquiorra realized he had no desire to revisit the building, or any memories he'd made there.

They entered hotel adjacent to Madison Square Garden, where they would play tomorrow at noon. The team booked 2-bedroom suites in advance and the problem lay in assigned who was rooming with who for the duration of the trip. Ichigo and Renji were rooming, Ikkaku and Yumichika grabbed a room together, but no one expressed any interest in rooming with either Grimmjow or Ulquiorra.

Kenpachi said, "Then just share a room. What the hell's the matter with you guys, since when are either of you so shy?" he shoved Grimmjow towards Ulquiorra and went away to the elevators.

As the team split off to their rooms, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra were left alone, avoiding one another's gaze. Grimmjow sighed. "Fine," he grumbled, "Let's just get this over with. I have my room, you have yours, no funny business…"

They took the elevator up to their room, each standing to one side as far away from each other as possible. Ulquiorra's mouth felt dry to be standing in such close proximity to Grimmjow after what had happened in February. At the same time, he had a hard time avoiding Grimmjow's gaze. It felt like years since they'd even acknowledged one another.

He missed talking to him. He missed how easy and natural their conversations were. Even if what they'd had was never purely friendship, Ulquiorra had savored every second of it and he wanted Grimmjow back. But he couldn't have him back.

Ulquiorra kept his jaw tightly clenched and the moment the doors opened and let them out onto their floor, he hurried ahead to their room. Their room had a view of the Empire State, a beacon of colored lights amidst a sea of glowing windows and flashing advertisements. Their room had an eat-in kitchen, and a cozy living room with a widescreen television.
Grimmjow went to admire the view and Ulquiorra dragged his suitcase across carpeted floors and into a room on the left. A double bed greeted him with fluffed cushions and plush blankets, illuminated by the city lights outside his window.

Ulquiorra flicked on the lights and began filling his dresser with his clothes, unpacking his toiletries in the master bathroom that was big enough to be another bedroom.

"Why do you get the double bed?" Grimmjow growled and his voice made Ulquiorra jolt. Ulquiorra turned and saw Grimmjow leaning in the doorway, arms folded over his broad chest.

"You don't have one?" Ulquiorra took longer than he cared to admit to reply. He hadn't been able to think over the momentary burst of panic in his brain.

"I got some little kiddy bed. Why didn't you ask me which rooms we could have?"

"I took it first." Ulquiorra only realized how childish he sounded after Grimmjow's full lips quirked into a smirk. He just wanted Grimmjow to let him pass without an issue.

"Well, alright, then," Grimmjow snorted, "You won't be lonely in such a big bed by yourself?"

Ulquiorra's mouth was dry and the back of his neck warmed from Grimmjow's words, accompanied with a playful smile. "Don't."

Grimmjow's smile fell away at Ulquiorra's words and he took a moment to speak, combing his hand through his hair. His intense blue eyes bore into Ulquiorra's and he said, "I'm not asking you to be in love with me. That's not what I want."

"I don't want to talk about this."

"Yeah, well I do." Grimmjow walked towards him. Ulquiorra could smell his clothes and the soap he used. They hadn't stood so close together since their kiss in February and Ulquiorra remembered the rough press of Grimmjow's mouth against his, the warmth of his skin under his fingertips, the taste of him.

"Then what do you want?" Ulquiorra asked.

"You know what I want. It's the same thing you want."

"Is it?" Ulquiorra didn't know. Did he want things to stay as they were before their encounter in February, or did he wanted something more? Was it possible they could have both?

The buzzer rang and Ulquiorra brushed by Grimmjow to get the door. Ulquiorra took his food and left Grimmjow to get his own from the bus boy. Ulquiorra went to his room and locked the door and ate his dinner alone in bed. He set his empty plate on the dresser and turned out the lights. He curled up underneath plush blankets and closed his eyes.

If Ulquiorra were sure they could keep things friendly between them and still indulge themselves in one another, would he take that chance?

Kenpachi stormed across the field where his team awaited him, sweaty and breathless as the first leg of their match with the USA came to a close. "What the hell are you people doing?" Kenpachi barked, "How the hell are they three points over us? This isn't what I trained you assholes for!"

Grimmjow spat onto the ground, pushing his hand through his wild blue locks. "Not my problem,
coach. If Cifer would just shoot me the ball—,

"Jaegerjaquez, you can't win this game by yourself and I need you on the field. You get one more foul, and I'm gonna call in Luppi."

Grimmjow's face colored. "I wouldn't be playing by myself if Cifer would accept my passes. I've been shooting to you and you fucking ignore me!"

Ulquiorra kept himself quiet. Had he been ignoring Grimmjow? If so, he hadn't done it knowingly. He thought back to a moment during the game as Grimmjow tried to shoot the ball away from their goal. Ulquiorra had seen Grimmjow shoot his way, but he'd let Ichigo take Grimmjow's pass.

Why did he need to be the one to take Grimmjow's passes?

"Toshiro," Kenpachi said, "I want another forward for the second leg. Can you do that?"

"Yes." Hitsugaya replied.

"Good. Guys, pull your heads outta your asses. Grimmjow, Ulquiorra, whatever is going on between you isn't worth costing us the game. So sort it out now. That's an order."

Grimmjow's lips quirked upwards. "Hear the man, Ulquiorra?" He asked, following Ulquiorra as Ulquiorra branched off from the team and went to get his water. "It's our moral obligation to fuck now. Coach's orders."

Ulquiorra ignored him and gulped down half his water. Behind him, Grimmjow's voice became a growl, "You too good for me now, is that it?" A warm hand fisted in his shirt and Ulquiorra was turned around to look Grimmjow in the face.

"Enough of this shit! Talk to me. We kissed, you liked it, so I'm not gonna take your attitude, alright?"

"I'm not doing this with you again."

"Doing what?" Ulquiorra tried to duck under his arm and Grimmjow blocked him.

"What? Stop running away from me and man up!"

"Have you forgotten what happened the last time we did this? Really?"

Grimmjow raised his brows. "The hell do you mean? We never fucked."

"I'm not returning any feelings you have for me. Our relationship only complicated things, who is to say it won't end the same as it did before?"

Grimmjow snorted. "You're way the hell over thinking things."

"No, I'm being cautious. Unlike you."

Grimmjow pushed Ulquiorra up against the wall before Ulquiorra could walk around him. "I don't have any feelings for you. Don't get me wrong, you're alright when you're not being a pain in the ass."

Cautious relief began to rise within Ulquiorra. "So, you don't—?"

"No. I don't. Weren't you listening when I told you I wasn't asking for you to be in love with me?"
Grimmjow's face split into a grin and his eyes twinkled. "Is this why you've been ignoring my passes and assists? 'Cause you're all freaked out I had feelings for you?"

Ulquiorra refused to say anything more as the back of his neck turned hot enough to light a match. Grimmjow slapped his knees, his shoulders heaving with mirth. "I don't fuckin' believe this! You've been avoiding me because you thought I liked you? You know, for a guy who claims feelings are useless, you sure as hell let yourself be controlled by 'em, didn't you?"

Ulquiorra was silent as the grave. Grimmjow was right; Ulquiorra had let his worries about their relationship get in the way of winning them this game, so much so that it had cost them goals for the first leg of the match.

"Aww, you're cute when you're shy, Ulqui. Come here, I'll give you a lil' kissy."

Grimmjow made obnoxious kissing noises and Ulquiorra turned tail and marched back across the field as Grimmjow's raucous laughter split the air behind him. His ears and neck were hot and he was sweating in his jersey. He'd been told he had a habit of ruminating and over thinking things, but he'd always thought of it as a useful habit to have. By trying to predict every possible outcome, he was preparing himself.

Instead, he looked like a shy schoolboy, thinking that Grimmjow had romantic feelings for him. How was he supposed to know Grimmjow didn't? Scowling, Ulquiorra lined up as the team awaited the referee's signal to kick off the game.

"You and Grimmjow good?" Ichigo asked, jumping from one foot to the next. Ulquiorra shrugged. Ichigo scowled. "Well you guys better be! I need to win this game!"

"Why this game in particular?"

"I just do." Ichigo was looking to the stands where Orihime stood with Rukia, waving and cheering for him.

As idiotic as Ulquiorra felt knowing he'd misread Grimmjow's feelings, he felt as if a cylinder block had been lifted from his chest. His mind was unclouded now and breathing felt easier. Within five minutes of the kick off, Ulquiorra felt as if his eyes had opened and when he saw a chance to make their first goal, he took it.

American defender Johnson was thrown the floor by a tackle from Grimmjow, knocking the ball away from his ankles. It was a close call. Grimmjow's toes touched the ball seconds before his ankle collided into Johnson's feet. Ulquiorra scowled.

"Idiot."

Ulquiorra swept up the ball and shot it over the American defenders and into the back of the net, just barely missing the goalie's fingertips. The crowd roared in support of Japan and Grimmjow, lying on his side in the dirt, pounding the pitch with his fist, teeth bared in a grin.

"What an excellent display of teamwork from Jaegerjaquez and Cifer of Japan! You can see in Jaegerjaquez's face seconds before the tackle that he was looking to pass to Cifer. Whatever they were talking about during half time has turned things around for them."

Ulquiorra, unwilling to give Grimmjow any more fuel against him, strode to him and extended a hand. Grimmjow clasped it and Ulquiorra tugged him to his feet. Grimmjow leaned in and knocked his shoulder into Ulquiorra's.
"That was too risky. If you’d passed the ball any later than you did, you might have been disqualified."

Grimmjow hand tightened around Ulquiorra's and tugged him close enough to bite the shell of his ear. Ulquiorra's whole body went taut and his breath got stuck in his throat. Did Grimmjow forget or just not care that they had the eyes of the world watching them? His body betrayed him with a rush of heat that tingled and throbbed in his loins. He shoved Grimmjow away and Grimmjow barked laughter.

"Yeah, but I didn't get disqualified. Nice to know you care, sweetie."

Ignoring him, Ulquiorra watched as the ball flew out into the field. An American player took possession. Twenty minutes into the second leg, Hisagi caught the ball before it could pass over Japan’s defense and into their goal. He threw the ball back out and Grimmjow launched it high into the sky away from their goal and back into the middle of the field.

Ichigo was off his game today. He was distracted and jumpy and in his nerves, he let the American players get through his defense. In a near miss for Japan, Ichigo tumbled head over heels from a tackle and the ball flew into a striker's ankles.

The striker hurtled towards Japan’s goal and shot it. Grimmjow was racing towards their goal but Ulquiorra thought he wouldn't make it. The ball was flying too high for Grimmjow to block the shot. Grimmjow propelled himself into the air and fell flat on his back, catching the ball off the tips of his toes as he fell and launching it out of play. The crowd went ballistic, the announcers tripped over themselves and Grimmjow raised his hands to the skies as the crowd chanted his name, basking in their love and respect.

Ulquiorra watched Grimmjow as he jogged across the field, stopping to taunt Ichigo with a cocky smile. It was hard to keep his eyes off Grimmjow. He was like a rockstar on the field. He was unpredictable, he lacked discipline and at times his behavior was un-sportsman, but the crowd loved him all the more for it.

Ulquiorra didn't know if he should shake his head at how many times Grimmjow had risked disqualification from this match alone trying to keep their goals safe, or if he should be in awe of him. Watching him in action on the field and off made the void in Ulquiorra's chest ache. He wished he could live as fearlessly as Grimmjow played. Without fear of consequences, nothing held back, unafraid to take his life by the horns.

Grimmjow awarded the team a corner kick after he kicked the ball out of play to keep it away from an American defender's clutches. Ulquiorra wanted to capitalize on this opportunity to score them their second goal and so when Grimmjow lined up his shot in the corner of the field, Ulquiorra tilted his head towards America's goal.

Ulquiorra touched Ichigo's wrist as he passed by him to stand near the goal and Ichigo tensed under his touch. Grimmjow launched the ball across the field and Ichigo leaped into the air and caught the ball of his head. It flew over team America and Ulquiorra caught it as it landed with a hard kick as it bounced off the ground. The trajectory was low enough that his kick sent it flying to the right of the American goalie's knee and into the goal before the goalie could bat an eye.

Grimmjow swept up the field to him and tackled him, nearly bowling him over in an aggressive embrace as he clapped Ulquiorra on the back. Ichigo jumped in and shook them about, his arms around their shoulders as the crowd cheered for them.

"Japan is pulling it together in the second leg! Astounding team play!"
Ulquiorra watched the midfielders as they tried to link the ball to him, dribbling around enemy players. An American defender swept in and stole the ball away from them with a tackle that knocked Ichigo off his feet. Ulquiorra ran to keep up with him as the defender dribbled the ball around Renji and tried to pass to the American striker closest to him.

They were too close to Japan's goal for Ulquiorra to feel comfortable if the striker got a hold of their ball, but he was too far away to stop them. The striker shot the ball and Grimmjow rushed in and got between the ball and the striker. Ulquiorra saw the American defender rushing at Grimmjow's blind side.

The American defender launched himself at Grimmjow as Grimmjow sprung into the air to head the ball. Their heads collided together and Ulquiorra cringed imagining the sickening crack the collision of their skulls produced. Grimmjow fell like a dead weight out of the air and landed on his shoulder and the defender toppled to the floor, cradling his head in his hands. Grimmjow was motionless.

The referee sounded his whistle and the crowd groaned in sympathy. Ulquiorra jogged over, quickening his pace as the referee rolled Grimmjow onto his back and examined him. Grimmjow's eyes were lidded and he looked lost and confused as he was helped into a sitting position. The referee beckoned for a medic and as he turned away from Grimmjow, Ulquiorra saw a patch of deep crimson clotting in Grimmjow's hair just above his ear.

Ulquiorra wanted to say this was what Grimmjow got. The defender responsible for his injury had gotten into an altercation with Grimmjow during the first leg. Grimmjow had earned himself a yellow card and the referee broke both men up before a fight could start. Grimmjow had been served his just-deserts.

Regardless of whether Grimmjow deserved this or not, Ulquiorra's nails were digging into his palm as he listened to the defender try to justify his behavior. The medics hurried to Grimmjow's side and examined him. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine. I can keep playing." Grimmjow was slow to reply and his speech was slurred. The medics helped him up and he swayed. When they asked how many fingers they held up—five—Grimmjow answered, "Eight? No, six. Fuck it, I can't tell." He screwed his eyes shut and wobbled.

The defender who'd injured Grimmjow was shown the red card. "What the hell, man, seriously? This asshole bowled me over first, and he gets a yellow card? Whose side are you on?"

"Yeah, and he has a concussion and you don't. You could have hit the ball and you went right for his head. So get off the field. Now."

Cursing, the American defender stomped off the field and no one was allowed to replace him. Ulquiorra followed the medics as they escorted Grimmjow towards the stands. "Grimmjow—,"

"Let me go, I gotta play, I—" Grimmjow ducked out from under their arms and tried to walk back onto the field. Ulquiorra cut him off.

"Go. I'll win us this game."

"Yeah, how? Kuro—what's his name? The asshole with the orange hair hasn't been able to focus this whole game. I've gotta be in there."

Ulquiorra put his hands on Grimmjow's chest and insisted, "Get yourself treated. I've got this."

"You fuckin' better." Grimmjow’s face fell as Kenpachi opened the door where the substitutes sat and Luppi strutted onto the field like a prized peacock.
Grimmjow's lip curled and he shoved Ulquiorra in the chest. "I'll be watching. You better win, you hear me?" Grimmjow was helped off the field and Ulquiorra lined up with the team for the penalty-kick awarded to Japan for Grimmjow's injury.

If they scored, Japan would have two to America's three. Ulquiorra took the kick for his team and lined up his shot. On the screens, Ulquiorra saw Grimmjow surrounded by medics, blotting at the blood crusting in his hair. Grimmjow's eyes were fixed on the field, fixed on him. Ulquiorra swallowed.

He wasn't shooting for himself and though he was shooting for his team, it wasn't their eyes that made his skin prickle. He was shooting for Grimmjow who was rooting for him, counting on him. Maybe that was why he didn't make the shot.

America's goal keeper blocked his shot, tumbling over in the dirt with the ball to his chest, and Ulquiorra didn't look towards where Grimmjow was sitting, unable to meet his gaze. He scowled at himself. He wasn't the one with the concussion, so why was he so unfocused?

What was the matter with him? When did he let someone else influence the way he played? Grimmjow had done nothing but distract him this entire game. Ulquiorra vowed to stay focused. He refused to allow Grimmjow to have such influence over him.

Ulquiorra took possession of the ball and dribbled up the field towards their goal. The defenders encroached on their goal, ready to intercept his shot and Ulquiorra stopped running and shot the ball behind him at Ichigo. Ichigo headed the ball to Hitsugaya who shot for their goal but the ball never made it as an America defender kicked the ball out of play.

The match ended with three home points to Japan's two. Ulquiorra stared up at the screens, watching as the American fans and players rejoiced, and breathed out a frustrated sigh through flared nostrils. It didn't matter, he told himself. They had four more games before the end of their season.

Grimmjow was right, Ulquiorra thought as he shook hands with the beaming Americans, I did let my emotions get the best of me. I let him get the best of me.

"Ichigo, Ulquiorra-kun!" Orihime waved at them from the entrance to the lobby. "You guys are winners to me!" Ulquiorra wondered how she'd been allowed onto the field. Security had let her in without an issue.

Ichigo scowled, determination blazing in his eyes. "Fuck it," he said to no one in particular, "Today's still gonna end in my favor." He hurried ahead and went to meet her. Ichigo and Orihime burst across the screens and the whole stadium watched as Ichigo got down on one knee in front of Orihime.

The crowd began to cheer and Orihime put her hands over her mouth, her eyes shining. Orihime threw herself into his arms and they shared a kiss with the eyes of the world upon them. Ichigo slipped the diamond ring over Orihime's finger and she began to cry.

"Congratulations to Mr. and Mrs. Kurosaki!" The announcer cried and the crowds cheered for them. "Even in the face of defeat, the future is bright today for the Kurosaki family."

Ulquiorra swept past the beaming couple and into the changing rooms. He showered and dressed and found Grimmjow in the lobby waiting for him, a bandage plastered to his temple.

"You look like a winner." Ulquiorra said.

"Shut the hell up. What kind of kick was that, how did you fucking miss?" Grimmjow said, falling
into step beside him as they went to meet the team outside for a round of losers drinks at a bar of their choosing.

Ulquiorra didn't know how to say that it was Grimmjow's fault he'd played his worst today. He didn't want to give Grimmjow the satisfaction of knowing how much he got to him. "Your concussion cost us the game."

"No, you cost us the game 'cause you fucking suck."

"If you hadn't been injured, we'd have won."

"Yeah, 'cause I'm better than you."

Ulquiorra was sure if Grimmjow hadn't been injured they would have won the game. They'd come together during the second leg and all the goals they'd scored, they'd scored together. And despite the loss their team suffered today, it was those moments he looked back on as they joined the team outside the stadium.

He'd caught a glimpse of the potential he and Grimmjow had when they came together on the field and next time, Ulquiorra would be sure he didn't forget it.
Grimmjow's head throbbed like he'd been slapped by a pimp's favorite hooker, her fingers bejeweled with rocks for rings. The blaring music in the pizza parlor only accented his headache and the raucous chatter of his teammates as they ate and drank made his head feel like it was full of stampeding elephants.

After leaving the field to change, he hadn't been able to remember which locker was his but the amnesia had since faded and in its place was bitter frustration. He was sore that they'd lost. Kurosaki had been off his game and Grimmjow expected that from him, but from Ulquiorra?

Ulquiorra was the last person Grimmjow thought would be out of sorts. At the time, Grimmjow was smug in his belief that Ulquiorra was distracted because of what had happened between them. Really, Ulquiorra thought Grimmjow was in love with him? Grimmjow chuckled at the thought. The guy really had a habit of overthinking things.

Now that he was off the field, he had to wonder if it was being back in NYC that had thrown Ulquiorra for a loop. Hadn't Ulquiorra mentioned that NYC was the last trip he and his mother took together?

That had to sting, and unlike his mother, Ulquiorra's mom had made no effort to contact her son even though he was in the city she lived in. Grimmjow wondered if she was keeping up with the World Cup news, or if she even knew her son was playing. Grimmjow hadn't realized his eyes wandered to Ulquiorra until he felt that owlish green gaze on him and he returned Ulquiorra's stare and offered a smile across the table at him. Ulquiorra averted his eyes and continued to scroll through his phone.

Had Ulquiorra been off his game this morning because of him? Had Grimmjow's injury affected him at all? Ulquiorra had been playing just fine until Grimmjow was injured, in fact, Grimmjow wanted to say they played well together. Grimmjow didn't know anymore. He wanted Ulquiorra, and he wanted Ulquiorra to feel the same way towards him. He knew Ulquiorra was attracted to him, so what was the problem?

Grimmjow wasn't known for his patience and what little patience he had was wearing thin. He wanted an answer tonight. Not "we can't do this", not "we shouldn't". He wanted either a fervent yes or a firm no. Then he could nurse his wounds, drown his disappointment in unsatisfying sex, and move on with his life. He didn't cope well with uncertainty.

"Let me see the ring again!" Rukia cried, leaning across the table and Orihime flashed her the enormous diamond on her finger. Rukia squealed. "It's so beautiful!"

"I feel like our hearts are finally one." Orihime mused, admiring the glittering ring on her dainty finger. Across the table, Ulquiorra quirked a brow, glancing up from his phone to listen.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like my heart finally has someone to beat for. We're joined together and united in our feelings about our future. You've never felt like this, Ulquiorra-kun?"

"Thankfully no."

Orihime sighed and said, "It's a wonderful feeling. I wish you knew what it was like to entrust your heart to someone and to know they've done the same for you."
"Why, so I can hand over my heart to them and watch them crush it in their hands?"

"But what if they don't crush it? What if they treasure it and keep it safe? What if they entrusted you with theirs?" Orihime insisted.

Ulquiorra hummed in response and Orihime accepted defeat. Rukia asked, "Have you guys decided when you'll have the wedding?"

"Sometime in the fall. We don't want a big, fancy wedding and I don't want to wait a year to marry you." Ichigo said, kissing Orihime's cheek. He called over the waiter for another round of drinks. The group dined on a couple of cheesy pizza pies and went through two rounds of drinks before the evening was done.

"See you losers!" Ichigo called as he and Orihime prepared to leave. Grimmjow slammed down his beer and shouted, "Kurosaki! We're not done yet!" He didn't want Kurosaki and Orihime to leave. He knew they'd go back to their hotel room and get busy, and the last thing he wanted was for Kurosaki to be getting laid while he wasn't.

"I'm done drinking," Ichigo said, his cheeks rosy and his speech slurred, "You won for now."

"What? Don't accept defeat that easily. We're not through until either you're on the floor or I am."

"Whatever, g'night!" Ichigo stumbled out into the cold with Orihime. Grimmjow scowled and pulled the pitcher over to pour himself another drink. "Come on, who else is in?"

"Not me, my liver's getting weak on me." Renji pushed his chair away and he and Rukia swept from the bar, waving goodnight.

"What, come on!"

Ikkaku, Kenpachi and Grimmjow got through half the pitcher before Ikkaku was dragged out of the bar by Yumichika. Kenpachi belched enormously and declared himself done for the night, pushing his empty glass away from him.

"Night, coach." Grimmjow jumped up to pull Kenpachi into a bear hug, slapping him on the back.

"Same. Shitty game, man, shitty game. But we've got time to improve." Kenpachi clapped Ulquiorra on the shoulder and said, "You guys played good together. Better than anyone else on the team did, anyway, and that's not saying much."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Grimmjow said, gulping down the last of his beer, "We're the only guys who scored at all today! We should play the other games on our own."

Kenpachi snorted and went to the door and Grimmjow accompanied him. Kenpachi threw on his scarf and said, "You make a good team. I don't know what the hell either of you guys did off the field, but something's happened between you two. Dare I ask what?"

Grimmjow didn't know the answer. He wished he could say that all the hard, fast sex helped ease the kinks in their relationship, but the fact was that there was more between himself and Ulquiorra than just physical attraction. They clicked. There was heat there and history, and they gave as good as they got with each other.

"Not a clue."

Kenpachi shrugged, buttoning up his coat. "Well, the guy likes you."
"You think?"

"Sure. He was out of it after you got hurt." Grimmjow was taken aback. He thought he'd been kidding himself thinking Ulquiorra had been negatively affected by his injury. How many other people thought the same?

"I think he just sucks."

Kenpachi scoffed. "Yeah, sure you do. The guy wasn't playing well, you and he had a talk at halftime and you both come back in and kick ass, then you get hurt and it sets him back. Talk shit all you want, you guys make a good team and you know it."

Kenpachi clapped Grimmjow on the shoulder. "Treat each other well. Girls come and go, Jaegerjaquez, but what you two have is a rare thing, so don't fuck it up. It's good for both of you."

Kenpachi bid him good night and left the bar. Grimmjow looked back and found Ulquiorra polishing off the last slice of pizza at the bar. The rest of the team had left for the night and it was just them. If he wanted to get an answer, tonight was the night.

Kenpachi's words resounded in his mind and Grimmjow knew the truth in them. It was rare that Grimmjow had anyone in his life he could call friend and it was the same for Ulquiorra. Grimmjow didn't want to ruin that. If Ulquiorra didn't want to go down that road, then Grimmjow would respect his decision and enjoy being his friend.

But it was also rare that Grimmjow could say he'd felt about anyone else the way he felt about Ulquiorra. If he had a chance of having just a little something more with him, he wasn't going to pass it up. He was certain Ulquiorra felt the same way about him, but he was holding back.

Grimmjow pulled out a bar stool and settled in beside Ulquiorra. Before he could figure out what to say to open up the topic of conversation he wanted, he felt sultry eyes on him. He looked at the end of the bar and saw an American woman with flowing blonde hair and ruby lips. She was dressed in a low-cut top and sipping delicately at a cocktail.

Her legs were bare despite the cold outside and they were long and supple, and either her push-up bra made her breasts look bigger—which it did—or they really were as full as they looked.

"How's your head?"

Grimmjow tore his eyes away as Ulquiorra's voice rumbled beside him. "I still remember the way you moaned my name when we made out, so pretty good." Ulquiorra's lips thinned and he looked back down at his phone. Grimmjow didn't understand. Was there something about him that wasn't good enough for Ulquiorra?

"Let it go, Grimmjow." Ulquiorra didn't so much as say it as he did growl the words through clenched teeth.

"Maybe I fucking could if you'd stop jerking me around and give me a straight answer."

"I've given you my answer. It's your fault if you don't believe me."

"You couldn't play today 'cause you thought I was in love with you—"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. I'm not stupid. You kissed me when you could have pushed me away to begin
with and you've been ignoring me. That's not an answer. That's you stuffing your fingers in your ears so you can't face the fucking music."

Ulquiorra refused to meet his gaze and Grimmjow covered Ulquiorra's phone with his hand. "So what the hell is it? You think you're too good for me? Why, because I was a junkie? What the hell is it?"

"I can't do this with you."

"I'm not asking for a repeat of the last time, would you fucking listen to me? I'm not asking you to be in love with me, I'm just asking if you want me. That's it."

"I don't."

"I don't. Ulquiorra's words were like a whip crack. "I don't know why I kissed you. It was stupid of me. I led you on and I shouldn't have. But I've thought about it and I've decided it would be a terrible idea if we went any further than this. There's no point. It will just end the same way our relationship always has."

"You don't know that, would you stop being such a—"

"I'm not a coward. I have the sense to end things before they get messy, unlike you. I'm not doing this with you. That's my answer and if you can't accept it, then maybe we shouldn't be friends, either."

Grimmjow was outraged that after all the time they'd spent together, Ulquiorra was ready to call things off with him as if it meant nothing to him. Something inside of him ached at the idea.

Ulquiorra stood up and Grimmjow lunged after him, grabbing a fistful of Ulquiorra's shirt as he steered Ulquiorra back towards him."So go on and fucking do it, then. End it right now. Go on and tell me to my fucking face this hasn't meant a thing to you!"

Grimmjow waited, his heart thudding. Ulquiorra wouldn't actually do it. Ulquiorra could talk about the meaninglessness of life until he was blue in the face, yet he kept on living. He preached that relationships were meaningless and in the next breathe he was joined at the lips with Grimmjow.

Ulquiorra touched Grimmjow's hand, smooth fingertips gliding over his skin. Ulquiorra's touch became claw-like, his grip like steel, and his eyes were cold and empty as he stared Grimmjow dead in the eyes and said, "Let go of me."

Grimmjow was frozen, unable to believe what he was hearing. He was sure he'd misheard, misunderstood. Ulquiorra's nails dug into his skin, his grip crushed Grimmjow's fingers together. Grimmjow refused to let go. He couldn't accept it.

"We're done." Ulquiorra wrenched Grimmjow's hand off his shirt and before Grimmjow could speak, though he had no idea what he would say or do, Ulquiorra walked into the restroom and left Grimmjow by himself.

Grimmjow sat in stunned silence, numb to the world. He couldn't comprehend it. Had he been misreading Ulquiorra this whole time? Had Ulquiorra used him to numb his own loneliness? Grimmjow couldn't grasp how easily Ulquiorra could let go of the past three months spent exchanging banter and light hearted insults. Ulquiorra had gone with him to Kyoto, he'd invited Grimmjow to Kurosaki's Christmas party, he'd written him countless cards and sent him gifts.

Did it really mean nothing to him? Grimmjow didn't know if he bought what Ulquiorra was trying to sell him, but he was pissed off. More than that, he was hurt and he hadn't realized how much of himself he'd given to Ulquiorra until Ulquiorra threw them all back at him, crushed.
"A handsome man like you hasn't got any right looking so down in the dumps." Grimmjow looked up and found the blonde American woman standing over Ulquiorra's empty seat, her ruby lips quirked and her hip cocked.

"I ordered an extra drink for my date, but he stood me up. Wanna share?" She offered him a smile and a glass of vodka. Grimmjow didn't know what was more tempting. His eyes tugged him in the direction of the bathroom, Ulquiorra's empty eyes burned into his mind.

_Fuck him. I gave him his chance. He can go to hell_, Grimmjow thought but not without a weight in his soul.

"Sure thing." He accepted her drink and she slid into Ulquiorra's empty seat. The door opened behind him and the feather light touch of the woman's hand on his arm was forgotten. Grimmjow looked over his shoulder and saw Ulquiorra come to a halt outside the door.

Grimmjow felt unexpected delight at the sight of Ulquiorra frozen in place, emerald eyes looking from Grimmjow to the woman beside him. Ulquiorra's eyes narrowed. Or was it a trick of the light? Ulquiorra walked up to the bar and grabbed his coat from the back of the woman's chair.

"Excuse me."

Grimmjow fought back a smile."You can go on home. I'm staying. And don't wait up for me, either."

Ulquiorra hummed in response and pulled on his coat. Without looking back he walked out the door and let it slam shut behind him. Grimmjow's mirth faded and he stared down into his drink and watched the light from the overhead lamp ripple and sway in the reflection.

Why was he surprised?

Ulquiorra didn't care, maybe he never had.

"So, where are you from? What's your name?" the woman asked, brushing her hand along his arm. If he closed his eyes, her touch was almost identical to—

"Grimmjow. Want another drink? On me."

She gave him a smile that almost made his pants slide off his body. Almost.

They spent an hour at the bar. They talked for a long time but Grimmjow didn't remember what about. She told him her name and he forgot it and though she was beautiful, she couldn't hold his attention. They had one more round of drinks and Grimmjow's vision was hazy and Ulquiorra wasn't on his mind anymore.

They left the bar together, Grimmjow weaving from one side to the next. She was dripping all over him, her breasts pushed up against his arm as they stumbled out into the cold. Usually just having a woman up against him was more than enough to get him worked up. Instead, all he could think about was how it would feel if Ulquiorra was flush up against him, if it was Ulquiorra's fingertips tugging down his shirt to caress his collarbone. If Ulquiorra wanted him.

Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez didn't settle and yet here he was, ready to jump into a yellow taxi cab and go home with the last person he wanted to be with. He was only with this woman to make Ulquiorra jealous, and not even that had worked because he was attracted to a stone-hearted asshole who got a kick out of toying with people's feelings the way a scientist enjoyed dissecting a frog. If he couldn't have Ulquiorra, there wasn't anyone else he wanted to spend his night with. He wanted to go back to
his hotel, pass out and stop feeling.

He stumbled into the cab and slammed the door shut before the blonde could get in. He fumbled out his destination and the engine drowned out the woman's furious expletive as they rounded the corner and left her standing outside the bar.

Grimmjow lay in the backseat of the taxi cab, breathing in the smell of new leather as the city sped by in a blur of sound and colorful lights outside his window. He overpaid the driver, too drunk to care, and stumbled into his hotel. He took the elevator up and weaved through the hallway, passing by his room twice.

He swiped the card three times and the door refused to open. "Fuckin' shit…" He swiped the card again and the door opened before he could swipe again. Ulquiorra was still awake, dressed in a bathrobe and probably nothing else, moon white skin peaking through the opening of his robe.

Grimmjow looked at the clock on his phone. It was almost one o'clock in the morning. What in the hell was Ulquiorra waiting up for? For him? Grimmjow quenched down the hope that flared inside him and said, "You gonna let me in not?"

"Is she with you?"

Grimmjow held his tongue as a ripple of shame went through him. Why exactly had he come home to this asshole again? Why had he left someone who actually wanted him standing on the curb for this stone cold machine?

"No." The words fell like lead from his lips.

Ulquiorra's lips parted and Grimmjow readied himself, his whole body going taut as if preparing for a blow to the gut. "Good." The words were whispered on a sigh of relief. Slender fingertips took hold of his face, tangling in his hair and tugging him downwards to meet Ulquiorra's mouth in an urgent kiss.

Grimmjow's brain went on autopilot and his arms were around Ulquiorra's waist, his fingers curling in his hair. Ulquiorra stepped backwards into their hotel room and Grimmjow followed, kicking the door shut behind them.
The moment Ulquiorra left Grimmjow at the bar, all he wanted to do was run back inside and get him. But he couldn't. He'd made his decision. He had to stick by it. But once he was alone in his hotel room, he realized sticking to his decision was easier said than done.

Especially when he'd only made said decision out of fear that Grimmjow would hurt him again. He couldn't get Grimmjow's face out of his mind. He'd trusted Ulquiorra not to hurt him and Ulquiorra took his trust and threw it back into his face. Now, Grimmjow was in bed with some stranger who'd taken Ulquiorra's seat. It was her name on his lips; her lips he kissed, her body he touched.

And why not? What had Ulquiorra expected, that Grimmjow would want Ulquiorra and only him? That Grimmjow would be available whenever Ulquiorra decided to reciprocate his feelings? Ulquiorra had his chance and he'd pushed Grimmjow away. This was how it was supposed to be.

Grimmjow would move on now and there would be no risk of a repeat of their teenage years. There was no chance Ulquiorra would be crushed when Grimmjow realized he wasn't worth his time. Ulquiorra could focus on his games with his mind unclouded by thoughts of what might become of their relationship.

There would be no more sightseeing with him. He wouldn't hear another one of Grimmjow's lewd jokes or comments. He would never see Grimmjow laugh in the way that made his chest tighten because he knew Grimmjow only smiled like this for him.

They wouldn't eat their meals together as they revisited the day's events. No more trading racist insults they laughed about because they understood each other well enough to know what they could and couldn't get away with.

As all that he'd lost sunk in, Ulquiorra became cold and short of breathe. Ulquiorra grabbed a robe and sat in the living room, flipping through a book he didn't read. He told himself he wasn't waiting up for Grimmjow, why should he when the man had told him not to? Grimmjow wasn't coming back to the hotel. He was with the American woman.

Yet every footstep in the hallway made him hold his breath as he waited for them to stop outside the door. Ulquiorra forced his eyes back on his book. He heard footsteps outside the door and he didn't look up. Then he heard the lock click.

Ulquiorra set down his book and listened as the lock clicked again. The door knob rattled and even though the door, he recognized the slurred expletive. Ulquiorra was on his feet, his hand curled around the knob.

Ulquiorra was speechless at the sight of Grimmjow, looking as if he'd crawled out from under a bush. He'd gone against his word and returned. But that meant very little if he wasn't alone.

"Is she with you?" Grimmjow's eyes blazed and his lips tightened but he didn't speak. Ulquiorra waited like the fate of the world hinged on the answer to his question. Grimmjow battled with himself and the muscles in his arm went taut.

Grimmjow's lips parted and the words fell off his tongue in a growl. "No."

I wish I wasn't after the shit you said to me, but I'm yours. Grimmjow didn't say it but from all the bitterness in his voice and the anger in his eyes, Ulquiorra didn't need him to. He hadn't blown his chance. Grimmjow had come back to him and Ulquiorra would be damned before he pushed him.
"Good." It was all he could manage. Then Grimmjow's lips were against his in a bruising kiss and Grimmjow was holding him. Ulquiorra didn't want to talk anymore.

Nothing else needed to be said.

Ulquiorra's robe pooled at his feet and Grimmjow's knees collided into the end of the bed. Grimmjow fell backwards, the blankets rising up around him. Ulquiorra undressed Grimmjow with his eyes, his cheeks and lips flushed cherry red, his eyes lidded with lust.

The front of his jeans was tight; Grimmjow was hard from kissing him and Ulquiorra was, too. Ulquiorra knelt on the bed and leaned down to kiss him. Grimmjow's fingers tangled in his hair, their noses bumping as their lips pressed together.

Grimmjow showered his lips with nips and bites, as if he wanted to devour Ulquiorra whole. Ulquiorra couldn't remember anyone who'd kissed him like he was delectable.

His lips tingling, Ulquiorra let Grimmjow's tongue dip past them and caress his tongue. Ulquiorra peeled away Grimmjow's shirt and explored his body with his lips, Grimmjow's skin hot and salty with sweat. Ulquiorra pinched Grimmjow's nipples, pulling and squeezing until Grimmjow moaned under his touch. Grimmjow wasn't delicate or gentle by any means and Ulquiorra knew he didn't have to hold back with him. His lips continued their descent across his rippling abs, his tongue dipping in his naval.

Ulquiorra yanked his jeans down to his knees and Grimmjow kicked them off onto the floor. Grimmjow wasn't a man known for his patience, but Ulquiorra found himself wanting to toy with him.

He wanted to see how much Grimmjow could take before he snapped. Ulquiorra stroked him through his boxers, relishing the unyielding hardness and heat of him. Grimmjow was short of breath and he arched his hips off the bed into Ulquiorra's touch. He had Grimmjow Jaegerjaquez rocking his hips and biting his lip and Ulquiorra got a thrill from every little reaction.

"You're so docile." Ulquiorra said, watching as Grimmjow's lips turned downwards in a scowl. "I didn't know it took so little to make you weak for me." Grimmjow's thighs snapped shut around his hips and Ulquiorra rolled over onto his back.

Grimmjow scooted down until his face was level with Ulquiorra's. He brought his hips crashing down on Ulquiorra's, thrusting against him. The hardness of him rubbed up against Ulquiorra's rigid cock. Heat blazed in his loins and Ulquiorra was the one left breathless and arching up into him.

"Here's the thing, I'm not anyone's bottom bitch. I'm not gonna suck your cock or let you fuck me. Clear?" Grimmjow's baritone voice was breathy with need.

Ulquiorra nodded his compliance as desire pounded between his legs. Ulquiorra was comfortable enough in his masculinity to bottom. He'd topped on a few occasions and while he enjoyed it, he liked being under another person's control.

He liked knowing it was his cock gliding in and out of their body that made them writhe beneath him. He also got a thrill when he knew it was being inside him that brought them over the edge.
Ulquiorra was a solitary being so he couldn't help but enjoy feeling needed and wanted. "Then what do you want?"

Grimmjow's lips kissed a scorching trail from his Adam's apple to his chin. "I want you to suck me off. Then I want your legs up over my shoulders so I can pound you."

Ulquiorra wanted Grimmjow buried inside him, filling him completely. He wanted to hear the headboard ramming the wall as they did what two grown men did best behind closed doors.

But he also wanted to hear Grimmjow come undone under his lips, teeth and tongue. "As you wish." Grimmjow wouldn't bottom, but Ulquiorra would make a mess of him. Ulquiorra pushed Grimmjow onto his back and tugged his boxers down. Grimmjow was swollen and twitching, begging for contact.

Ulquiorra wanted Grimmjow to come as close to begging as it was humanly possible. Ulquiorra dropped onto his elbows. He brought Grimmjow's crown to his lips and dragged his lips from the tip of his head to the dark curls of hair at the base. Grimmjow's chest rose and fell, beads of sweat glistening on his chest in the light of the lamp.

"Ulquiorra—" Grimmjow's voice was breathy, Ulquiorra's name an impatient moan on his lips. A rush swept through his stomach, like a flock of birds sweeping from a tree. Ulquiorra pressed his lips to the tip of Grimmjow's head, opened his mouth around him and blew a gust of hot air against him.

"You little shit." Grimmjow's voice would have sounded threatening if not for how out of breath and turned on he was. Ulquiorra felt he was getting close to where he wanted them to be. He was fine bottoming, but he wasn't just going to whore himself out. He wanted to know that Grimmjow wanted him and only him and that no cheap American hooker would suffice.

No, he wasn't still jealous. Not at all, even if he could still smell the woman's cheap perfume on Grimmjow's neck. He would wash away every trace of her by the end of tonight. He would make sure Grimmjow knew he couldn't have better than him. Grimmjow wouldn't want anyone else. Ulquiorra would be sure of that by the time he was done with him.

Alright, so he was a petty lover. Sue him. Due to his lack of a loving upbringing, what he did have he didn't want to lose to anyone else.

Ulquiorra parted his lips around Grimmjow's shaft and wrapped his lips around his tip. Ulquiorra engulfed his head, tracing his crown with his tongue. Grimmjow's hand fisted in his hair and tried to force his head down. Ulquiorra pulled off of him and left Grimmjow panting and snarling at him.

"You little..." Grimmjow's nails clawed into his scalp, his breathless grunts and gasps filled the room. "Oh, for fuck's sake...Ulquiorra, I swear to God—" His voice was frayed and his eyes full of wild desperation. Ulquiorra thought he'd played with him enough. Grimmjow wasn't begging for him, but he was close enough.

Ulquiorra buried his face between Grimmjow's legs and took him fully into his mouth. "Oh, fuck..." Grimmjow's breathless groan tore from his throat. It was a noise of the deepest pleasure and immense relief. His fingers curled in Ulquiorra's hair and egged him on.

Ulquiorra glided his lips from the base of Grimmjow's shaft to the tip, plunging him in and out of his mouth. Grimmjow pulled at his hair, ripping out a few strands. Ulquiorra's cock twitched its approval.

Grimmjow's voice filled the room in coarse moans as Ulquiorra blew him. Ulquiorra didn't notice
he'd stopped speaking Japanese until Grimmjow's voice rose in a flurry of French slurs.

Ulquiorra never thought he would hear Grimmjow make such whorish sounds. "Fuck, Ulquiorra. Stop, stop." Grimmjow's voice was breathless but firm. Ulquiorra relented and sat up onto his knees. Grimmjow's hair was tousled; his lips ruby red and his cheeks, nose and ears flushed bright pink.

Ulquiorra's cock throbbed for him. "What?"

"I'm saving the rest of this for you." Grimmjow pulled him down to the bed with him, their lips clashing. Ulquiorra didn't know if he'd ever gotten anyone so worked up before. Grimmjow brought out this carnal passion inside him. He wanted to do everything he could to make Grimmjow writhe and moan. Every other man he'd been with made sex feel like a chore or an obligation.

With Grimmjow, sex was intense. It was painful, passionate, rough, and Ulquiorra felt alive when he was with him. Grimmjow rolled him onto his back and grabbed an unopened bottle of lube and two condoms from the end table.

Grimmjow popped the cap and poured a generous amount into his palm which he glided over his member, hissing. Grimmjow squeezed a small amount into both condoms and slid the condom over Ulquiorra's rigid flesh.

Grimmjow handed the remaining condom to Ulquiorra and rocked his hips, teeth bared in a grin. "Put it on my cock." Ulquiorra wet his lips and pulled the condom over Grimmjow's member.

Ulquiorra's stomach fluttered as Grimmjow's fingertips pressed against his hole. Ulquiorra took in a breath and Grimmjow's fingers slipped inside him. Ulquiorra's body went taut at the sensation. It had been too long since he'd felt anything but his own fingers inside him. Grimmjow searched for the spot that would have Ulquiorra coming undone beneath him. Within less than a minute, his fingers curled inside Ulquiorra. An explosion of pleasurecoursed from deep within his body, curling his toes. Ulquiorra clamped down on his lower lip to silence what would have been a cry of relief and pleasure. His body trembled and convulsions wracked him as Grimmjow rammed his prostate again.

Grimmjow's fingertips beckoned inside him and Ulquiorra arched off the bed and clamped his jaw shut to keep quiet. He wanted Grimmjow to make a mess of him. More than anything, he wanted release. Catatonic pressure was building deep within his pelvis and he knew it would be intense.

"Come on and tell me what you want, Ulquiorra."

Ulquiorra's hand tangled in Grimmjow's hair and he tugged him closer so he could bite the shell of his ear. "Fuck me."

Ulquiorra raised his legs over Grimmjow's shoulders. Grimmjow pulled Ulquiorra into his lap and Ulquiorra couldn't stifle his sigh as Grimmjow's head nudged his entrance. Grimmjow rocked his hips and his eyes fell closed as he sunk into Ulquiorra's heat and tightness. Grimmjow's girth stretched him wide but Ulquiorra's body yielded to him; he raised his hips off the bed, wanting him deeper. Grimmjow choked out a breathy slur as he buried himself in Ulquiorra's heat. His eyes closed and his head hung low, lips parted in an expression of blissful agony.

Grimmjow moved inside him, stealing away all the breath in Ulquiorra's body. He pulled Ulquiorra down onto him and their bodies came together. Grimmjow nailed his prostate and Ulquiorra covered his mouth to stifle the moans he could no longer hold back. Ulquiorra tangling his fingers through wild blue locks and tugged. Grimmjow folded at the waist, deepening his thrusts. He covered
Ulquiorra's mouth with frantic kisses as the bed quivered under their wild movements.

Their bodies glided together, slick with sweat. Ulquiorra's lips attacked Grimmjow's neck, kissing and biting. He clung to Grimmjow as every swift and powerful thrust chipped away at his self control. Ulquiorra rocked his hips, meeting Grimmjow's thrusts halfway and coaxing hoarse moans from them. Grimmjow filled him so completely, Ulquiorra felt empty unless Grimmjow was inside him.

With every frantic thrust, the headboard rammed the wall as their release bared down upon them. Grimmjow bit down on the shell of his ear, his breathed burned against Ulquiorra's skin as he panted, "Give it up. Give it all up for me, Ulquiorra. Fuck. Yes. That's it." Ulquiorra's pleasure peaked. Grimmjow's name spilled from his lips and Ulquiorra latched onto him for dear life as his orgasm ran through him, leaving him weak and vulnerable. In his arms, Grimmjow rolled his hips with abandon, biting down hard on Ulquiorra's neck. He moaned again and again, his voice low and shuddery in Ulquiorra's ear. Even through the condom, his release warmed Ulquiorra to his very core. Grimmjow collapsed atop him and Ulquiorra sunk into the sheets as the aftershocks of his orgasm left him trembling and elated.

For a long time, neither of them moved, adrift in the blissful ache and throb of their post-sex haze. The scent of Grimmjow's sweat and sex made his stomach flutter. Their chests rose and fell, their stomachs touched as they took in one frantic breath after the next.

They lay dead to the world until the haze of pleasure dispersed enough for them to move. Grimmjow rolled off Ulquiorra with a huff, snapping the condom off and tossing it away.

They turned out the lights, enveloping the room in darkness touched by a sliver of light creeping in through the curtains.

Ulquiorra's eyes were too heavy to keep open and he sunk into his pillow with ease. Behind him, the warmth and firmness of Grimmjow's chest nestled against his back.

Grimmjow's hand ran up his leg and settled on his hip and stayed there. Grimmjow's hair tickled the back of his neck and his breath was warm and slow against his back.

With Grimmjow curled up behind him, Ulquiorra didn't care what the future might bring as he drifted into sleep.

Maybe this was what it was like to live in the present.
The Morning After

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your continuing support. It makes me happy to know the community for this pairing is still kicking.

Grimmjow woke up to the distant noise of the city below him. Cars honked, motorcycles roared by, but in Grimmjow's mind the birds were chirping and singing and the skies outside were a bright blue instead of a dreary gray.

He opened his eyes and, just as he'd hoped, Ulquiorra was fast asleep beside him, his hair tousled from his night's sleep and his lips parted as he slept. Grimmjow wanted to pinch himself just to make sure he wasn't having a cruel dream.

Grimmjow couldn't believe it. The man he'd wanted for four months now was naked in bed beside him, completely spent from a night of intense passion. Ulquiorra looked beautiful while he slept and Grimmjow's eyes feasted themselves on him, admiring his bare shoulder uncovered by the blankets, the graceful dip of his neck, his full lips.

Those lips looked innocent now but when Grimmjow remembered what he'd done with them the previous night, his cock stirred to life between his legs and a rush of heat swept over him. He didn't care what happened after this, but he wanted to end every day buried deep inside Ulquiorra.

Last night was the best he'd ever had and he'd be damned before he let Ulquiorra get away from him. Grimmjow shifted closer, brushing aside strands of ebony hair as he dragged his lips from Ulquiorra's collarbone to his jawline. Ulquiorra stirred beneath him and Grimmjow grinned at the soft grunt he received.

"Too early." Ulquiorra's voice was gravelly, and it turned Grimmjow on.

Grimmjow wasn't fully awake, either, but how could he do nothing but sleep in the same bed as someone who looked this good? Grimmjow slung his leg over Ulquiorra's hips and dragged himself on top of him and ravished Ulquiorra's lips with slow, tired kisses.

Ulquiorra's lips parted against his and his tongue darted out and caressed Grimmjow's lower lip. Grimmjow's cock gave an approving twitch and he ran his fingers through Ulquiorra's hair. He couldn't remember the last person he'd slept with that he'd bothered to have morning sex with, much less the last person he'd had sex with twice.

There were something irresistible about Ulquiorra. Grimmjow felt needed by him and intensely wanted. Ulquiorra was all for him in bed, but Grimmjow derived a great deal of pleasure just knowing he got Ulquiorra hot and heavy for him.

Ulquiorra's lips were dry and they both had morning breathe but Ulquiorra mustn't have minded because within seconds he was as hard as Grimmjow was. Grimmjow's hand groped blindly for the night stand, knocking over a box of tissues, and found the lube and the condoms.

Grimmjow couldn't be bothered sitting up or putting Ulquiorra's leg's over his shoulders so he
grunted, "Roll over." Ulquiorra turned onto his stomach and Grimmjow got an eyeful of taut, sculpted buttocks. Grimmjow splashed lube in the condom and slid it over his hardness.

Grimmjow lay down atop Ulquiorra, his face in the crook of his neck. He could smell sweat and Ulquiorra's skin, untouched by soap or deodorants or laundry detergent. It was purely Ulquiorra's scent and Grimmjow breathed him in by the lungful.

He rocked his hips and kissed Ulquiorra's shoulder when Ulquiorra rolled his hips to meet his thrust and Grimmjow couldn't stifle his groan as he sunk easily into Ulquiorra's tight heat. Ulquiorra sucked him in and raised his hips and Grimmjow slid in even deeper.

Ulquiorra's breaths were labored beneath him and Grimmjow closed his eyes and lost himself inside Ulquiorra as he pumped his hips in slow, lazy thrusts. The bed creaked beneath them, the sheets rustled, and the distant noise of the city was drowned out by grunts and moans.

Grimmjow wrapped an arm beneath Ulquiorra's hips and raised them higher, deepening his thrusts and Ulquiorra moaned his approval. Every thrust sent pleasure rolling from his balls to the tip of his rigid shaft, every little sound Ulquiorra made brought him closer to the brink.

Grimmjow couldn't see Ulquiorra's face but Ulquiorra's fingers were fistling in the sheets, tugging and tearing at them, his voice hoarse and breathless as Grimmjow took him harder and faster. Grimmjow grasped Ulquiorra's cock and beat him off in a tightened fist and Ulquiorra bucked his hips into his hand.

Grimmjow bit down on his neck as he neared his climax and thrust faster, plowing his hips into Ulquiorra's buttocks with increased urgency. Grimmjow couldn't help but grin when he heard Ulquiorra curse. He'd only ever heard him swear in bed, so he figured he must be doing a damn good job.

Grimmjow bit down on Ulquiorra's earlobe, his nails digging into his hips as he wrenched Ulquiorra down to meet his thrusts. His hips rolled frantically into Ulquiorra's as he reached the explosive culmination of his lust, leaving him gasping and moaning Ulquiorra's name.

Ulquiorra's teeth clamped down on the pillow case as he came, and he rocked his hips into Grimmjow's hand as he coated Grimmjow's hand with his release. Grimmjow fell like a stone against Ulquiorra's back as his body trembled and shuddered.

Ulquiorra went slack beneath him, his voice breathless when he said, "Sorry. I got your hand dirty." Grimmjow chuckled and kissed Ulquiorra's ear, rolling them both onto their sides so they could lie close together. Grimmjow's arms wrapped around his hips and he rested his forehead against Ulquiorra's hair.

"Shut up and go to sleep."

Grimmjow closed his eyes as early morning sunlight peaked through the curtains, spilling across their bed sheets. Ulquiorra's hand touched his arm and stayed there as he drifted off, falling into sleep that was deep, blissful and comforting as he held Ulquiorra.

Grimmjow woke up a little while later, a blissful ache spreading throughout his body from his rigorous activities the night before. Ulquiorra stepped out of the bathroom clad in a fluffy bathrobe, his skin shining and his hair wet.

"I ordered food." Ulquiorra gestured to the bacon, eggs and muffins on the table. Grimmjow's stomach roared at the sight.
"How sweet of you." He crammed a muffin in his mouth and Ulquiorra joined him in bed and they watched coverage of last night's game while they sipped coffee and ate. Grimmjow didn't watch the TV, he watched Ulquiorra eat, admiring his chest through the opening of his robe, and the rise and fall of his prominent Adam's apple as he drank his coffee.

Grimmjow couldn't believe he still wanted Ulquiorra after having him twice within less than twenty-four hours, but he did. Ulquiorra touched his arm, only testing Grimmjow's patience. He wouldn't have him a third time and so soon. He couldn't have Ulquiorra thinking he was desperate for him.

"Where did you get these?" Ulquiorra's fingertips caressed the underside of his arm just below his elbow. Ulquiorra had noticed the track marks on Grimmjow's arm.

"What, think I'm using again?"

"No, I just—"

"I got 'em back when I overdosed. I couldn't find my vein, so I just kept jabbing. Now I've got these." Little reminders of the worst mistake of his life he could never get rid of, track-shaped reminders of how close he'd come to killing himself. It was good he had them. Now he could never forget.

Ulquiorra's fingertips traced the scars and Grimmjow thought his eyes had darkened. "Feeling sorry for me? Don't."

"I'm not. I'm just remembering…" Grimmjow nodded, thinking back to that day against his better judgment. He could faintly recall Ulquiorra's voice in his ear, his touch on his shoulder.

"Gave you a scare, huh?"

"I knew something was coming. I didn't say anything."

Grimmjow was surprised to hear the bitterness in Ulquiorra's voice. "Why should you have? I didn't exactly give you any reasons to watch my neck. You hated me."

"I didn't. You disappointed me, that's all."

"I thought you did. I couldn't wait to get outta the hospital and show you who was boss on the field." That was only partially true. Knowing someone believed in him kept him going. He'd looked forward to Ulquiorra's cards and gifts every week.

Grimmjow reached for his coffee and cringed. His muscles ached from the game yesterday. While he wanted to stay indoors and see only the bedroom ceiling with Ulquiorra until they went home tonight, he wanted something to ease the aches. He pulled out his phone and found a drug store nearby.

"I'm gonna head out and get some ointment."

"They have pain medication downstairs."

"I want ointment." Grimmjow imagined Ulquiorra must have his fair share of aches and pains. He wanted them to help alleviate one another's pains, and what better way to do that than by rubbing one another's naked bodies with ointment?

Grimmjow dressed and grabbed his bomber jacket. Ulquiorra pulled on his shoes. "I'll join you. I'm in need of a few things as well."
They left the hotel together and stepped out in the smoggy streets of NYC. A foggy gloom hung over the city. Grimmjow thought it gave the city character. They walked to the drug store and walked down the escalator.

"Where the hell do they keep the ointments?" Grimmjow wondered, standing on his toes to get a better look at the aisles.

"Let's ask."

"Don't need to. How hard can it be, this place ain't that big."

"We'll be here for hours."

"No we won't." Grimmjow roamed the aisles and browsed the condoms the store sold, dropping one package into their basket. He had a feeling they'd need more once they returned to Japan. Ulquiorra eyed them. Grimmjow raised a brow. "What, not enough for you?" he grabbed two more packages and tossed them in.

Ulquiorra tried to take them out and Grimmjow quickened his pace, grinning. He could only imagine the cashier's raised brows. They spent fifteen minutes looking for Grimmjow's specific ointment.

"Would you just ask someone?" Ulquiorra asked through clenched teeth.

"Let's get these for you," Grimmjow said, tossing sanitary napkins into their cart, "You're actin' a little bitchy today; I think you need 'em." Ulquiorra fished them out and tossed them back on the shelf.

"Let's get this for you." Ulquiorra dropped cream for athlete's foot into the basket. Grimmjow snorted, unable to hide his amusement. He hadn't expected Ulquiorra to tease him back. Grimmjow grabbed adult diapers off the shelf and said, "This is your size, right?"

Ulquiorra snatched them and stuffed them back in place. "No, but they're yours."

"Wanna stop in the makeup section? I think you're almost outta your blush, not that you need any around me."

"Let's go back."

"Why?"

"We passed the aisle with the Viagra. You could use it."

Grimmjow shoved him into a shelf, barking laughter despite himself. "I sure as hell didn't hear you complaining." Ulquiorra's eyes glinted despite his stoic expression as Grimmjow cornered him against the shelf. "Anyone ever tell you you're a funny little asshole?"

"I know. I kill myself."

Grimmjow snorted at the words spoken with dead-pan snark. "Alright, Giggles, let's find the ointment and after I've rubbed it all over you, we'll see who needs the fuckin' Viagra." Not that using Viagra had to be a bad thing. It had its uses even for people without erectile dysfunction.

They found the ointment Grimmjow was looking for and went to the check-out upstairs. The cashier swiped their items, ignoring Grimmjow's smile as she scanned the three packages of condoms.

"We get busy."
She hummed and her smile twitched, her cheeks coloring as she struggled to keep a straight face. Just before she could ring them up, Ulquiorra thrust the Viagra onto the counter.

"You forgot this." Ulquiorra said, patting Grimmjow's hand. Grimmjow wanted to ring his neck. The cashier turned the color of a tomato. This had to be an interesting day for her.

"You are gonna get spanked for that later." Grimmjow hissed in Ulquiorra's ear as they left the store.

Ulquiorra hummed, his eyes dancing. "You call that punishment?"

Grimmjow had to walk the rest of the way home with the bag not-so-subtly covering the tent in his pants.

Ichigo invited the team out for an early evening showing of The Room at Sunshine Cinema on Houston Street. The movie theater was old and historical and the movie was supposedly one of the best worst movies ever made.

Grimmjow wanted to stay in bed with Ulquiorra all day, but the movie piqued his interest. He hadn't watched something funny in a while. He and Ulquiorra rode the subway to the theater and were bombarded by street dancers, swinging from poles and doing flips through the car to blaring hip hop music.

Fighting down the urge to trip the dancers as they flew by, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra squeezed out of the train car and maneuvered their way up into the streets where they found Ichigo, Renji, Rukia, Orihime and Ikkaku and Yumichika waiting for them.

They bought their tickets, grabbed a huge bucket of buttered popcorn and found their theater. Grimmjow touched Ulquiorra's arm and murmured, "Let's sit in the back." The back of the movie theater was secluded, perfect for the kinds of things Grimmjow wanted to do to him if the movie was too boring.

"That's a good idea, Grimmjow-kun," Grimmjow hadn't noticed Orihime was standing so close by, "Let's sit in the back, guys. It's just the right distance from the screen." The team rumbled their agreement and Grimmjow scowled.

"Dammit."

"Balls turning blue?" Ulquiorra said, slipping by him. Grimmjow pursued him, breathing down his neck.

"I'll just have to be subtle about it."

Ulquiorra snorted. "Good luck."

"Hey, I can be creative."

Grimmjow plopped down into a seat with Ulquiorra on his left and Abarai on his right. They passed the popcorn out in plastic cups and waited for the trailers to roll. Abarai elbowed Grimmjow, smiling. "So…who's the lucky lady?"

"The hell are you talking about?"

"You either punched some sorry asshole or you got laid last night. I haven't seen you this happy ever, so I figured it's gotta be one or the other."
Grimmjow's hand froze against Ulquiorra's thigh, their touches concealed by the arm of their seat, and he felt Ulquiorra tense under his touch. Grimmjow knew he should keep his trap shut, but when he remembered all the things he and Ulquiorra had done last night and this morning, he found it nearly impossible to keep quiet.

He was happy. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so happy. How could he not be happier than a clown on speed after the thing he'd wanted and waited for had finally come to pass?

"Yeah, I got some." Ulquiorra's hand clamped down on his fingers and crushed them. Grimmjow grinned despite the pain. "Best I ever had." Ulquiorra's grip slackened and he looked at Grimmjow in surprise.

"Oh, shit, man! That's awesome." Renji said, punching his shoulder.

"What is?" Ikkaku asked and Ulquiorra sighed beside Grimmjow.

"Our big guy here got some last night." Renji said.

Ichigo's face colored. "Do we have to talk about this? What are we, fifteen?"

"Was she pretty?" Orihime asked, leaning across the arm of her seat. Ichigo scoffed.

"Hotter than hell." Grimmjow replied, patting Ulquiorra's thigh.

"Where'd you meet her?" Renji asked.

"At the bar, where else?"

"What's she look like?" Ikkaku asked. "Come on, big jugs, nice legs?"

"Beautiful body, legs for days and an amazing ass."

Ikkaku sighed. "Oh, man…You lucky guy."

"What's her name?" Rukia asked.

"Can't remember. She knew mine, though. I think she liked it a lot, she kept moaning it." Grimmjow could feel Ulquiorra's eyes glaring a hole into his face and he could hardly suppress his laughter.

Ikkaku and Renji laughed and high-fived him. Rukia rolled her eyes. "You're an idiot, Renji." Renji kissed her cheek and said, "So, you guys had a good time?"

"The fuckin' best."

"Hang on," Ichigo said, leaning around his chair to get a better look at Grimmjow, "Wait a second, man, you sound like you're really into her."

Ulquiorra gave a smug little chuckle beside him and it was Grimmjow's turn to be flustered. "So?"

"You're leaving tonight. Does she know?"

"Yeah. I told her."

"Are you gonna see her again?"

Grimmjow had never had a monogamous relationship before. He'd been too traumatized by his
parents' marriage to attempt a relationship of his own. He wasn't in the market for a relationship, not yet anyway, and so any flings he had ended the next day. He didn't let himself sleep with the same person twice, most of them time he didn't want to.

But Ulquiorra was different. Grimmjow felt comfortable with Ulquiorra and free to be himself. They connected on a level despite their differences that he'd never connected with anyone. Grimmjow didn't know what Ulquiorra wanted, but he'd stayed through the night and well into the morning when he could have returned to his room and carried on as if nothing had happened.

Grimmjow didn't know what last night meant to Ulquiorra, but given Ulquiorra's attitude towards relationships, he thought it was a good thing. Grimmjow didn't want things to end when they returned to Japan. Grimmjow wanted to continue what they'd started. No matter how busy or unpredictable their lives became as the games continued, Grimmjow wanted to end every day tangled up in bed with Ulquiorra.

He'd never felt surer. He'd never wanted anything more. Grimmjow grasped Ulquiorra's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Yeah. I'm definitely seeing her again. If she wants me, anyway." Ulquiorra squeezed his fingers and Grimmjow couldn't fight down the smile that burst across his face.

"Grimmjow-kun's in love!" Orihime sang and Grimmjow knocked his popcorn over onto the floor in his surprise. Grimmjow didn't have to look at Ulquiorra to see him smirking; he could feel the smugness radiating off him in waves
Their movie got out in the late evening. They had to be at the airport in three hours to catch their flight. Grimmjow and Ulquiorra split off from the group, still quoting lines from the movie between hysterical bouts of laughter, and went to grab some dinner from China Town. The street signs changed from English to Chinese and they walked by Chinese spas, restaurants and grocery stores.

Ulquiorra stopped to browse food stands selling ready-made noodles bubbling in pots and fish lined up ready to be chopped. Grimmjow called him over and they ducked inside a Chinese restaurant and grabbed some veggie Lo Mein for dinner.

Ulquiorra's phone vibrated in his pockets. Ulquiorra didn't know why Ichigo or Orihime would be texting him when they'd seen him only a half hour ago and if it wasn't them, then Ulquiorra didn't know who else it could be. He lunged for his pocket and whipped out his phone, fingers slipping over the keys as he unlocked it.

He opened up his messages, unsure what he would say or do if it turned out his mother had decided to get in touch with him. The disappointment he felt when he saw Ichigo's number crushed any nervous excitement he felt and left bitter anger in its place.

What had he been expecting? How would she even know he was in the city in the first place? If she really wanted to see him, she would have contacted him long before now. Ulquiorra deleted Ichigo's text without reading it and stuffed his phone into his pocket.

A pair of chopsticks walked across the table and snagged one of his snow peas. Grimmjow was looking at him from across the table, brows furrowed as he slurped his noodles. "Someone shit in your noodles?" Grimmjow asked with a coy smile, his head tilted and his chin propped in his palm.

"It's nothing."

"Expecting her to call you?" Grimmjow was more perceptive than Ulquiorra gave him credit for.

"Why—?"

"—Would I think that? I can't think of anyone else who'd make you look so disappointed. How about you call her? She's got no way of knowing you're in the city."

"And say what?"

"Hell if I know, that's your problem. Do you wanna see her?"

Ulquiorra didn't know. He was curious to know how she was doing since she'd left his father. He didn't even know if she'd married the man she'd cheated on his father with. He wondered if she was still in business or if she'd started acting. Ulquiorra realized how much his mother was a stranger to him after they'd come to New York and he'd seen a side of her he'd never known about.

"We were never very close. I doubt she would want to see me."

"You don't know that."

"She cared very little for me. Her work was more important. I think I was the product of a life she never wanted."
"I thought my mom hated me. She doesn't. We're gonna go to Paris together."

Envy clawed its green hands into his chest. "That's because she loves you."

"Yeah, and maybe your mom loves you. How the hell do you know she doesn't?"

"I just do."

Across the table from him, Grimmjow huffed and laid his chopsticks down. Ulquiorra glanced up and saw Grimmjow looking at him with a scowl on his face. "What?"

"You're pathetic." Grimmjow announced and from his tone of voice, Ulquiorra gauged it was Grimmjow's turn to be disappointed. Ulquiorra's noodles slipped from his chopsticks and he set them down, his hunger forgotten.

"How exactly am I pathetic?" Ulquiorra tried and failed to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"You think you know what everyone thinks about you! You hide behind this shitty nihilistic attitude and you don't take any chances, you don't take risks."

"Did you meet my mother? No. You don't know a thing about her or my relationship to her."

"You didn't know shit about what I went through with my mom, but you still wanted me to meet with her."

"Your mother wanted to see you. It's different, why can't you understand that?"

"You wanna talk to her, so just do it and fuck whatever is telling you otherwise. Who the hell knows when we'll be back in this city, you might now get another chance."

"What if she doesn't want to see me?"

"Then fuck her and move on with your life."

Ulquiorra didn't know what to do. He'd already been hurt by her once, he didn't want to be hurt a second time. He couldn't bring himself to anticipate a second outcome. What if he was let down all over again?

Ulquiorra wondered what it would be like to hear her voice on the other line after so many years. Would she be happy to hear his voice or would she cry like Grimmjow's mother had? Would she even let him get a word in before she hung up the phone?

Ulquiorra sat in stasis as different outcomes whirled around in his mind. He was sure he would be disappointed by her. He'd always been disappointed, but just like when he was a child there was still a hopeful voice inside him, whispering that this time things would be different. She would stop working just for a little while so they could go out to lunch together like she'd promised, she wouldn't work over time this week and they would spend time together like she kept saying they would.

Time and time again, she'd let him down. Why would this time be any different? But maybe it would. He was older now, she was living the life she'd wanted. Things had changed. Maybe she would agree to be in touch or maybe she would shut him out, either way Ulquiorra wanted to know which it would be.

Ulquiorra excused himself to the restroom and locked himself inside. Short of breath and his stomach churning, Ulquiorra dialed her number and got her answering machine, his mouth went dry at the
sound of her voice. He waited for the beep and then he waited a few seconds more, tongue wetting his lips as his thoughts tumbled over themselves.

"Hello. Hello, it's Ulquiorra. I'm in the city for a game but I'm leaving at 9:00. I would be glad to see you if you're available between now and then. We could catch up. Call me and let me know. Thanks. Bye."

He ended the call and released all the air lodged in his throat as his shaking fingers pushed his phone back into his pockets. He leaned against the bathroom door and closed his eyes, unable to believe what he'd just done.

Ulquiorra returned to their table and finished his food. He felt like a block had been lifted from his shoulders. Grimmjow wasn't speaking to him and ate with a frown. It didn't sit well with Ulquiorra to know that Grimmjow was disappointed in him. In his own way, Grimmjow was looking out for him.

They returned to the hotel and packed their things. Ulquiorra's phone didn't ring once and he checked his messages every few minutes to see if he'd received any voice mail or texts. Ulquiorra waited with his stomach churning as the minutes ticked by until they had to leave for the airport But his mother didn't call him.

She didn't call him during the cab ride to the airport or during the hour he spent waiting for his flight. As Ulquiorra returned from the restroom on his flight and heard the announcement over the intercom to take his seat, he accepted defeat.

He'd known from the beginning not to expect any different, but, like an idiot, he must have; there was an ache inside him and he felt like a little boy all over again, disappointed and alone with feelings of inadequacy swirling inside him.

Ulquiorra collapsed into his seat beside Grimmjow and looked out the window at the New York skyline through the fog, the Freedom Tower standing tall as the lights of the Empire State shone through the gloom.

"I called her four hours ago and left a message. She didn't get back to me." Ulquiorra wished he hadn't been right to expect any different.

Beside him, Grimmjow heaved a sigh and his fingers closed around Ulquiorra's hand. "Then fuck it. At least you tried."

Ulquiorra leaned his forehead against the cool glass as the plane turned towards the runway.

"Wanna come to Paris with me in September? You'd like it and my mom started reading A Moveable Feast. You'd have something to talk about with her and she'd spare me an hour of her gushing over Hemingway."

Ulquiorra's lips were heavy, but they quirked upwards at the idea of traveling the streets of Paris with Grimmjow. "I'd like that."

When they returned to Japan, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra settled into a steady routine of eating together, hanging out whenever possible, fighting and fucking. Now that they were fucking, they reconciled their arguments with greater ease than before.

They kept a low profile around the team, trading biting insults and bruising remarks while Grimmjow felt him up in the most subtle ways he could. Ulquiorra could remember a time when Grimmjow wouldn't even breathe near him if he thought anyone might catch on they were dating. He'd come to
terms with his mutual attraction for men and women, for the most part.

Ulquiorra thought if Grimmjow were more accepting of himself, he would have let Ulquiorra top or be open to giving Ulquiorra head, but Grimmjow was also a very prideful man so Ulquiorra wondered if he was misreading Grimmjow's feelings on his sexuality.

Grimmjow's pride was sacred to him, so Ulquiorra pretended not to notice that Grimmjow took every opportunity to touch him and kiss him when they were alone. He wasn't going to complain, how could he?

On one such occasion, they were cleaning the table after having dinner at Grimmjow's new place. He'd moved a month ago and settled in the same district Ulquiorra lived in. Ulquiorra didn't want to say Grimmjow had moved purposefully to be closer to him, but he liked the idea.

"Hang on," Grimmjow's hands were warm against his hair. "You've got something in your hair."

"Your fingers?"

Grimmjow plucked a feather out of Ulquiorra's hair, grinning. "You gotta stop biting my pillows."

"That isn't how that got there." Grimmjow snorted and reached out, caressing the locks of hair that fell across the bridge of Ulquiorra's nose.

"You gonna keep your hair long? I could cut it for you." Grimmjow had told Ulquiorra recently that he styled his own hair and that he enjoyed doing his own hair because he didn't want to look like everyone else wearing the same trendy do. Ulquiorra just thought he was gayer than he let on.

"I haven't thought about it."

"I like it long. It's sexy. You could push your bangs back, though. They make you look kinda emo. What about a spiky do?" Ulquiorra pushed Grimmjow's hands away. He didn't want Grimmjow messing it up.

"I wouldn't look good with spiky hair."

"Ever tried?"

"No."

Grimmjow pushed the bangs behind his ear but they fell back into place. Grimmjow licked his palm. "Hold still." Ulquiorra jolted away from him and regretted his knee-jerk reaction as Grimmjow's eyes lit up.

Grimmjow, his eyes dancing with mischief, tried to tangle his fingers in Ulquiorra's hair. "Come on, I just gotta slick it back!" Ulquiorra battered his hands away but Grimmjow was persistent, trying to slip his fingers past Ulquiorra's defenses.

Ulquiorra retreated from Grimmjow's hands, pushing him away half heartedly. He really did like the feeling of Grimmjow's fingers in his hair. The back of his knees collided into the table and he caught himself on his elbows and Grimmjow trapped him.

"Grimmjow—," Ulquiorra nudged his knee between Grimmjow's legs in an effort to keep him at bay but Grimmjow dipped his fingers in Ulquiorra's hair and ruffled it. Grimmjow, a triumphant grin on his face, chuckled and leaned down, capturing Ulquiorra's lips with his.
Ulquiorra's hair stayed untouched and Grimmjow discovered a new use for his table. It was a win-win for both of them. Ulquiorra didn't know what their relationship was. All he knew was that he enjoyed their time together and to his knowledge, Grimmjow wasn't sleeping with other people. Neither was Ulquiorra; no one else had his attention.

No one else got him the way Grimmjow did.

In May, they played a home game against Thailand and won with five goals to Thailand's three. Kenpachi was ecstatic, slapping his team on the backs as they left the field, sweaty and breathless. "Keep it up, boys. We'll have a spot in Germany before the end of the year."

Ichigo and the crew wanted to go out and celebrate so they hopped in Grimmjow's car to begin the drive down to a bar. Ulquiorra climbed into the front seat beside Grimmjow and Grimmjow slapped him on the shoulder.

"Guys, we play another game like that and we've got Germany in the fuckin' bag!" Renji hollered as Grimmjow kicked the engine into gear.

Grimmjow turned on the radio and the bass vibrated the car floor. "Fuck yeah, this song was my shit when I was a teen!" Grimmjow raved, cranking up the volume.

"You know this song? This was my jam!" Ichigo leaned around the front seat to look at Grimmjow. Grimmjow guffawed.

"You listened to this shit, Kurosaki? You're not as big a loser as I thought you were!"

"Sing it!" Ikkaku and Renji chanted and Grimmjow shushed them as the intro led into the song.

"Early in the mornin', risin' to the street, light me up that cigarette and I'll strap shoes on my feet," Grimmjow sang, his natural bass smooth and alluring to Ulquiorra's ears.

Ichigo jumped in, "Got to find a reason, a reason things went wrong."

He and Grimmjow sang together, "Got to find a reason why my money's all gone."

Grimmjow slapped the steering wheel. "Fuck yeah, Kurosaki!" Ulquiorra couldn't believe his ears. Grimmjow and Ichigo finally had something to bond over.

Grimmjow sang the next verse, "I got a Dalmatian, and I can still get high, I can play the guitar like a mother fuckin' riot." Grimmjow's voice dropped to a low growl, seethed into Ulquiorra's ear, and Ulquiorra involuntarily squeezed his thighs together as arousal prickled in his loins.

Instrumentals kicked in that had Ulquiorra tapping his feet and Grimmjow swaying in the seat beside him, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. As the chorus kicked in, Grimmjow, Ichigo, Renji, Ikkaku and Yumichika began singing.

As his team's singing and laughter washed over him, Ulquiorra looked out the window as Tokyo's streets sped by them. Heads turned, people ogled at the singing, dancing passengers through the window, but their stares humored Ulquiorra.

Yes, my friends are crazy, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Ulquiorra's lips twitched upwards and he felt light and warm inside. Maybe he'd lost what little family he had, but for however long it lasted, he'd found a new one in his teammates and regardless
of the nature of their relationship, he'd found something with Grimmjow he couldn't find anywhere else.

Maybe that was what counted.
Fearless

Four months flew by in the blink of an eye to Grimmjow and before he knew it, they were practicing for their home game against Australia as September 20th approached. Grimmjow kept in touch with his mother over the summer via emails, planning their trip the day after the first game of September.

Grimmjow would fly up to see her on the 23rd and stay a week with her at her home. Ulquiorra would go with him. Grimmjow couldn't keep himself from fantasizing about himself and Ulquiorra roaming the streets together, drinking wine and eating only the best Parisian foods until they could burst, then retiring to their room and fucking until they were too spent to stay awake any longer. Grimmjow wanted to fall asleep naked beside Ulquiorra, staring out the window at the Paris skyline, the Eiffel Tower glowing golden.

Grimmjow was surprised to himself. He hadn't slept with anyone else this summer. If he were with anyone else, he'd had long since moved on by now, wary of their intentions. He couldn't end what they had. He was happier with Ulquiorra than he'd ever been with anyone else. He'd never connected with anyone on an emotional level before, but he and Ulquiorra understood each other and they enjoyed one another's company, in and out of bed.

This was the longest Grimmjow had stayed with anyone and he'd be damned before he changed a thing. Ulquiorra was too good to lose to someone else. As if anyone would get Ulquiorra the way he did, anyway.

Grimmjow wasn't sure what to call their relationship. They'd never actually sat down and had the talk. Grimmjow figured they didn't need to. Ulquiorra wasn't sleeping with anyone else, neither was Grimmjow. Grimmjow didn't know if that made them boyfriends or mutually-exclusive-friends-with-benefits.

He told himself it didn't matter. He liked to present himself as someone who lived in the here and now; it went with the whole I-don't-give-a-fuck image he had going for him. Asking questions and probing into things was Ulquiorra's duty. But Grimmjow did catch himself wondering what Ulquiorra would say if Grimmjow asked him what the nature of their relationship was, or if Ulquiorra saw a future with him.

Grimmjow saw a future with him, just ideas and fantasy, but that was something, wasn't it? He wanted to keep playing soccer with Ulquiorra. That was all he knew and he looked forward to every game they played together. Regardless of what they were or where things went, Grimmjow wanted to be on the field with him, or watching Ulquiorra play from the stands.

The ball bounced off his head and hopped off the floor. "The fuck was that, Ulquiorra? You wanna break my nose?"

"You were spacing out. Something on your mind?"

"I was thinkin' we should shower together after practice."

Grimmjow didn't miss the way Ulquiorra swallowed, his Adam's apple rising and falling. Every little reaction he got out of Ulquiorra brought him over the moon, especially when he remembered that only a year ago Ulquiorra had treated him like the wall.

"Shoot." Ulquiorra ordered, looking to make sure no one had overheard that exchange.

"Oh, I will." Grimmjow kicked the ball towards the goal and Ulquiorra blocked his shot. "Fuck.
Come on, another!

"You're still not the best at scoring. You're too eager and your kicks lack precision."

"Yeah, fucknucks? So how come I won us Iran, huh?"

"You're an opportunistic player and you can capitalize on an enemy's mistake, but I've never seen you make a penalty kick."

Grimmjow snorted. "Yeah, well, you're a shit defender. Now shut up and give me the ball!"

Ulquiorra tossed the ball back to him and Grimmjow set it down and aimed for just over Ulquiorra's shoulder. Ulquiorra blocked his shot again. "I'm going easy on you."

"There's very little you can do to surprise me. I know all your tricks by now."

Grimmjow saw that as a challenge and his stomach fluttered. "Oh, yeah? You really think so?"

"I do."

Ulquiorra was always challenging Grimmjow in his little ways. Grimmjow foresaw every night they spent together as another opportunity to find new ways to make Ulquiorra's toes curl. Ulquiorra was a reserved person, so Grimmjow took immense satisfaction in getting under his skin in bed and out of it. He was always rewarded when he did crack through Ulquiorra's mask, be it with a coarse moan of his name or a light flush of color to Ulquiorra's cheeks.

Grimmjow couldn't fight back the grin that split his face in two. "We'll see about that. Watch me tonight when we play. I'll fuckin' surprise the hell out of you, just you wait."

Ulquiorra's eyes twinkled and something in Grimmjow's chest tumbled over itself. "I look forward to it."

Australia commenced the kick off, and the third game in the third round of the World Cup began to the roars of the crowd. Grimmjow set his sights on a particularly aggressive midfielder who was intent on getting the ball to his teammate, a striker.

Grimmjow wanted to defend their goal. He also wanted to see if he could score one so he watched and waited for the opportunity to arise. Grimmjow launched himself into a slide, kicking the ball away from the midfielder's ankles and into Ichigo's feet and the orange-haired defender took this chance to shoot the ball out of their side of the field.

"Perfect slide tackle from Jaegerjaquez and Kurosaki takes possession. Excellent chest trap from Abarai, he dribbles and shoots up the field to Cifer who passes it to Maderame, Madarame passes to Hitsugaya. Turner is in hot pursuit of Hitsugaya, could we have our first goal for Japan?"

Hitsugaya was cornered by the defenders; he kicked it through their legs to the roar of support from the crowd. Grimmjow took off up the field towards the goal, ready to rush in from the left and kick the ball over the goal keeper. "Hey, Ayasegawa!" Grimmjow roared, catching his attention. Yumichika took possession and kicked it up the field towards Grimmjow as he ran for it.

Are you watching, Ulquiorra? Grimmjow's heart was pounding as he glanced through the sea of players and saw emerald eyes fixated on him. I'm gonna make you eat your words!

Grimmjow got a faceful of an Australian defender's chest as he raced in from Grimmjow's blindside
and got between him and the ball. The collision was comparable to running straight into a boulder. Grimmjow's body bounced off the defender and he fell backwards, striking his head on the pitch floor as the wind was knocked out of him and his ribs caved inward from the collision.

Grimmjow huddled, clutching his shuddering ribs. Every breath felt like a blow to the gut. He was worried he'd cracked a rib, or broken a few. "Are you alright, Jaegerjaquez?" The referee touched his shoulder and Grimmjow tried to stand.

The referee helped him into a sitting position and to Grimmjow's relief, the ache in his ribs began to subside as he sat up. Grimmjow turned a hateful glare on the defender and spat onto the pitch in his direction. "Motherfucker."

"Hurt?" Ulquiorra was standing over him, brows furrowed in concern. Grimmjow snorted.

"Yeah, like that'll do me in. I've been hit harder by my baby cousins, shitstain." The defender curled his lip at him and tried to walk away only to be cut off the referee. Ulquiorra extended a hand and Grimmjow took it, rising to his feet. The defender succeeded in kicking the ball out of play, but he was shown the yellow card for his actions.

"Be more careful." Ulquiorra said, turning to leave.

"Worry about yourself." Grimmjow squeezed his hand as he brushed by Ulquiorra. Since the foul occurred in the penalty box, Grimmjow finally had his chance to make a penalty kick. He'd only scored a handful of penalty kicks in his career. He was a man of opportunity and therein lay his strength on the field. He was overzealous when it came to penalty kicks but he'd never wanted to score one more than he did today.

For the first time in his career, he wasn't playing for himself. He was going to score this goal for Ulquiorra. His need to win wasn't the only thing driving him, it was knowing that with every pass, possession and attempt at Australia's goal, Ulquiorra was watching him.

The spot where the foul occurred was marked and Grimmjow approached the ball and lined up his shot as the Australian goal keeper watched him intently. Grimmjow's heart pounded in his chest, ready to burst. His stomach fluttered and sweat broke out on his brow.

He wasn't playing for himself, not anymore. He was playing for Ulquiorra. For the first time in his life, Grimmjow finally had someone to play for. A smile tugged at his lips and despite the nerves twisting in his stomach, his heart swelled.

Grimmjow feinted, charging in from the left and the goal keeper ran left, arms outstretched. Grimmjow scooped the ball with his right leg and hurled it over the goal keeper as he plummeted to the floor and the ball caught in the far corner of the net.

"He scores! Jaegerjaquez scores! What a goal! The first goal of the match belongs to Japan!"

Jubilated, Grimmjow thrust his hand into the sky, leaping high into the air in his excitement. The crowd was on their feet, jumping up and down and chanting for him. Ichigo and Renji rushed him, jumping up and down with him and Grimmjow slapped them on the backs before he broke free, eyes seeking the man he had scored for.

The look on Ulquiorra's face made Grimmjow smile so hard, it hurt and his heart soared inside him, ready to grow wings and fly from his body. Grimmjow ran to him and Ulquiorra met him halfway and Grimmjow engulfed him in a bear hug, crushing Ulquiorra to his body. Grimmjow couldn't contain himself, jumping up and down with Ulquiorra in his arms.
"I told you I'd surprise you! I fuckin' told you! Who looks stupid now? Come on, admit it, I surprised you!" Grimmjow pulled away to look Ulquiorra in the eyes, their foreheads touching and green and blue eyes drinking in the others presence.

Ulquiorra's lips tugged upwards and he shrugged. "I'm a little surprised."

Grimmjow guffawed, wrenching Ulquiorra back into his arms to slap him on the back. Grimmjow couldn't have stopped himself if he wanted to, nuzzling his face into Ulquiorra's neck to secretly run his tongue from the crook of Ulquiorra's neck to his jaw line.

Ulquiorra wriggled to get away and Grimmjow couldn't stop the laughter bubbling up from his chest to his lips. Ulquiorra rubbed his neck, pink coloring his cheeks. "Are you crazy?" he seethed, shoving Grimmjow in the chest. "You have the whole world watching you."

"So? Maybe I want 'em all to know the way I make your toes curl?" Grimmjow advanced on him and purred those words into his ear. Ulquiorra shoved him backwards, shaking his head.

"You're an idiot. What if we're discovered?"

"I don't care."

Never in a thousand years had Grimmjow imagined he would say those words. He'd kept his bisexuality under lock and key since he was a teenager. The only relationships he went public with were with women. His relationship with men didn't last longer than a night. The risk hadn't been worth the shame he felt the morning after, not even after he'd decided that what he did behind closed doors wasn't anyone's business.

But what did he have to be ashamed of? Ulquiorra made him happier than any woman or man he'd been with. If someone could make him this happy, how could it be wrong? He wanted the whole world to know Ulquiorra Cifer was all his.

Ulquiorra's lips were parted, brows furrowed in disbelief. "You don't?"

"Can't care less." Grimmjow assured him, unable to fight the grin that burst across his face. Ulquiorra huffed, shaking his head. Grimmjow didn't know if Ulquiorra was angry and embarrassed at him until he saw the tiny smile on Ulquiorra's face as he turned away.

Grimmjow was lighter than air, ready to float off the ground. The referee sounded his whistle and the game continued. The ball was tossed out onto the field by the Australian goalkeeper and Ulquiorra pursued it. An Australian defender took possession and Grimmjow watched as Ulquiorra flanked him. Grimmjow fell into a sliding tackle, knocking the ball away from the defender and the defender tumbled over him.

Grimmjow's feet touched the ball in a matter of seconds before the defender tumbled over him, barely avoiding a foul. The ball rolled into Ulquiorra's feet and Ulquiorra took off with it, shooting a look over his shoulder at Grimmjow. There was a twinkle in his eyes that made Grimmjow's heart sing.

Grimmjow gave him a grin that fell away when he saw the Australian defender running at Ulquiorra's blind side. Ulquiorra's attention was on Grimmjow. There was no way he would see the collision until it was too late.

"Ulquiorra!" Ulquiorra's name was barely past his lips before it happened. Ulquiorra turned back and saw the collision coming when the defender was inches from him. Ulquiorra's feet scrambled in the dirt, sending shards of grass and specks of dirt flying out in front of him. Ulquiorra was bowled off
his feet and his body hurtled out of the field and rolled to a stop on his side against the stand.

The crowd groaned and gasped, the referee's whistle screamed and every man on the field turned their heads. Grimmjow held his breath, staring with wide eyes at Ulquiorra's unmoving figure, his right leg bent at an angle that wasn't natural.

"You can almost feel that collision," the announcer said, his voice hushed as the replay filled the screens. Grimmjow turned, watching with a knot in his stomach as the defender rushed in slow motion at Ulquiorra's side and threw all of his weight into his elbow which slammed into Ulquiorra's ribs.

"Look at his left leg, he lands on it just before he goes flying. God, that looks painful, look at the way the leg bends. If his ribs aren't broken from that collision, his ankle is almost certainly broken from the way he landed on it."

The referee pelted by Grimmjow, jolting him away from the screens and tearing his eyes back to Ulquiorra. Ulquiorra was sitting up, jaw clenched and his lips in a thin line. His chest expanded rapidly, his nostrils flared as he clutched at his ankle before the pain became too much and he fell backwards, his fingers curling against the concrete.

"Unfortunately for Cifer, this is a game-ending injury, and he'll be lucky if it isn't season-ending."

Grimmjow's skin was cold, his stomach twisting nauseously. He scrambled to his feet and ran off the field to Ulquiorra's side. Behind him, he heard a stampede of footsteps and the concerned babbling of team Japan and other Australian players behind him. Ulquiorra's breaths grew shorter and he inched himself closer to the wall, gasping as he dragged his leg behind him.

"Back the hell off, give him space!" Grimmjow bellowed, trying to keep the team at bay as they clustered around Ulquiorra's writhing body. "Move, move!" the referee hollered, breaking through the team as medics rushed through the crowd, carrying a stretcher.

Grimmjow's heart sunk. Ulquiorra was out of the game. He'd known the moment he'd seen Ulquiorra's ankle, but he'd wanted to believe he could recover and get back on his feet. The medics helped Ulquiorra on the stretcher and Ulquiorra collapsed, sweat gleaming on his forehead as his chest rose and fell with every labored breath.

"Ulquiorra?" Grimmjow tried to follow them but the referee grabbed his arm.

"He's going to be fine, Jaegerjaquez. Get back on the field."

Grimmjow watched Ulquiorra over the referee's shoulder until he'd been carried from the field. The referee whistled and Grimmjow turned and his blood boiled at the sight of the defender who had caused Ulquiorra's injury. The defender was shown the red card.

"Are you fucking serious? I was going for the ball!" The defender argued. "Not my fault he got in my way, mate!"

Grimmjow's hand curled into a fist. "Bullshit!" He shoved between the referee and got in the defender's face. Grimmjow shoved him in the chest and the defender stumbled backwards and nearly lost his foot. "Go for the ball like that with me; I'll break your fuckin' nose! What, he's smaller so you think you can get away with that shit, you pussy?"

The referee's hands clawed into his arm, trying to separate them and Grimmjow wouldn't have it. Grimmjow lunged, throwing himself at the defender and tackling him to the floor. Grimmjow pinned him and plunged his fist into the defender's face. Warm blood gushed across his knuckles. The
Australians rushed at him and punches rained into his back, hands tugging at his hair, a knee flew into his ribs and sent him flying.

"Get in there, boys!" Renji bellowed as he charged in, tackling one of the Australians away from Grimmjow. The defender rolled onto Grimmjow and Grimmjow tensed the muscles in his stomach as his knuckles rammed into his stomach. The blow knocked the wind from him and Grimmjow shoved at his chest, hooked his knee over the defender's hips and bucked.

The defender tumbled onto his back and Grimmjow climbed on him and threw his fist into his face a second time. Grimmjow could hear nothing over the scream of rage driving every punch, his senses were muted, his reasoning was gone. Then he was thrown to the floor, scrambling in the dirt to regain his footing as the referee sounded his whistle and the assistant referees tore the fighting teams apart.

The referee thrust a red card in Grimmjow's face and Grimmjow wasn't angry, just disappointed he hadn't broken the Australian defender's nose like he'd shattered Ulquiorra's ankle. The referee marched them off the field and Grimmjow shoved the Australian defender in the other direction, spitting over his shoulder at him. "Go fuck yourself!"

Kenpachi bellowed at him as Grimmjow forced open the stand door and flung himself into a seat beside the substitute players. "What the hell is the matter with you, Jaegerjaquez? You've got no fucking self control! I need you out there, you dumbass!" Kenpachi slapped him over the head.

"Whatever."

Kenpachi threw his hands in the air and plopped onto the bench, shaking the floor. "You've really got some anger issues, kid. You just cost us any points you earned from that goal, for fuck's sake!"

"So we'll win 'em back." Grimmjow didn't like being lectured, but he liked the disappointment in Kenpachi's voice even less.

Kenpachi snorted, shaking his head. The game continued with the referee adding stoppage time from Ulquiorra's injury and showing Renji a yellow card for fighting. Kenpachi shoved his shoulder and leaned down to whisper, "Did you make that fucker bleed?"

Grimmjow nodded and Kenpachi clapped him on the shoulder. "Good man."

Japan lost the game four points to Australia's five, their second loss in their season. This game put them in fourth place, the lowest they'd been this late in the season since they started playing. Grimmjow left the stadium with a bitter taste in his mouth. If they won Russia, they would be in third place and they would have one game left to snag a spot in second place, which was the highest they could hope for this late in the games.

Second was fine. They could get to the World Cup on second place.

For now, Grimmjow would push these thoughts to the back of his mind and rush to the hospital. He'd texted Ulquiorra after the games and Ulquiorra told him he was hospitalized nearby. He needed to know if Ulquiorra could still play their remaining games. With Ulquiorra off their team, Grimmjow was poised to think they would end their season in third place.

Mexico was a tough team. He didn't think they would fare well without Ulquiorra's abilities on their side. As Grimmjow reached his car, reporters came at him from both sides. "Jaegerjaquez-san, why did you fight Williams on the field, what did you say to him?"
Microphones were thrust under his nose and Grimmjow turned to confront the reporters. "He fuckin' disrespected me, that's why."

"How did he disrespect you? It was Cifer-san he hurt, wasn't it?"

"Same difference. He wouldn't have tried that on any of the bigger guys. So I gave him as good as he got. Cifer couldn't get even, so I did it for him. It's simple as that."

Grimmjow wrenched open the car door and slammed it, muffling the reporter's babbling. He started the engine and made a mental note to pick up a house-warming present for Ulquiorra on his way there.
Awakened

Ulquiorra lay in bed, his leg suspended and in a cast. His ribs were bruised and ached as he watched coverage of Japan's World Cup match. He couldn't remember the last time he'd suffered a game-ending injury.

He couldn't understand how he'd let this happen. His head was on straight at the start, then after they scored—after Grimmjow scored—he'd let his guard down. Ulquiorra's neck tingled, remembering Grimmjow's tongue against his skin. Warmth spread throughout Ulquiorra's body and he wet his lips.

No. My injury had nothing to do with him. I got overconfident from our goal.

His goal was good enough to have been one of Ulquiorra's own; he'd been working hard on his kicks. Ulquiorra couldn't hide his surprise or his respect. Grimmjow had scored one of his best goals today trying to surprise Ulquiorra.

Affection tightened Ulquiorra's chest. He was proud of Grimmjow and surprised by his determination to prove Ulquiorra wrong. Very few people cared enough to give him the time of day, he felt spoiled by Grimmjow's attention toward him.

The commotion on television caught Ulquiorra's attention. A skirmish broke out as Grimmjow tackled the defender who had injured Ulquiorra.

Ulquiorra stared in amazement as Grimmjow hurled punches into his face and was shown a red card. "You idiot." Ulquiorra whispered, unable to believe his eyes. No wonder they'd lost the game.

"Williams, the defender responsible for Cifer's injury on the field, was sent to the hospital with a broken nose. When questioned, Jaegerjaquez had this to say about his involvement in today's skirmish,"

Footage cut to Grimmjow outside his car, surrounded by reporters as he left the field. "He fuckin' disrespected me, that's why."

"How did he disrespect you? It was Cifer-san he hurt, wasn't it?"

"Same difference. He wouldn't have tried that on any of the bigger guys. So I gave him as good as he got. Cifer couldn't get even, so I did it for him. It's simple as that."

Ulquiorra shook his head, unable to stop his lips from quirking upwards. In many ways, Grimmjow was still the boy standing up for Ulquiorra when he wouldn't do it himself. There were gentle knocks on his door and the nurse poked her head in. "Cifer-san, you have—,"

"Yo!" Grimmjow boomed, forcing his way into the room, carrying a bag in his hand.

"—Visitors." The nurse concluded, shuffling out of the room to make way for Ichigo, Kenpachi and Orihime. Orihime had brought flowers and filled a vase while Kenpachi grilled Ulquiorra.

"What's the diagnosis?" Kenpachi asked, eyeing Ulquiorra's leg.

"My ankle was partially fractured. The doctor says I should be healed within six weeks as long as I don't do anything strenuous."

Grimmjow curled his lip. "Mother fucker…Good thing I broke his nose."

Kenpachi pointed at him. "No. That was not a good thing. I needed you on the pitch. You act out like that again—."

"Alright, alright."

Kenpachi said, "Alright, you're out of the next game this month. I want you to spend October getting back into shape to play Mexico. Understand?"

"Of course."

"Good. I want you to rest, eat well, and focus on mending your leg. I need you for Mexico. Your boyfriend here lost us a lot of points today."

Grimmjow sputtered and Ulquiorra's stomach lurched. "We're not—," they both jumped to cover for themselves and Kenpachi snorted with laughter.

"I'm joking. Christ. Calm down. I've gotta go. Get better, Cifer. Jaegerjaquez, keep an eye on him. I'm holding you responsible for helping him recover."

"What? Why me?"

"What, you're so close on the pitch I figured it wouldn't kill you guys to spend a little more time together. See you kids." Kenpachi waved and left the room.

Orihime set the flowers on Ulquiorra's bedside table. "I know you need your rest, but you have to stay mobile, too. Being inactive after a leg injury isn't safe."

Grimmjow patted his shoulder. "I'll keep him nice and active." Ulquiorra's stomach fluttered at the thought. Grimmjow was creative; he'd find new ways for them to stay sexually active.

"Hey, guys, so we have a date," Ichigo said, "We're gonna get married on October 15th. Can either of you make it that day?"

"I'm invited?" Grimmjow asked, quirking a brow.

"Yeah, man. Come on, we're cool, right?" Ichigo asked.

Grimmjow shrugged. "As cool as we're ever gonna be, I guess. What the hell, I'll go."

"I know you hate love, Ulquiorra, but you'll come, too, right?" Ichigo asked, "It wouldn't be right not to invite you, you've known us since we first started dating."

Ulquiorra wanted to go, even if he disagreed with the idea of marriage. Marriage hadn't done his parents any good and they'd had legal complications getting out of it. If they hadn't married, they could have spared Ulquiorra the trauma of their divorce.

Ichigo and Orihime were different from his parents. They did love one another. Why they needed marriage to prove their love, Ulquiorra didn't understand.

"I don't understand why it is necessary, but—."

"Thanks, Ulquiorra, you're a pal!" Ichigo cut him off.

"But what? Why isn't it necessary for us to get married?" Orihime asked.

"No, don't set him off; we'll never hear the end of it." Ichigo hissed.
"You already love each other. Marriage isn't a necessity because society promotes it."

"Because I wanna spend the rest of my life with her. I want us to be husband and wife."

"Yeah, it is kinda pointless. Slap a couple rings on it and call it a day. Save yourself the hassle of signing all those papers."

"Why, in case it doesn't work out?" Ichigo asked, glaring at Grimmjow. "Man, you guys should get together. You have the same depressing mindset."

"How the hell am I depressing?" Grimmjow reported. "I wasn't there, but I bet my parents had a hellish divorce."

"But that doesn't mean we will, Grimmjow-kun. We love each other; we want to spend the rest of our lives together. You don't want to love someone enough to spend the rest of your life with them?"

Grimmjow shrugged, sitting on the bed beside Ulquiorra. "If I love someone that much, there's no way in hell I'm gonna put 'em through marriage."

"So, what would you do instead?" Ichigo asked.

"We'll work out, eat our meals together, play soccer, fight and fuck for the rest of our days."

"You'll at least be exclusive, though, right?"

"Why the hell wouldn't I be? Like hell I'm letting them sleep with anyone else."

"Yeah, this was a great idea inviting you two. At least pretend to be happy for us, alright?" Ichigo clapped Grimmjow on the back and patted Ulquiorra's knee. Orihime waved farewell and paused, looking at the television.

"Look at you two!" She cooed as Grimmjow enveloped Ulquiorra in his arms after he scored, jumping up and down with him. The reporter said, "Twitter is abuzz with this celebration from this morning's game. A fan captured footage that turns this celebratory hug into something a…different."

Ulquiorra's stomach twisted and Grimmjow tensed beside him. Shaky, blurry footage showed Grimmjow and Ulquiorra as they embraced. The camera zoomed in on Grimmjow's face buried in Ulquiorra's neck. "Bro, is he kissing his neck? What the fuck is he doing?" The person taking the video was laughing.

"Fans are saying that it is only a hug. For some, its fueled the rumors that Jaegerjaquez and Cifer are in a secret relationship. How spicy!"

Ichigo spit out his drink and Orihime blushed. Ulquiorra's face was hot enough to fry an egg on. He reached into Grimmjow's pocket and pinched his thigh. Hard.

"So, uh…Grimmjow, what were you doing?" Ichigo asked.

"I was hugging him. Get out." Grimmjow growled, getting his feet and shepherding Ichigo and Orihime to the door.

"I should have planned your wedding instead. No wonder you two were so pissy!" Grimmjow shoved Ichigo in the chest and pushed Orihime out the door. Grimmjow fell against the door, pushing his hand through his wild blue locks. Pink dusted his cheeks and he scowled.

"Son of a…"
"What were you saying this morning, you didn't care if anyone found out?"

Grimmjow sat at the end of the bed, chewing his lower lip. Ulquiorra wondered if Grimmjow had regrets about his actions today. Grimmjow was an impulsive man, he rarely considered the consequences of his actions.

Ulquiorra was in the closet and he had no intention of leaving anytime soon, though not out of shame. He didn't like identity politics and he didn't think it was the media's business who he was sleeping with.

Grimmjow ignored the rumors surrounding the men the media saw him with. Being gay wasn't widely accepted in Japan yet. Gay athletes were another subject entirely.

If it got out he and Grimmjow were sleeping together, their fans opinions of them would change. Ulquiorra didn't want to be the gay athlete dating another man. He wanted to be one of Japan's best soccer players who so happened to like men.

"What the hell did he mean its only fueled the rumors?" Grimmjow murmured, whipping out his phone and going on Google. Grimmjow typed in both their names, added in the word gay and hit search. The first results that popped up were videos of their games together. One such video was set to the song Never Had a Dream Come True. The editor took footage from their games, focusing on their moments together on the field.

"What the fuck?" Grimmjow snorted as he watched their embrace in slow motion as the song swelled. He read one of the comments, "Grimmjow is in love with him, look at the way he looks at him…What? I look normal!" The video ended with a slow-mo of their smiling faces, the camera panning in. Ulquiorra's mouth went dry when he saw the way they held each others gaze as they parted from their hug.

"Okay, if you put it to the right song, fine, you could try to make something of it..." Grimmjow added, scratching his head as he grew flustered. Ulquiorra couldn't believe there were people who took time out of their lives to do this. In the suggested videos, Ulquiorra saw a thumbnail that made his stomach turn over. The title was **Grimm x Ulqui Love U Betta** and someone drew them making out in the thumbnail.

He jabbed his finger at Grimmjow's phone, knocking it out of his hands. "Click on that." It was a compilation of drawings depicting them making out and having sex on the field. This video dated back to a year ago.

There were people who thought they were in a relationship since their game in November. Ulquiorra had no idea what they'd done to plant this idea in people's minds that far back. They'd only begun to get along.

"What did we do to give people this idea?" Ulquiorra asked, staring dumbfounded at a picture of Grimmjow making out with him.

"We looked at each other." Grimmjow burst out laughing, doubling over in his mirth.

"Grimmjow, if people find out—,"

"They've been thinkin' we were gay since our first handshake at the end of our November game! We're not in any danger. Besides, these people are getting off to the idea."

"What you did during this game was risky. These people are getting off to what they think is a fantasy, but it's real, Grimmjow. If anyone finds out, the media will be all over us, people's opinions
will change towards us."

Grimmjow's mirth faded. "I can't control what people think about me, why should I waste my time worrying how people will react?"

"If that's how you feel then why have you kept your gay flings a secret?"

"Cause I was ashamed for a long time about it. I got over it. If people can't accept what I do in my off time, then that's their problem, not mine. I'm not who I fuck, I'm me."

Ulquiorra was wrong to dismiss Grimmjow's actions as an impulsive spur of the moment. Grimmjow was finally comfortable in his own skin when it came to his sexual identity.

"So you don't care, then?"

Grimmjow shrugged, his usually stern facial features softening as he smiled. "Why should I give a damn what anyone thinks? I'm the one who's happy." Grimmjow's hand fumbled across the bed sheets and found Ulquiorra's.

It was as if Grimmjow's touch was a defibrillator, jolting his long-dead heart into action. Or if he'd become the Grinch whose shrunken heart two sizes too small had grown to three times its size.

Ulquiorra felt like his heart was beating after years of lying dormant. After their breakup, he was certain it would never beat for anyone else.

And for a very long time, it hadn't and Ulquiorra couldn't conceive how he could feel as happy as he did then. He thought it was impossible. So he decided he was heartless. He didn't let himself love or be loved, told himself with certainty that he didn't need it because he couldn't feel it. His parents divorce and the loss of his first love left him too damaged to love again. Or so he thought.

In reality, his heart had been sleeping the way trees and flowers do in winter. It wasn't that he couldn't feel, his heart had needed someone to beat for. "Hey!" Ulquiorra jolted out of his epiphany. Grimmjow's hand was warm in his and those intense blue eyes fixated on him.

"Yes?"

"I asked you if you wanted food. Do you?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"Grimmjow, you don't have to—"

"Who says I'm doing it for you? I'm hungry, too."

"I have a nurse, there's no reason for you to get me anything."

"What, you'd rather eat shitty hospital food than accept my help, is that it? It's no big deal, so tell me what you'd like to fucking eat." Grimmjow seethed, ready to yank his hair out.

Ulquiorra couldn't believe this man. "Miso soup."

"Coulda answered me the first time...Alright, I'll be back in a few." Grimmjow slung his legs out of bed and marched to the door, his jacket over his shoulders.
Grimmjow had to have been with his fair share of guys, he was too experienced in bed to plead innocent in that regard. Was it their relationship that gave Grimmjow confidence to be open about it? Was what they had different to Grimmjow than any of his past relationships?

What they had was different to Ulquiorra. He couldn't deny it if he wanted to.

Grimmjow waved, his scowling features falling away as he flashed Ulquiorra a smile. Ulquiorra watched him leave and realized he had fallen in love with Grimmjow all over again.
Ulquiorra was discharged from the hospital and Grimmjow drove him home. He didn't have time to settle in before he was packing his bags for his and Grimmjow's trip to France on the 23rd. Ulquiorra was eager to see the places Hemingway wrote about. Grimmjow was excited to return to his home country for the first time since he was ten years old.

They met Grimmjow's mother at the airport and got into Paris late at night. They took a car service into the city and sped through the city of lights, the Eiffel tower glowing golden against the city skyline. They were staying in Grimmjow's mother's home and she gave them two rooms down the hall from hers. She had a three bedroom home, but Grimmjow dumped his things in Ulquiorra's room and curled up in bed with him.

Ulquiorra was shaken awake a few hours later, peering through eyes blurry with sleep at a vast expanse of golden skin and blue hair. Grimmjow's lips were warm against his neck and ears, the smell of him surrounded Ulquiorra. "Get up. We're gonna go for coffee, or do you want me to bring you back something?"

Truthfully, Ulquiorra wanted to stay in bed with Grimmjow until he was ready to get up. He also wanted to see Paris. Groggily, he heaved himself out of bed and threw on some clothes and brushed his teeth, splashing water on his face. Grimmjow grinned at him, waiting by the door. "Not a morning person?"

Ulquiorra brushed by him and out into the hallway. Grimmjow's mother was waiting for them in the living room. Beside him, Grimmjow murmured, "Can't over this this…It feels so fuckin' weird to see her again." Ulquiorra was proud of him.

"Ready, boys? Let's go. I know you like Hemingway, Ulquiorra, so I thought we could visit one of the cafes he wrote in for breakfast."

They took the 4 line to reach the cafe, bumping elbows with drowsy Parisians clutching their hot coffees on the way to work. They left the metro, walking across sleek cobblestones as they hurried past tightly-knit apartments with flowerboxes in the windows, their balconies overlooking the streets.

They arrived at Cafe de Flore, the oldest coffeehouse in Paris on the corner of Boulevard Saint-Germain and Rue Saint-Benoit. The café was famous for its celebrity clientele, having seen many famous regulars in its early days. Nowadays, Ulquiorra thought it was mostly a tourist attraction. Hemingway spent afternoons here, writing.

They squeezed through tourists and approached the counter to order. Grimmjow ordered an almond croissant for himself and Ulquiorra and a black coffee. Grimmjow's mother had a latte and some bread and jam. Ulquiorra ordered a cafe au lait. Grimmjow's mother smiled at him. "Hemingway had the same thing, didn't he?"
They sat at a quiet corner table, looking out at the quaint, bustling streets of Paris. Grimmjow thrust his almond croissant across the table. "Have one. There's no excuse not to." Ulquiorra took a bite of the flaky pastry and sweet almond paste graced his tongue.

"Good, right?" Grimmjow asked, grinning as he dunked his croissant in his coffee and took a hearty bite.

"Very." Ulquiorra wanted to visit the hotel Hemingway and his wife spent their first night in Paris, the Hotel a'Angleterre.

"We could have tea there." Grimmjow's mother suggested. Grimmjow made a face. "What, you don't have to."

They finished their breakfast and they took the metro to Notre Dame. A canal carved its way through the city and Grimmjow led Ulquiorra down the stairs to walk the boardwalk just below the streets. They passed beneath a stone bridge and climbed the stairs and walked the promenade to the cathedral.

As they approached, the bell in the nave chimed twelve o'clock, raising the hairs on Ulquiorra's arms. He craned his neck, staring up at the rose windows, the towering spirals and flying buttresses. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in a church. Grimmjow's mother led them inside and they walked down the aisle, admiring the stained glass windows splashing colors across the floor.

Grimmjow yawned and left before Ulquiorra and his mother had finished exploring and was waiting for them outside. Grimmjow slung his arm around Ulquiorra's shoulder and said, "C'mon. I wanna show you something." Excitement brimmed in his voice.

They took the metro to the 15th administrative district of Paris. Skyscrapers dominated the river bank, the sunlight glittering like gems against the windows. Boats floated in the harbor, rocked two and fro by the late summer breeze.

"Go on ahead boys, I have to take this." Francine stopped to take a call and Grimmjow gripped Ulquiorra's arm.

"Follow me. It's nearby."

Grimmjow's pace quickened and he hurried ahead of Ulquiorra, winding through streets with ease. Ulquiorra followed him to the waterfront and Grimmjow pressed on like a bloodhound on the scent. Grimmjow led him past highrisers, checking the building numbers as he passed with increasing urgency.

Grimmjow stopped on a quiet corner of the street a stone's throw away from the waterfront. Ulquiorra walked into him and follow Grimmjow's stare. Grimmjow stood outside a high rise building that faced the river, bedecked with traditional French balconies and gargoyles.

Grimmjow craned his neck, rocking back on his heels with a huff "Huh. It got remodeled. It's definitely the place, though."

"Was this your home?" Ulquiorra asked.

Grimmjow's lips quirked upwards, a faraway look in his eyes. "Yeah. We couldn't afford it after my dad lost his job and my ma couldn't find work. Some company in Japan wanted her to work for 'em in Karakura. We thought her gig was gonna be big for us, so we moved. Long story short, we shouldn't have bothered."
Grimmjow climbed the step and peered in through the window in the door. Unsatisfied, he stepped off the stoop and beckoned for Ulquiorra to follow him down memory lane. Ulquiorra fell into step beside him and they turned the corner and walked along the water. Grimmjow looked across the river at the rows of apartment buildings and said, "I had a friend who lived around here. His pops owned a boat and we'd go on boating trips. We'd catch frogs and eat 'em right outta the water."

Ulquiorra raised his brows. "Really?"

Grimmjow snorted. "No, stupid!" He linked his arm with Ulquiorra's and tugged, knocking their shoulders together. This was the closest they'd come to holding hands in public. Ulquiorra looked around to see if anyone was staring but no one spared them a glance.

"What? It's Paris. I could throw you up against this gas lamp and do you right here and no one would give a damn."

Ulquiorra stumbled and Grimmjow stopped, tugging Ulquiorra against him to keep him from falling. "Your leg acting up?" Ulquiorra's leg was hurting a little, but it wasn't enough to impede him.

"No." He cleared his throat. The image Grimmjow put in his head had thrown him for a loop and only in the best of ways. They continued their walk, walking close enough that their shoulders touched. Ulquiorra felt at ease with Grimmjow in France and confident no one would harass them. It was France; Ulquiorra speculated half the city was gay.

"If you wanna rest, tell me. I don't wanna drag a cripple around the city."

"I'm fine." Grimmjow left it at that, though Ulquiorra occasionally felt watchful eyes on his gait. They passed a playground, children's laughter carrying to them on the breeze. Grimmjow stopped to watch the children play.

"I use to come here sometimes. I liked it, but the city streets were my playground." They heard the click of high heels and Grimmjow untangled his arm from Ulquiorra's as Francine caught up to them, breathless.

"You two move quickly! Did you show him our old place?"

"Yeah."

"I still miss it sometimes," Francine mused, sighing longingly, "I still remember the day I brought you home from the hospital, Grimmjow. It was the happiest day of my life."

"Great." Grimmjow tried to hurry on ahead and Francine took his arm.

"I kept all the tapes I took of you, you know. I'd love to watch them with you sometime; you were such a cute little baby."

"I'd be interested in seeing these tapes." Ulquiorra chimed in. "It's hard for me to imagine a time when you were cute."

"Ma, stop it." Grimmjow's attempt at a growl came out whiny, trying to tug his arm away from her.

"Oh, Ulquiorra, you should have seen him! Chubby little cheeks and the roundest little belly. He had the most adorable nose, beautiful eyelashes."

"Ma, shut up!" Grimmjow barked, wrenching his arm away and storming ahead. His cheeks were flaming red and he would have looked cute if not for the hideous scowl on his face.
"Ulquiorra, you won't believe me, but he had a winning smile when he was a child. Ugh. I am sure I have some pictures somewhere…"

"No, I believe you." Ulquiorra wanted to say Grimmjow could smile radiantly when he wanted to.

"I'll show you the tapes when we get upstairs," Francine giggled, patting his arm.

"No, you won't!" Grimmjow hollered over his shoulder, "I'll kill both of you!"

"I'll enjoy seeing them."

"Fuck you, Ulquiorra!" Grimmjow stormed ahead and Francine laughed, smiling after her son.

She sighed, her smile grew heavy. "I never thought I'd actually see my son so happy. I always worried about him, so I pushed him too hard to be successful and I think I made him feel like I was never happy with him. I wasn't there to make him feel like he is good enough as he is, but you've done that for me. Thank you. You have made my son very happy."

"No, he's done that himself."

She shoved his shoulder. "You're too modest. You always made him very happy. He's always turned my hair gray, but you take him as he is and only add to him. You've given him what he always needed."

Ulquiorra wanted to believe her, but it was hard to imagine he was capable of bringing someone so much happiness. Francine stopped to admire a clothing store window display and Ulquiorra caught up to Grimmjow waiting for the light. Grimmjow muttered, kicking invisible pebbles as he gnashed his teeth.

"I'm getting tired. If we're done, let's visit the Eiffel tower and call it a day, cute stuff." Ulquiorra added as dully as he could to keep a straight face, unable to help himself.

Grimmjow seethed beside him, his face red enough to start steaming. "I'm gonna kill you. What the hell is her problem? Fucking embarrassing me like that." Grimmjow stomped across the street, glaring at the sidewalk with enough intensity to burn holes in the concrete.

The sky had gone from blue to periwinkle since they'd began exploring. As they walked, the gas lamps came on along the river. Grimmjow veered right and walked to the railing and leaned on it, looking down into the river.

The water rippled, the light from the gas lamps scattering like gems in the reflection. Ulquiorra joined Grimmjow at the railing. In the distance, the Eiffel tower lit up and glowed golden against the periwinkle sky.

"It's interesting that she kept the tapes and pictures of you." Ulquiorra noted.

"Yeah, more like sad and creepy!"

"Considering the way she left you, I thought she would have thrown away any reminders of you." If Orihime were here, Ulquiorra imagined her saying, "She must really love you, Grimmjow-kun." Ulquiorra thought she would be right. Why else would Grimmjow's mother still keep reminders of him.

"I doubt my parents kept any of my baby pictures, if there were any."
Grimmjow's scowling features softened and his lips turned upwards. "I bet you were a cute little kid."

"I don't know. I'm much more interested in seeing your girlish eyelashes."

"Yeah, like you're one to talk, pretty boy."

Francine caught up to them and they took the metro to the Eiffel tower. They visited the restaurant on the first floor and had dinner with the city of Paris illuminated below them. After dinner, they visited the observatory and Francine walked around, taking pictures at different angles.

Ulquiorra leaned on the railing. The city was sprawled out below him, glowing golden and as picturesque as a painting. Ulquiorra couldn't comprehend that he was here. As Francine rounded the corner, Grimmjow gripped his shoulder. "Turn around."

Ulquiorra faced Grimmjow and Grimmjow's lips covered his in a rough kiss, yanking Ulquiorra's shirt to pull him in close. Their bodies flush together; Ulquiorra tangled his fingers through Grimmjow's hair and parted his lips. Grimmjow's tongue caressed his lower lip, his lips sucked and nibble Ulquiorra's lips and his tongue tangled with Ulquiorra's.

The kiss lasted five seconds until the click of approaching high heels broke them apart. Grimmjow pushed Ulquiorra back against the railing and walked away, his eyes dancing. Ulquiorra caught his breathe and his heart tumbled over in his chest. Grimmjow's taste lingered on his lips and Ulquiorra could still feel the heat of his body long after he'd gone.

Once they returned to Francine's home, she rushed upstairs to get her video collection. "Ma!"

Grimmjow hollered, looking betrayed as his mother hurried downstairs carrying a dusty box.

"Oh shush, no one is making you watch these."

"You turn those on, and I'll kill myself outta protest."

"I'll get the noose." Ulquiorra said, uncorking the wine and making himself comfortable on the sofa as Grimmjow's mother opened the box, revealing labeled discs.

"This one is so cute." She said, smiling as she popped the disc into the player.

Grimmjow tugged on Ulquiorra's shirt and Ulquiorra batted his hand away. Grimmjow's lips nibbled his ear. "How about we go upstairs? Bring the wine."

"Are you soliciting me?"

"...No." Scowling, Grimmjow turned his back on them and marched up the stairs. Francine cried in delight, gripping Ulquiorra's arm. Ulquiorra looked at the television and found a miniature Grimmjow tottering across the screen, shirtless and wearing jeans. He hugged a kitty plush by the neck to his chest.

He had a tangle of black hair, big, bright blue eyes and cupids bow lips and chubby cheeks. Ulquiorra couldn't tear his eyes away and masked his smile behind his hand. Ulquiorra thought he was adorable. "Even then you didn't like wearing shirts."

"Alright, you saw me, turn it off now." Grimmjow growled. "Why do you even have a shirtless video of me, Ma? That's creepy."

"Look at how little you are. Actually, the doctors told me you were very tall for a two year old."
"Grimmy," Francine's voice resounded from off camera and Grimmjow batted his blue eyes at her, full lips parted, "Do you want to sing mommy your favorite song?"

"There was a favorite song?" Ulquiorra quirked a brow at Grimmjow.

"Oh fuck this!" Grimmjow marched upstairs and slammed the bedroom door. On the screen, his younger counter part smiled. Despite his missing front teeth, the smile lit up his face. His smile was innocent and bright, yet Ulquiorra recognized it from the way it crinkled his eyes.

"Come on, don't be shy. Sing for mommy?"

"Okay, mommy." Grimmjow ducked his head and began to sing in a high wavering voice, "There is a castle on a cloud. I like to go there in my sleep. Not any floors for me to sweep. Not in my castle on a cloud."

"Yay!" His mother clapped for him and Grimmjow beamed. Ulquiorra couldn't believe his eyes or ears. There was no way he would let Grimmjow live this down. Ulquiorra took his pain meds for the night and grabbed the wine bottle to bring upstairs. As he stepped onto the landing, he heard a baritone voice outside the room. Grimmjow's voice was rough but he could carry a simple tune.

"There is a lady all in white, holds me and sings a lullaby. She's nice to see and she's soft to touch. She says...something, something, whatever."

Ulquiorra opened the door and Grimmjow cut himself off before he could sing the second part, scratching behind his head with a cough. "What was the song, do you remember?"

Grimmjow sneered at him and beckoned for the wine. Ulquiorra sat on the bed and uncorked it and Grimmjow joined him. Grimmjow took a gulp and shared with Ulquiorra. Ulquiorra thought he'd had too much as heat pooled in his stomach and loins.

"You owe me for that." Grimmjow tugged Ulquiorra in close for a bruising kiss and his fingers wandered up the front of his shirt. Ulquiorra lay back in bed and pulled Grimmjow down with him. Their tongues tangled, Grimmjow unbuttoned his shirt and Ulquiorra rocked his hips between Grimmjow's legs.

Grimmjow groaned against his lips, capturing Ulquiorra's lower lip between his teeth. Grimmjow cupped Ulquiorra's buttocks and stroked his thigh, raising his leg higher. A jolt of pain went through Ulquiorra's leg and he tensed. Grimmjow pulled away, frowning. "That hurt?"

"A little. I'm fine." Ulquiorra was too pent up to skip sex tonight.

Grimmjow's brow furrowed and he raised Ulquiorra's leg to his shoulder. Ulquiorra clenched his jaw to hold in his discomfort but Grimmjow noticed. "What about on your knees? Nah, that wouldn't work, either." Grimmjow sat up, legs splayed on either side of Ulquiorra's hips.

Grimmjow leaned back, almost sitting in Ulquiorra's lap and Ulquiorra got an idea but quickly dismissed it. Even if Grimmjow felt comfortable doing it, Grimmjow had already clarified he was a top only. "What? Got an idea?" Grimmjow asked.

"You won't like it, but it's very similar to what we're doing now." Ulquiorra watched his expression closely and was disappointed when he frowned. "Technically, you would still be topping but I wouldn't be the one..."

"I get it." Grimmjow ran his hand through his hair, brows furrowing. "I, uh..."
"He wet his lips as they quirked upwards in a suggestive smile. "I like the sound of that, actually." Ulquiorra wanted to ask him to repeat himself but the rush of heat straight to his half-hard cock proved him right.

"You do?"

"Yeah. Why, you don't think I'd be any good?"

"I don't know. You've never topped before so…"

Grimmjow's eyes gleamed. "I could ride your dick." He leaned down and his warm lips kissed Ulquiorra's throat and nibbled his chin. Ulquiorra sucked in a breath as Grimmjow's hand stroked his member through his jeans. "You're hard already." Grinning, Grimmjow ground his ass into Ulquiorra's swollen member.

Ulquiorra couldn't stifle his sharp gasp and he was helpless to stop his hips rising off the bed. He'd never wanted to fuck anyone more than he wanted to fuck Grimmjow. He could only imagine how wild Grimmjow would be when he came undone.

"Want me to ride your dick, Ulquiorra?" Grimmjow's lips ravished Ulquiorra's neck with hot, hungry kisses. Ulquiorra nodded, unable to speak as his breath grew short and his cock throbbed. He wanted to be the first person to fuck Grimmjow. He wanted to be buried Grimmjow's tightness, swallowed up in his heat.

"Ride me." It was an order and Grimmjow's lips clashed with his, assuring him it would be done.
Vive la France

Though desire raged between his legs, Grimmjow's palms were sweating. He'd never let anyone fuck him. Thankfully tonight he was still technically on top so this wasn't a stretch out of his comfort zone.

When he was with Ulquiorra, Grimmjow wasn't ashamed of himself or the person he chose to take into his bed at night. How could he be ashamed when Ulquiorra made him feel as good as he did?

Grimmjow hadn't expected his feelings to change as a result of their relationship. Seeing Ulquiorra lose himself beneath him made Grimmjow wonder how it would feel to be the one taking it. If Ulquiorra's reactions were any indication, it felt amazing. His position in his fantasies shifted and he got off to the idea of Ulquiorra riding him hard and fast.

Grimmjow liked to be in control and he'd always assumed he didn't like the idea of not having power in bed. It came from feeling powerless as a child. When he climaxed to thoughts of being at Ulquiorra's mercy, he wondered if he'd been wrong. He hadn't found someone he felt comfortable submitting to, but he did now.

Ulquiorra wouldn't judge him for it, or mistake it for a sign of weakness. Grimmjow trusted him and he wanted to try it with him, if only once. He knew Ulquiorra wouldn't argue. More than anything, Grimmjow wanted Ulquiorra inside him. He wanted to know that with Ulquiorra, he didn't always have to be the one in charge.

"Grimmjow?" Ulquiorra's voice, low and breathless, stirred him from his thoughts. Ulquiorra lay sprawled out below him like a delectable treat. His cheeks flushed, raven hair tousled and sticking to his forehead. Sweat gleamed in droplets on his chest, rising and falling as Grimmjow jerked him off. "You want this, don't you?"

"Yeah." Grimmjow had never wanted anything more. Ulquiorra's cock was beautiful; thick and long and hard in his hand. He would never do this for anyone else. He didn't want anyone else. He was taking his sweet time. He didn't know what to expect or how he'd perform once the roles reversed.

Grimmjow forced his worries out of his mind, watching as Ulquiorra raised his hips off the bed, bucking into his hand. Ulquiorra fell back, his hips suspended, and his lips parted he groaned. The sound had Grimmjow biting his lip, his cock so tight between his legs it hurt.

Ulquiorra was close, thrusting his hips into Grimmjow's hand with mounting urgency. With every thrust, his voice trembled and his breaths grew shorter. Ulquiorra might be too spent to continue if he waited much longer and Grimmjow didn't want that.

It wouldn't be fair to keep Ulquiorra waiting, not when he was this worked up. Grimmjow released him, leaving Ulquiorra gasping and frustrated. Grimmjow captured Ulquiorra's lips, biting and nibbling at his plump lower lip. "Want my ass on your dick?" Ulquiorra responded with fervent kisses, his nails digging into Grimmjow's back.

"Come on and tell me you wanna come in my ass."

"I want to be inside you," Ulquiorra's voice was a growl in Grimmjow's ear, "before I pin you down and force you."

A thrill went through Grimmjow and he grinned. He loved it when Ulquiorra got demanding. "That's a bad thing?" Ulquiorra shot him a look that said he was seconds away from flipping him onto his
back and riding him for all he was worth.

"Do you want me to prepare you?" Ulquiorra asked. Grimmjow's cock pulsed at the idea and he nodded, at a loss for words. Ulquiorra clambered onto his knees so that he was level with Grimmjow.

Ulquiorra pulled Grimmjow in to kiss him, his hands wandering from Grimmjow's face to his back. Ulquiorra's hand cupped and squeezed his buttocks and the lube popped open. Two of Ulquiorra's fingers, slick with lubricant, caressed his entrance.

Grimmjow tensed but the sensation wasn't unpleasant. The tips of Ulquiorra's fingers entered him, stretching him and forcing him open. Ulquiorra waited, his breath coming in short puffs against Grimmjow's neck.

"More?" Grimmjow nodded. It had to get better. He'd seen the way Ulquiorra reacted when Grimmjow did it to him. Grimmjow clenched his jaw as Ulquiorra sunk deeper into him, stretching him wider.

Ulquiorra submerged his fingers halfway inside him and the sensation didn't get better. The heated buzz of arousal began to fade and Grimmjow wondered if there was something wrong with him. Wasn't this supposed to feel good?

Grimmjow grew uncomfortable, his breath hitching as Ulquiorra's fingers moved inside him. He worried that this wouldn't feel good and that tonight would wind up being the biggest mistake of his life.

Then Ulquiorra's fingers massaged his prostate and Grimmjow couldn't think anymore. A tingling sensation spread from his balls to the tip of his shaft, as if Ulquiorra were jerking and fingering him all at once. From deep in his pelvis, pressure built, numbing and catatonic in its blissful ache.

It was like the first few seconds before orgasm and the feeling only got stronger. His erection was taut and when he wrapped his hand around himself, he folded over into Ulquiorra. It was almost painful to touch himself.

Grimmjow choked out a breathless cry as Ulquiorra circled his fingers inside him. He could do nothing but curl his toes and moan as pleasure, paralyzing in its intensity, overcame him. Grimmjow didn't know why he had waited so long. The pleasure wasn't that much different than jerking off but it came from deep within his body.

He could feel his orgasm building and he knew he would be overcome in the wake of his release. The thought brought him that much closer. But Grimmjow didn't want Ulquiorra's fingers to bring him there. "I want you inside me." Grimmjow pushed Ulquiorra onto his back. Ulquiorra scooted to the head of the bed so he could prop himself up against the pillows.

Grimmjow instructed Ulquiorra to raise his hips so he could shove a pillow under the small of his back. Grimmjow knelt in Ulquiorra's lap, sucking in a breath to ease himself. What did he have to worry about? Ulquiorra already wanted him. Grimmjow's job was done.

Grimmjow leaned down to kiss him and Ulquiorra's arms flew around his neck and tugged him closer. Their tongues tangled, lips kissing hard enough to bruise. Grimmjow lowered his hips and Ulquiorra's lips parted in bliss as he sunk into Grimmjow's heat. Grimmjow grinned. "That feel good?"

Ulquiorra's fingers curled in the sheets and he bit his lip. "Yes." His voice was a choked whisper and
his head fell back against the sheets. Grimmjow had never seen him so overcome.

Ulquiorra was thick, stretching him wide and Grimmjow's body yielded to his girth. Grimmjow sank onto him, taking Ulquiorra in deeper. Grimmjow began to move, Ulquiorra's cock gliding in and out of him with increasing speed. Ulquiorra rocked his hips, penetrating Grimmjow as he came down onto him. They groaned, at a loss as carnal desire overcame them. "That's it, Ulquiorra. Right there. Oh fuck..."

Pleasure coursed from the base of his shaft to the tip and Grimmjow bounced on him, wanting it faster. His prostate was stimulated and Ulquiorra grabbed his hips and pulled Grimmjow down onto him, filling him completely. Shouting his approval, Grimmjow rocked his hips up and down, taking Ulquiorra in deeper, harder, faster.

With every thrust, Ulquiorra took Grimmjow apart and made him whole again. Ulquiorra's eyes rolled back, every buck of his hips coaxing grunts and moans from his lips. Grimmjow wanted to come watching him. It wasn't possible for Ulquiorra to look sexier than he did tonight.

"Touch my cock." Grimmjow ordered, his voice breaking as he bounced up and down on Ulquiorra's shaft. Ulquiorra stroked him to the frantic pulse of his hips and the whole building knew Ulquiorra's name.

Grimmjow's release bore down upon him from deep within his pelvis. His cock was drenched in precome and he knew his orgasm would leave him shaken to the core. Ulquiorra was close, gasping between slurred curses as he plunged his cock deeper and faster into Grimmjow.

Then Grimmjow's release was there and he lost himself in a frenzy. Their bodies came together in zealous thrusts that made the bed creak. Every collision milked Grimmjow's prostate until he could take no more. Grimmjow came and he couldn't stop, chanting Ulquiorra's name amidst a slew of curses as he blew the biggest load of his life all over Ulquiorra's chest.

Grimmjow was overcome with pleasure, tossing his hips for what felt like an age. Ulquiorra was there with him, moaning helplessly as his hips rose off the bed with the force of his release.

Grimmjow didn't know if he would ever be able to orgasm again, he was sure he'd spilled every drop of semen from his body. Euphoria swept over him and he was content in his body and in his soul. Grimmjow's mind was made up; he was never having sex with anyone else. Nothing would be better than this.

Grimmjow slumped over into Ulquiorra's waiting arms like a stone, trembling and gasping. Ulquiorra's sweaty chest rose and fell, touching Grimmjow's. Ulquiorra trembled beneath him, his breath coming in short huffs against Grimmjow's neck. For what felt like ages they lay exhausted in the wake of their passion.

Grimmjow fumbled for the blankets and tugged, covering them. Ulquiorra turned out the light and his hand fell like a weight against Grimmjow's back. In the dark, Grimmjow kissed a trail from Ulquiorra's neck and found his lips. Ulquiorra grunted, tangling his fingers in his hair to bring him closer. Grimmjow dropped his head in the crook of Ulquiorra's neck and huffed laughter.

"What?"

"We are doing that again." Ulquiorra fell asleep in his arms and Grimmjow was seconds behind him.

That week, France played a World Cup game against Italy. Since they were in the city, Grimmjow, Ulquiorra and Francine went to root for France. They took their seats and watched as team France
marched onto the field. The roar of the crowd swept over Grimmjow and the pride of France's people took hold over him.

Something tugged deep in his soul, a yearning for something but for what, he didn't know. Beside him Francine clapped and cheered. Ulquiorra said, "I can't remember the last time I watched a soccer game from the stands."

Grimmjow couldn't either. He was happy to cheer for his home country. The announcer asked the crowd to rise for the national anthem of France and Grimmjow jumped to his feet. As the national anthem of his country swept over him, emotion welled inside him. Grimmjow hadn't heard the song of his country in years. To hear it sung with such passion took his breath away.

Team France bowed their heads and sang with pride, their eyes gleaming. The joy of his fellow Parisians engulfed Grimmjow and he found himself singing along.

_I want to be down there. I should be playing with them, winning games for my country._

The realization swept over him, catching his breath and making his heart swell in his chest. He wanted to play a home game in his country. He'd come to love Japan, but France would always be his home. He longed to play for France, knowing he was playing for his people, for the country he loved.

"Translation?" Ulquiorra asked as the song ended. Grimmjow jolted from his revelry and scrubbed a hand across his eyes.

"Uh… to arms, citizens. Spill impure blood, glory days arrived, form your battalions, fight with your defenders. Stuff like that. It's pretty fuckin' badass, actually. Fuck, I love my country." Ulquiorra chuckled and they took their seats as the anthem for Italy ended.

Grimmjow watched the game on the edge of his seat, roaring his support for every goal France scored. France won the game five to zero, qualifying for the World Cup. When the referee sounded his whistle, Grimmjow went ballistic. He jumped up and down, punching the air and engulfing his mother and Ulquiorra in a bear hug.

"Vive la France! Vive la France!" Grimmjow roared, beside himself with glee. He couldn't stop talking about the game as they enjoyed their final dinner in Paris. Parisians sang the national anthem after one too many drinks, toasting their country. The whole city was ecstatic and hopeful for France's victory.

Grimmjow slammed down his wine and announced, "I wanna play with France."

"Really? That would be wonderful!" Francine said.

"I don't know when, sometime after the World Cup is over. Maybe I'll move back to Paris and get signed onto a team here."

Ulquiorra frowned. "And if you can't?"

"Why the hell couldn't I? I got into the World Cup. People will wanna sign me."

"Think on it." Ulquiorra insisted.

Grimmjow said, "I don't need to! I wanna play for France, so I'm gonna find a way to do it."

Ulquiorra didn't say a word and cast he eyes down at his plate. He didn't eat the rest of his food and
he was quiet for the rest of dinner.

Grimmjow had no way of knowing the downward spiral he'd sent Ulquiorra into. He wouldn't know until it was too late. Grimmjow wished he'd known sooner. He could have spared himself the most painful conversation of his life once they returned to Japan.

Their last day in France arrived. Grimmjow awoke to an empty bed and a quiet house. He was disappointed he was leaving today but thoughts of playing a home game in Paris kept his spirits high.

Grimmjow slung his legs out of bed and hurried downstairs. Usually he wasn't a morning person but his future was bright today and his for the taking. He couldn't wait to see what possibilities were in store for him after the World Cup ended. Grimmjow found Ulquiorra boiling tea in the kitchen. His sweatpants hung low on his hips, teasing a sharp hipbone and creamy skin.

Grimmjow took hold of his waist, gliding his hand up Ulquiorra's shirt to trace the shape of his hips. Ulquiorra stirred, leaning back into Grimmjow's body. Grimmjow dragged his lips from the crook of his neck to his jawline.

Grimmjow breathed him in by the lungful, rocking his hips into Ulquiorra's buttocks. Ulquiorra exhaled and the sound sent a rush of heat past Grimmjow's hips. Ulquiorra didn't face him and continued to watch the kettle. Grimmjow turned Ulquiorra to face him and Ulquiorra's emerald eyes found his own.

Grimmjow pressed his lips to Ulquiorra's, sweeping his arm around his waist to pull him close. If Ulquiorra thought he could ignore him, Grimmjow would be sure to remind him what he would be missing. Ulquiorra's lips parted slowly, as if he were only half there in the moment with Grimmjow. Grimmjow slipped his tongue past Ulquiorra's lips and their tongues tangled. Ulquiorra's fingers curled in his hair, tugging to bring him closer.

Ulquiorra's resistance crumbled and his arms were around Grimmjow. Ulquiorra reversed their position and Grimmjow's back collided with the stove. Ulquiorra's kisses were hungry, his hands roaming Grimmjow's body with urgency. If Grimmjow found Ulquiorra's fervency unusual, he paid his feelings no heed. Who was he to complain when Ulquiorra wanted him like he did?

The kettle's hiss rose to a shrill whistle and masking the sounds of the door closing in the hallway. Grimmjow didn't hear his mother come in until she walked in on her son, pinned against the stove. "Oh, God!" Grimmjow's heart flew into his throat and his arousal turned to dread. She dropped her groceries.

Grimmjow struggled to explain himself but his words were a knot in his throat. He had ruined his relationship with his mother, he was sure of it. He needed a chance to explain himself, not that this situation needed any explaining. He couldn't lose his mother, not again.

"I'm sorry," Ulquiorra began and Grimmjow cut him off.

"Ulquiorra, go upstairs, alright? Ma, I wanna talk to you."

Flustered, his mother followed him into the living room. Grimmjow tried to speak around the panic fogging his brain. "Ma..." He couldn't meet her gaze. He was terrified to see her embarrassment fade, unable to predict what would take its place.

"You're-?"

"Yeah, I am, and before you ask why I never told you, how about you remember who walked out on
"Alright, alright..." Francine brushed her hair from her face, her cheeks still flaming. Grimmjow couldn't gauge what she was thinking. Grimmjow had no reason to care what she thought of him. She'd left him. She was lucky he was giving her the time of day. Yet his heart raced and his palms were sweating.

"You're right. I have no place passing judgement. I was embarrassed...but I'm not surprised. You and he make sense." She laughed and Grimmjow's fear began to melt away. "I thought you two were awfully close. Of all the people in the world, I'm glad that man is Ulquiorra, someone who makes you so happy."

Grimmjow couldn't believe his ears. "Really?"

"Of course. I would be stupid to push you away over something like this."

Grimmjow couldn't meet her gaze, worried she would see the emotions welling in his eyes. Never had he dared to dream he would have his mother's support. He'd never imagined he would hear her professing how much he mattered to her. "Grimmjow, are you-?"

"No." He insisted and his voice wavered, betraying him. His mother sniffed, not helping matters by any means, and she swept him into her arms. Grimmjow couldn't remember the last time his mother held him. He'd forgotten how comforting the warmth of a mother's embrace could be. Grimmjow had reclaimed a piece of his soul he'd been missing for so long.

They held each other for a long while then his mother released him, drying her eyes. She patted his cheek and said, "You two were dating back in high school, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I didn't wanna tell you guys. Not with dad around."

"Of course. But it didn't last, did it?"

"No. We broke up. We met last year. I couldn't stand him at first. I thought he looked down on me. I was projecting my own shit onto him."

"What about now?" Her eyes twinkled and she quirked a brow. "Do you love him?"

Grimmjow swallowed and choked on his own spit. He averted his gaze and collected himself, unsure how to answer that question. "The hell kinda question is that?"

"Do you? Please say yes, I've never seen you so happy. He's good for you, he's got a good head on his shoulders."

"And I don't?" Grimmjow threw her an offended look.

"And you're good for him. You bring him out of his shell." Grimmjow pushed his fingers through his hair, fixating on a spot on the wall above his mother's head. Ulquiorra was different from anyone Grimmjow knew. Ulquiorra drove Grimmjow crazy in the best and worst ways, but he didn't want anyone else. As much as he'd changed for himself, he'd broken free of his drug addiction because Ulquiorra believed in him. Otherwise, he might not have come through. At the time, he'd felt unworthy of saving.

Ulquiorra, without even trying, had saved his life. Grimmjow never wanted to stop pushing himself to be his best. Not because Ulquiorra made him feel like he had to, but because he wanted to.
"Yeah. I love him." He didn't falter in his proclamation. How could he? He'd never been surer of anything else. Grimmjow never expected to feel for anyone the way he did for Ulquiorra. To finally accept his feelings made his heart swell in his chest. His skin prickled as his mother remained quiet. Heat seared the back of his neck. Grimmjow felt as if he'd rolled over and exposed his underbelly.

"Got a problem with that?"

His mother laughed, smiling wide enough to split her face in two. "Oh...this is wonderful, Grimmjow. Have you told him yet?" Grimmjow shook his head. "Why not?"

"What's it matter if he knows or not? Not like it'll change anything."

His mother rolled her eyes. "My God...He should know! That way, he'll know you're serious about him. He's a very deep thinker. He might jump to conclusions unless you're straight with him."

But did Ulquiorra feel the same way for him? Grimmjow's mouth went dry. He didn't have the answer. Ulquiorra's parents' divorce had left a sour taste in his mouth. But if Ulquiorra believed relationships were useless, why hadn't he moved on by now?

Grimmjow didn't know what they were to one another. He liked to live in the moment, but he didn't cope well with uncertainty. His mother touched his shoulder. "Grimmjow, talk to him. Do this for yourself. Alright?"

Grimmjow didn't know that he would. Never in his life had he been more afraid. He wanted Ulquiorra and it hurt to imagine he wouldn't want him. "Sure, Ma." She patted his cheek and left Grimmjow alone in the living room.
Ulquiorra couldn't sleep the night they returned to Tokyo. Exhausted from a late flight, Grimmjow asked Ulquiorra to put him up for the night. Ulquiorra let him toss his bags in a corner and Grimmjow curled up in bed beside him.

Grimmjow's arms held him fast while he slept but Ulquiorra remained awake. His mind remained in Paris, remembering the look of joy and pride on Grimmjow's face. Grimmjow wanted to play for France. He wanted to move to Paris and get signed to a home team there.

Ulquiorra's newly awakened heart cried out at the idea. Grimmjow would leave him. Just like his mother had, just like Ichigo and Orihime were leaving him. Orihime had only messaged him once since the game, as compared to the past when she bombarded him with messages.

Ulquiorra understood why. She was getting married. In high school, they'd numbed each other's loneliness, she'd helped Ulquiorra pick up the pieces of his broken heart and move on. She was a popular girl, he was quiet and withdrawn, viewed as an oddity.

Their relationship had meant more to Ulquiorra than it did to her. Unlike Orihime who had many friends, she was the only person in Ulquiorra's life he could call friend after Grimmjow left him.

Of course she was moving on. Ulquiorra understood, but he couldn't help himself from feeling bitter and regretful. He should have kept his distance, but she'd had to keep forcing herself into his life. And he, idiot he was, had let her in. He should have stayed away from Grimmjow, just like he'd said he would.

If losing Orihime hurt, losing Grimmjow would kill him. Ulquiorra had thought for sure they were on the same page. Instead, Grimmjow was ready to leave him behind as if the past seven months hadn't meant a thing to him. Maybe Ulquiorra was the only one who felt a thing. Had it all been fun and games to Grimmjow?

It was as Ulquiorra had known from the start; he wasn't worthy of anyone's time or affection. He'd been stupid to think he could mean anything to Orihime or Grimmjow. He didn't know what he would say if Grimmjow broached the subject of playing for France. The part of him that was petty, selfish and jealous wanted to forbid Grimmjow to go and force him to stay.

Yet when he remembered the joy in Grimmjow's face, the emotions in his eyes, Ulquiorra hated himself for thinking that way. Grimmjow didn't deserve to be miserable. Ulquiorra couldn't be the one who'd choked the life and happiness from those blue eyes. If he couldn't tell Grimmjow to stay, then there was only one alternative.

Unable to sleep, Ulquiorra gently untangled himself from Grimmjow's arms and took a late shower to ease his mind. Standing beneath the spray of warm water, Ulquiorra leaned against the wall and didn't move for half an hour. His heart ached, the void inside him that had finally closed reopened with a vengeance.

When the time came, if he had to, could he let Grimmjow go?

Later that month, Japan traveled to Russia for their second to last game in the World Cup. While the team set off to explore the city of Moscow together, Ulquiorra branched off on his own until the game.
Ulquiorra explored the Red Square, walking the length of the Kremlin Building to give himself something to focus on. Saint Basil's Cathedral towered over the square, overshadowed only by the Kremlin. The brightly colored domes against the bright red stonework gave the cathedral festive charm.

Ulquiorra entered the cathedral and the insides were just as colorful with paintings on the ceilings and walls. He sat beneath a chandelier and basked in the quiet. When he became too hungry to sit around, Ulquiorra left and found a Russian-style creperie. Nostalgia surged inside him. Of course, when he was trying to keep his distance, something had to come along that reminded him of Grimmjow.

The last time they'd had crepes, they'd been in their late teen years and in love. They'd spent a romantic night together in a hotel in Karakura Town. They fooled around, and Grimmjow made them a French dinner. That night was spiked with bitterness in Ulquiorra's memory, remembering Grimmjow's drug addiction and his own feelings of inferiority. Despite that, it was one of the few good times they'd had before their relationship fell apart.

Ulquiorra stepped inside and ordered a crepe. He sat by the window and ate a crepe filled with cheese. It was good, but he'd enjoyed the sweet crepes he and Grimmjow had made together. His phone vibrated as Grimmjow called him. "Yo. We found some place called Gorky Park. It's an open-air movie theater. Wanna grab a show later?"

Ulquiorra hadn't been to an open-air theater before. He'd wanted to but he struggled to reply. Wasn't he supposed to be keeping his distance? "Maybe."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Ulquiorra had never felt farther than fine in his life.

"Alright, so after the game I'll pick you and we can head out. I don't know what they're playing, but I guess we'll see."

Ulquiorra hummed and hung up. Unsure what else to do and reluctant to explore the city alone, Ulquiorra returned to the hotel and watched Russian soap operas. He didn't understand a word but it gave him something to do.

Grimmjow walked into the hotel room and quirked a brow at him. "You goin' crazy or something?"

Ulquiorra shrugged. Grimmjow fell into bed beside him and watched the TV with lidded eyes. He reached for the remote and switched it off. Grimmjow lay down beside him, his finger tracing circles against Ulquiorra's chest. "You look pathetic. What, you depressed you won't be playing?"

"It will be different to watch and not participate."

Grimmjow grinned, his eyes twinkling. "Yeah, but I don't know. I kinda like it. I wanna see your face in the crowds. Cheer for me. Not that I need it, I think we're gonna win."

"I will." Grimmjow's lips covered his and Ulquiorra wrapped his arms around Grimmjow's shoulders. He was going to miss this.

They spent the rest of the day in the hotel, making out and watching television. They didn't talk much for little needed to be said. When it came time to leave for the Luzhniki Stadium, Ulquiorra accompanied Grimmjow there to wish him good luck.
The rest of the team descended into the locker rooms, Grimmjow turned to face him, grinning. "I'm gonna kick their Russian asses. Everyone else better play half as good since you won't be there."

"Don't get overconfident and try not to get fouled out of the game this time."

Grimmjow's lips pouted. "What, I only did it for you. Admit it, you liked seeing me punch that asshole out."

Ulquiorra scowled and looked Grimmjow in the eyes. "Don't disappoint me."

A grin burst across Grimmjow's face. "Who the hell do you think I am?" He took Ulquiorra's hand and pulled him into a hug. Cameras flashed and reporters babbled but Ulquiorra paid them no mind, losing himself in Grimmjow's warm embrace.

Grimmjow pressed his lips to his ear. "I'll make you pop a big one for me." Ulquiorra shoved Grimmjow off him and Grimmjow guffawed laughter, his head thrown back as he jogged into the locker room.

Ulquiorra sat beside Orihime as Japan commenced the kick off. "Go, Ichigo!" Orihime cried, clapping for her fiancé. Today, Ichigo was captain of team Japan, having won the team coin toss pre-game. Ulquiorra could practically see Grimmjow seething.

It was a close call for Japan. Renji was injured heading the ball and had to be substituted and Russia was leading Japan by two points at half time. Hisagi saved Japan's goal by the skin of his teeth, keeping them tied with Russia after Ichigo scored for the team.

Grimmjow played aggressively, dangerously so. His tackles were risky, narrowly missing the players legs before coming in contact with the ball. Halfway through the first leg, Grimmjow headed the ball away from an enemy player, bowling him over. Ulquiorra put his face in his hand as the referee sounded his whistle.

"You idiot."

Fortunately, Grimmjow was more careful and he stayed penalty-free for the rest of the game. He stayed on top of the strikers and saved a goal for the team when Russia shot for their goal.

Ulquiorra wondered if Grimmjow knew how much people loved him. The crowd went wild watching him, waiting to see what he did next. He was undisciplined and unpredictable but he had the charisma of a rock star to make up for it.

With ten minutes left in the second leg, Russia and Japan were tied four-to-four. Ulquiorra watched with baited breath, his fingers clenched in his lap. Japan clustered around Russia's goal and the Russians scrambled to defend it. Ulquiorra waited for a penalty; the players were frantic and he was worried Grimmjow would do something risky.

In a stunning display of team work, Yumichika kicked the ball out of the crowd and away to Hitsugaya. Hitsugaya launched it into the fray and Grimmjow sprung into the air and headed it into the goal. Japan won the game, five to four and put them in second place. They'd won and they'd done it all without Ulquiorra's help.

The noise of the crowd should have been deafening, but Ulquiorra hardly heard a thing. His team hadn't needed his help to win this game. In fact they'd hardly noticed he was gone. If they won enough points against Mexico, they could qualify for the World Cup.

The World Cup would be over by the end of next year. In what would feel like the blink of an eye,
Grimmjow would be leaving for France. Next month, Ichigo and Orihime would wed and begin their lives together. Ulquiorra would become a distant memory to the people he cared the most for.

Did his own team even need him? What difference did it make if he was on the team or not? For the longest time, soccer had filled the void in his heart his parents and his broken relationship had left him with. Grimmjow closed the void and for the first time in his life, Ulquiorra had someone to play for.

He'd come to realize there was more to playing than just winning. The moments off the field mattered as much if not even more. If Grimmjow left, Ulquiorra didn't know if he could go back to playing after he'd experienced the joy of playing with someone he loved.

So where did he go from here?

To celebrate their victory, Grimmjow wanted to visit Gorky Park and catch a movie. Ulquiorra waited for him outside the stadium, staring through his phone as confusion roiled inside him. "Hey." A warm hand closed over his and tugged. Ulquiorra let Grimmjow pull him to his feet and followed him. Grimmjow let his hand fall away until they reached the park.

Since all of Russia had seen his face tonight, Grimmjow chose a secluded corner of the park beneath a tree. They sat far away from the screen but the sound carried to them on the night breeze. Away from watchful eyes, Grimmjow took Ulquiorra's hand and tangled their fingers together against his thigh.

Desire prickled in Ulquiorra's loins and his breath grew short as Grimmjow pressed warm kisses to his neck. "Were you watching me tonight?" Ulquiorra could hardly take his eyes off him.

"I was. You played beautifully."

Grimmjow's eyes twinkled. "Really? That's one hell of a compliment. It was different without you there."

"How so?"

"I don't know...I liked knowing you were watching me, cheering me on. It's not the same, though."

Ulquiorra didn't know what to think. When Grimmjow put it that way, it sounded like Grimmjow wanted them to keep on playing together. Ulquiorra parted his lips, the words pressing into the back of his throat.

"Then stay with me."

But they remained unsaid.

"Ulquiorra?" Grimmjow's inquisitive eyes were on him, lips pouting in confusion. "What's up? You're quiet."

Ulquiorra responded with a fervent kiss to Grimmjow's lips, pulling him close. Grimmjow responded with earnest and they fell down to the blanket together. They kissed until they were breathless, then Grimmjow fell asleep against his chest, exhausted from the game.

Ulquiorra weaved his fingers through Grimmjow's wild blue locks and watched him sleep. He'd never imagined Grimmjow would lie so vulnerably in his arms, like a panther basking; beautiful and deadly. He hadn't deserved a second chance with Grimmjow.
The past seven months with him were the best thing Ulquiorra could have asked for. He couldn't ask for more, he wasn't worthy. So he would burn this memory into his mind and always remember how fortunate he'd been to know him so intimately.

Their time together had renewed him and given him purpose. Ulquiorra didn't deserve to ask for anything more than Grimmjow had already given him. Ulquiorra brushed aside the bangs draped across Grimmjow's forehead and kissed him.

"I love you." It was the first time he'd said those three words and Ulquiorra meant every one.
Shattered

In October, Ichigo and Orihime were wed in a backyard ceremony surrounded by their friends and family. Renji had the honor of being Ichigo's best man. Rukia and Orihime's other close friends were flower girls. Since Orihime had lost her mother and father long ago, she asked Ulquiorra to walk her down the aisle.

Grimmjow took his seat alone in the first row, hoping the ceremony would be short and sweet so he could hit the buffet. The ceremony began and Ichigo and Orihime's friends and family walked down the aisle. Ichigo waited at the alter, eyes shining and face aglow in a way that made Grimmjow snort.

Orihime emerged, turning every head in the crowd as she walked down the aisle on Ulquiorra's arm. Before he let her go, Orihime held him tightly; tears in her eyes, and Ulquiorra whispered something that made her smile radiantly.

Alright, alright, you're getting married to Kurosaki, not my boyfriend, let go, Grimmjow thought. He didn't know if that was what they were, but it was easier to refer to Ulquiorra as his boyfriend. What else could they be? They were monogamous, they enjoyed each other's company...Grimmjow loved him. If that didn't make Ulquiorra his boyfriend, what did?

Ulquiorra took his seat beside Grimmjow, staring into his lap. Grimmjow patted his thigh. "What's got you looking so pathetic?"

"I became so accustomed to having her around. I started thinking she would be around forever."

Grimmjow's fingers clenched in his pocket as he wondered, am I not enough?

"You'll see her. Maybe she'll invite you over to change diapers or something. Then you'll wished she'd pissed off."

"That's true; they've always told me they wanted children. I'm not sure how great of an uncle I'll be..."

"I'm talking about Kurosaki's diapers."

"Oh."

Grimmjow chuckled and slipped his hand into Ulquiorra's pockets and played with his fingers. "Kurosaki and Inoue are getting married, but so what? You'll see 'em, maybe not as often as you used to, but I'll be around."

"Will you?" Grimmjow gave Ulquiorra an incredulous look and was unsettled when he realized Ulquiorra was being serious. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Ulquiorra looking so down.

"What the hell kinda question is that?" He was insulted Ulquiorra would doubt him. Grimmjow had no intention of letting Ulquiorra go. He wanted to play with Ulquiorra by his side and if that couldn't happen, then he wanted to see Ulquiorra's face in the crowd or be the one cheering him on.

After so many years of playing for himself and being alone, Grimmjow had found someone he cared for on and off the field. Somewhere down the line, playing for himself and playing to win had changed; he had someone to celebrate every goal and someone to walk out of the stadium with.
Ulquiorra had given him everything he wanted and Grimmjow didn't understand how the man could be so blind to his worth. What did he have to say or do to get it through Ulquiorra's head that this man was the best thing that had ever happened to him?

His mother's words resounded in his mind and Grimmjow squirmed. He was a man of action and while he could hurl insults with the best of them, when it came to being open about feelings other than anger or frustration, he bottled it up.

He didn't want to do that with Ulquiorra. When the moment was right, Grimmjow wanted to tell him how he felt. Ulquiorra was having doubts and if Grimmjow let those doubts fester for too long, he worried about the damage it would do to them.

I'm at a wedding. What better time or place to say it?

Grimmjow's skin turned cold and clammy.

Forget it. Maybe later. I'll take him aside during the reception and tell him then. I'm not losing him.

"I now announce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride." Ichigo swept Orihime into his arms and kissed her and the crowd erupted into cheers. Ichigo carried Orihime down the aisle and Orihime tossed her bouquet into the first row. The flowers flew into Ulquiorra's lap and Orihime blew him a kiss over her shoulder as Ichigo carried her into the house.

Grimmjow's temperature went from cold to hot and he snatched the flowers and tossed them over his shoulder into the crowd. "Glad that was short. Come on, I'm starving." The pair followed the newlyweds into the house for dinner.

The wedding cake, a mountain of frosted goodness, awaited them and Grimmjow longed to dig in but the cake wouldn't be served until later. Grimmjow stacked food onto his plate and dug in as the deep bass and the seductive howl of the saxophone carried in through the open door.

Kurosaki had booked a live jazz band for the occasion. Grimmjow supposed the guy was good for something. He knew Ulquiorra liked it; he was sitting outside, watching them play. Or he was avoiding Grimmjow.

Scowling, Grimmjow set his crab cake back on his plate. Frustration boiled inside him. Ulquiorra hadn't been the same since their return from France. He'd been quiet, distant, and they hadn't slept together since they'd returned.

Ulquiorra kept insisting he was busy, or that his leg hurt and he wanted it to mend before their final game of the year. Grimmjow didn't know what he'd done or what happened to make Ulquiorra withdraw, but he wasn't about to let him slip away.

Grimmjow marched outside and dropped into the empty seat beside Ulquiorra. "What'd you get?"

"Salad and a crab cake." Ulquiorra answered, watching the band play.

"Yeah, the crab cakes are fuckin' sick." Grimmjow went quiet, dissatisfied by how forced and unnatural their conversations were.

Ulquiorra was silent, chewing his food, and Grimmjow struggled to find a way to shatter the silence. As reserved as Ulquiorra was, once he started talking, he couldn't stop. Grimmjow had never felt like things were too quiet between them. Even during quiet, lazy Sundays spent in, wrapped up in blankets with Ada curled up between them, the silence between them was charged with unsaid feelings that only need be conveyed with the touch of their lips.
Now, sitting here beside him, there was nothing to fill in the silence. Fear flitted through Grimmjow's stomach and his crab cakes became a nauseous lump in his stomach.

"If I couldn't play soccer, I'd probably play music." Grimmjow should have felt relieved when Ulquiorra broke the silence. Instead, his words made Grimmjow's stomach churn over.

"Sounds boring."

"Maybe to you. I've always liked jazz. I enjoyed playing piano when I was younger."

"You don't play now, though."

"My mother didn't make learning to play very enjoyable. I wished I'd pursued it."

"You know you can do both, right?" Grimmjow couldn't see Ulquiorra doing anything else. He was too good at soccer to waste his time banging on a piano for a living. "You got the fingers for it but playing soccer's made your ass a hell of a lot cuter than sitting on a piano bench would..."

Grimmjow twined his fingers through Ulquiorra's and squeezed.

Ulquiorra returned the pressure, but he eyes didn't meet Grimmjow's and he continued to watch the band play. Grimmjow tugged his hand away. "The world isn't over 'cause you fractured your ankle, alright? You have time to recover so do whatever it takes to get you ready to play. Or I'm gonna win without you."

Ulquiorra scoffed. "I think you're misjudging what I bring to the team. You did fine without me."

His words sparked a flicker of irritation inside Grimmjow. "No, I'm not. We need you, you're our best striker."

"Hitsugaya played well."

"Fuck Hitsugaya. The guy's a fuckin' kid. No one thought he could make those penalty shots."

"But he did."

"If you were there, there wouldn't have been a doubt in anyone's minds! Would you stop it with this crap? He won us one game, he's gotta win us the next game, then the finals! I'm not gonna rest easy until you're back on the team."

"You could do it without me."

Grimmjow's plate clattered to the floor and he sized Ulquiorra's chin in his hand and forced Ulquiorra's empty green eyes to look into his. Grimmjow's heart pounded in his chest and the flicker of irritation inside him fanned into a roaring flame.

"Maybe I don't fucking want to, huh? Shut up and get better. I'm not saying this shit to make you feel better. Hitsugaya doesn't have half the experience you do, I'm not gonna feel good about our chances until you get your ass back in the game."

Ulquiorra's eyes slid away from Grimmjow's and stared into his lap. Grimmjow felt helpless. He couldn't do or say anything to bring Ulquiorra out of this slump. He didn't understand where Ulquiorra's bitterness had come from, but it scared him.

Grimmjow released Ulquiorra's chin and his fingertips traced Ulquiorra's jawline to his cheek. Grimmjow wanted to kiss him, kiss him so desperately that Ulquiorra could never question the value
he possessed, but he couldn't. There were too many people around.

"Fine. You wanna play the piano, go play the fucking piano. Fuck..." Grimmjow shoved away his chair and marched back into the house. He didn't know what else he could say or do to help him. He felt useless. Grimmjow dumped his uneaten food in the trash and collapsed onto the sofa beside Yumichika and Ikkaku.

Am I gonna lose him? The thought gnawed away at him and made him sick. He needed to talk to Ulquiorra. He needed to make sure Ulquiorra knew the way he felt. Orihime jumped to her feet and cried, "Come on, everyone! Let's go dance!" The partygoers hurried out into the yard as the jazz band kicked up a toe-tapping beat.

Grimmjow poured himself some wine went to join them. Orihime grabbed Ulquiorra's hands and tugged him to his feet and, his eyes aglow, Ulquiorra let her pull him into the crowd of dancers. Grimmjow crushed the plastic cup in his hands, sloshing wine all over his hand. "Son of a..."

"Grimmjow, man!" Ikkaku slung his arm around Grimmjow's shoulders. "Let's dance! Come on!" He dragged Grimmjow into the crowd and Grimmjow soon forgot his worries and cares and lost himself in the swing of the music. The music slowed and Ichigo and Orihime danced to Save the Last Dance for Me.

For a long time, Grimmjow had been certain he never wanted to get married, but seeing Ichigo and Orihime so happy made him reconsider. If marriage meant waking up next to Ulquiorra every morning, cooking with him, and spending the rest of their days together, Grimmjow could live with that.

He wasn't about to run out and buy a ring, but he'd never imagined he would feel so strongly for someone that he would go against what he believed in and yet he wasn't afraid. How could he be? Grimmjow spent the rest of the party in a daze, eating more cake than he knew he should and dancing until his feet hurt. Ulquiorra loosened up after a few drinks and joined him. Grimmjow stole Orihime from her new husband and danced around the room with her.

"See, Kurosaki! This is how you keep a woman satisfied!" Grimmjow hollered, dipping Orihime who blushed profusely.

"Yeah, alright, now give me back my wife." Grinning, Ichigo stole away with her and after another hour of dancing and drinking, the party came to an end. Ichigo and Orihime bid farewell to their guests as they climbed into the car service to take them to the airport.

They rode the train and Grimmjow realized they would go separate ways unless Ulquiorra wanted to stay the night. "Can I come over? I wanna talk to you."

"Sure." His stomach did backflips and his breath was short during the walk to his home. Ulquiorra let him in and Grimmjow lingered in the doorway, his heart in his throat.

Calm down. Just ask him. Be casual about it, don't go all Kurosaki with some big love confession. That shit isn't me.

Grimmjow wished he'd had more to drink for this, and that he'd eaten less. Grimmjow dropped onto the couch beside Ulquiorra, twisting his fingers together. Ulquiorra wasn't looking at him, either, his fingers drummed out a beat against his knee.

Grimmjow opened his mouth and the words wouldn't come out. They pressed into the back of his throat and made him sicker by the second. He took in a breath through his nose and released it in a
long, silent sigh.

Just ask him what we are. Get it over with. Do it before he gets insecure and runs off to someone else.

"Ulquiorra—" It was as if his throat were blocked up. Ulquiorra would reject him. How could Ulquiorra feel the same way for him when Grimmjow was his opposite in every way? What if Grimmjow was all alone in his feelings or what if he'd completely misread Ulquiorra?

Grimmjow couldn't believe himself. He'd conquered drug addiction, he'd won them Iran and Russia and Thailand, he'd climbed the top of Mount Takao, he'd confronted his drug dealer. Since when did Grimmjow let fear hold him back? What had Ulquiorra done to him?

His fear turned to frustration and he gnashed his jaw, balling his fists in his pockets.

"If you'd rather talk in the morning that's fine. Or you could let me go first. I have something I wanted to say, too."

Grimmjow's curiosity was piqued. "Really? Fine, go ahead." He internally smacked himself in the head. Since when had he become such a coward?

Ulquiorra parted his lips but the words didn't come, his face twisted in an expression of bitterness that made Grimmjow's heart ache. Grimmjow reached out and poked his cheek. "Come on and tell me. I wanna know what's been making you look so pathetic lately. Or who. Was it Luppi? I'll knock out a tooth for you if—,"

"If we don't win against Mexico, I'm retiring." Something dropped inside of Grimmjow and left him cold and speechless. "There's no reason for me to play if we lose. We've had our fun but our lives will go in different directions soon. I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Grimmjow wanted to ask why, he wanted to know what made Ulquiorra feel this way, but he couldn't speak. It was as if a knife were twisting around in his heart. For a year now Ulquiorra had been his reason for playing, he'd been the reason Grimmjow looked forward to every game.

But he wasn't Ulquiorra's reason. No, to Ulquiorra all their time spent together amounted to a bit of fun while only half an hour ago, Grimmjow had been thinking of their future together.

What an idiot he was. He'd fallen in love with a heartless son of a bitch who was incapable of returning his feelings. As these painful truths washed over him, Grimmjow's vision blurred and his breathes turned short and painful.

"Grimmjow?" Ulquiorra's voice, only moments ago hard and cold, wavered.

Grimmjow shoved Ulquiorra away from him and threw himself to his feet, marching across the room to hide the tears burning in his eyes and constricting his throat. Anger numbed his hurt and he clenched his fists tightly, turning his knuckles white.

"This upsets you?" Ulquiorra's voice was small and confused. Grimmjow wanted to strangle him; he didn't understand how Ulquiorra could be so blind to his feelings.

"Of course it fucking upsets me," he seethed, scrubbing his fist across his eyes, "I'm not a manipulative, emotionless son of a bitch like you." He began to tremble as rage overran his heartache.

Ulquiorra thought relationships were meaningless, yet he'd spent a year in what could only be
described as a monogamous relationship. Grimmjow couldn't understand why Ulquiorra stuck around for so long, but he knew all too well what he'd gotten out of it. Hours of Grimmjow's time and affection, access to Grimmjow's body whenever he wished. He'd given his heart to a sociopath.

"Grimmjow—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Grimmjow roared, "You should have said something!"

"Told you what?"

Grimmjow seized a book lying on the coffee table and hurled it at him. It flew into the wall, breezing just past Ulquiorra's head. "You fucking used me!"

"What should I have told you?"

Grimmjow grabbed the statuette of Senso-ji Temple they'd bought together so many months ago and hurled it into the wall. It shattered, sending shards flying all around the room. "That it meant nothing to you!"

"It...meant something to you?" Ulquiorra's wide eyes were fixed intently on him and Grimmjow felt as if he were a frog laid out for dissection under those bright green eyes. Grimmjow was at a loss; unable to comprehend what he could have done to make his feelings more obvious. Grimmjow would never have introduced just anyone to his aunt or his mother. He would never have let just anyone inside of him. How could Ulquiorra not understand?

Grimmjow didn't want to answer; he didn't want to give Ulquiorra the satisfaction. Grimmjow grabbed his coat and marched to the door. Ulquiorra tried to follow him and Grimmjow lashed out, pushing Ulquiorra as far away from him as could.

Grimmjow wrestled with the knob and threw it open. The door bounced off the wall and slammed behind him. Grimmjow ran home, the cold air stinging his throat as the breath tore from his body like icy daggers.

When he got home, the slammed the door and didn't lock it. He dropped his coat onto the floor and ignored Ada when she trotted over to greet him. Grimmjow blocked and deleted Ulquiorra's number, he threw away every card he'd kept that Ulquiorra had written him. At the sight of the cards, his eyes burned and his throat closed up.

He couldn't understand what Ulquiorra got out of stringing him along for so long. Grimmjow didn't know if he'd wanted revenge for their breakup in high school, or if he'd seen Grimmjow as a social study. Whatever he'd wanted, he'd gotten and at the expense of Grimmjow's trust and affection.

Grimmjow collapsed onto the couch and curled into a ball. Tears blurred his vision, his throat tightened and every breath was like a dagger in his lungs. Ada came out from where she'd hidden and sprung onto the couch and rested just above his head.

Grimmjow didn't let himself cry. He held it all in until his face twisted and his throat ached, pressing his fingertips into his eyes until they throbbed. He refused to give any more of his time or feelings to Ulquiorra. He wished he hadn't run out; he wished he'd cursed him out, punched him, and broken everything in his home.

More than anything, he wanted to wake up and realize he'd been dreaming and find Ulquiorra beside him. Unable to keep his eyes open, Grimmjow fell into a fitful sleep with his arms wrapped tight around himself.
Divided

Chapter Summary

With only two chapters left to go, I'd like to thank everyone for reading this far and for leaving such lovely comments. This has been a lot of fun, and I wasn't expecting anyone to read this. Thanks for all the support!

Grimmjow loved him. For the first time in his life, someone loved him. And Ulquiorra had ruined everything.

Between himself and Grimmjow, Ulquiorra thought for certain he was the only one in love. He was sure Grimmjow only saw their relationship in a purely sexual light. Breaking things off wouldn't be easy, but if he was the only one who would get hurt, what did it matter? Then he saw the furious tears brimming in Grimmjow's eyes and his stomach had churned over.

He'd been wrong. Contrary to everything he thought about himself, Grimmjow had loved him. Ulquiorra lamented that he hadn't known and tried to excuse himself from any blame, arguing that if Grimmjow had loved him, why didn't he say anything?

Then, when Ulquiorra considered that was what Grimmjow wanted to speak to him about, Ulquiorra was horrified. Grimmjow was about to confess love for him, and Ulquiorra had taken his feelings and pelted them back into his face.

In the weeks following their argument, Ulquiorra tried to call him but Grimmjow never responded. Ulquiorra tried to contact him on Facebook but Grimmjow had blocked him. Ulquiorra went to Grimmjow's home, fully expecting to be punched in the face and certain he deserved it.

Ulquiorra buzzed Grimmjow's apartment multiple times and waited outside in the cold for nearly an hour. Grimmjow either wasn't home, or he'd seen Ulquiorra's face in the intercom and he wasn't letting him in.

One hour became two and the cold became unbearable. Ulquiorra accepted defeat and trudged home in the falling snow, his head too heavy to lift. He'd ruined everything. Maybe it was just as well things. They would have gone separate ways after the World Cup.

Or not, Ulquiorra thought with dismay, If Grimmjow knew I loved him, he might have decided not to go to France. He might have stayed. We might have had a future together. Would I have continued playing if I knew he would stay with me?

Ulquiorra was sure he would have gone on playing if he knew Grimmjow might stay by his side. But now, he'd ruined things regardless of the outcome and he had to live with the consequences. Ulquiorra shut himself away in his home, speaking little to anyone until November arrived and Japan began training for their final game of the third round.

Seeing Grimmjow again was like a cold hand reaching into his chest and tearing into his heart. The moment those blue eyes found his, Ulquiorra's heart tumbled over itself and his breath was stolen. He was paralyzed like prey, frozen in place by the rustling in the underbrush.
Grimmjow's eyes widened, blazing with anger and hurt, his lips thinning. Melancholy overran the irritation in his face, and his always-present scowl was gone, leaving his face dark and tired.

Those blue eyes, once a piercing, electric blue were like the flicker of blue in a dying fire. Ulquiorra didn't know what to say, or if he should say anything. Ulquiorra didn't know if he could feel any lower for taking the fire out of Grimmjow's spirit.

Ulquiorra parted his lips and Grimmjow turned away, face twisted in bitterness. He marched into the locker rooms and Ulquiorra watched him go, unable to remember if he'd ever seen Grimmjow so downcast. Throughout practice, Grimmjow's face wouldn't leave his mind and Ulquiorra couldn't look at him.

Ulquiorra showered and changed quickly after practice, eager to leave. "Jaegerjaquez," Luppi's voice purred and irritation flared inside Ulquiorra, "What's wrong? Missing coke? Let me know if you need me to play for you."

"Whatever." Ulquiorra thought he'd misheard. Luppi's bombast deflated as if he'd been poked with a pin. He gaped at Grimmjow and shuffled away, muttering. Ichigo watched Grimmjow, brows furrowed in unease.

"What's eating you? You've been depressed all day."

Grimmjow ignored him and grabbed his coat. "We're not friends, Kurosaki. I don't want your pity. Leave me alone." Grimmjow let the locker room door slam behind him and Ulquiorra felt Ichigo's eyes on the back of his head.

"Did something happen between you two?"

Ulquiorra zipped up his coat and said, "I'd rather not get into it. You need to stay focused."

"Hey—" Ulquiorra left in a hurry, unwilling to get into it with him. When he saw how miserable Grimmjow looked, Ulquiorra wondered if it was possible to continue to have a relationship with him. He was sure he'd screwed up royally.

So when he was cornered outside the stadium by a horde of reporters and they asked him what his plans were if they lost Mexico and the playoffs, Ulquiorra said, "I don't know if I have any interest in playing if we aren't guaranteed a spot in the World Cup after Mexico. I've been playing soccer for many years and I feel like it is time to move on. After the World Cup is over, or if we fail to qualify after Mexico, I'm thinking about retiring."

Knowing that his words would be broadcasted worldwide made Ulquiorra's thoughts a reality. As the words fell like lead from his lips, something in Ulquiorra's soul tugged in another direction.

He didn't know if he meant what he said, or if he wanted to go through with it. But how could he go back to playing for the sake of it after playing beside the man he'd loved and lost yet again?

Then again, what did it matter, he wondered bitterly as he dragged himself home. He knew for a fact his team could play without him. He wasn't needed; not by them and the one person who'd made him feel needed was hurting because of him.

Maybe it was better if he disappeared altogether.

In mid November, the team flew to Mexico City and made straight for Estadio Azteca where they would play within the next two hours. The stadium had hosted two World Cups, and was regarded
as one of the most iconic stadiums in the world.

Estadio Azteca was the perfect place to play Ulquiorra's last game. Mexico was a proud team and even though he'd seen little of the city, it was beautiful. If this was to be his last game, he couldn't have chosen a better team or a better city to play in.

As the team headed to the locker rooms, a large, calloused hand fell upon his shoulder. Kenpachi said, "Talk to me for a minute." They took their seats on a bench outside the stadium. Kenpachi scowled down at the floor, his fingers knotted together in his lap.

"I heard you're thinkin' about retiring. Now is this something you decided or is this something someone's making you do?"

"It was my decision."

"Alright. Why?"

"I've lost interest; the team can play without me."

"Sure they can but maybe they don't want to, ever think about that?" Ulquiorra doubted they'd notice if he was gone. Few people did.

"Well, this is a damn shame, Cifer. You're one of the best strikers I've had… what the hell are you gonna do if you stop playing?"

"I don't know. Other things."

"Yeah, like what? I don't believe a word of this. You were playing great, you were enjoying it, then you got injured. Cifer, people get hurt; it doesn't make them any less valuable to the team."

"I don't have any interest in playing anymore."

Kenpachi sighed. "Well, you had a good run. Some people your age fizzle out, some of them aren't successful to begin with. I think people will remember you after you're gone. It's a shame you're going so soon, but fine. I think this is a mistake, Cifer, but hopefully you'll realize that in time."

Wordlessly, Ulquiorra got to his feet and entered the locker rooms. The team turned their heads and their chatter died down when they saw him. Ichigo, scowling, looked away and tugged on his shoes. Ulquiorra opened up his bag and pulled out his jersey. He remembered the excitement he'd felt the first day he'd tried it on. He'd been so excited to play in the World Cup, eager to feel the pitch under his feet and put his wandering mind to rest.

For years, playing soccer had been little more than a distraction. A placeholder for the meaning he was lacking and looking for. Then he'd found Grimmjow again and he hadn't had to wonder what he needed to feel at peace in life. For the past eight months, he'd had it; everything he'd been looking for, someone to play with, someone he loved and cared for.

With Grimmjow beside him on the field, he'd felt complete at long last. Without him, the field would be empty and meaningless. It was good he was retiring. He couldn't go back to that.

Someone gripped his arm and Ulquiorra turned and found Ichigo behind him. He was scowling but his eyes were anguished. Ichigo tugged and said, "Come on. I wanna talk to you." Ichigo led him to the showers and slammed the door. Ichigo chewed his lower lip, contemplating what he had to say. Ulquiorra waited, trying to ignore the guilt festering inside him at the sight of those pained almond eyes.
"I thought we were friends." Something in Ulquiorra's soul clenched and he couldn't meet Ichigo's gaze.

"We are."

"Then why did I hear you were retiring through the fucking news?" Ichigo's voice broke and he averted his gaze, lips tightly clenched. Ulquiorra didn't know what to say. He'd assumed his retirement would hurt no one but himself, instead he was hurting the people who mattered the most to him.

"We're so close. If we win this game, we're going to Germany. But I don't know if I wanna go if you're not gonna be there."

Ulquiorra's breath caught. "You... you should. You've wanted this for a long time."

"You have, too!" Ichigo gripped his shoulders, "So why the hell are you leaving? I thought we were going to do this together. I thought you were my friend."

"I was. I never knew I was yours."

"You are! You always were!" Ichigo's voice echoed off the tiles. Ulquiorra was speechless. For so many years, he'd thought Ichigo only saw him as his girlfriend's odd friend. Instead, Ichigo was heartbroken to imagine they would never play together again.

"I know Orihime and I haven't been there like we used to. But I'm not the kinda guy that just forgets about my friends, neither is she. Things are just..."

"Different."

"Yeah." Ichigo's hands fell away from his shoulders and he leaned back against the door. "I guess I was stupid for thinking things would be the same once we started playing again. You're not retiring because of us, right?"

"No."

"Then—"

"Grimmjow's leaving to play in France after the World Cup is over. That could be within the next year, or within a few months if we lose the playoffs and fail to qualify."

"So?" Ulquiorra wished he hadn't said anything. Orihime would have understood. Ichigo had always been slower on the uptake.

"Nothing." Ulquiorra turned to leave and Ichigo grabbed his wrist.

"Wait a second... Wait. Wait, wait, wait." Ichigo's eyes got wider, his mouth slipped open. "Wait, no, hang on... Were the rumors true? Were you guys actually—?"

"I don't want to get into it. He and I are close; there's no reason for me to play if he isn't here."

"Holy—" Ichigo let go of his wrist and gaped at him. "You two—You are!"

"Were. I ended it last month."

"That explains it. Grimmjow's been so sour lately. I was worried he was suffering withdrawals or something. Holy hell, man, the guy really likes you. Grimmjow really likes you. Holy shit,
Grimmjow's gay?"

"Bisexual."

"Oh. I couldn't really picture him full-on gay. Uh..." Ichigo's face was the color of a tomato. "Wow, yeah the guy is really depressed, Ulquiorra. He must have really been into you."

"He was. I didn't know."

"Hey," Ichigo's face brightened. "Maybe if he knew, he'd stay."

"No. I don't want to force him—"

"He'd be making the decision himself, you idiot! You're not forcing him to do anything. If he knew you felt the same, he might stay. Getting him to listen is gonna be hard, though."

"Of course. You think so?"

"I do, but what do I know? Get your head outta your ass and talk to him! I've been telling you for ages, you never know what anyone thinks of you. This is what you get for not listening to me."

Ulquiorra wanted to talk to Grimmjow. He needed to know if he still had a chance to make things right. He brushed by Ichigo and threw open the door and came face to face with a scowling Grimmjow.

"The hell were you two doing in there?"

Ichigo averted Grimmjow's gaze. "Nothing."

Grimmjow curled his lip, eyes burning into Ichigo's. The muscles in his arm were taut. Ulquiorra was pleased to know Grimmjow was jealous. Maybe there was still a chance for them. "You sure moved on quickly, didn't you?" Grimmjow sneered. "You guys all chummy now that I'm not in the way?"

"We were actually talking about you," Ichigo began, shoving Ulquiorra towards Grimmjow. "We were thinking—"

"I don't have to guess," Grimmjow growled. "If Ulquiorra here has put any doubts in your head about me, let's settle it right now. I've been wanting to kick your ass since I got on the team."

"Whoa, hang on!" Before things could get ugly, Ulquiorra grabbed Grimmjow's arm.

Grimmjow froze under his touch, the fire in his eyes sputtering as surprise burst across his face. Ulquiorra said, "I want to talk to you."

Grimmjow wrenched his arm out of Ulquiorra's grasp. "I don't." He turned and Ulquiorra pursued him through the locker room. Before Grimmjow could step outside, Ulquiorra lunged and threw him up against the lockers. The lockers rattled, turning the heads of their teammates. Grimmjow's lip curled and his nostrils flared, but Ulquiorra could see the anguish darkening his eyes. "Let me go or I'm breaking your jaw."

"I'd deserve it."

Grimmjow shoved him and continued down the hall. Ulquiorra shot after him and seized his wrist. "Grimmjow—" Grimmjow whirled around and shoved him in the chest and Ulquiorra collided into the lockers.
"Fuck off!"

"I didn't know you had feelings for me."

Grimmjow's eyes blazed and his mouth fell open in disbelief. "Didn't know? What did I have to do, spell it out for you?"

"I thought it was a game to you."

"I went way the hell outta my way to let you know how I felt; it's your fault you didn't get it, not mine!"

"How was I supposed to know you weren't in it for the fun of it? You never said anything."

"Neither did you!"

"Then I'll say it now; I love you."

Grimmjow's eyes widened and he lost his fire, seeming to shrink before Ulquiorra's eyes. Hoping for the best, Ulquiorra continued, "You wanted to play in France. I assumed if I'd meant anything to you, you would have wanted to stay. That's why I did it. It wasn't because I didn't care about you. I was over thinking things."

Grimmjow was silent for nearly a minute, staring down at the floor as if hoping he'd find all his answers inscribed there. His fingers curled and his lips thinned. He smiled a vicious smile that didn't touch his eyes. "I don't believe you."

"Why would I say I loved you if I didn't?"

"I don't… Fuck, you know what, even if you did mean it, I'm glad we ended it. You know why? You get scared, you run away. Things get complicated, you run away. You're always making excuses. Life is meaningless, love is meaningless, nothing matters. Who gives a fuck! You want something, you get it and everything else can go to hell!"

"Then what do you want?"

"I want you to say fuck it and grab life by the fucking horns and have the balls to go after the things you want! But you can't do that, can you?"

"You made me want to."

"But I wasn't enough, was I? Yeah, well, you know what? I'm so fucking tired of not being good enough. I'm not taking that shit, especially not from you." Grimmjow turned away and left Ulquiorra alone.

Go after what I want, Ulquiorra thought, watching Grimmjow's retreating figure, Do I want to play with him even if I know it might not last? Could I love him knowing I may have to let him go?
Japan's final game in the third round commenced as Mexico kicked off. The roar of the crowd swept over Ulquiorra like a tidal wave, drowning him. He closed his eyes and tried to savor the sound he might never hear again. For so many years, the victorious roar of the crowd felt like coming home.

Ulquiorra set his sights on the goal keeper; Sado "Chad" Yasutora, Ichigo's high-school friend and a monster of a goal keeper. Mexico was a good team, but Chad's towering stature had kept them afloat against the toughest teams.

Ulquiorra thought there should be a rule against having a goalie that towered over the net, but he didn't make the rules. He and Hitsugaya were the strikers this game as per usual, but Hitsugaya had the idea of smuggling in a third striker to take Chad by surprise.

Grimmjow eagerly volunteered to score goals when he thought he could pull it off. Grimmjow was a versatile player and he was good at sneaking in goals. Ulquiorra trusted him to help them. Within fifteen minutes of the first leg, Grimmjow assisted in an attempt on Mexico's goal. Ichigo kicked the ball into Mexico's side of the field and away from Japan's goal.

Ulquiorra tailed Grimmjow and watched as he threw himself into a tackle. In his desperation, Grimmjow's timing was off and Mexico's striker, Szayelaporro Granz, tumbled head over heels and lay face down in the mud before Grimmjow had even tickled the ball with his toes.

"You idiot." Ulquiorra muttered as the referee sounded his whistle. Worst of all, Grimmjow had earned Mexico a direct free kick. Though Japan formed a wall in front of their goal, Grantz shot around it and scored Mexico their first goal.

Twenty minutes flew by and Japan hadn't scored a goal yet.

Close to Mexico's goal post, Grimmjow made an attempt at goal. Grimmjow scooped the ball on his laces and hurled it. Chad sprung into the air with speed no man his height ought to possess and caught the ball on his head. Grimmjow swore, spitting onto the pitch and Mexico's side of the stadium roared their support for Chad's save.

Ulquiorra tailed Grimmjow as he pursued one of Mexico's strikers, pelting towards Japan's goal. Grimmjow dropped into a tackle and Ichigo possessed the ball as it tumbled away from Mexico's striker. Granz ran out in front of Ichigo before he could shoot around him. Ikakku beckoned, waving
behind Granz, and Ichigo tried to pass to Ikkaku.

Granz took off after the ball and flipped onto his back, catching the ball on his toes as he fell backwards onto the pitch. Hisagi lunged too early and the ball flew over his shoulder and into Japan's net.

"Goal! What an incredible goal from Mexico's Szayel Aporro Granz! You've never see anything like this before in your life!"

Ulquiorra looked up at the scoreboard and was dismayed when he realized they had less than twenty minutes before half time and they hadn't scored once.

With only fifteen minutes to go before half-time, Japan broke through Mexico's defense and brought the ball dangerously close to Mexico's goal. Over the roar of the crowd and the shouting from his teammates, Ulquiorra heard a call of his name. He turned in time to see Grimmjow head the ball over the crowd towards him. Ulquiorra trapped the ball against his chest and charged for the goal.

He kicked towards the corner of the net and Chad blocked his shot. Grimmjow ran at the ball as it bounced off Chad's body and went for an assist. Dordoni rammed him and Grimmjow flew off his feet and tumbled over, spraying grass up behind him. "Nice try, nino!" He shouted over the referee's whistle. Dordoni was fouled and Japan had a shot at their first goal.

His mouth dry, Ulquiorra watched as Grimmjow approached the ball and Chad faced him, hands on his knees. The referee sounded his whistle and Grimmjow charged, his eyes blazing, and sent the ball flying.

Chad was seconds ahead of him, diving to the ground and cradling the ball against his chest. If he'd been any later, the ball would have rolled under him and Japan would have had their first goal.

Grimmjow thrust his hands into the air. "Fuck!" He bellowed.

Things went from bad to worse as with only a minute left until half time, Mexico scored their third goal of the match. As Japan trudged off the field, dirty and sweaty, Ulquiorra came to a halt as the realization sunk in. If they lost today, this would be the last game he ever played.

Ulquiorra fell into a seat; hands clasped as he stared down at the pitch. With Mexico's strikers and
their talented goal-keeper, the chances were very high they could lose today. Ulquiorra began to realize that while he'd announced he would retire if they lost today, he hadn't actually assumed they would lose. But they were losing.

Short of breath, his stomach twisting, Ulquiorra dropped his face into his hands and screwed his eyes tightly shut.

_I don't want to lose. I can't lose. I don't want to retire._

Ulquiorra wanted to go to the Finals; he wanted to go to Germany with his team. With Grimmjow. If he retired, he would lose so much more than just his career; he would lose everything he loved most in life.

He had to find a way to give his team the advantage. Now that all he loved was at stake, Ulquiorra vowed to play like he never had before.

He was going to win them a spot in Germany or go out trying.

The second leg commenced with a kick off that launched the ball into Mexico's side of the field. For the first twenty minutes, Japan and Mexico battled for control over the ball. The ball plummeted into Mexico's penalty box and Grimmjow kicked it Ulquiorra's way. Ulquiorra caught the ball off the side of his foot, rocketing it towards goal. Chad lunged, the ball caressing his fingertips before flying over his head and into the back of the net.

The announcer babbled incoherently and Japan's hope for a victorious match came surging back in full force. Breathless, Ulquiorra slumped over against his knees. He'd wanted so badly to start off the second leg with a goal but he hadn't dared to hope he could do it. All he'd had to do was try his hardest.

Ulquiorra was crushed to Ichigo's chest and jostled as Ichigo jumped up and down. Ikkaku ripped off his jersey and ran around the field, waving it over his head like a banner. The referee sounded his whistle and Ikkaku shouted his defense while the referee ranted at him.

Ulquiorra snorted. A warm hand fell upon his shoulder and he turned to find Grimmjow walking away, letting his hand fall back to his side. Ulquiorra's shoulder tingled and he watched Grimmjow
leave. He was surprised Grimmjow hadn't attempted a goal. In passing to Ulquiorra, Grimmjow had put the needs of the team first.

Play resumed with forty minutes remaining. Granz attempted Mexico's fourth goal of the match and Hisagi caught the ball against his chest. Mexico groaned and booed their disappointment while Japan went wild in their relief.

Ulquiorra took possession. Too close to Mexico's goal to settle for anything less, Ulquiorra ran. Hands clawed into his jersey and Ulquiorra pushed on, the breath tearing from his lungs. Everything else was a blur except for the ball against his feet.

Ulquiorra ran into the penalty box and passed Chad without an attempt at goal. Chad was thrown off, and Ulquiorra sent the ball rolling into the goal. Chad could only blink as he processed what had happened.

Ulquiorra turned, breathless and relieved, and saw bright blue as Grimmjow enveloped him in his arms. Ulquiorra lost himself in the warmth and strength of his arms. He'd been so sure he would never feel those arms around him again. Grimmjow hoisted Ulquiorra into his arms and paraded him in a circle to the roar of support from the crowd.

Ulquiorra had never felt closer to flying. Grimmjow set him down and pulled him close, clapping him on the shoulder. He pressed his lips to Ulquiorra's ear and murmured, "We've fuckin' got this. Let's kick their asses."

Despite everything, they'd come together again. Ulquiorra couldn't say if this rekindled camaraderie would last beyond the match, but he vowed to savor every second of it. With twenty minutes on the clock, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra pulled it together and with Grimmjow's help, Ulquiorra scored Japan another goal, evening their score against Mexico.

"Goal! Goal! Goal! Jaegerjaquez and Cifer are at it again! They are unstoppable! What a sensational goal! A hat-trick from Cifer; three goals in a row all within the second leg! What a way to turn the tables for Japan. With only fifteen minutes left on the clock, we are at a tie. Things can really go in any direction now."

With five minutes remaining, Mexico got too close for comfort. Ulquiorra was certain that at any moment, Mexico would score and they would lose. There wasn't anything he could do; every time he kicked the ball away, a pair of frantic feet would send it rocketing back towards goal.
Hisagi flew in and blocked a shot at Japan's goal. Ulquiorra's relief turned to dread; the ball bounced off Hisagi's body and flew into a Mexican striker's clutches and he shot for Japan's goal. Ulquiorra dropped his face into his pitch, unable to look. He didn't need to; Mexico had won. There was no time to even the score. Then the referee sounded his whistle and the crowd booed and jeered.

Ulquiorra rolled over and stared in astonishment at Grimmjow, clutching the ball in both his hands. Scowling and unable to meet his team's horrified gaze; Grimmjow dropped the ball and didn't utter a sound as the referee reprimanded him. The referee held up the red card for the whole stadium to see and Grimmjow didn't argue.

Ulquiorra scrambled onto his knees and watched as Grimmjow was escorted towards the stand. The team followed, babbling, trying to argue and the referee shouted them down. Ulquiorra heaved himself to his feet and shoved through his team, following Grimmjow.

"Grimmjow, what did you do?"

"I hand-balled. Need me to spell it out for you?" Grimmjow said, wrenching open the door to the stand. Ulquiorra grabbed his wrist and whirled him around.

"You're an idiot. How could you why would you do something so stupid?"

"I couldn't have stopped it if I fucking wanted to, alright?"

"How are we supposed to play short a defender? We have five minutes."

"Yeah, well five minutes is better than nothing, right? So make it count."

Ulquiorra was speechless. Grimmjow had made a huge sacrifice for their team and worst of all, Ulquiorra didn't know if he could make his loss worth it. Grimmjow took hold of his shoulders, his grip painful in his desperation. His eyes wild and wide, Grimmjow knocked his forehead against Ulquiorra's.

Their eyes locked and Grimmjow's hands fell from his shoulders to his elbows and pulled Ulquiorra close. "Win, Ulquiorra." His breath was hot against Ulquiorra's lips and his hands trembled. Grimmjow released him and tore his eyes away, turning his back on Ulquiorra as left the field.
His heart on his throat, Ulquiorra walked back to the team on legs like gelatin. The referee called a halt to play and announced a penalty shoot-out to determine the winner. The referee wrote down a list of the best kickers from each team.

Ichigo, Ikkaku, Hitsugaya and Ulquiorra were chosen from Japan. Szayelaporro Granz, Dordoni Socaccio, Yammy Llargo, and Gantenbainne Mosqueda were selected to kick for Mexico. They had five shots; whoever scored the most goals was taking their team to the World Cup.

The minutes ticked by and the kickers took their shots. On the screens, Japan's supporters dried their eyes and Mexico's fans sat on the edge of their seats. Ulquiorra watched the scoreboard with his heart in his throat. Ulquiorra's throat was dry as the announcer proclaimed a tie between the teams. Mexico botched two of their five penalties. If Japan scored the next goal, they were be World Cup qualifiers.

The referee beckoned and Ulquiorra went to stand behind the ball. The whistles and cheers of the crowd were drowned out by his heartbeat. Ulquiorra looked from the ball to Chad, guarding the goal post, calm and imposing even in the wake of his team's encroaching defeat.

Of all the eyes watching him, Grimmjow's attention was all Ulquiorra could notice. Ulquiorra turned and found Grimmjow in the stands, leaning forward in his seat, wide eyes locked on Ulquiorra as if he were the only person in the stadium who mattered.

Ulquiorra closed his eyes tightly, blocking out those intense blue eyes. *Let me score*, he thought, *let me go to Germany with him. It doesn't matter for how long it lasts or how it ends, just let me stay with him a little longer*...

The referee sounded the whistle. Ulquiorra launched the ball through the air and Chad didn't have time to bat an eye as the ball soared between his legs and into the goal. Japan's victorious roar swept over Ulquiorra and his legs trembled. Joy surged from deep inside him, turning his breath to short gasps.

"And Japan is World Cup qualifiers!" The announcer cried and Ulquiorra realized he wasn't dreaming. They were going to Germany. He was going to Germany and Grimmjow was going with him. Ichigo threw his arms around Ulquiorra, sobbing, and his teammates enveloped him but Ulquiorra was blind to anyone else.

Numbly, he separated himself from his teammates and looked towards the stand where Grimmjow
stood, bearing a smile that split his face in two, his eyes shining with joy and full of love only for Ulquiorra. Grimmjow threw open the stand door and ran to him and they met one another halfway.

Grimmjow thrust out his hand and Ulquiorra took it. Ulquiorra tugged his hand and he pulled Grimmjow close enough to see the unshed tears shining in his eyes. The warmth and softness of Grimmjow’s lips covered his. Grimmjow was taut against him for nearly a minute, then his arms flew around Ulquiorra’s shoulders. His fingers weaved through Ulquiorra's hair as he returned the kiss, lips trembling.

Blinding flashes of light burst through his shuttered eyelids and when he opened his eyes, he found himself and Grimmjow surrounded by an army of reporters. The crowd cheered, some booed, but most people were on their feet and echoing their support and jubilation. Then Grimmjow’s hand was in his and he was running and Ulquiorra ran with him. They broke through the throng of reporters and ran through the stadium and out into the streets. "Grimmjow, where...?"

"Who cares? This way!" Grimmjow led him left and the world became a blur. Grimmjow’s laughter, wild and free, carried on the wind as they ran without a care as to where they were going. Ulquiorra couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so alive. They tore through the streets together, hand in hand, not a care given to the stares they received and the heads they turned.

Ulquiorra thought his lungs would burst when they stopped running. They'd found Parque De Santa Ursula, a park just behind the stadium. The dirt path was surrounded by white fences and snow-blanketed trees. The park was dark and quiet, theirs for the taking with no one around to intrude. Grimmjow climbed the fence and walked among the trees and Ulquiorra followed him.

The park spun before his eyes as Ulquiorra was turned around and his back collided into a tree trunk. Flurries of snow rained down upon them and though he was only in his jersey and shorts, Ulquiorra hardly felt the cold when Grimmjow's arms wrapped around him.

Grimmjow's lips, fervent and hungry, captured Ulquiorra's, and Ulquiorra was helpless from kissing him back with any less enthusiasm. He swept his fingers through Grimmjow's hair and tugged to bring them closer, their bodies melding together as if they were a single being.

Ulquiorra didn't know how long they remained tangled up together beneath the tree but they kissed until they were breathless. The desperation in their kiss faded away and Grimmjow's arms went around his shoulders and held him tightly. Grimmjow huffed laughter against his lips and he moved back to bump his forehead against Ulquiorra's, blue eyes shining like the moon off the surface of the ocean.
"Can't fuckin' believe you did that..."

"Did I surprise you?"

Grimmjow bared his teeth in a smile and shrugged. "A little bit. I wanna see Berlin with you."

"I do, too." Ulquiorra pulled him close and Grimmjow met him halfway in a kiss that was slow and gentle. No matter what happened in Germany, whether they won or lost, he wanted to go wherever Grimmjow did.

It wasn't in Ulquiorra's nature to be optimistic, but as he and Grimmjow walked hand in hand, recounting the incredible game they'd played, Ulquiorra was certain they were going to win.

Unfortunately, life is never certain and things very rarely go according to plan.
We Are The Champions

Chapter Notes

For those who have stuck around from the very beginning; thank you. I loved sharing this story and revisiting my love for this amazing pairing. Thanks for all the lovely comments. Until next time!

That night after Ulquiorra's hat trick won them a spot in the World Cup Finals a year ago, Grimmjow felt for certain that the World Cup was in their hands. But if Grimmjow had learned anything it was that life is a cruel and unpredictable thing.

The soccer world was abuzz over the course of 2018. Fans reactions to Grimmjow and Ulquiorra's relationship were mixed, but so far, no one had bothered them. They were sent the occasional hate-mail or booed when they walked onto the field, but they kept their chins up. They kept their public displays of affection subtle and saved their more intimate celebrations for once they were alone team was supportive and to Grimmjow's relief, Kenpachi was hardly surprised.

In January, the 32 qualified teams were drawn into four groups of eight. In June, Japan played three games against Senegal, Poland and Columbia and emerged as victors in the group stage.

They entered the knockout stage in July and competed against the remaining teams. They triumphed in the knockout stage and quarterfinals. Grimmjow thought that Mexico was the most intense game of his career, but throughout the semifinal, his heart had been in his throat. They'd won three to zero and earned themselves a place in the final game on July 15th.

In November the team traveled to Berlin to battle Germany for the greatest prize in soccer. Grimmjow knew from the start it would be a hard won game. Ywach, captain of the Wandereich, Germany's beloved home team, was a formidable defender. The team looked up to him and his aggression on the field fueled their desire to win at whatever cost.

When Ywach assisted in Germany's third goal of the match only within the first leg, Grimmjow's frustration was a bitter taste in the back of his throat. In a desperate attempt to turn things their way, Japan scored their second goal in the second leg, evening the score. Grimmjow's hopes were high; one more goal, and Japan had could be World Cup champions.

The hopes of their country fell on their shoulders. In the stands, Japan dried their eyes and cheered, and not one person took their seat as Japan and Germany were brought neck to neck. Grimmjow thought they could win. It only seemed fair that they should win; he'd faced his demons and overcome so much to be in Germany, fighting to win the World Cup for his country.

He deserved to win. What was it all for if he couldn't win?

With the ball under his feet, Grimmjow ran for goal. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Ulquiorra running to meet him, eyes locked on Grimmjow's as he awaited Grimmjow's pass. They would win it together, Grimmjow couldn't think of any other way he wanted to win than with Ulquiorra.

Then with only five minutes remaining, Ywach stole the ball from under Grimmjow's feet. The world spun before Grimmjow's eyes and the wind was knocked from his lungs. He scrambled to his
feet, shredding grass and dirt under his fingertips, and looked up to see Germany score the fourth and final goal of the World Cup. The referee sounded the whistle and it was over. After everything, Japan lost.

At first, Grimmjow was numb to everything, unwilling to believe it. Ichigo's roar of fury and defeat shook him to his core and as he watched his teammates despair and saw Ywach and his cheering teammates hoist the cup that should have been theirs into the air, Grimmjow realized what he'd lost.

Grimmjow couldn't react, it didn't feel real. Without a word to his teammates, he left the pitch and ignored the reporters hounding him for questions. A week went by and it still didn't feel real. A month later, Grimmjow didn't want to get out of bed. Everything he'd worked so hard for had been stolen from him. Yet through the bitter disappointment that left him in a haze, through the ache of loss, anger burned deep inside him that nothing could extinguish.

Grimmjow wanted to do it all over again and this time, he wanted to win. And he wanted Ulquiorra to be beside him every step of the way.

Until then, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra began another kind of adventure. One they hadn't imagined they'd undertake with anyone. Ulquiorra spent the night at Grimmjow's apartment as he usually did. As per their usual routine, Grimmjow made them both breakfast, they watched television curled up under their blankets, and then it was time for Ulquiorra to leave.

Grimmjow followed him to the door with a heavy heart and kissed him goodbye. Not for the first time, a thought sprung into his head of what it might be like to give him a welcome home kiss instead. Before Ulquiorra could leave, Grimmjow gripped his hips and held him fast.

"Move in with me."

He'd been expecting a barrage of questions, a quirked brow or dead silence. Instead Ulquiorra said, "I would like that."

Grimmjow was helpless to stop himself from grinning ear to ear. "Really?"

"It makes sense. We live in the same district; you keep leaving your clothes at my place."

"Yeah, never mind the fact that we love each other and wanna spend more time together, right? Let's do it because it's practical."

"At this point, it is the most practical thing to do."

"I'm tired of having to wait twenty five minutes to fuck you 'cause the train was slow. But if you're here and I'm here…"

"Did you want to move in with me, or would you rather I moved in with you?"

Grimmjow hesitated. He hadn't expected Ulquiorra to so readily agree, but would Ulquiorra to open to his next idea? "I'm tired of Tokyo. I was thinking we could move to Kyoto."

Ulquiorra was silent, his face unreadable as he digested Grimmjow's idea. Grimmjow gripped Ulquiorra's shoulders and said, "Come on. You love it there. My aunt and my nephews are real close by. My ma is, too."

"What's the price of living?"

A pin popped Grimmjow's hope and it slowly began to deflate. "Not that much better than Tokyo."
"Have you been looking at houses?"

"The hell do you think I am, stupid? I found a great, traditional house. It's only a fifteen minute walk to my aunt's. It's real nice; it's in the country, it's quiet. It's way the hell cheaper than this place."

"It's fine. Money isn't an issue. I just wanted to know you've thought this through."

"Course I have! I'm fuckin' serious about this. So, what do you think?"

Ulquiorra stood up on his toes and kissed him. "I'm surprised by you. When were you thinking of moving?"

Grimmjow hummed against Ulquiorra's lips, his heart doing a dance for joy in his chest. "When do you think? As soon as possible."

"Alright. How soon?"

"Before the end of the year." Ulquiorra opened his mouth and nothing came out. Grimmjow held his breath.

"How about within a few months?"

"Come on, what do we have to wait for? What's the problem?"

Ulquiorra pursed his lips, brows furrowing. Grimmjow's chest tightened. He'd thought for sure the timing was right. Grimmjow said, "Fuck Kyoto. It was an idea. If you want us to stay in Tokyo, that's fine." He'd fallen in love with the idea of them living in Kyoto, but at the end of the day, it was Ulquiorra he wanted to be with.

"No, I like the idea. I like Kyoto, and I would love to live there with you." Grimmjow could scarcely believe his luck.

"Seriously?"

"Do I need to spell it out for you?"

Grimmjow grinned and tugged him closer. "Go on."

"Fine... I would love to live with you, Grimmjow. Good enough?"

His heart aflutter for the first time since their loss against Germany, Grimmjow covered Ulquiorra's lips in eager kisses and they made sure to let Grimmjow's old bedroom know how much they would miss it.

In late December, Grimmjow and Ulquiorra finished preparations for their move at the end of the week. Ichigo and Orihime threw their traditional Christmas party and the pair attended. As Grimmjow stepped onto the driveway, he felt like he'd stepped back in time.

Kurosaki's family home was decorated the same as it was a year ago. Grimmjow remembered Kurosaki sputtering in horror when he realized Grimmjow had come to his party. He remembered meeting Chad and how excited he was to play against him. More than anything, he remembered Ulquiorra stepping out of his car in a suit and stealing away all the breath in his body.

He'd wanted him so much and he'd felt certain he would never have him and here they were, a year later, arm in arm as they rang Kurosaki's doorbell and waited out in the cold to be invited in. The
"Watch it, woman, you'll poke my eye out with that thing!" Grimmjow squawked, untangling himself from her.

"Thing?" Orihime's eyes swelled with tears. "What do you mean? That's my child, not a thing, Grimmjow-kun! You're so insensitive!"

"I see your hormones haven't kicked in yet." Ulquiorra said, putting his arm on her shoulder as he accompanied the distraught red-head inside.

"No, I'm fine, don't be silly!" Orihime brightened instantly, alarming Grimmjow. "I'm just so excited for you to meet the baby!" She began to cry again and Grimmjow shuffled away towards the cookies and eggnog.

Instead, he bumped into Ichigo as he rounded the corner. Ichigo tensed, eyes widening as his eggnog splashed against Grimmjow's sweater. Grimmjow scowled, internally dancing with glee as Kurosaki looked more and more like a dog that shit in the house.

Grimmjow raised his hand and Kurosaki jolted, ready to defend himself. Grimmjow slapped him on the shoulder. "Kurosaki."

"G-Grimmjow." Ichigo deflated like a popped balloon and Grimmjow sniggered as he went to pour himself a drink. By the roaring fire, he saw the back of Ikkaku's bald head, red hair that resembled a pineapple, and Yumichika's bob haircut decorated with festive bows. "Yo, losers!" Grimmjow bellowed and they all whirled around to face him, beaming.

"Hey, Grimmjow!" They cried, leaping up to greet him. Grimmjow crushed their hands in enthusiastic handshakes.

"Merry Christmas, you sorry assholes. Seriously, what the hell kinda game was that? You guys sucked!" Grimmjow said.

"No one sucked more than him," Ikkaku cried, leaping to his feet and wrestling Chad into a hug as the giant marched inside, covered in snow.

"Oh man, did you suck!" Renji exclaimed, slapping Chad on the back. "How did you not see that nutmeg coming?"

"That was a very talented shot," Chad commended, turning to Ulquiorra, "You all played very well."

"Oh shut up," Grimmjow grinned at the sight of Kenpachi, covered in snow, jingle bells attached to every spike in his wild hair, "Don't flatter them, it goes straight to their heads. So let's get one thing straight; you guys blew. That last game was asinine! I retired because of you morons."

One by one, Grimmjow watched as his teammates' faces fell. Grimmjow found it hard to meet Kenpachi's gaze. He felt like he'd let his coach down. He wanted to win for him; the only man he'd considered a father.

"But we got this closer than any other team I've coached, and I'm proud of you assholes. So come here!" Grinning viciously, Kenpachi shook his team's hands, wrestling them into bear hugs and letting them go with a hearty clap on the back. When his turn came, Grimmjow crushed Kenpachi to him and held him tightly. Their hug didn't last longer than any of the others, but Grimmjow savored every second of it.
The team gathered around the fire, drinking and munching down Orihime's homemade cookies. They sang carols and laughed until Grimmjow's voice was hoarse and then the time came for them all to go their separate ways.

"So, Grimmjow, any plans for the new year?" Ikkaku asked, tying his scarf.

Grimmjow said, "I'm moving to Kyoto in a week." The chatter died down and his friends' faces turned solemn. "I'll probably get myself signed to a team there. I'm not giving up soccer, no way in hell. It's been a blast, guys."

Ichigo frowned. "Yeah. It has."

"I'm going with him." Ulquiorra announced and every head in the room turned his way.

Orihime's face fell. Renji said, "That's a shame. We'll miss seeing you guys."

Kenpachi stood up, grabbing his scarf. "Good luck on the move, kids. Look, I'm heading out. It was a pleasure to work with you guys. I'll be watching the next Cup. I hope to see you all on the big stage."

Grimmjow left his team alone and followed Kenpachi to the door. "Hey." Kenpachi turned in the doorway, the wind ruffling his scarf. Grimmjow said, "Thanks. For everything." Two years ago, when he'd been a paranoid and insecure addict, knowing Kenpachi believed in him had meant the world to him. Without that support, he didn't know if he would have had the motivation to recover.

"The hell are you thanking me for? You did it all yourself. Give yourself some credit, Jaegerjaquez. But not too much. And work on your discipline on the field, alright? You've got more potential than any other guy I've worked with." Kenpachi looked at him with pride, and those fleeting seconds he held Grimmjow's gaze mattered more than the fifteen years he'd spent with his father.

Then he was gone and Grimmjow watched him leave even after the door closed behind him. The time came to say good bye. Grimmjow bid farewell to Ikkaku, Yumichika, Uryuu, Hitsugaya, and Chad. Renji and Rukia wanted to stay a while longer and chatted on the sofa while Ichigo and Orihime said goodbye to their guests.

"This is it..." Orihime's eyes welled with tears and she took Ulquiorra's hands in hers. "It feels like you're going so far away, but it's only a plane ride away. You have to keep in touch, okay?"

"I will." Ulquiorra assured her and though he was composed, his eyes were sorrowful and Grimmjow wanted to yank him into a hug.

"And you have to come and visit the baby. Both of you." Grimmjow asked.

"When's the little sucker due?" Grimmjow asked.

"June 20th," Ichigo said, smiling widely as he rubbed Orihime's baby bump, "Come down for the birth. We want you guys to be there."

"I'll miss you, both of you." Orihime wiped her eyes and when she opened her arms, Grimmjow walked into them and gave her a quick squeeze. She'd been a good friend to Ulquiorra and he appreciated her for that.

Grimmjow wasn't sure what to do when he faced Ichigo. Kurosaki coughed and stuck out his hand. "Grimmjow."
Grimmjow grasped his hand and crushed it in his grip. "Kurosaki." They left it at that. Orihime wrapped her arms around Ulquiorra and pulled him close. Ulquiorra held her tightly and though his voice was quiet, Grimmjow heard him say, "You are like family to me. Thank you for everything. I'll see you soon."

"You, too." Orihime was crying as Ulquiorra pulled away and he planted a quick kiss on her cheek. More than a little envious, Grimmjow put his arm around Ulquiorra's shoulders and Ichigo got the door for them.

"It was great playing with you guys," Ichigo said, "Even if we did lose."

"Yeah, maybe you lost. My name's gonna be on the roster again in a few years." Grimmjow assured him, fetching Ulquiorra's scarf from the coat rack.

"Sore loser." Grimmjow scowled at him and Ichigo redeemed himself by saying, "But hey, at the end of the day; we made some really great memories. Yeah, I wanted to win; but maybe winning wasn't what really mattered, you know?"

"That kinda attitude lost us the game, Kurosaki."

"No, you lost us the game 'cause you wanted to show off and score us a goal!" Sighing, Ulquiorra grabbed Grimmjow's scarf and wrenched him out the door.

"Someone's whipped!" Ichigo hollered.

"Shut up! You're gonna see my name on the roster in 2022, you shitstain!"

Later that night, Grimmjow nestled up beside Ulquiorra and watched the flurries of gently falling snow blanketing Tokyo's skyline with Ada curled up between them. He would have fallen right to sleep, but Ulquiorra was still wide awake. Grimmjow snorted in disbelief. "The hell are you still awake for? I must be losing my touch or something…"

"You really see a future with me?"

"No, I asked you to move in with me for the fun of it."

"I'm only asking because you were so excited about playing in France. I thought you would leave right after the World Cup was over."

Grimmjow laughed, unable to stop himself. "You sound so clingy. What, you think I'm really gonna up and leave after all the shit I went through to get you?"

"I'm surprised, that's all."

"Why? You're not that annoying. Look, playing in France was an idea. What I want with you is way more than just ideas, Ulquiorra."

Ulquiorra rolled over to face him, emerald eyes searching Grimmjow's. "Then what do you want?"

"Tell me what you want, first."

Ulquiorra slipped his fingers through Grimmjow's. "I want us to keep on playing together; in the championships, in the World Cup, in the Internationals, it doesn't matter what we do." Grimmjow couldn't wipe the smile off his face.
"Then that's what we're gonna do." They fell down to bed together and Grimmjow held him close as they kissed. As Ulquiorra fell asleep in his arms, Grimmjow nestled his face in his shoulder and closed his eyes. "I love you."

"You, too." Grimmjow tensed, his face burning hot enough to fry an egg. He hadn't meant for Ulquiorra to hear those words, though he meant every word. Ulquiorra would never let him live it down.

"Shut up and go to sleep, schnitzel."

"I'm expecting breakfast in bed in the morning, my little frog. Don't put a ring in the croissants; I'm not quite ready for that yet."

Grimmjow seethed, fighting down the urge to smother him in his pillow. Instead, he fell asleep with a tingling in his chest.

*Not quite ready, huh? Well, that's not a no, is it?* He thought as he drifted to sleep.

As hard as it was to admit, Grimmjow agreed with Kurosaki for the first time since they'd known one another. He'd worked so hard to get to Germany and even though the outcome was a hard pill to swallow, Grimmjow wouldn't change a thing.

After so many years of playing for himself, he'd found someone to play for. He wouldn't trade Ulquiorra or any of the memories they'd made together for a trophy. Over the years, he and Ulquiorra had come together and apart; each encounter leaving them more broken than the last.

But as he fell asleep beside Ulquiorra, their future before them, Grimmjow knew they'd come together for good this time.

Two halves made whole by the beautiful game.

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